

Did Gangsta Rap Kill Hip Hop?

From Crime Statistics to Commercialism

Abstract

For the past thirty years rap music has made its way into the mainstream of America, taking an increasingly prominent place in popular culture. At its start the original message of rap was one of peace, community activity and social commentary. However, the majority of rap music played on the radio today is almost a parody of its former self with exaggerated themes of violence and materialism. Although I appreciate today's emerging subgenres such as dirty south, crunk and hiffy are not gangsta rap, there is a direct ancestry in their hard beats and violent imagery.

I aim to explore whether it was the emergence of gangsta rap that turned rap music into the pejorative style it has become today, I will do this by looking at the trends of conspicuous consumption within the hip hop industry, exploring whether violent themes encourage violent crime and will be looking into the identity of young male rappers.

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Introduction

Everybody sound the same, commercialise the game,

Reminiscent when it wasn't all business,

I forgot where it started,

So we all gather here for the dearly departed.

Nas, *Hip Hop is Dead*.¹

In December 2006 American rap artist Nas concluded with the release of his eighth studio album that *Hip Hop is Dead*.² This idea is mirrored by author Tricia Rose in her 2008 book *The Hip Hop Wars*, with the opening line being 'hip hop is not dead but it is gravely ill'.³ Rose continues to explain that although more of a metaphor than a reality, 'there is an incredibly rich world of hip hop that has literally been buried [and] for the past dozen years, the most commercially successful hip hop has become increasingly saturated with caricatures of black gangstas, thugs, pimps, and hoes'.⁴ The war that the title of Rose's book references is that between hip hop culture and the general

¹ Nasir bin Olu Dara Jones, *Hip Hop is Dead* (Single) (Def Jam, ASIN: B000JVSZIY, 19 December 2006).

² Nasir bin Olu Dara Jones, *Hip Hop is Dead* (album) (Def Jam, ASIN: B000KP61P8, 18 December 2006).

³ Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip-hop and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), p. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

public and the fear that 'American values are under assault owing to the negative influence of rap music'.⁵

Themes of violence and materialism inherent in some subgenres of rap music have led to hip hop culture being labelled as public enemy number one in many critic's eyes.

This view is evident in the writings of Professor Herbert London from New York University. London claims that rap music is leading us toward the end of civility.⁶

London also argues that 'the record executives contend that the lyrics do not lead to coarse behaviour; this is said with some disingenuousness since violence is manifest in the entire rap world'.⁷ Although a generalised view, these thoughts are echoed by Dr

C. Delores Tucker, political and social activist and former secretary of state for Pennsylvania. Tucker claims 'the lyrics in many hip hop songs promote violence'.⁸

Tucker took her views one step further than most, purchasing a percentage of shares in Time Warner so she could attend the stockholders meetings to voice her concerns (concerns in particular about the lyrical content of one of Time Warner's acts, L'il Kim⁹).

Bernard Goldberg's uncomfortably right wing *100 People that are Screwing up America* also shares this opinion, blaming such acts as Illinois born Ludacris, saying that rappers

⁵ Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip-hop and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), p. 96.

⁶ Herbert London, 'the End of Civility' (29 September 2010) < <http://www.herblondon.org/8015/the-end-of-civility> > [accessed 23 November 2012]

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Mickey Hess, *Icons of Hip Hop: An Encyclopaedia of the Movement, Music, and Culture, Volume 2* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), p. 399.

⁹ Mark Lander, 'Time Warner Is Again Criticized for Distributing Gangsta Rap' (*The New York Times* online article, 16 May 1997) <<http://www.nytimes.com/1997/05/16/business/time-warner-is-again-criticized-for-distributing-gangsta-rap.html>> [accessed 15 November 2012]

are 'like a demented caricature of real black men'.¹⁰ Goldberg continues, suggesting that a large proportion of today's youth are getting their values from these acts and this is why, as the title suggests, America is becoming 'screwed up'. In 2003, perhaps feeling threatened by views like Goldberg's, Pepsi decided not to run an already filmed advert starring Ludacris over criticisms from influential right wing talk show host Bill O'Reilly claiming Pepsi was 'immoral to hire Ludacris [because] he uses obscene lyrics'.¹¹ Pepsi replaced the advert with another featuring the equally profane Ozzy Osbourne. Ludacris has won three Grammy Awards, three MTV Video Awards and has setup the Ludacris Foundation which, according to Erika R. McCall, has 'strived to inspire youth through education and memorable experiences to live their dreams by uplifting families, communities and fostering economic development'.¹² For some reason Pepsi decided that Ozzy Osbourne's foul vernacular was preferable.

During the 1980s to the mid-1990s, an era that William Jelani Cobb refers to as the 'golden age of hip hop',¹³ some of rap music's most popular artists were creating ground-breaking music, from rappers such as Grandmaster Flash waxing lyrical about the social injustice in the world and what can be done to resolve it, to Afrika Bambaataa helping street kids leave gang culture behind for a more rewarding focus on music. The emergence of gangsta rap in the 1980s, although rich in social commentary, could be blamed for the negative connotations associated with the sub genres of rap music dominating the airwaves today, as Mickey Hess observes, 'some critics claim that

¹⁰ Bernard Goldberg, *100 People Who Are Screwing Up America* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), p. 60.

¹¹ Duncan Campbell, 'Pepsi Loses its Bottle in Dispute Over Hip Hop Commercial', in *The Guardian* (15 February 2003), p. 17.

¹² Erika R. McCall, *Go for Yours: A Compilation of Young, African Americans Who Were Brave Enough To Reach for the Stars* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse Publishing, 2011), p. 126.

¹³ William Jelani Cobb, *To the Break of Dawn: a Freestyle on the Hip Hop Aesthetic* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), p. 47.

real *hip hop* was killed off by hyper-consumerist *gangsta rap* and its fascination with violence'.¹⁴

Hip hop could be a vital source of creativity and industry for today's youth, or as S.

Craig Watkins eloquently states:

At its core, tensions percolating within the movement are a startling recognition that for all of its pop culture allure and economic success hip hop has failed to realize what many believe is its greatest calling: the chance to have a meaningful and enduring effect in the lives of ordinary youths.¹⁵

As Watkins notes, the future of the previous generation's hip hop could have been more grand than today's reality. Instead of art simply imitating life, is art now corrupting life? Gangsta rap was once a subcategory of hip hop, now it seems to be the industry standard and it could be argued that gangsta rap destroyed hip hop in many ways; it lost its original message, steered the music to a pop fuelled future and as Peyton Paxson notes, made it possible that 'the general public associate all rap with gangsta rap'.¹⁶ Author Tricia Rose blames the role of the music industry in distorting today's rap music into this one-dimensional form:

The [music] industry has limited the representation of hip hop to narrow, negative associations of Blackness, and by letting commercialized hip hop become a nearly

¹⁴ Mickey Hess, *Icons of Hip Hop: An Encyclopaedia of the Movement, Music, and Culture, Volume 2* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), p. xviii.

¹⁵ S. Craig Watkins, *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), p. 6.

¹⁶ Peyton Paxson, *Media Literacy: Thinking Critically About Music and Media* (Portland: Walch Publishing, 2003), p. 10.

constant caricature of gangstas, pimps, and hoes, we've come to equate poverty with street life. This denies and silences a wide range of urban ghetto experiences and points of view which venerates predatory street culture.¹⁷

As Michael Eric Dyson states 'we should acknowledge that gangsta rap crudely exposes harmful beliefs and practices that are often maintained with deceptive civility in much of mainstream society',¹⁸ but in doing this shouldn't we also acknowledge that gangsta rap offers 'an uncensored social commentary [and] a charged political critique',¹⁹ and that 'gangsta rap music is a post-industrial black culture industry with job openings and a chance for upward mobility'?²⁰

In this essay I will explore whether it was the emergence of gangsta rap that steered the path of rap music toward a violent, corporate pastiche of its former self or if these traits were already inherent in rap music. I will do this by looking at four fields within the hip hop culture; its history, its love affair with violent crime, why hip hop is now a multi-billion dollar industry and why these themes are adopted by a large percentage of today's rap artists.

¹⁷ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), p. 139.

¹⁸ Michael Eric Dyson, Dyson, Michael E., *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 177.

¹⁹ Emmett G. Price, *Hip Hop Culture* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Ltd, 2006), p. 59.

²⁰ Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip-hop and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), p. 96.

And it don't Stop:

A Brief History of Hip Hop Culture

Ten years ago,

I used to listen to rappers flow,

Talking about the way they rock the mic at the disco.

Ice-T, *Original Gangster*.²¹

Rap music has been described as both 'the most popular and influential form of music of the 80s and 90s',²² and quite poetically as 'America's most dynamic contemporary popular cultural, intellectual, and spiritual vessel'.²³ So how did hip hop become such a cultural phenomenon? To understand its significance let us start by looking at the history of hip hop. I will be doing this by splitting its past into three branches; the history of its aesthetics, hip hop as a commercial enterprise and the emergence of gangsta rap as a subgenre.

²¹ Tracy Marrow, *Original Gangster*, Ice-T (Sire, ASIN: B000002LO8, 13 May 1991)

²² Michael Erlewine, *All Music Guide to Rock* (San Francisco: Miller Freeman, 1995), p. 921.

²³ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), p. 19.

The exact beginning of the hip hop movement is under some contention. Nelson George in his book *Hip Hop America* pins the time to the late 1970s²⁴ whereas Tricia Rose claims that the movement had been bubbling away for some time by then.²⁵ Whatever time frame you go by the one fact that everyone seems to agree on is that it started in the Bronx, New York and its founding father was Jamaican immigrant Clive Campbell.

Being a regular of local nightclubs but becoming increasingly frustrated with the city's brash DJs, Campbell soon brought his Jamaican influence to the Bronx by playing records on huge sound systems at bloc parties around the area and was quickly becoming better known as DJ Kool Herc. Herc's revolutionary attitude ensured he played his music from a dancefloor perspective, or as he puts it 'I always kept up the attitude that I'm not playing it for myself, I'm playing for the people out there'.²⁶ With this new perspective, Kool Herc realised that the dance floor would erupt during certain sections of a song, as James Haskins explains in *The Story of Hip Hop: from Africa to America, Sugarhill to Eminem*:

Kool Herc seldom played an entire song. He knew which part of the record sent his audience into a frenzy. It was usually a thirty second 'break' section in which the drums, bass and rhythm guitar stripped the beat to its barest essence.²⁷

²⁴ Nelson George, *Hip Hop America* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 11.

²⁵ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), p. 6.

²⁶ Alex Ogg, and David Upshall, *The Hip Hop Years: A History of Rap* (London: Channel 4 Books, 1999), p. 13.

²⁷ James Haskin, *The Story of Hip Hop: From Africa to America, Sugarhill to Eminem* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 46.

To extend these sections that were sometimes as short as four bars, Herc developed a system comprised of two turntables with the same record on each, he would queue one break up to play as the other was ending, creating an endless loop (or as Herc affectionately named it: the merry-go-round, now perhaps better known as back-spinning). This sound became known as the breakbeat and within this sound there emerged a style of dancing that took advantage of its strong rhythms: breakdancing. The two disciplines of DJing and breakdancing were used as a medium for rivals to battle against one another; the outcome of this performance warfare was to 'allow [the contestant] to compete for the honour of being the best at that moment'.²⁸ It was during one of these battles that a local DJ battled the reigning champion Disco King Mario and entered the newly forming world of hip hop, changing its aesthetic course forever. That DJ's name was Afika Bambaataa.

