

A predominantly African American musical style that first gained prominence in the late 1970s. The most widely recognized element of hip-hop culture, it is characterized by semi-spoken rhymes declaimed over a rhythmic musical backing. Early rap music drew heavily on the sampling of pre-existing recordings and the use of DJ mixing techniques. Increasingly, this art of “beats and rhymes” has been influenced by producers responsible for beat-making and assembling tracks, working alongside rappers who craft and deliver lyrics.

1. To 1983.

Rapping first came to widespread attention in 1979 with the popularity of the Sugarhill Gang’s single, “*Rapper’s Delight*,” although there were many African American antecedents for the style. In the late 1960s and early 70s, militant black poetry collectives such as the Last Poets in Harlem, New York and the Watts Prophets in Watts, Los Angeles had combined their poems with jazz or African-style percussion as a way of reaching a broader audience. Their lead was followed by Gil Scott-Heron, who matched radical polemic with soulful jazz backings. Other sources for rap could be found in the work of black comedians, the fluid patter of jazz and rhythm and blues radio disc jockeys, and the spoken soul raps of Isaac Hayes, Millie Jackson, and Barry White.

These traditions had grown out of the valuation of linguistic competence within African American culture, whether expressed by delivering sermons in the church or telling stories about tricksters, folk heroes, and historical events. Other influential practices included competitive verbal games such as the “dozens,” which traded humorous and exaggerated insults back and forth until one contestant conceded defeat, or the spoken narratives known as “toasts,” which drew from Afro-Caribbean and particularly Jamaican oral traditions. Although the verbal fluency of African American culture may be traced back to griot, or praise singing, traditions and other lyric forms of West Africa, the style of rapping that developed in New York was distinctly different in its unique integration of words and music. The music in rap is not simply an accompaniment to lyrics; rather, voice and instrumental tracks are placed in a more dynamic relationship. A rapper’s style of declamation, colloquially known as “flow,” imparts form and direction to the music by means of rhythmic patterns and rhyme schemes that interact dialectically with the instrumental track.

Rap developed as an element of hip hop culture, which emerged during the early to mid-1970s amidst privation and poverty in the South Bronx in New York City. De-industrialization, skyrocketing unemployment, increased crime, governmental neglect, and white flight, had made the area a national symbol of urban blight. At the same time, New York remained popular as the destination of various black Atlantic migrations, including the largest wave of Caribbean immigrants in US history, which brought an upsurge of immigrants from Jamaica, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic after 1965. Puerto Ricans also flocked to New York in the period leading to hip hop, contributing to the growth of the Latino youth population who would also play a role in the music’s development.

Clive Campbell was among the tens of thousands of Jamaicans who relocated to New York in the late 1960s, arriving with his family in the South Bronx at age 12. He came to embody the spirit of early hip hop: he briefly ran with a street gang and hung out with a well-known graffiti crew before he found his calling as a DJ. Taking the stage name Kool Herc, he started DJing public events as early as 1973 and became known for his massive system and his wide-ranging musical selections, including reggae, R&B, Latin jazz, soul, and more. Dancers responded particularly well when he played the percussion or Break sections of funk records at street parties and local dances. Using what he called a “merry-go-round” technique, he started to play these breaks repeatedly using two copies of the same record on different turntables. By doing so, he could lengthen these sections from seconds to minutes, creating an extended opportunity for partygoers to dance, and thus inspiring early b-boying/b-girling (or breakdancing). (See Hip-hop dance.) He also hired Coke La Rock, often described as the first rapper, who rhymed and improvised over the music. As the musical innovators of the hip-hop revolution, other DJs such as Afrika Bambaataa, Grand Wizard Theodore, and Grandmaster Flash became figureheads for hip-hop culture: Bambaataa for his leadership qualities and inventive selections of music; Theodore for his pioneering role in his percussive scratching; and Flash for his many technical developments, including what he described as his “quick mix theory,” which produced elaborate musical collages and seamlessly looped breakbeats without interrupting the music’s flow. (See Turntablism.)

