Rap as Poetry

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**HISTORY**

To achieve the high levels of poetic excellence these poetic masters of rap achieved did not come easy. Rap was born where graffiti and breakdancing took shape in the 1970s. It sprang from the street corners and block parties in the urban poverty of the South Bronx. There was the local DJ, laying down a beat. The MC encouraged the community to get with the music and have a good time. Within a short time, these MCs developed into something more. They were riding the beat with their wordplay the way a jockey rides a racehorse.

Like reggae, rap was born where least expected. Like the blues, it did not separate itself from people’s pain. Like country, it came from a group of people looked down upon by the rest of society. Like rock and roll, it did it with feeling. Like jazz, it did it with a beat. Like punk, it was the sound of rebellion, a “we’re not going to take it anymore” cry. Since nobody spoke for the kids born and raised in urban poverty, the MCs became their bards.

The MCs fell in love with language. It may not be your language or my language. Most likely it was the language of the street. And this language can be quite scary. This street talk gave the MC a credibility to his audience. This new form of poetry spread like wildfire to Detroit and Atlanta and New Orleans and Compton.

**ORAL POETRY**

Rap did something poetry had not done in a long time. It brought poetry out of the shadows of academia and took it into the mainstream. It showed us that it was okay to do a poetry not meant to be read. Poetry could be heard and experienced, and it was no longer a niche. Within a few years from its birth in the streets of the Bronx, it had reached a worldwide audience, influencing everything from rhythm and blues to rock ‘n’ roll to reggaeton. Even country music got in on the act with Bubba Sparxx.

The rappers did not do their poetry in isolation. The community was the tree from which the branch (the rapper MC) grew. The fruit springing from the branch were the rapper’s lyrics. Rappers did what the griots of West Africa did for their communities. What Homer and medieval troubadours did. These modern troubadours delivered the news (the anti-crack song, NWA’s “Dopeman”); protested treatment by the authorities (Public Enemy’s “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos”); showed off their skills (LL Cool J’s “I’m Bad”); told stories (Tupac’s “Brenda’s Got a Baby”); and critiqued bad behavior (Salt-N-Pepa’s “Tramp”). Like Ice Cube said in “Straight Outta Compton”, “I am a journalist, reporting what’s going on in the hood. Only thing, I’m brutally honest.”
COMPETITIVENESS
From the beginning, the MCs did their poetry in public competition. Like William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe in Elizabethan England, they were out to out-poet each other. MCs went onstage, ready to do battle like Achilles and Hector. Their swords were their wordplay with puns and insults for their blades. These puns and insults were wrapped in metaphors and rhymes, similes and rhythm. Their armor was their swag, that quality to get on stage and blow away all competition with a lyrical confidence. If an MC didn’t have his swag, he wasn’t respected.

Here’s Lil Wayne’s “Doctor Carter” doing his sway thing:

"And I don’t rap fast, I rap slow
’Cause I mean every letter in the words in the sentence of my quotes.
Swagger just flow sweeter than honey oats.
That swagger, I got it. I wear it like a coat.” (Bradley, 2009, 180)

This one-upmanship of the MCs was much of the reason that rap evolved so fast into a very sophisticated poetic form. It forced MCs to develop poetic tools that made them shine on stage.

POETIC TOOLS
Early on, the MCs used rhyme to deliver their rap and remake the language. Quickly rappers were using many rhyme schemes in addition to end rhymes, such as internal rhymes, slant rhymes (imperfect rhymes), apocopated rhymes (such as “dance” and “romancing”), and split rhymes (“highway” and “my way”). In addition to metaphor and simile, many used such poetic techniques as personification (giving human qualities to animals, places, things and ideas such as Jeru the Damaja’s take on ignorance as an arch-nemesis, “He has an army, they always give me trouble/Mainly – Hatred, Jealousy and Envy, they attack me”), eponyms (exchange an attribute for a famous name that brings it to mind such as “I’m Muhammad Ali with rhymes so perfect they make me shine”), and homonyms (words that sound alike but are spelled differently with different meanings such as “hear” and “here”).

CURRENT STATE
As we enter 2016, there are those who would proclaim rap dead. But rap still has glory days ahead. To be relevant, rap like all art forms, must shed its old skin and grow a new one. Rap is doing just that. Kendrick Lamar’s new album “To Pimp a Butterfly” is an example. Kendrick has created a rap album that uses not just a beat to lay down his lyrics to but jazz and other musical forms. With it, he takes on many of the problems facing black artists and the African American community, using the symbol of the butterfly to show that there is hope.
Rap has made it to Broadway and given America a rap-infused musical history lesson about the founding fathers. It is selling out to packed houses and it won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Then there is Robin Coste Lewis’ poem, “Voyage of the Sable Venus”. It focuses on the black female figure in Western art. More than something to be read, it is a theatrical monologue that echoes the work of poet Derek Walcott and of “Hamilton”.

Who knows what we will see next? Maybe Sophocles’ “Oedipus Rex” translated into a rap poetic format.

**CLOSING**

Ice-T in “Something from nothing: The art of rap” sums up the vocation of the Rapper in this way, “A true rapper knows that his personality and status is on the line every time his pen hits the page. He’s going to be judged for knowledge, flavor, style, presentation, as well as his gift for wordplay.” I can think of no better definition of the work of a poet.

**REFERENCES**

**Films:**


**Books:**