Bambaataa, raised by an activist mother, had grown up in the Bronx and had become a member of one of the city's biggest youth gangs: the Black Spades. Accounts of how troublesome the Black Spades were is mixed, in Alex Ogg's *The Hip Hop Years* it is claimed 'they were the most feared gang in the Bronx',²⁹ whereas Jeff Chang, author of *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation*, suggests they were acting more as vigilantes and became 'the law in the absence of law, clearing their turf of drug dealers, assisting with community health programs and both fighting and partying to keep members and turf'.³⁰ Either way the violence that characterized gang warfare led Bambaataa, by his own admission, to leave the Black Spades in 1975 after

²⁸ Imani K. Johnson, 'B-Boying and Battling in a Global Context: The Discursive Life of Difference in Hip Hop Dance', in *Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 31, (2011), pp.173-195, p. 178.

²⁹ *The Hip Hop Years*, dir. by David Upshall (Channel 4 Television Corporation, 1999) 14.03.

³⁰ Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: a History of the Hip Hop Generation* (London: Picador, 2006), p. 89.

witnessing the brutal death of one of his friends by the hands of the police.³¹

Bambaataa soon realised that these hip hop battles could be a peaceful alternative to gang fighting and decided to use his leadership skills learnt in gang culture to turn those involved in the gang life into something more positive to the community. This decision began the development of what later became known as the Universal Zulu Nation, a group of socially and politically aware rappers, b-boys and graffiti artists. Bambaataa began organizing block parties all around the South Bronx and his peaceful aesthetic was quickly adopted by the hip-hop community.

During this time the MCs that were used to introduce the DJs and warm up the crowds, such as Coke La Rock, Lovebug Starski or Casanova Fly (also known as Grandmaster Caz) were utilizing their time in front of a microphone more and more; their rhymes grew from couplets to stanzas to full poems. These proto-rappers created a paradigm shift that led to them becoming more popular than the DJ, as Mark Katz notes 'the spotlight was now trained on the MCs with the DJ working essentially as an accompanist, and the dancers had become, at least at times, an audience'.³² Moving hip hop away from Herc's original aesthetic that 'hip hop was not something you could put on a record; hip hop was a party in the park, a social event, a practice not a product',³³ Puerto Rican born DJ Disco Wiz and Casanova Fly created the first mixed recording of these beats and rhymes when 'he and Grandmaster Caz combined sound

³¹ *The Hip Hop Years*, dir. by David Upshall (Channel 4 Television Corporation, 1999) 13.35.

³² Mark Katz, *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip Hop DJ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 73–74.

³³ Mickey Hess, *Icons of Hip Hop: An Encyclopaedia of the Movement, Music, and Culture, Volume 2* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), p. 19.

bites, special effects and paused beats'.³⁴ This cheap method to make rap music added to Bambaataa's aesthetic, creating:

A genre [that] rose up from desperately impoverished high-rise ghettos, where families couldn't afford to buy instruments for their kids and even the most rudimentary music-making seemed out of reach. But music was made all the same: the phonograph itself became an instrument.³⁵

The expense at which rap music could be produced made it entirely accessible to poorer teenagers, helping Bambaataa to 'build a youth movement out of the creativity of a new generation of outcast youths with an authentic, liberating worldview'.³⁶

If Bambaataa added consciousness to rap music then Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five 'paved the way for rap's evolution from party music to social message music'.³⁷ Consisting of Grandmaster Flash, Melle Mel (who is one of the plethora of artists credited with creating the first rap), Cowboy Keith (often credited with coining the term hip hop), Kidd Creole, Rahiem and Scorpio they penned songs such as *White Lines (Don't Do It)* and *The Message*. These songs featured a grim narrative about inner city violence, drugs, and poverty, creating a template for socio-politically conscious rap and subsequently paving the way for such acts as Public Enemy, Mos Def and Talib Kweli.

³⁴ Mickey Hess, *Hip Hop in America: a Regional Guide* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Ltd, 2009), p. xxxiii.

³⁵ Alex Ross, *Listen to This* (London: Fourth Estate, 2010), p. 60.

³⁶ Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: a History of the Hip Hop Generation* (London: Picador, 2006), p. 182.

³⁷ Richard Oliver, and Tim Leffel, *Hip Hop, Inc.: Success Strategies of the Rap Moguls* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2006), p. 67.

As Rose states ‘without historical contextualization, aesthetics are naturalized, and certain cultural practices are made to appear essential to a given group of people’,³⁸ so to understand why the hip hop movement emerged let us take a look at why the Bronx was the setting for its humble beginnings. During the early 1970s the Bronx was in turmoil and it has been argued that this could be the reason that the emergence of hip hop spread like it did: out of a need for escapism, a voice for social commentary and free (or cheap) entertainment.³⁹ There have been many moments in history that have been credited with the downfall of the once affluent Bronx, which in turn spurred the need for such a cultural phenomenon; Chang suggests that the Harlem and Bronx budget crisis of 1968, which pulled funds out of public sectors in the surrounding areas was the start of its downfall.⁴⁰ However, music journalist Henry Adaso traces this back even further in his *Brief History of Hip Hop* to Parks Commissioner Robert Moses in 1959.⁴¹ Moses commissioned the Cross Bronx Expressway that consequently made middle class German, Irish, Italian and Jewish neighbourhoods disappear. This caused businesses to relocate away from the borough only to be replaced by impoverished black and Hispanic families and along with these poor families, according to Adaso, came drug addiction, crime, and unemployment.

As with many aspects of hip hop, the first commercial rap record is again a matter of some contention, William Jelani Cobb in his book *Break of Dawn: A Freestyle on the Hip*

³⁸ Tricia Rose, ‘Black Texts/Black Culture’, in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. by Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), pp. 223-227, p. 224.

³⁹ Richard Oliver, and Tim Leffel, *Hip Hop, Inc.: Success Strategies of the Rap Moguls* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2006), p. 58.

⁴⁰ Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: a History of the Hip Hop Generation* (London: Picador, 2006), p. 32.

⁴¹ Adaso, Henry, ‘A Brief History of Hip Hop’, <<http://rap.about.com/od/rootsofaphiphop/p/RootsOfRap.htm>> [accessed 9 January 2013]

Hop Aesthetic claims it was The Fatback Band's *King Tim III (Personality Jock)*,⁴² whereas Marcel Danesi credits The Sugarhill Gang's *Rappers Delight*;⁴³ whichever source you are to believe this created opportunities for a lot of people to make a lot of money from hip hop.

In 1978 Sylvia Robinson, after recognising the potential of the pullulating rap scene in the streets and clubs of New York, founded the Sugarhill label. This was the first label to exclusively sign rap acts and Robinson, according to Oliver Wang, in his 2003 *Classic Material: The Hip-Hop Album Guide*, had trouble finding anyone willing to record a rap song as 'most of the rappers who performed in clubs did not want to record'.⁴⁴ As hip hop mythology recalls, in a Harlem pizza parlour, Robinson heard an employee rapping to himself. That employee was Big Bank Hank and he agreed to join a rap group that Robinson was trying to start. This became the first manufactured rap group: The Sugarhill Gang.

Rapper's Delight has received a lot of negative press over the years; the hip hop aesthetic was anti-disco, as Tim Lawrence observes, 'just as the economy entered a deep recession disco was critiqued for being superficial, materialistic, and irretrievably commercial'.⁴⁵ This led to the view that, as David Upshal argues, 'disco was out of touch with reality'.⁴⁶ Because of this, the disco-heavy backing quickly ensured *Rapper's*

⁴² William Jelani Cobb, *To the Break of Dawn: a Freestyle on the Hip Hop Aesthetic* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), p. 44.

⁴³ Marcel Danesi, *Popular Culture: Introductory Perspectives* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), p. 135.

⁴⁴ Oliver Wang (ed), *Classic Material: the Hip Hop Album Guide* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2003), p. 63.

⁴⁵ Tim Lawrence, 'Disco Madness: Walter Gibbons and the Legacy of Turntableism and Remixology', in *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, vol. 20, 3 (2008), pp. 276-329, p. 280.

⁴⁶ *The Hip Hop Years*, episode 1, dir. by David Upshall (Channel 4 Television Corporation, 1999), 18.33.

Delight to become a party record, removing the newly established aesthetics that Bambaataa had worked hard to instil, as Ian Peddie notes: '[Rapper's Delight was] catchy, apolitical and nonsensical'.⁴⁷ There was also a controversy over the origins of Big Bank Hank's verse in *Rapper's Delight*. Hank's verse was originally written by Casanova Fly; this is evident by his first line: 'I'm the C-A-S-A-N-O-V-A and the rest is F-L-Y', but neither Sugarhill nor Hank gave any money or credits as a songwriter or co-writer to Grandmaster Caz.⁴⁸ For all of its bad press *Rapper's Delight* did lead to Robinson being hailed in her obituary as the 'mother of hip hop',⁴⁹ it has been claimed to be 'the best-selling 12 inch [record] of all time'⁵⁰ and also gave way to the new nomenclature for an MC: *the rapper*.

Dr Richard Oliver and Tim Leffel, authors of *Hip Hop Inc.: Success Strategies of the Rap Moguls* note that 'a history of rap music in the 1980s is in large part a history of Russell Simmons' businesses',⁵¹ having started as a small time drug dealer, Simmons became hip hop's first successful entrepreneur. Simmons first entered the conglomerate world of hip hop by managing an unknown Queens' act called Kurtis Blow. Due to Simmons persistent management style and the success of *Rapper's Delight*, Blow became the first rap act to sign to a major label (Mercury records in 1979). Simmons then built on his early management success by working with other New York acts, including his younger brother's outfit Run DMC. Simmons took control of the band's image and

⁴⁷ Ian Peddie, *The Resisting Muse: Popular Music and Social Protest* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), p. 90.

⁴⁸ Vladimir Bogdanov (ed), *All Music Guide to Hip Hop: the Definitive Guide to Rap and Hip Hop* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2003), p. 366.

⁴⁹ Dave Laing, 'Sylvia Robinson Obituary' (*The Guardian* online article, 30 September 2011) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2011/sep/30/sylvia-robinson>> [accessed 2 March 2012]

⁵⁰ David Toop, *Rap Attack 2* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1992), p. 81.

⁵¹ Richard Oliver, and Tim Leffel, *Hip Hop, Inc.: Success Strategies of the Rap Moguls* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2006), p. 67.

sound, and their first records were an immediate success in the clubs and parties of New York.

The success of Run DMC brought rap to the mainstream. As successful as Flash, Bambaataa or The Sugarhill Gang had been, Run DMC were the first rap group to sell out arenas and had the first rap album to be certified gold. These huge successes led to Run DMC having the first endorsement in the history of hip hop, after touring for the release of their third album, the group's song *My Adidas* was picked up by the sportswear manufacturer leading to a \$1.5 million dollar endorsement.⁵² This moment, as Ralph Watkins points out, 'started a connection between hip hop and product'.⁵³

This 'corporate assault on youth' as Deron Boyles claims it to be⁵⁴ then snowballed from Kurtis Blow appearing in a Sprite advert, to Simmons launching his own clothing line, Phatfarm, to today where long time rap artist Snoop Doggy Dogg has a list of endorsements ranging from clothes to toys to alcoholic beverages and even to anti-virus software.

In 1984 Simmons met punk-rock producer Rick Rubin and after discovering each other's affinity with hip hop, set up the label Def Jam. They signed hip hop heavyweights such as LL Cool J, Beastie Boys and Public Enemy. Due, in no small part, to Simmons' business savvy attitude, the hip hop industry, as Cheryl Keyes observes, 'became a multimillion dollar enterprise that major record companies could no longer

⁵² Louise C. Slavicek, *Run-DMC* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2007), p. 59.