Increasingly, MCs, or rappers as they became known, were hired by DJs to help with crowd control and to present a more exciting and professional show as hype men. As they developed their art, the rappers became a focal point of events held in school gymnasiums, clubs, and parks. Hip-hop crews also grew in number, such as Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five (which joined DJ Flash with rappers Melle Mel, Cowboy, Kidd Creole, Scorpio and Rahiem), Afrika Bambaataa and the Soulsonic Force, Cold Crush Brothers, and DJ Breakout and the Funky Four Plus One More (which featured the first female MC, Sha Rock). They engaged in competitions, known as “battles,” for community recognition.

Although DJs, dancers, and graffiti artists were key participants within hip-hop culture, the release of the first rap records in 1979 shifted the balance in favor of MC. As the recording industry became more involved, executives and producers minimized the role of DJs, replacing them with studio bands that emulated hip hop’s looped breakbeats. Improvisational rapping, or freestyling, also declined in favor of written lyrical compositions. (See Freestyle rap.) Few of the earliest hip-hop stylists, including Grandmaster Caz, Jimmy Spicer, Spoonie Gee, and Lovebug Starsky, managed to build a career that matched their unsung influence on later events. Soloists such as DJ Hollywood and Eddie Cheeba faded quickly from the scene, but their radio-DJ style of delivery inspired Kurtis Blow, the first solo rapper to be signed to a major label.

1979 saw the release of the Sugarhill Gang’s *“Rapper’s Delight,”* which went multi-platinum and was the first rap single to appear on the Top 40 charts. Introducing international audiences to the new art form, “Rapper’s Delight” propelled rap music beyond its local boundaries even though the studio group was critiqued for lacking credibility within local-hip-hop circles. Many rap groups and soloists subsequently released recordings. Sylvia and Joe Robinson’s Sugar Hill Records in New Jersey, and Bobby Robinson’s Enjoy label in Harlem, dominated the first era of rap recordings with energetic singles by Funky Four Plus One More, Sequence, the Treacherous Three, and the Crash Crew. Artists outside hip-hop circles also began to release rap-inflected singles such as Blondie’s “Rapture” (1981). The most significant changes in hip-hop style came from three releases: Afrika Bambaataa’s *“Planet Rock”* (Tommy Boy, 1982), which helped launch an “electro” rap trend and eventually spawned new genres of electronic dance music, including Detroit techno; Grandmaster Flash’s *“Adventures of*

Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel" (Sugar Hill, 1981), which demonstrated the collage techniques of the hip hop DJ; and *"The Message"* (Sugar Hill, 1982), an indictment of inner city life by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five.

The lyrics of *"The Message"* set a new agenda for rap. Featuring rapper Melle Mel, the song offered an up-close view into the devastation and deprivation experienced by many urban working-class people of color, in particular those in the South Bronx, during the mid-to-late 1970s. It resounds with a defiant, defensive and sometimes desperate cultural stance that defined what came to be called "message rap," asserting a sense of agency in the face of dehumanization. The majority of raps composed before 1982 had been light-hearted and self-aggrandizing, but after the portrait of the decayed urban landscape delivered by *"The Message"* a new tone of realism was established, typified by recordings such as Run D.M.C.'s *"It's Like That"* and *"Hard Times,"* both released in 1983.

2. 1984–9.