⁵³ Ralph Basui Watkins, *Hip Hop Redemption: Finding God in the Rhythm and the Rhyme* (Ada: Baker Academic, 2011), p. 28.

⁵⁴ Deron R. Boyles, *The Corporate Assault on Youth: Commercialism, Exploitation, and the End of Innocence* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 2008), p. 38.

afford to ignore'.⁵⁵ This resulted in a distribution deal with CBS, which at that time was the world's biggest label. Perhaps inspired by the success of Def Jam, rapper Eazy-E and his manager Jerry Heller, in 1987, founded the first rapper owned label, Ruthless Records. It is around this time that the history of the commercialisation of hip hop and the emergence of gangsta rap start to become intertwined.

If it could be argued that hip hop was born out of poverty then gangsta rap was born out of even bleaker surroundings, in Jennifer Wolch's paper *From Global to Local: The Rise of Homelessness in Los Angeles During the 1980s*, Wolch states that 'in 1969 7 percent of L.A.'s male workers earned under \$10,000; by 1987, the inflation-adjusted proportion earning this pitiable wage had doubled'.⁵⁶ At the same time, Los Angeles was experiencing a boom in high-tech industries creating opportunities for high skill, high salaried workers, also Reagan had halved the budget for public housing meaning there were 'tax cuts for the rich, cut backs for the poor'.⁵⁷ These extreme economic conditions led to Los Angeles becoming, as economist Edward Soja claims, a 'bipolar city'.⁵⁸ During this time, Los Angeles was experiencing racial tension between the Los Angeles Police Department and its African-American residents; from the shooting of Eula Love to the beating of Rodney King over a decade later the police's mentality

⁵⁵ Cheryl L. Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), p. 112.

⁵⁶ Jennifer Wolch, 'From Global to Local: The Rise of Homelessness in Los Angeles during the 1980s', in *The city: Los Angeles and urban theory at the end of the twentieth century*, ed. by Allen John Scott, and Edward W. Soja (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 390-425, p. 396.

⁵⁷ *Planet Rock: the Story of Hip Hop and the Crack Generation*, dir. by Richard Lowe and Martin Torgoff (Prodigious Media, 2011), 9.00.

⁵⁸ Edward W. Soja, 'Los Angeles, 1965-1992: From Crisis-Generated Restructuring to Restructuring-Generated Crisis', in *The city: Los Angeles and urban theory at the end of the twentieth century*, ed. by Allen John Scott, and Edward W. Soja (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 426-462, p. 426.

meant, according to Robin D. G. Kelley, that 'youth African-Americans by virtue of being residents of South Central L.A. and Compton were subject to harassment'.⁵⁹

This mentality was reflected in the music in the mid to late 1980s with the introduction of such acts as Schoolly D, Ice-T and Eazy-E's NWA. These new sounds coming from America's west coast were, as Chris Smith discusses, 'made in response to violent neighbourhoods, their albums explicitly detailed a hardcore lifestyle of violence, drugs and sex'. Smith continues to note that 'when sales exploded the themes in rap songs started to turn decidedly darker'.⁶⁰ Politically aware groups like Public Enemy and Brand Nubian were pushed aside as records labels, hungry to match the enormous sales of NWA's anti-establishment sound, looked for groups that replicated this winning formula. After some debate over the misappropriation of royalties, Dre left NWA and Ruthless Records to start, with former bodyguard Marion 'Suge' Knight, his own label: Death Row Records.

Described by hip hop author Ronin Ro as 'an imposing figure who stood at 6 foot three inches tall, weighed over 320 pounds, and stared at people as if measuring them for a coffin',⁶¹ Suge Knight was known to secure contracts for his label by less than reputable means (Knight allegedly released Dr Dre from contractual obligations to Ruthless Records by threatening harm to Eazy-E's mother⁶²). If Ruthless Records is

⁵⁹ Robin D. G. Kelley, 'Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: Gangsta Rap and Postindustrial Los Angeles', in *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, ed. by William Eric Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), pp. 117-158, p. 123.

⁶⁰ Chris Smith, *101 Albums that Changed Popular Music* (San Francisco: OUP USA, 2009), p. 200.

⁶¹ Ronin Ro, *Have Gun Will Travel: Spectacular Rise and Violent Fall of Death Row Records* (London: Quartet Books, 1998), p. 86.

⁶² Jake Brown, *Suge Knight: The Rise, Fall, and Rise of Death Row Records* (London: Amber Books Publishing 2001), p. 8.

famous for starting gangsta rap, then Death Row Records should be famous for perfecting the gangsta rap sound, with Dre's debut *The Chronic* and the first ever gold record from a debut artist; his protégé Snoop Doggy Dogg's *Doggystyle*, Death Row Records became the most lucrative rap label in history.⁶³ After the success of Suge Knight's Death Row Records, hip hop's new direction was firmly set, creating a legacy soon followed by such hardcore acts as Cypress Hill, The Onyx and the Notorious B.I.G.

Due to the darker content of these rap records, hip hop started getting some high profile enemies. The Vice President to George H. W. Bush, Dan Quayle, criticised the Universal Music Group in 1991 for allowing 2Pac's *2Pacalypse Now* to be released. Quayle has been quoted as claiming there was 'absolutely no reason for a record like this to be published... It has no place in our society'.⁶⁴ Also after the release of NWA's *Fuck the Police* the FBI issued a warning letter to the group's distributor, Priority Records. The song in question highlighted many of the tensions between black urban youth and the police. This negative press led to a dark cloud looming over the public's opinion of hip hop.

⁶³ Richard Oliver, and Tim Leffel, *Hip Hop, Inc.: Success Strategies of the Rap Moguls* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2006), p. 99.

⁶⁴ Damien Morgan, *Hip Hop Had a Dream: the Artful Movement, Vol. 1* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2008), p. 153.

Thug Life:

Assessing the Popularity of Rap Music against Crime Statistics

Today I didn't even have to use my A.K.

I got to say it was a good day...

Plus nobody I know got killed in South Central L.A.

Today was a good day.

Ice Cube, *It Was a Good Day*.⁶⁵

In 2003, British Education Secretary David Blunkett dismissed gangsta rap as being appalling, violent and promoting gun crime and class A drug abuse.⁶⁶ This opinion has been widely mirrored around the globe over the last 20 years, from a Reebok advert featuring rapper 50 Cent being banned worldwide to the Democratic Republic of Congo banning any rap music that wasn't made on its own soil. David Blunkett made his speech just days after two teenage girls were killed at a Birmingham New Year's eve party in gun related incidents and at the time it seemed like gangsta rap was fast becoming public enemy number one. Whilst being interviewed for the Guardian

⁶⁵ O'Shea Jackson,, *It Was a Good Day*, Ice Cube (EMI, ASIN: B00008GQEO, 17 November 1992).

⁶⁶ Citation from Daniel Sandford,, 'Blunkett Targets Gangster Gun Culture' (BBC News online article, 6 January 2003) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/2632343.stm> [accessed 10 February 2013]

newspaper, however, Greg Wilder from The Source magazine (America's longest running rap periodical) claimed that:

People go too deep into things as far as I'm concerned. These rappers are just making records, just rhyming a word that fit [sic], that's all! I contend that not one of the millions of people who listen to these records is going to go out and try to do the things he hears on them.⁶⁷

Although this could be seen as quite a naïve view, there could be some truth to it.

Conversely, in a study at the Western Connecticut State University titled *Does Rap or Rock Music Provoke Violent Behaviour?* Eliana Tropeano comes to the conclusion that violent themes in music do affect levels of aggression in the listener and that 'this information is useful for parents of young children who are growing up watching these music videos'. Tropeano continues to explain that 'this specific study's results and that of previous research reveal a serious problem. Our society as a whole should consider this a severe problem'.⁶⁸ With this in mind is our society facing a severe problem regarding gangsta rap?

If we are to believe the writings of Doctor Naim Akbar, that 'gangsta [rap] can influence young people to engage in antisocial behaviour and even push those who may be inclined to violence over the edge',⁶⁹ then it seems we may have a social problem with gangsta rap. However, the reality could be that society wants something

⁶⁷ Citation from Benjamin Playthell, 'Reckless Rhetoric of a Fairy-tale Gangsta', in *The Guardian* (11 March 1993), p. 54.

⁶⁸ Eliana Tropeano, 'Does Rock or Rap Music Provoke Violent Behaviour?', in *Journal of Undergraduate Psychological Research*, vol. 1, (2006) pp. 31-34, p. 33.

⁶⁹ Brian Longhurst, *Popular Music and Society*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 83.

to blame. Michael Eric Dyson follows this thought in his book *Between God and Gangsta Rap* and suggests that ‘we should acknowledge that gangsta rap crudely exposes harmful beliefs and practices that are often maintained with deceptive civility in much of mainstream society’⁷⁰ and perhaps the reality is, as S. Craig Watkins notes ‘the perception that youth crime is more rampant, more violent, and more menacing to law abiding citizens than ever before is simply out of touch with reality’.⁷¹

In Dr Deanna Wilkinson’s 2003 book *Guns, Violence and Identity among African American and Latino Youth*, Wilkinson found no causal link between crime and rap music.⁷² Her book claims there is a problem with young people and crime and that perhaps rap music is merely a genre listened to by the younger generation. This idea is mirrored in Julian Tanner et al’s study *Listening to Rap: Cultures of Crime, Cultures of Resistance*, where the consensus was ‘there is no relationship between involvement in either property crime or violent crime and rap music’.⁷³

If we are to look at the United States Census Bureau’s published statistics from 1980 to 2009 we can see that crime has been on a steady decrease in the United States of America, falling from 13,408,000 reported crimes in 1980 to 10,639,000 reported crimes in 2009.⁷⁴ The highest recorded crime rate in this time frame, according to the data, was in 1990 with 14,467,000 reported crimes, but if we look at the per capita

⁷⁰ Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 177.

⁷¹ S. Craig Watkins, *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), p. 167.

⁷² Deanna Wilkinson, *Guns, Violence, and Identity among African American and Latino Youth* (El Paso: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC, 2004).

⁷³ Julian Tanner, Mark Ashbridge, and Scot Wortley, ‘Listening to Rap: Cultures of Crime, Cultures of Resistance’, in *Social Forces*, vol. 88, 2 (2009), pp. 693-722, p. 721.

⁷⁴ ‘Crimes and Crime Rates by Type of Offense: 1980 to 2009’ (U.S. Census Bureau) <<http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0306.pdf>> [accessed 12 December 2012]

statistics, we can see that 5,803 reported crimes per 100,000 people in 1990 compared to the 5,950 per 100,000 in 1980 means that a spike in population could be to blame for the statistical anomaly.

According to Neil E. Farber, gangsta rap has been blamed for an increase in violent crimes,⁷⁵ however, the published statistics do not support this argument; the U.S. Department of Justice's *Homicide Trends in the United States: 1980-2008*, published in November 2011 shows that 'the homicide rate declined sharply from 9.3 homicides per 100,000 in 1992 to 4.8 homicides per 100,000 in 2010', and that 'between 1999 and 2008, the number of homicides remained relatively constant... These homicide numbers were still below those reported in the 1970s, when the number of reported homicides first rose above 20,000 [per 100,000]'.⁷⁶ Violent crime in the United States of America as a whole is also reported to have decreased from 1993 to 2011.