The 1984 release of Run-D.M.C.'s self-titled debut album is often cited as a line of demarcation between "old school" and "new school" hip-hop. Their novel, commercially lucrative, and widely influential approach moved away from the funk, soul, and disco of rap's early days and instead embraced a harder, minimalistic, rock-influenced sound replete with forceful rhythms, especially prominent beats programmed on drum machines, and powerfully delivered vocals. The group also sported an urban signature look, featuring black fedoras, black leather/denim suits and white shell-toed Adidas. Although Run-D.M.C. signed early in their career to Profile Records, their manager, entrepreneur Russell Simmons, capitalized on their success to found Def jam Records with Rick Rubin, which released many key recordings by artists ranging from teen phenomenon LL Cool J to the group Beastie Boys, a trio of white rappers whose debut album, *Licensed to Ill* (1986), sold nearly ten million copies and became the first rap album release to top the Billboard charts. During this period of creative diversity in the rap world, comedic storytellers like Dana Dane and Slick Rick co-existed with Big Daddy Kane, who combined complex lyricism and sex appeal. A number of female rappers emerged, ranging from the playfully sexy trio Salt-N-Pepa to hardcore lyricist MC Lyte and Afrocentrist Queen Latifah.

Rhymes during the mid-1980s were characterized by wars of words, whose answer-record scenario emphasized the historic significance of verbal contests like the "dozens." These contests were either personal, as between UTFO, the Real Roxanne and Roxanne Shante, or LL Cool J and Kool Moe Dee, or they were territorial battles between New York boroughs. High standards were set for aspiring newcomers by the rhythmic virtuosity and verbal complexity of rappers such as Rakim, whose partnership with DJ Eric B proved to be a continuing influence on later generations.

With the success of Run-D.M.C.'s partnership with Aerosmith for *"Walk This Way"* (1986), hip-hop videos became an even greater part of MTV broadcasts. Rap package tours were staged in stadiums, Hollywood films disseminated the music to cinema audiences, and charismatic and comedic acts like DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince, Kid 'N Play, and the Fat Boys appealed to pop listeners. Despite the success of pop rap, the medium was changing from party music to a serious vehicle of expression for young African-American musicians. This process created a diversification of subject matter and tone of lyrics, ranging from KRS-One's "Edutainment" raps to the Black Muslim-inspired *"Pure Righteousness"* of Lakim Shabazz. Regional styles asserted themselves as rap spread from the New York boroughs to

other states. As a means of using language within a popular music form, rap also appealed to disaffected youths in other countries, gaining ground particularly in Britain, France, Germany, Holland, Canada, and Japan, though also spreading to China, India, Thailand, Scandinavia, and parts of Africa.

Def Jam also launched the career of rap nationalists Public Enemy, whose music and lyrics delivered an intense assault upon institutionalized racism, counterbalanced by the court jester of the group, Flavor Flav, who answered Chuck D's polemic with memorable exhortations. With the album *By All Means Necessary* (1988), KRS-One similarly used rap music as a platform to express black rage and articulate Black Power. X-Clan, Poor Righteous Teachers, Ice Cube, and Paris followed suit. These "raptivists" spoke truth to power, composing lyrics that engaged with black history, promoted black liberation, and critiqued anti-black racism in singles like Public Enemy's "Fight the Power." (See also Five Percenter Rap.)

Meanwhile, the hardcore street narratives of Schooly D, Kool G Rap, Boogie Down Productions, and Ice-T paved the way for Gangsta rap, the most explosive, controversial and influential subgenre in rap history. In 1988, the influential group, N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitude), released their debut album *Straight Outta Compton* (1988), featuring inflammatory chronicles of gang life in Compton, Los Angeles. It sold on the strength of its word-of-mouth reputation rather than by radio play and television exposure, and propelled the careers of several members, Eazy-E, Ice Cube, and Dr. Dre. As a form of social criticism, gangsta rap addressed important topics such as gang violence, black-on-black crime, drug trafficking, and police brutality. But in the process of fueling criminalized stereotypes of African American men, gangsta rap attracted fans and upset critics with its hypermasculine, ultraviolent tales that often engaged in misogyny and homophobia.



Run-D.M.C., 1986.