According to Jennifer L. Truman and Michael Planty, writing for the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 'since 1993, the rate of violent crime has declined by 72 percent from 79.8 to 22.5 per 1,000 persons aged 12 or older'.⁷⁷ Burglary, vandalism, car theft and aggravated assault are also following these same trends and we are seeing a thirty year low in the latter half of the first decade of the millennium. One could assume that

⁷⁵ Neil E. Farber, *The Blame Game: the Complete Guide to Blaming, How to Blame and How to Quit* (Minneapolis: Bascom Hill Publishing Group, 2010), p. 56.

⁷⁶ Alexia Cooper, and Erica L. 'Smith, Homicide Trends in the United States, 1980-2008' (U.S. Department of Justice) <<http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/htus8008.pdf>> [accessed 6 February 2013]

⁷⁷ Jennifer L. Truman, and Michael Planty, 'Criminal Victimization, 2011' (U.S. Department of Justice) <<http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv11.pdf>> [accessed 6 February 2013]

the supposed increased crime is only affecting juvenile criminals, but according to Watkins, youth crime has decreased steadily since the 1990s too.⁷⁸

If the statistics are to be believed, what could have caused the drop in crime? Robin D. G. Kelley observed that 'the criminal justice system changed just when hip hop was born'.⁷⁹ Crime and punishment in the United States of America is predicated on deterrence, with laws such as the Rockefeller drug law passed in 1973, the three strikes law passed in 1993 and Rudy Giuliani's 1994 quality of life campaign. Because of these harsher laws the prison population in America, according to Watkins, tripled between 1980 and 1994.⁸⁰ The prison population in America today is around 2.3 million inmates, which is more per capita than the prison population of the United Kingdom, France and Spain combined.⁸¹ Perhaps the harshest law passed in America since the birth of hip hop was the Gang Violence and Juvenile Crime Prevention Act of 1998, otherwise known as Proposition 21. This law increased a variety of criminal penalties for crimes committed by youth and incorporated many youth offenders into the adult criminal justice system, which was seen by many as mistake, as Watkins explains:

The changes made were not simply sweeping, they were radical. At its core

Proposition 21 represented a stunning philosophical break from longstanding ideas

⁷⁸ S. Craig Watkins, *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), p. 167.

⁷⁹ Robin D. G. Kelley, 'Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: Gangsta Rap and Postindustrial Los Angeles', in *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, ed. by William Eric Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), pp. 117-158, p. 118.

⁸⁰ S. Craig Watkins, *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), p. 169.

⁸¹ 'Entire World Prison Population Totals' (International Centre for Prison Studies) <http://www.prisonstudies.org/info/worldbrief/wpb_stats.php?area=all&category=wb_poptotal> [accessed 8 February 2013]

and approaches to dealing with wayward youth, many of whom suffered as much from poverty, broken families, inadequate education, and mental health problems as they did from any personal or moral defect.⁸²

This ultimately led to California having the highest prison population per capita in the whole of the United States of America.⁸³ This perhaps suggests that gangsta rap, which is also from California, is merely social commentary and perhaps, as Kelley claims, 'gangsta rap lyrics have been misinterpreted as advocating criminality and violence',⁸⁴ and that they were merely reflecting on the situation these artists were facing on a daily basis. As rapper Dr Dre explains 'we're making our records based on what we're seeing'.⁸⁵

It has been argued that statistical data on crime is not particularly accurate. The Guardian's John Burn-Murdoch and Mona Chalabi claim that '[there] may have been pressure on the police to downgrade incidents in the face of a targets culture',⁸⁶ the BBC's Danny Shaw mirrors this opinion and blames that 'It's more the culture and informal pressure of having targets and expectations', Shaw also claims that 'low-level crimes [are] being dealt with informally and outside the formal crime-recording

⁸² S. Craig Watkins, *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), p. 166.

⁸³ Robin D. G. Kelley, 'Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: Gangsta Rap and Postindustrial Los Angeles', in *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, ed. by William Eric Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), pp. 117-158, p. 124.

⁸⁴ Robin D. G. Kelley, 'Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: Gangsta Rap and Postindustrial Los Angeles', in *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, ed. by William Eric Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), pp. 117-158, p. 121.

⁸⁵ *Planet Rock: the Story of Hip Hop and the Crack Generation*, dir. by Richard Lowe and Martin Torgoff (Prodigious Media, 2011), 40.50.

⁸⁶ John Burn-Murdoch, and Mona Chalabi, 'Crime Statistics for England and Wales: What's Happening to Each Offence?' (*The Guardian* online article, 24 January 2013) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/jul/14/crime-statistics-england-wales#data>> [accessed 6 February 2013]

system'.⁸⁷ Michael Quinn's paper *Gangsta Rap and the Struggle over Racial Identity* claims that crime statistics don't take race into consideration and that even though crime may be perceived as going down, for certain racial groups the statistics are entirely different, in some cases doubling between 1980 and the mid-1990s.⁸⁸ So if the statistics are believed to be unreliable, what could cause a rise in crime?

In his book, *Young People, Crime and Justice*, Roger Hopkins Burke claims that something as significant as a person's diet could affect criminal behaviour. This idea mirrors the 1980 paper *Dietary Correlates of Hyperactive Behaviour in Children* by R. J. Prinz et al, where the authors suggest 'some foods and in particular certain additives have effects that may lead to hyperactivity and even criminality'.⁸⁹ John Muncie, however, claims possible factors for crime are parenting, truancy, drug-abuse, lack of facilities, homelessness, unemployment, low income and recession.⁹⁰ In no part of his book *Youth and Crime* does Muncie entertain the idea that music has a role to play in causing criminal activity. This idea is also shared by Detective Chief Superintendent John Coles, in the documentary *Guns are Cool*, Coles claims that:

Music and fashion are being blamed when they aren't necessarily the problem. It is actually those basic underlying issues that are causing the situation that we have today which is about poor education and not much perceived chance of being successful in

⁸⁷ Danny Shaw, 'Fall in Crime "May be Exaggerated"' (BBC News online article, 24 January 2013) <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-21178847>> [accessed 8 February 2013]

⁸⁸ Michael Quinn, "'Never Shoulda Been Let out the Penitentiary": Gangsta Rap and the Struggle over Racial Identity', in *Cultural Critique*, vol. 34, (1996), pp. 65-89, p. 86.

⁸⁹ Ronald J. Prinz, William A. Roberts, and Elaine Hantman, 'Dietary Correlates of Hyperactive Behaviour in Children', in *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, (48), pp. 760-785, p. 768.

⁹⁰ John Muncie, *Youth and Crime*, 2nd edn (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2007), p. 230.

society, which leads them to drugs which ultimately leads to guns. One follows the other.⁹¹

The idea that the drug trade ultimately leads to crime is by no means a revolutionary one. If we look into the history of hip hop and in particular gangsta rap we can see that one drug in particular is prominent in the cities that these genres were born in: crack cocaine.

Cocaine was a popular drug in America in the 1970s, being dubbed by James A. Swartz as the 'champagne of drugs'.⁹² Cocaine was expensive, leading it to be popular, as Swartz explains, among 'wealthier Americans and the glitterati as a status symbol and harmless diversion'.⁹³ Crack, however, is cocaine at its basic alkaloid level and the popularity of this form of cocaine coincided with a dramatic increase in the growth of Coca leaves in Bolivia, Peru and Columbia that drove down the price of manufactured cocaine. In Terry Williams 1992 book *Crackhouse: Notes from the End of the Line* it is reported that the price of cocaine dropped from \$50,000 a kilo in 1980 to \$35,000 in 1984 to \$12,000 a kilo in 1992.⁹⁴ During the falling prices of this drug, infamous drug runner Freeway Rick Ross discovered a cheap method of manufacturing crack: using baking soda instead of ether to produce the rocks. This meant that, as Edith Cooper explains, '[crack] was no longer the drug for the wealthy but became affordable for

⁹¹ *Guns are Cool*, dir. by Ben Chanan (C4, 2003), 25.30.

⁹² James A. Swartz,, *Substance Abuse in America: a Documentary and Reference Guide* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Ltd, 2012), p. 190.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁹⁴ Terry Moses Williams,, *Crackhouse: Notes from the End of the Line* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1992), p. 66.

virtually everyone, even the unemployed or a teenage drug user'.⁹⁵ It has been noted that the cheapening of crack 'led to a substantial rise in property crimes committed by juveniles and young adults'⁹⁶ and has also been cited as the main reason for the birth of gangsta rap, as Nelson states, 'this is not a chicken-or-the-egg riddle, first came crack rocks then gangsta rap'.⁹⁷ Due to this, the Wu Tang Clan's Rza claims 'this crack culture influenced our music... It became part of our music'.⁹⁸

The sheer volume of crack addicts led to some American cities becoming, as Kelley describes, 'militarized landscapes',⁹⁹ leading to Reagan's war on drugs. It also meant that a lot of money could be made selling crack. If we are to believe the documentary *Planet Rock: The Story of Hip-Hop and the Crack Generation*, a lot of gangsta rap's big successes started out selling drugs. Cypress Hill's B-Real suffered a collapsed lung after being shot in the chest due to drug related gang activity¹⁰⁰ and Snoop Doggy Dogg spent the first three years of his rap career going in and out of jail after skipping bail due to allegedly trying to sell crack to an undercover police officer.¹⁰¹ Chart topping rapper Jay-Z also famously rapped that 'I used to move snowflakes by the O Z',¹⁰² a

⁹⁵ Edith Fairman Cooper, *The Emergence of Crack Cocaine Abuse* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2002), p. 26.

⁹⁶ Robin D. G. Kelley, 'Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: Gangsta Rap and Postindustrial Los Angeles', in *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, ed. by William Eric Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), pp. 117-158, p. 123.

⁹⁷ Nelson George, *Hip Hop America* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 42.

⁹⁸ *Planet Rock: the Story of Hip Hop and the Crack Generation*, dir. by Richard Lowe and Martin Torgoff (Prodigious Media, 2011), 2.10.

⁹⁹ Robin D. G. Kelley, 'Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: Gangsta Rap and Postindustrial Los Angeles', in *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, ed. by William Eric Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), pp. 117-158, p. 123.

¹⁰⁰ *Planet Rock: the Story of Hip Hop and the Crack Generation*, dir. by Richard Lowe and Martin Torgoff (Prodigious Media, 2011), 26.55.

¹⁰¹ Mickey Hess, *Icons of Hip Hop: An Encyclopaedia of the Movement, Music, and Culture, Volume 2* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), p. 327.

¹⁰² Shawn Carter, *Public Service Announcement, Jay-Z* (Mercury Records, ASIN: B00011FXGO, 19 November 2003)

clear reference to his drug dealing past. It was the migration of careers from drug dealer to the safer occupation of rapper that led to west coast producer Too \$hort claiming 'crack basically funded hip hop'.¹⁰³

The idea that criminals moved into the hip hop industry as a more secure profession is also shared by author Ethan Brown in his stranger than fiction book *Queens Reigns Supreme: Fat Cat, 50 Cent, and the Rise of the Hip Hop Hustler*. Brown describes that because of such events as the Edward Byrne killing (a police officer who became well known in the United States after he was murdered while on duty by known gang members, causing nationwide outrage) and the Rudy Giuliani administration's quality of life policing, the criminal gangs were driven off the streets. Brown explains that:

Hustlers looked to start a new life in hip hop... Hustlers became part of the ever-present hip hop entourage or took on jobs as assistants, security guards, or managers. Hip hop might have offered lower pay than hustling, but the risks were no longer worth the gamble.¹⁰⁴

Before some of the criminal underworld merged into corporate hip hop, themes of criminality inherent in gangsta rap were already apparent, author Vladimir Bogdanov claims that 'gangsta rap got started around 1986, when the seminal Ice-T wrote a disturbing tune called 6'N the Mornin'''.¹⁰⁵ Although Ice-T suffered a very harrowing childhood (losing both parents by the age of twelve), his dabbling with criminality was

¹⁰³ *Planet Rock: the Story of Hip Hop and the Crack Generation*, dir. by Richard Lowe and Martin Torgoff (Prodigious Media, 2011), 42.30.

¹⁰⁴ Ethan Brown, *Fat Cat, 50 Cent, and the Rise of the Hip Hop Hustler* (London: Plexus, 2008), p. xxi.

¹⁰⁵ Vladimir Bogdanov (ed), *All Music Guide to Hip Hop: the Definitive Guide to Rap and Hip Hop* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2003), p. 564.

very minor, reportedly no more than 'selling small amounts of cannabis and stealing car stereos'.¹⁰⁶ The content of the album, although more about sex than violence, talks of his violent surroundings rather than his own violent encounters. In *Squeeze the Trigger*, Ice-T raps 'they say I'm violent, they should watch their T.V. They say I'm brutal, they should check their P.D. You made me, now your kids rave me. I rap about the life that the city streets gave me'.¹⁰⁷ From the content it is clear that the song's commentary is about the social surroundings of Ice-T's life; he is criticising, as Kelley states that he is a 'product of a callous, brutal society'.¹⁰⁸ As Emmett George Price notes in *Hip Hop Culture*, 'gangsta rap [was] the epitome of Hip Hop because it offered an uncensored social commentary',¹⁰⁹ and you can see from this statement gangsta rap was not about promoting violence but about portraying to the world the hard times these people were experiencing. Mirroring the argument that gangsta rap is merely social commentary is hip hop mogul Russell Simmons, in the 2003 documentary *Guns Are Cool*, Simmons explains that 'one of the poet's jobs is to report the truth. Poets write what they see'.¹¹⁰

In his autobiography, *Ice: A Memoir of Gangster Life and Redemption, from South Central to Hollywood*, Ice-T cites Schoolly D's 1985 *PSK - What Does it Mean* as being the first gangsta rap record, and the inspiration for *6'N the Mornin'*,¹¹¹ in the song

¹⁰⁶ Tracy Marrow, *Ice: a Memoir of Gangster Life and Redemption - from South Central to Hollywood* (London: Random House, 2012), p. 30.

¹⁰⁷ Tracy Marrow, *Squeeze the Trigger*, Ice-T (Sire, ASIN: B00008G0YV, 17 October 1990)

¹⁰⁸ Robin D. G. Kelley, 'Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: Gangsta Rap and Postindustrial Los Angeles', in *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, ed. by William Eric Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), pp. 117-158, p. 120.

¹⁰⁹ Emmett G. Price, *Hip Hop Culture* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Ltd, 2006), p. 59.

¹¹⁰ *Guns are Cool*, dir. by Ben Chanan (C4, 2003), 28 .12.

¹¹¹ Tracy Marrow, *Ice: a Memoir of Gangster Life and Redemption - from South Central to Hollywood* (London: Random House, 2012), p. 30.

Schoolly D raps about his time spent with the Philadelphia based gang Park Side Killas. Removing Bambaataa's anti-gang aesthetic, Schoolly D, as Price notes, 'brought the gang culture into rap music'.¹¹² In regard to themes of violence within rap music, Price also explains that:

hip hop was unable to escape the brutal clutches of these violent acts and violent crimes, even though Bambaataa, the Universal Zulu Nation, and numerous other artists and collectives have stood against promulgation of violence, whether it be domestic, race-based, gang-related, or any other form.¹¹³

If the violent acts that Price talks of were already ingrained within the hip hop community then we can clearly trace these themes back further than the emergence of gangsta rap. Kurtis Blow and Run DMC's 1984 collaboration *8 Million Stories* rap of tales of street violence and drug abuse and in Grandmaster Melle Mel (after parting ways with Grandmaster Flash) and the Furious Five's 1984 *Hustla's Convention* lead rapper Melle Mel can be heard rapping 'if I caught a dude cheating, I would give him a beating and I might even blow him away',¹¹⁴ illustrating that the idea of settling a dispute with violence is not an idea new to gangsta rap. Antony B. Pinn also claims that themes of violence can be traced back to the original MCs of the 1970s, claiming 'the most frequent style of rap was a variation of the toast, [that was] explicitly political and often aggressive, violent, and sexist in content'.¹¹⁵ Rapper KRS-One claims this braggadocio within hip hop stems from a game called *the dozens* in which participants

¹¹² Emmett G. Price, *Hip Hop Culture* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Ltd, 2006), p. 59.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹¹⁴ Melvin Glover, *Hustler's Convention*, Grandmaster Melle Mel and the Furious Five (Sugarhill Records, ASIN: B000A7BB6A, 8 October 1984).

¹¹⁵ Anthony B. Pinn, (ed), *Noise and Spirit: the Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), p. 83.

insult each other until one gives up. In the documentary *The Art of Rap*, KRS-One draws direct parallels from this verbal duel to the time of slavery where 'slaves were sold one by one, unless they were not in their prime, then they were sold by the dozen'.¹¹⁶ He continues to explain that to overcome such traumatic experiences the slaves turned it into a game, suggesting each other were not fit for selling, becoming a dozen.

It has been suggested that the violent content in some rap music is due to 'a belief of a gross failure of the legal system, and the need to take the law into one's own hands'.¹¹⁷ This idea is evident in Ice-T's 1992 outfit Body Count's *Cop Killer*, a song written from the point of view of an individual who is outraged by police brutality and decides to settle matters himself, a song reminiscent of Hank Williams Junior's 1979 *I've Got Rights* where the narrator shoots a man accused of murdering his wife who was acquitted by the judicial system; a song described by Dominic Pulera as 'hard edged cultural commentary'¹¹⁸ and highlighting Williams' 'hyper-patriotic, anti-crime attitude'.¹¹⁹ The lyrical content of such songs are not meant to be taken literally, the narration is embedded in fantasy. Neither Hank Williams Junior nor Ice-T have ever murdered, their use of narration is, as Cheryl Keyes notes, storytelling; a tradition that in rap music, Keyes claims has direct ancestry to the toasts of Jamaica.¹²⁰ This suggestion would mean that the content of such songs are not based on real life

¹¹⁶ *The Art of Rap: Something from Nothing*, dir. by Tracy Marrow (Kaleidoscope Home Entertainment, 2012), 1:20.36.

¹¹⁷ Rodrigo Bascunan, and Christian Pearce, *Enter the Babylon System: Unpacking Gun Culture from Samuel Colt to 50 Cent* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2007), p. 32.

¹¹⁸ Dominic J. Pulera, *Sharing the Dream: White Males in a Multicultural America* (New York: Continuum, 2004), p.251.

¹¹⁹ Dominic J. Pulera, *Sharing the Dream: White Males in a Multicultural America* (New York: Continuum, 2004), p.251.

¹²⁰ Cheryl L. Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), p. 24.

occurrences, as Ice-T explains 'if you believe I'm a cop killer then you believe David Bowie is an astronaut'.¹²¹

The idea that the narration within rap music is not to be taken literally has led hip hop scholar Richard Littlefield to claim 'rap lyrics are a manifestation of the rapper's power and ego',¹²² Littlefield continues to explain that there is no metaphor more powerful than the suggestion of murder. Kelley, however, takes this idea further claiming:

Many of the violent lyrics are not intended literally. Rather, they are boasting raps in which the imagery of gang bangin' is used metaphorically to challenge competitors on the mic... The mic becomes a Tech-9 or an AK-47, imaginary drive-bys occur from the stage, flowing lyrics become hollow-point shells.¹²³

Mark Katz shares this opinion too, analogising the turntable as a weapon.¹²⁴ Examples of such metaphors in rap music can be seen in tracks such as Ice Cube's *Jackin' for Beats*; a song describing Cube's sampling of other artists work as armed robbery, and Ice-T's *I'm your pusher*, an anti-drug song comparing his style to that of an addictive drug that he is selling: 'the dope I'm sellin', you don't smoke, you feel out on the dance floor'.¹²⁵

¹²¹ Richard Oliver, and Tim Leffel, *Hip Hop, Inc.: Success Strategies of the Rap Moguls* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2006), p. 92.

¹²² Richard Littlefield, 'Hip Hop Citizenship' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Central Michigan, 2005), p. 18.

¹²³ Robin D. G. Kelley, 'Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: Gangsta Rap and Postindustrial Los Angeles', in *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, ed. by William Eric Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), pp. 117-158, p.121.

¹²⁴ Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology has Changed Music, Volume 2* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), p. 124.

¹²⁵ Tracy Marrow, *I'm Your Pusher*, Ice-T (Sire, ASIN: B000002LF6, 17 October 1988).

These analogies could perhaps suggest that not only is the violent content not meant directly but hasn't been experienced at all by the artist. Ta-Nemisi Coates mirrors this idea in his article for *The Village Voice*, claiming 'rap lyrics about shoot-outs in the street are now more fantasy than reality',¹²⁶ Jay-Z also suggests this in his autobiography *Decoded* in which he states 'the rapper's character is essentially a conceit, a first-person literary creation', Jay-Z continues to explain that 'the core of that character has to match the core of the rapper himself. But then that core gets amplified by the rapper's creativity and imagination'.¹²⁷ The reality that these rappers are portraying does not have to be real but it does have to be believable, as Rose states:

Because hip hop relies on the reality of life in the hood . . . many hip hop artists project a certain image. . . As we have seen rapper's own credibility rests on convincing their fans that they are telling the truths in their rhymes.¹²⁸

Blurring the line between reality and fiction, Cobb has noted that 'the truth or falseness of a story is secondary. What matters is that the story was credible enough to be relayed'.¹²⁹ Possibly two of the most high profile gangsta rappers with dubious roots are 2Pac and Notorious B.I.G., both are from New York and both ended their careers signed to two of the biggest labels in rap (Death Row Records and Bad Boy Records respectively). Notorious B.I.G. was famous for his rags to riches stories,

¹²⁶ Coates, Ta-Nemisi, 'When Music Moguls Attack' (*Village Voice*) <<http://www.villagevoice.com/2004-07-27/news/when-music-moguls-attack/>> [accessed 19 February 2013]

¹²⁷ Shawn Carter, *Decoded* (New York: Random House, 2010), p. 139.

¹²⁸ Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip-hop and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), p. 189.

¹²⁹ William Jelani. Cobb, *To the Break of Dawn: a Freestyle on the Hip Hop Aesthetic* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), p. 34.

claiming he was brought up in a 'one room shack'¹³⁰ struggling to afford meals. In an interview with Nick Broomfield for the documentary *Biggie and Tupac*, however, his mother Voletta Wallace explains that his lyrics were from the view point of an alter-ego and that his one room shack was actually a modest middle class house,¹³¹ not too surprising for someone who was born to a teacher mother and politician father.

Although his upbringing was by no means as luxurious, 2Pac similarly had a comfortable upbringing, reading poetry under Leila Steinberg and attending the Baltimore School of the Arts, studying acting, poetry, jazz, and ballet; 2Pac performed in Shakespeare plays, and in the ballet *The Nutcracker*.¹³² Both artists also experienced global success before they ultimately paid the highest price for their Faustian deal with fame.