Mirrorpix/Lebrecht Authors

The success of California rappers such as Ice-T, Too Short, and Ice Cube challenged New York's pre-eminence in hip hop. As the subject matter of rap grew to be increasingly violent and materialistic, a reaction against this trend surfaced in New York, pioneered by the Jungle Brothers and De La Soul. Later forming the Native Tongues coalition with Queen Latifah, Monie Love, and A Tribe Called Quest, these groups experimented with musical form and rapped in a thoughtful, reflective, and humorous style that appealed to college radio listeners as well as the core rap audience. Long Island trio De La Soul's *3 Feet High and Rising* album (Tommy Boy, 1989), was particularly successful in both commercial and creative terms. Conceived as a series of skits by the group and their producer, Prince Paul, the album sampled fragments from a remarkable range of musical sources, ranging from the Detroit Emeralds and Johnny Cash to Otis Redding. Failure to obtain permission for the use of a fragment from a record by the Turtles led to an expensive out-of-court settlement being imposed on De La Soul's record label. This highlighted the contentious issue of sampling in early rap, the practice of using digital technology to capture small sections of existing records, then looping these fragments to

form the basis of a new musical track. Producers such as DJ Mark, the 45 King, had become experts in discovering obscure records from the past and transforming them into music that combined the spontaneity of the old with the technological impact of the new.

3. 1990–99.

As well established and lucrative in the 1990s as heavy metal, rap similarly courted controversy on a number of fronts. Many musicians considered sampling to be an unmusical form of theft; the violent tenor and profane language of gangsta rap lyrics provoked calls for restraint from within and without the hip hop community; misogyny within rap rhymes and acted out in music videos was giving strength to voices of censorship that included Tipper Gore's Parents' Music Resource Center, a variety of politicians, black church groups, music retailers and the police. The obscene lyrics of the Miami group 2 Live Crew precipitated contradictory rulings through a number of court actions in Florida, while N.W.A.'s *Efil4Zaggin* (1991) was unsuccessfully prosecuted for obscenity in Britain. A 1991 case against Biz Markie had the most profound impact on beat-making, forcing rap producers to pay a copyright clearance fee for every sample used in their music. When those fees proved prohibitive, some producers stopped using samples altogether while others devised ways to circumvent the law. Dr. Dre, for example, often arranged to record his own versions of songs he wished to sample so that payment was due only to the songwriter.

Although few hip-hop acts aligned themselves unequivocally to one camp, the rap world had spawned various subgenres that offered a number of opposing viewpoints. Alongside the MTV-friendly pop rap of MC Hammer sat the positivism of Arrested Development and Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy. Next to the bohemian jazz rap of Gang Starr and Digable Planets stood the musical experimentalism of New Kingdom and Gravediggaz. Of these disparate directions, Wu Tang Clan's 1993 debut, *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*, represented a consolidation of the music's potential with the group building an impressive empire of solo artists, group efforts, and related business ventures. Yet the most lucrative style in this period remained gangsta rap, which had lost its subversive edge and had become the backbone of the rap commercial industry (which exceeded a billion dollars in sales in 1996). Dr. Dre's pivotal 1992 release, *The Chronic*, introduced audiences to G-funk (Gangsta-funk), a bass-laden, slow-paced music that recalled the sounds of George Clinton and Parliament/Funkadelic and formed the backdrop to laidback and lethal tales delivered by rapper Snoop Dogg.

Despite considerable global success enjoyed by the Fugees, a group whose positivism seemed to have grown from the Afrocentric, didactic rap of Arrested Development, a more malevolent mood prevailed. Bitter rivalry flared between rap scenes on the East and West coasts of the United States, with artists represented by rival entrepreneurs Sean "Puffy" Combs (Bad Boy Records) and Suge Knight (Death Row Records) trading vicious threats and insults through the lyrics of their records. This war of words culminated in the fatal shootings of two of rap's biggest stars, Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G., plunging hip hop into a mood of crisis.