It has been suggested that the global success achieved by Christopher Wallace and Tupac Shakur's alter-egos, Notorious B.I.G. and 2Pac, was due to the fact that, as rapper Mellow T describes in *Louis Theroux's Weird Weekends*, 'everybody is fascinated by the bad guy'.¹³³ Nelson too believes this, claiming 'often [America's] heroes are not heroes, but anti-heroes'.¹³⁴ Cobb takes this theory one step further, claiming 'the two most identifiable American folk heroes are the cowboy and the gangster... re-playing the age-old conflict of man verses nature, and at the same time,

¹³⁰ Christopher Wallace, *Juicy*, Notorious B.I.G. (Bad Boy Records, ASIN: B000JJ4PDK , 8 August 1994).

¹³¹ *Biggie and Tupac*, dir. by Nick Broomfield (Optimum Home Entertainment, 2002), 20.36.

¹³² Randall Sullivan, *Labyrinth: a Detective Investigates the Murders of Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls, the Implication of Death Row Records' Suge Knight, and the Origins of the Los Angeles Police Scandal* (New York: Grove/Atlantic, 2002), p. 39.

¹³³ *Louis Theroux's Weird Weekends, Series 3, Episode 6*, dir. by David Mortimer (BBC Bristol, 2000), 24.36.

¹³⁴ Nelson George, *Hip Hop America* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 53.

man verses human nature',¹³⁵ suggesting that these catharsis figures are questioning our own perceptions of human weakness, and that 'gangsta rap is an echo of the folklore tradition of lionizing the outlaw'.¹³⁶

If this were true however, then Darth Vader wouldn't have killed Emperor Palpatine at the end of the original Star Wars franchise, Carlito Brigante would not have been killed at the end of *Carlito's Way* and James Bond would not have survived to his 23rd movie. Oliver and Leffel suggest that the consuming public weren't sympathising with the narration but that 'gangsta rap was embraced by all those who didn't want to break the law but wanted to live vicariously through the music'.¹³⁷ Conversely Ziauddin Sardar claims that, although the violence inherent is reflective rather than glorification, the consumption of it is the 'postmodern equivalent of the blackface minstrel shows'.¹³⁸

Whatever the reason for the popularity of violent themes within gangsta rap and whether or not the artist rapping about such themes have experienced it for themselves or not, as we can see by the statistics there is no causal link between the popularity of gangsta rap and crime. We can also see that themes of violence already

¹³⁵ William Jelani. Cobb, *To the Break of Dawn: a Freestyle on the Hip Hop Aesthetic* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), p. 34.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹³⁷ Richard Oliver, and Tim Leffel, *Hip Hop, Inc.: Success Strategies of the Rap Moguls* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2006), p. 97.

¹³⁸ Ziauddin Sardar, *The A to Z of Postmodern Life* (London: Vision, 2002), p. 28.

existed within rap music before gangsta rap's emergence, or as Rose claims: '[hip hop was] carrying many of the seeds of destruction that were part of society itself'.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk about When We Talk about Hip-hop and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), p. ix.

Mo' Money, Mo' Problems:

Commercialism, Consumerism and Conspicuous Consumption

I'm an individual, yeah, but I'm part of a movement,

My movement told me to be a consumer and I consumed it,

They told me to just do it,

I listened to what that swoosh said.

Macklemore and Ryan Lewis, *Wing\$*.¹⁴⁰

In 2005, before he became president, Barack Obama stated that 'the underlying values [of rap music] are so square. It's about bling. It is entirely cynical, entirely materialistic'.¹⁴¹ This opinion has been echoed by such writers as Adam Joel Banks, claiming '[materialism] killed hip hop',¹⁴² to the *Mirror's* Paul Routledge who blamed the London riots on 'hip hop's glorification of trashy materialism'.¹⁴³ Although an

¹⁴⁰ Ben Haggerty, *Wing\$*, Macklemore and Ryan Lewis (Macklemore LLC, ASIN: B00908DDZM, 11 February 2013).

¹⁴¹ Barack Obama, citation from Katz, Jamie, 'The Chosen One', in *Vibe*, vol. 13, 10 (2005), pp. 206-211, p. 211.

¹⁴² Adam Joel Banks, *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011), p. 120.

¹⁴³ Paul Routledge, 'London Riots: Is Rap Music to Blame for Encouraging this Culture of Violence?', in *The Mirror* (online article, 10 August 2011) <<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/london-riots-is-rap-music-to-blame-146671>> [accessed 2 April 2013]

extreme view, Routledge's column was printed two days after the release of Kanye West and Jay-Z's collaborative album *Watch the Throne*.

Watch the Throne is thick with references of wealth, opulence and materialism to the extent that the album has been criticised for 'promoting relentless capitalism',¹⁴⁴ even down to the sleeve designed by Givenchy's Riccardo Tisci. While hip hop started off as an underground and often political movement, it has for many years pursued an increasingly intimate relationship with money. The hip hop industry has become fully accepting of all the opportunities that the conventions of the capitalist system has to offer and no two rappers are better examples of embracing this than Kanye West and Jay-Z. Both rappers own the record labels distributing their music (GOOD Music and Roc-A-Fella Records respectively), both have their own clothing lines (Pastelle Clothing and Roc-A-Wear), both are supported by major corporate endorsements and, according to American business magazine *Forbes*, both were within the world's 25 highest paid musicians of 2012.¹⁴⁵ So where did hip hop's love affair with money come from?

In this chapter I will be splitting rap's relationship with money into three categories; commercialism, consumerism and conspicuous consumption. I will be exploring how hip hop became the global brand that it is today, who is buying rap records, why these

¹⁴⁴ Rob Harvilla, 'Jay-Z and Kanye West, Watch the Throne' (*Spin* online article, 12 August 2011) <<http://www.spin.com/reviews/jay-z-and-kanye-west-watch-throne-roc-felladef-jamroc-nation>> [accessed 26 March 2013]

¹⁴⁵ Zack O'Malley Greenburg, *The World's 25 Highest-Paid Musicians 2012* (Forbes, Inc.) <<http://www.forbes.com/pictures/eeel45mjgk/the-worlds-25-highest-paid-musicians-16/>> [accessed 1 March 2013]

themes of wealth are adopted by a large number of today's rap artists and whether these themes were due to the emergence of gangsta rap.

The first commercial ventures of rap music took a while to snowball to become the 'first global genre' that hip hop has been described as today.¹⁴⁶ It has been argued that the first commercial offerings of rap were pop fuelled and not true to hip hop's aesthetics, as George notes, 'they lacked soul and to a large degree sounded too formulated'.¹⁴⁷ However, in the 1980s, as Shapiro observes, 'the novelty effect of Rapper's Delight wore off'¹⁴⁸ and it was this period that Rachel Cepeda claims 'marked the diversification of hip hop as the genre developed more complex styles'.¹⁴⁹ This development steadily increased until rap music was so popular that in 1997 hip hop mogul Puff Daddy's Bad Boy Records had produced a third of all top 100 singles that year¹⁵⁰ and rap producer Master P was in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for being the richest entertainer.¹⁵¹ So how did this success come about?

Oliver and Leffel suggest that this success was due to the emergence of LL Cool J in 1985 as he was the first rapper to use a conventional song structure with a defined chorus, turning rap music into 'songs that could be a radio hit'.¹⁵² Thomas Hatch traces the roots of hip hop's commercial success back a year earlier to Run DMC's 1984 self-

¹⁴⁶ Patrick Neate, *Where You're at: Notes From the Frontline of a Hip Hop Planet* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2004), p. 6.

¹⁴⁷ Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 43.

¹⁴⁸ Peter Shapiro, *The Rough Guide to Hip Hop* (London: Rough Guides Ltd, 2005), p. 1996.

¹⁴⁹ Cepeda, Raquel, *And it Don't Stop: the Best American Hip Hop Journalism of the Last 25 Years* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p. 169.

¹⁵⁰ Richard Oliver, and Tim Leffel, *Hip Hop, Inc.: Success Strategies of the Rap Moguls* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2006), p. 114.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 173.

titled debut album that Hatch refers to as ‘the first rap album ever made’¹⁵³ (although in the same year Kurtis Blow was releasing his fifth studio album). Bikari Kitwana, however, claims it was the introduction of the music video in 1983 that was ‘the primary catalyst responsible for the popularisation of rap music’,¹⁵⁴ adding ‘[the] music video opened corporate industry’s eyes to a virtually untapped goldmine: selling the black musical concept to consumers’.¹⁵⁵

As John M. Shaw notes, ‘negativity sells, and there is no shortage of buyers’.¹⁵⁶ This was definitely the case with the commercialisation of rap music. The imagery of violence was, as Simona J. Hill states, ‘an important marketing tool of the capitalist hip hop industry’.¹⁵⁷ It is this tool that George explains kept rap music popular, he claims these themes meant hip hop ‘managed to remain vital, abrasive, and edgy for two decades’.¹⁵⁸ Selling violence proved to be a winning formula, as Chang explains ‘[it] proved to be the ideal form to commodify hip hop culture. It was endlessly novel, reproducible, malleable, [and] perfectible’.¹⁵⁹ As we have discussed these themes of violence were already evident in rap music but the emergence of gangsta rap definitely exacerbated it. The bad publicity these themes were creating led to many record labels dropping their rap focused subsidiaries, as Bogdanov notes, ‘major labels were running

¹⁵³ Thomas Hatch, *A History of Hip Hop: the Roots of Rap* (Bloomington: Red Brick Learning, 2005), p. 42.

¹⁵⁴ Bikari Kitwana, *The Rap on Gangsta Rap* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1995), p. 14.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁵⁶ Shaw, John M., *The Memphis Commercial*, citation from Oliver, Richard, and Tim Leffel, *Hip Hop, Inc.: Success Strategies of the Rap Moguls* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2006), p. 109.

¹⁵⁷ Simona J. Hill, and Dave Ramsaran, *Hip Hop and Equality: Searching for the Real Slim Shady* (New York: Cambria Press, 2009), p. 73.

¹⁵⁸ Nelson George, *Hip Hop America* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 155.

¹⁵⁹ Jeff Chang,, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: a History of the Hip Hop Generation* (London: Picador, 2006), p. 228.

away from the controversy that gangsta rap caused'.¹⁶⁰ Time Warner sold Interscope because of their distribution deal with Death Row Records and Uptown Records, as a parent label, dropped Bad Boy Records due to the signing of gangsta rap heavyweight Notorious B.I.G. This disassociation by major record labels meant that independent rapper-owned labels flourished. As Jennifer C. Lena observes, 'the independent labels had a much greater understanding of the cultural logic of hip hop and rap music',¹⁶¹ it was this increase of rapper-owned labels that Oliver and Leffel claim increased the sales of rap music, and they note, 'if you want to sell to a certain demographic, you have to understand it. The majority of certain corporations don't'.¹⁶² This also meant that the rappers owning the labels made a lot more money than if signed to a major label, in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* Jerry Heller stated:

The economics of it were staggering, just staggering. If you were with Warner Brothers, for example, and you sold 500,000 records, they might drop you from the label. The way we were doing it, if you sold 200,000 records you made a quarter [of a] million dollars. And you made it right there.¹⁶³

Although Ruthless Records was not the first independent rap label, it was the first to be co-owned by a rapper. This paradigm shift from a major record label to a small self-owned independent label is a model still used today by rap music's biggest names, as Oliver and Leffel observe, 'moving 10 to 20 thousand units a week does more for [an

¹⁶⁰ Vladimir Bogdanov (ed), *All Music Guide to Hip Hop: the Definitive Guide to Rap and Hip Hop* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2003), p. 310.

¹⁶¹ Jennifer C. Lena, *Banding Together: How Communities Create Genres in Popular Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 107.

¹⁶² Richard Oliver, and Tim Leffel, *Hip Hop, Inc.: Success Strategies of the Rap Moguls* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2006), p. 153.

¹⁶³ Chris Lee, 'His Rep Got a Bad Rap' (*Los Angeles Times* online article, 24 September 2006) <<http://articles.latimes.com/2006/sep/24/entertainment/ca-brief24>> [accessed 28 November 2012]

independent label's] bottom line than it does for a conglomerate such as Time Warner or Sony'.¹⁶⁴ Not only does this mean more money can be made through distribution but it also means the rappers have more creative control, as Mickey Hess claims, 'recording outside the influence of the industry marketing strategies, artists claim to recover the individuality of their music, making it more real than the standardized corporate product'.¹⁶⁵ Because the music didn't have to be watered down to suit a corporate gain it also meant the themes of violence could become more evident, as Quinn explains: 'despite censorious strategies, the mainstream and specialist media were increasingly forced to let gangsta in'.¹⁶⁶ Quinn continues to explain that the popularity of gangsta rap was due 'to the widespread fascination with ghetto blackness and the "sensational" deterioration of urban areas',¹⁶⁷ and that such high profile cases such as the Rodney King beating or the Los Angeles riots only helped strengthen this image.

The idea of a 'fascination of ghetto blackness', as Quinn claims is a well-used argument for the consumption of hip hop. This 'cultural tourism' that Watkins labels it¹⁶⁸ has been regularly reported by various sources, such as Rose, who claim that 'white people purchase anywhere from 60-80% of all rap music'.¹⁶⁹ Oliver and Leffel claim this to be a big factor in the violent themes being consumed, they state '[gangsta rap] was

¹⁶⁴ Richard Oliver, and Tim Leffel, *Hip Hop, Inc.: Success Strategies of the Rap Moguls* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2006), p. 137.

¹⁶⁵ Mickey Hess, *Is Hip Hop Dead?: the Past, Present, and Future of America's Most Wanted* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), p. 29.

¹⁶⁶ Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang: the Cultures and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 89.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹⁶⁸ S. Craig Watkins, *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), p. 97.

¹⁶⁹ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), p. 164.

embraced by all those who didn't really want to break the law, but wanted to live vicariously through the music, the clothes, the jewellery and the lifestyle'.¹⁷⁰ Damien Arthur mirrors this thought, claiming 'gangster rap is often consumed as a fantasy in which teenage males can forge strong masculine gender identities'.¹⁷¹

The assumption that the consumers of rap music and, more importantly, of the violent gangster image are a predominantly white audience is commonly accepted, however, Kitwana challenges this. In his 2005 book *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop*, Kitwana claims that it stems from a 1991 article by David Samuels published in *The New Republic* titled, *The Rap on Rap: the Black Music that Isn't Either*. Although Samuels doesn't offer a percentage, his claim that a white audience is accountable for the majority of hip hop's consumption has, according to Kitwana, continually been reiterated since the article was published.¹⁷² Kitwana states that although the percentage of hip hop consumption to a white audience is reported consistently as between 60 to 80 percent, you can 'search high and low and you would be hard pressed to find a source for it'.¹⁷³ As we can see the audience demographics cannot be quantified, however the perception of selling to a predominantly white audience is important, as Margaret Hunter notes:

Whether or not whites are the primary audience is not as important as the perception that whites are hip hop's primary audience and as whites have been accepted as the

¹⁷⁰ Richard Oliver, and Tim Leffel, *Hip Hop, Inc.: Success Strategies of the Rap Moguls* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2006), p. 97.

¹⁷¹ Damien Arthur, 'Hip Hop Consumption and Masculinity', in *Gender and Consumer Behaviour*, vol. 8, (2006), pp. 105-116, p. 105.

¹⁷² Bikari Kitwana, *The Rap on Gangsta Rap* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1995), p. 82.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

primary audience of hip hop music, the culture industry has shaped the images and messages of hip hop music to fit what they believe whites' will accept and purchase as an authentic representation of the black culture.¹⁷⁴

Hunter also explains that the consumer can not only purchase hip hop through rap music but can 'consume hip hop by purchasing ringtones, magazines, fragrances, shoes, cars, entire lines of clothing, video games, pornography, specialty liquors, and more',¹⁷⁵ showing that rap music is being sold now as more than just a genre of music, as Hill states, 'hip hop is more than just the beats now; it is a lifestyle'.¹⁷⁶ Patrick Neate explains that it is this selling of a lifestyle that has made hip hop the global force that it is today, claiming 'the most long lived and successful [genres] tend to be those that encompass more than music alone'.¹⁷⁷

Unsurprisingly, corporate brands have been keen to get involved in selling the hip hop lifestyle. Darren Wright, creative director of the Nike account at advertising agency Wieden and Kennedy explains that:

With hip hop you're buying more than music. It isn't a genre—it's a lifestyle, encompassing fashion, break dancing, the clothes or the jewels you wear... The

¹⁷⁴ Margaret Hunter, 'Shake it, Baby, Shake it: Consumption and the New Gender Relation in Hip Hop', in *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 54, 1 (2011), pp. 15-36, p. 16.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁷⁶ Simona J. Hill, and Dave Ramsaran, *Hip Hop and Equality: Searching for the Real Slim Shady* (New York: Cambria Press, 2009), p. 142.

¹⁷⁷ Patrick Neate, *Where You're at: Notes From the Frontline of a Hip Hop Planet* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2004), p. 3.

lifestyle is worth its weight in gold because it's not just about one rap song, it's so much more.¹⁷⁸

Starting with Run DMC's tie-in with Adidas and going from Tommy Hilfiger's emergence from obscurity to Dr Dre's range of headphones, the hip hop industry now, according to Hunter, has 'created a culture where hip hop is experienced primarily through consumption rather than production'.¹⁷⁹ This change in trends has led to many of the rapper-owned labels expanding to rapper-owned enterprises, branching out into designer clothes, jewellery, film, and much more, changing not just the hip hop industry but, according to Oliver and Leffel, the whole music business, as they note:

The hip hop impresarios have changed the music business in two fundamental ways. They got control over their own music and in doing so became increasingly wealthy. And, not content to stay within the music industry as most had in the past, they used that money to create a large number of interlocking endeavours in a myriad of businesses.¹⁸⁰

This change, or strategic renewal, in what is being sold started happening at a time when 'the chance of making a living in the traditional CD-sales based 'record business' [was] rapidly dwindling'.¹⁸¹ This meant the culture of consumption could be exploited when music sales were not producing as much revenue as they once would; this

¹⁷⁸ Darren Wright, citation from Yates, Steve, *The Sound of Capitalism* (Prospect Magazine) <<https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/hip-hop-bling-capitalism-business/>> [accessed 6 March 2013]

¹⁷⁹ Hunter, Margaret, 'Shake it, Baby, Shake it: Consumption and the New Gender Relation in Hip Hop', in *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 54, 1 (2011), pp. 15-36, p. 20.

¹⁸⁰ Richard Oliver, and Tim Leffel, *Hip Hop, Inc.: Success Strategies of the Rap Moguls* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2006), pp. 68-69.

¹⁸¹ David Kusek and Gerd Leonhard, *The Future of Music: Manifesto for the Digital Music Revolution* (Boston: Berklee Press, 2005), p. 115.

paradigm shift is exemplified by the recent marketing strategies of the latest controversial hip hop outfit Odd Future.

According to the Guardian's Alexis Pedritis, Odd Future are:

An internationally famous band who, in the 12 months since Billboard magazine proclaimed them the future of the music business, have parlayed their notoriety into awards, a global chain of pop-up shops, a book and a TV series but not, as yet, into actually selling many records.¹⁸²

Having given away more than 20 albums worth of free material via the internet, Odd Future make their money through selling their merchandising in a system where, as music journalist Clyde Smith notes, 'all the rules seem to have changed'.¹⁸³

The product being sold by these enterprises can be promoted by the rapper's music too as a cross-promotional strategy, or synergy, as Hunter states, 'the rap video is not just a commercial for a song, but a commercial for all kinds of other products that are placed in the videos'.¹⁸⁴ This 'hard-sell' as Julian Okere observes¹⁸⁵ has increased the perception of buying into another culture, as the music video will feature the clothes, cars and jewellery necessary to obtain the hip hop lifestyle, as Patricia Hill Collins

¹⁸² Alexis Petridis, 'Odd Future: "I Woke Up One Morning with \$100,000 in My Bank Account"', *The Guardian* (online article, 15 March 2012) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2012/mar/15/odd-future-woke-up-one-morning>> [accessed 1 April 2013]

¹⁸³ Clyde Smith, 'Debunking the Myths of Odd Future's Free Music and Non-marketing Strategies' <<http://www.hypebot.com/hypebot/2012/04/debunking-the-myths-of-odd-futures-free-music-and-non-marketing.html>> [accessed 13 March 2013]

¹⁸⁴ Margaret Hunter, 'Shake it, Baby, Shake it: Consumption and the New Gender Relation in Hip Hop', in *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 54, 1 (2011), pp. 15-36, p. 28.

¹⁸⁵ Julian Okere, *Hip Hop's Wall Street: From Social Obscurity to America's Most Wanted* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2005), p. 35.

explains: 'hip hop moguls create products that allow consumers to emulate a commodified blackness'.¹⁸⁶

In Gabriel A. Tolliver and Reggie Ossé's *Bling: The Hip-Hop Jewellery Book* the authors describe how the opulence presented in television programmes in the 1980s such as *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, *Dallas*, and *Dynasty* were, for most people completely unattainable, however, they explain, 'when hip hop became a viable industry, it also became a way for the performers to attain that lifestyle'.¹⁸⁷ This emulated lifestyle made its way into hip hop culture through the music videos and sartorial accessories of the rappers by way of conspicuous consumption, showing, as Elizabeth Purinton explains, 'status as opposed to utility'.¹⁸⁸

A term coined by Thorstein Veblen in his book *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions*, conspicuous consumption was used to describe the behavioural characteristics of the nouveau riche social class who would communicate their economic capacity by consuming and displaying luxury goods and services. This 'shallow and crass celebration of material wealth',¹⁸⁹ as Purinton claims it to be is evident in the hip hop culture so much so that it led to its own terminology: bling.

¹⁸⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, 'New Commodities, New Consumers: Selling Blackness in a Global Marketplace', in *Ethnicities*, vol. 6, 3 (2006), pp. 297-317, p. 299.

¹⁸⁷ Gabriel A. Tolliver, and Reggie Ossé, *Bling: the Hip Hop Jewellery Book* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. vi.