While artists such as DJ Shadow discarded rapping, returning to turntable skills to create instrumental music based around arcane samples, others, such as Los Angeles-based group Jurassic 5 and Philadelphia-bred hip-hop band the Roots, looked back nostalgically to the "old school," when hip hop seemed more innocent, less mired in a labyrinth of big business, gang rivalry, and actual, as opposed to fantasized, violence. Such nostalgia obscured rap's surprising longevity, however, along with its

phenomenal commercial success and its continuing capacity to reinvent itself during periods of stagnation. This fact was reinforced in the mid- to late 1990s when southern entrepreneurs such as New Orleans' Master P (No Limit Records) and brothers Bryan and Ronald Williams (Cash Money Records) grew their regional labels into major players. What came to be known as the "Dirty South" turned rap artists from New Orleans (Juvenile), Atlanta (Outkast, Goodie Mob), and Memphis (Eightball, MJG) into international sensations, proving that rap could adapt to multiple geographical contexts.

The decade ended with the emergence of Eminem: the first high-profile solo white rapper since Vanilla Ice experienced short-lived success in the early 1990s. Backed by producer Dr. Dre, Eminem balanced skill and humor, parodying various representations of whiteness on singles such as "My Name Is" (1999), to preempt criticism that he was imitating or stealing black culture. Harsh criticism about his music's violent imagery, much of it directed at women and homosexuals, only seemed to reinforce Eminem's image as a rebellious artist, further bolstering his popularity and sales.

4. Since 2000.

Rap since 2000 has witnessed countervailing trends of consolidation and diversification. In the first decade of the 21st century, the genre emerged as a, if not *the*, dominant form of youth-oriented popular music. The genre solidified its place in the national and global marketplace with numerous chart-topping acts, including Eminem, Ludacris, Lil Jon, T.I., Kanye West, Lil Wayne, and Drake, all hailing from outside the East Coast and West Coast communities that dominated the industry in the 1980s and 1990s. The simultaneous ubiquity and diversity of contemporary rap stars speak to today's industry's organizational structure in which a handful of major rap labels and distributors cultivate relationships with much smaller "independent" labels that assume the majority of the risk in developing and producing new acts. The arrangement has led to an environment in which up-and-coming rap artists are often encouraged to appear as independent from the mainstream as possible, building fan bases through grassroots tactics. New Orleans rapper Lil Wayne, for example, captured mainstream attention by releasing much of his music free of charge as a series of mix tapes, despite the fact that he had already signed with and recorded for Cash Money/Universal records.

The consolidation of rap music as mainstream popular music, however, was not universally celebrated. Resistance to "music industry rap" spawned a number of local scenes and independent producers that defined themselves as "underground hip hop." While underground scenes of various types have been an important part of the hip-hop world since the early 1990s—producing influential groups such as the San Francisco Bay Area collective Living Legends and Los Angeles's Freestyle Fellowship—computing developments, the Internet, and social networking together have opened up even greater opportunities for independent rappers to thrive. Emerging independent labels such as Minneapolis-based Rhymesayers Entertainment and New York's Definitive Jux have also provided an outlet for independent artists, including Aesop Rock, Atmosphere, Brother Ali, Company Flow, Eyedea and Abilities, and MF Doom. Such underground artists embrace a set of values centered on artistic integrity and experimentation, rejecting the celebration of materialism and commercial success evidenced in much of rap's mainstream. Their commitment to the craft of hip-hop music privileges musical skill over other claims to hip-hop authenticity, making the underground a site of racial inclusivity that differs significantly from a mainstream rap world strongly attached to black "realness."

Not all independent artists, however, adhere so stridently to these principles, and many who began their careers in obscurity have found ways to use underground tactics to achieve mainstream success. Far East Movement, for example, began by playing small Los Angeles-area venues and using the social networking website MySpace to cultivate a committed local fan base. The group was able to prove its worth to major record labels and eventually signed a deal with Cherrytree Records, a subsidiary of Interscope, and went on to become the first Asian American rap act to score a number one hit on the *Billboard* charts with the single “Like a G6” (2010).

Not all attempts to challenge rap music’s conventions have emerged from the underground; some have been issued by rap’s most popular artists. Kanye West’s critically acclaimed *The College Dropout* (2004) introduced an unapologetic, black middle-class perspective to the genre, delving into themes such as insecurity, materialism, and existential angst. West released his second album, *Late Registration*, the following year (2005) and completed his college-theme with the album *Graduation* in 2007. In similar fashion, Missy Elliott, emerged as a convention-defying mainstream rapper during the late 1990s and into the 2000s, a period during which few other female rappers prospered. The most visible representations of female identity in rap at this time were found in music videos by male artists, and presented one-sided depictions of sexually available, submissive women who existed to meet the needs of male stars. Albums such as *Under Construction* (2002) showcased Elliott’s playful wit and her ability to deal with a wide range of topics, including contemporary gender roles, standards of beauty, and female sexuality.

The early 21st century has also witnessed a powerful wave of interest in older rap music, particularly recordings made from the late 1980s through the late 1990s. Capitalizing on fans’ desire for “classic material” from rap’s past, the touring music festival Rock the Bells (established 2004) has featured a number of older rap acts, including Nas, Mobb Deep, and Cypress Hill, recreating their best known and most beloved albums live in concert. In part, such fondness for “old school rap” reflects curiosity about the music’s history and development by the newest generation of hip-hop fans; older audiences, who grew up with hip hop before the concept of “old school” emerged, are also able to indulge in all sorts of nostalgia, whether attending such reunion tours or replacing their old LPs with digitized music.

Rather than trade on nostalgia, some older rappers have remade themselves. Ishmael Butler, for example, had brief success in the 1990s with the jazz-influenced rap group Digable Planets, and found new audiences as the co-leader of the collective Shabazz Palaces, which released the album *Black Up* (2011) to critical acclaim. Other recent developments include a heightened sense of self-reflexivity and irony in the genre. New York-based underground duo Das Racist, for example, captured public attention with the viral download “Combination Pizza Hut and Taco Bell” (2008). Since then, they and a number of co-conspirators have injected a destabilizing element of surrealistic play into the genre. Much rap music still tends towards the sincere, however, and Canadian-born rapper Drake has attracted attention for his emotive, soul-searching lyrics on *Take Care* (2011). Yet if there is one constant in rap, it might be that it is still primarily a young person’s genre subject to generational cycles. Artists who have maintained widespread commercial success into their forties, such as Jay-Z, are rare exceptions to the rule, while new and young rap acts such as OFWGKTA or Kreayshawn often elicit contempt or detached bemusement from older fans. Despite claims about rap music’s best days having past, concerns about the effects of corporate control, critiques surrounding representations of violence and misogyny, and the continued racial typecasting of many African-American rappers, the

early 21st century has proven to be rap's most eclectic and creative period to date, based on the sheer number and diversity of its practitioners—across racial, ethnic, gender, linguistic, and international boundaries—and the broad impact and appeal of their music to audiences around the world.

5. Rap aesthetics.

To succeed in a highly competitive arena, rappers develop their lyrical creativity, distinctive flow, rhyming agility, timbral character, and rhythmic dexterity to set themselves apart from their peers. Some artists possess memorable timbral qualities, ranging from Chuck D's guttural force to Q-Tip's light nasal approach. Others cultivate distinctive styles of vocal production, such as the monotone delivery used by the Notorious B.I.G. to the growls of DMX and Jah Rule. By varying their modes of address, rap artists convey different moods. LL Cool J's aggressive approach to a battle rap like "Mama Said Knock You Out" stands in sharp contrast to the velvety sound he uses in the romantic rap ballad "I Need Love."

Rap artists also distinguish themselves in terms of "flow," a combination of their rhythmic timing and approach to rhyming. In the early years of hip hop, rappers' flows were relatively simple and unvaried. Rhymes typically landed on the last word or syllable of each line, as in Run-D.M.C.'s 1983 recording "Sucker MCs." As the music evolved, rappers began experimenting more with their voices as percussive instruments, adjusting their delivery and rhythmic approaches and making use of polyrhythm and syncopation. Rapid-fire vocal techniques were skillfully employed by rappers such as Tung Twista, Busta Rhymes, and Bone Thugs-n-Harmony. Others, such as Big Daddy Kane, Rakim, and Lord Finesse, played with cadential expectations and created rhythmic dissonances by stuttering, pausing, or chopping up syllables within words. Rappers such as the Notorious B.I.G. in singles such as "The Warning" (1994) bypassed predictable end-rhymes in favor of surprisingly complex internal rhyme schemes. Rappers Jay-Z and Eminem are revered in part because of their exceptional flows, which feature tricky staccato rhythms delivered at an extremely fast pace. Jay-Z's verses in "Jigga What, Jigga Who" (1999), and Eminem's work on "Forgot About Dre" (2001), a collaboration with Dr. Dre, are exceptional examples.

For freestyle rappers, such as Supernatural, Aceyalone, and Medusa, concerns about content are tied to the challenges of extemporization. Freestyling usually occurs in the context of a battle or a cypher, a tight-knit circle of multiple rappers who take turns delivering rhymes from its center. Both settings involve rappers engaged in a playful, yet confrontational style of competition reminiscent of playing the dozens. Rather than performing memorized rhymes, freestylers show off their spontaneous improvisatory skills by cultivating content from their immediate surroundings and targeting their raps directly at and about their competitors.

Fans of rap music also assess their favorite artists by their ability to tell a story. Clever wordplay that allows rappers to "flip the script" and surprise listeners with their creativity is particularly admired. Similes and metaphors are tools in every rapper's arsenal, whether used sparingly or whether unfolding over the course of entire songs, such as in Common's "I Used to Love H.E.R." (1994) or Tupac Shakur's "Me and My Girlfriend" (1996). Verbal dexterity, including the use of multisyllabic rhymes and compelling alliteration, are also highly valued among rap artists and enthusiasts. Others creatively use homonyms and homophones ("I see you" in the "I.C.U."). Mastery of wordplay and storytelling helps to explain why Notorious B.I.G., Jay-Z, Eminem, Rakim, Nas, and Missy Elliott,

among many others, are widely admired by rap aficionados. Through the art of rhyming, rappers negotiate a line between literal meaning and verbal play (signifyin') that has led to many misunderstandings. As Ice-T has said, "rap is really funny, man. But if you don't see that it's funny, it'll scare the shit out of you."

An analogous point can be made about rap's backing tracks, whose method of construction, commonly referred to as Beat-making, has evolved considerably over time, and whose contribution to the music varies from song to song (and from listener to listener). In a way, beats exist to provide rapper's with a steady rhythmic framework; they function as both a metronome that sets the song's tempo and as an audible "poetic meter" that prompts MCs to organize their lyrical flows into a rhythmic argument. At the same time, rap beats can become expressive forces in their own right, overwhelming lyrics with sonic force and prompting bodily engagement or dancing. Similarly, beats may also contribute meaningful content through musical cues that comment on, extend, or amplify a song's lyrical content. These aspects of rap's beats exist simultaneously in dialectical tension with one another.

Although this entry has focused on rap music in the United States, rap recordings have, from their very beginning, traversed the globe as mass mediated commodities and helped to spread the aesthetic forms outlined above. Rap music thrives in numerous countries, including Cuba, France, Germany, Japan, Korea, Senegal, and South Africa. Despite vast linguistic differences, this art of "beats and rhymes" has been adapted to numerous languages and cultures, transforming them as they transform the music. That the music exhibits a family resemblance without being simply duplicated is a testament to the creativity of the music's originators as well as its adoptees.

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