¹⁸⁸ Elizabeth F. Purinton, 'Compensatory or Conspicuous Consumption?: Bling it on', in *American Society of Business and Behavioural Sciences*, vol. 16, 1 (2009) <<http://asbbs.org/files/2009/PDF/P/PurintonE.pdf>> [accessed 18 March 2013]

¹⁸⁹ Elizabeth F. Purinton, 'Compensatory or Conspicuous Consumption?: Bling it on', in *American Society of Business and Behavioural Sciences*, vol. 16, 1 (2009) <<http://asbbs.org/files/2009/PDF/P/PurintonE.pdf>> [accessed 18 March 2013]

There are many theories for the displays of wealth observed in many of today's hip hop acts; Hunter suggests it is to create envy,¹⁹⁰ Purinton suggests it is to show a rapper's success,¹⁹¹ however, female rapper Salt explains that conspicuous consumption is a symbolic way of constructing an affluent identity for those not historically expected to enjoy such a position, stating:

For generations Black people were economically disadvantaged. So bling is a way for us to say, "We're making it too!" It makes you feel good about yourself. Those shackles are platinum now. Those shackles are now diamonds around your wrist. Our music and fashions came from the streets. We did it on our own. And bling emphasizes that.¹⁹²

To suggest that such displays of wealth are to celebrate coming from an economically disadvantaged background is an argument mirrored by Ludacris, he explains:

Being Black, coming from a background of struggle, all of that has a lot to do with the bling mentality. Our whole culture has it. We always feel like we have to prove something and we have to be real splashy in order to show what we have achieved.¹⁹³

It is worth noting that during hip hop's infancy, as Quinn states, '36.7% of African Americans earned wages that placed them at or under the poverty line'%.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰ Margaret Hunter, 'Shake it, Baby, Shake it: Consumption and the New Gender Relation in Hip Hop', in *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 54, 1 (2011), pp. 15-36, p. 24.

¹⁹¹ Elizabeth F. Purinton, 'Compensatory or Conspicuous Consumption?: Bling it on', in *American Society of Business and Behavioural Sciences*, vol. 16, 1 (2009) <<http://asbbs.org/files/2009/PDF/P/PurintonE.pdf>> [accessed 18 March 2013]

¹⁹² Cheryl James, citation from Oh, Minya, *Bling Bling: Hip Hop's Crown Jewels* (New York: Wenner Books, 2005), p. 54.

¹⁹³ Christopher Bridges, citation from Oh, Minya, *Bling Bling: Hip Hop's Crown Jewels* (New York: Wenner Books, 2005), p. 83.

Hunter explains that consumption in the world of hip hop is slightly different to Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption, explaining:

Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption is somewhat inverted in hip hop discourse because hip hop is associated with "the streets" and the urban underclass, yet the most popular rappers are now part of the "leisure class" and serve as tastemakers for the entire globe.¹⁹⁵

This suggests that although individual rappers may be wealthy from their careers, they dress to affiliate with a lower class instead of a higher class, or as Christopher Smith states 'they maintain a ghetto aesthetic that connects their style and consumption patterns to the black and Latino poor'.¹⁹⁶

As Hunter claims, 'gangsta rap set a juggernaut of commercialisation in motion that has showed few signs of slowing',¹⁹⁷ but how much of hip hop's commercial success can gangsta rap be accountable for? As we have seen the violent themes may have increased the sales of rap music and perhaps the 'gangsta culture led to the commercialisation of the "experience" as the black gangsta rapper to the white American audience',¹⁹⁸ as Hunter claims. However, the expansion of rap music to selling the 'rap lifestyle',¹⁹⁹ as stated by Hunter did not emerge from gangsta rap. It

¹⁹⁴ Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang: the Cultures and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 43.

¹⁹⁵ Margaret Hunter, 'Shake it, Baby, Shake it: Consumption and the New Gender Relation in Hip Hop', in *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 54, 1 (2011), pp. 15-36, p. 24.

¹⁹⁶ Christopher Smith, "'I Don't Like to Dream about Getting Paid": Representations of Social Mobility and the Emergence of the Hip-Hop Mogul', in *Social Text*, vol. 21, 4 (2003), pp. 69-97, p. 70.

¹⁹⁷ Margaret Hunter, 'Shake it, Baby, Shake it: Consumption and the New Gender Relation in Hip Hop', in *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 54, 1 (2011), pp. 15-36, p. 23.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

has been argued that Russell Simmons expansion into clothing with his 1992 company Phatfarm was the point at which ‘hip hop and the fashion industry merged’,²⁰⁰ creating a lifestyle rather than just a genre of music. However, the emerging trends in the decline of sales in the music business could be blamed too, as Lena explains, ‘[music] sales are no longer a major source of income for artists working in such genres’,²⁰¹ she continues ‘it is a common misunderstanding that sales revenue is sufficient to provide artists with an extravagant lifestyle’,²⁰² showing that perhaps the trend of hip hop moguls expanding to create business enterprises, was due to a maladroitness in the music industry.

The displays of materialism or conspicuous consumption evident in the hip hop culture can be traced back further than the emergence of gangsta rap too, according to the *Rolling Stone Encyclopaedia of Rock ‘n Roll*, Run Dmc were the group that brought ‘oversized jewellery to hip hop’.²⁰³ Conversely, Purinton claims it started with English rapper Slick Rick; both examples predate gangsta rap. Interestingly Hunter claims these themes came from the strip club culture of Southern hip hop,²⁰⁴ Hunter suggests that the emergence of the subgenre dirty south has led to ‘strip clubs playing an increasingly important role in today’s hip hop industry’, claiming they are an ‘extension

²⁰⁰ Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (London: Chicago Press, 2011), p. 158.

²⁰¹ Jennifer C. Lena, *Banding Together: How Communities Create Genres in Popular Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 42.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 43.

²⁰³ Holly George-Warren, Patricia Romanowski, and Jon Pareles, *The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock and Roll* (Cambridge: Touchstone Press, 2001), p. 352.

²⁰⁴ Margaret Hunter, ‘Shake it, Baby, Shake it: Consumption and the New Gender Relation in Hip Hop’, in *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 54, 1 (2011), pp. 15-36, p. 23.

of consumption'.²⁰⁵ Oliver and Leffel mirror this thought claiming that the first big act to come from the south, 2Live Crew, were a 'prototype of today's rappers [exploiting] scantily clad women and crude lyrics'.²⁰⁶ Ethan Brown, however, claims the themes of violence, misogyny and wealth all came from the image of the drug dealer, claiming that rappers 'looked up admiringly at drug dealers. They had the money, the luxury cars, the jewellery, the girls'.²⁰⁷ Salt from rap duo Salt-n-Pepa mirrors this idea too, in an interview with author Minya Oh she states:

You're right, they were all wearing it. All the hustlers. They had the money. They were the ones out there first, setting the tone of the fashion and what was in the street, 'cause they were in the streets. They had the money before the rappers even thought about getting the money. They were setting the trend.²⁰⁸

The fact that, as we have seen, the rappers and the drug dealers were, at times, the same person meant these themes could become even more entwined into the hip hop culture, as Hunter notes, 'the difference between the drug dealers and the hip hop performer is sometimes just a point in time'.²⁰⁹

Rose claims that the themes of opulence in hip hop are just mirroring society as a whole and that 'it's not surprising that the dog eat dog capitalistic logic has become a

²⁰⁵ Margaret Hunter, 'Shake it, Baby, Shake it: Consumption and the New Gender Relation in Hip Hop', in *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 54, 1 (2011), pp. 15-36, p. 24.

²⁰⁶ Richard Oliver, and Tim Leffel, *Hip Hop, Inc.: Success Strategies of the Rap Moguls* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2006), p. 160.

²⁰⁷ Ethan Brown, *Fat Cat, 50 Cent, and the Rise of the Hip Hop Hustler* (London: Plexus, 2008), p. xx.

²⁰⁸ Cheryl James, citation from Oh, Minya, *Bling Bling: Hip Hop's Crown Jewels* (New York: Wenner Books, 2005), p. 31.

²⁰⁹ Margaret Hunter, 'Shake it, Baby, Shake it: Consumption and the New Gender Relation in Hip Hop', in *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 54, 1 (2011), pp. 15-36, p. 26.

visible fact of commercial hip hop: it reflects larger trends in our society'.²¹⁰ James

Gilbert and Joseph Pine echo this argument, claiming:

People want to buy merchandise not for the benefit of having new things all the time but rather acquiring products that will represent us and place us in relation to who we want to be and how we want to be perceived by others²¹¹

Whichever reasons you believe as to hip hop's love affair with money, it is still being consumed. As a genre that was originally deemed 'too black'²¹² to play on the radio, it is now a dominating force on the culture industry, which, as Hunter notes, 'indicates its acceptance into mainstream America'.²¹³ Since the early 1990s, the public's engagement with hip hop may have shifted from a focus on cultural production to one of consumption, but as Arthur explains 'hip hop in the 21st century is an industry, and like any modern day industry, if the consumers didn't like the product, it would cease to exist'.²¹⁴

²¹⁰ Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip-hop and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), p. 267.

²¹¹ James H. Gilmore, and Joseph Pine, *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2007), p. 154.

²¹² S. Craig Watkins, *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), p. 17.

²¹³ Margaret Hunter, 'Shake it, Baby, Shake it: Consumption and the New Gender Relation in Hip Hop', in *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 54, 1 (2011), pp. 15-36, p. 22.

²¹⁴ Damien Arthur, 'Hip Hop Consumption and Masculinity', in *Gender and Consumer Behaviour*, vol. 8, (2006), pp. 105-116, p. 108.

Conclusion

The principles of true hip hop have been forsaken,

It's all contractual and about money making.

The Roots, *What They Do*.²¹⁵

This essay looked at the current themes associated with the negative aspects of hip hop to see if they could be traced back to the emergence of gangsta rap. We have seen that hip hop started as an underground movement and was soon elevated to a popular form of entertainment that was rich with social commentary and political messages. We have also seen that gangsta rap emerged through hard economic times and was a dominant factor in the global success of the hip hop culture.

So to answer our initial question, is hip hop dead? It has argued by Rose that the rap music we hear on the radio today is a 'playground for caricatures of black gangstas pimps and hoes'²¹⁶ and that 'the beauty and life force of hip hop have been squeezed out'²¹⁷ If we are to believe, as Nas states, that hip hop is dead then could we blame the emergence of gangsta rap?

Miriam Gazzah claims gangsta rap is:

²¹⁵ Mark Kelley, and James Poysner, *What They Do*, The Roots (Def Jam, ASIN: B0000081SQ, 18 April 1997).

²¹⁶ Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip-hop and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), p. 1.

²¹⁷ Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip-hop and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), p. ix.

Responsible for giving hip hop a bad reputation, through its association with angry African-Americans, gangs, homophobia, drugs, crime, violence, and poverty, either through the lyrics or through media hypes around the gangsta rapper's own struggles with the law.²¹⁸

As Bikari Kitwana claims, 'the culture industry capitalizes on the media spectacles of gangsta rap'²¹⁹ but if we are to blame gangsta rap for the increased themes of violence in hip hop then surely we must acknowledge the poor economic conditions created by the Reagan government or Proposition 21, we should acknowledge the illegal drug trade and Rick Ross's role in reducing the street value of crack cocaine. We should also acknowledge the consumer's power in making these themes such a commodity and an industry standard.

Brian Greenburg claims 'gangsta rap helped push hip hop into the commercial mainstream',²²⁰ but if we are to blame gangsta rap for the commercialisation of hip hop then we should also acknowledge *Rapper's Delight* for being, as Jeff Chang claims, 'the first death of hip hop'.²²¹ We should acknowledge LL Cool J, Run DMC and Slick Rick who were all big stars before the emergence of gangsta rap. We should acknowledge the birth of the music video, the changing music industry and Russell Simmons for branding hip hop as a lifestyle. We should also acknowledge the exploitative nature of the culture industry, as Rose notes: 'marketing and sales strategies have compounded the narrowing of what we see and hear, which are then

²¹⁸ Mirriam Gazzah, *Rhythms and Rhythms of Life* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), p. 101.

²¹⁹ Bikari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), p. 54.

²²⁰ Brian Greenburg, *Social History of the United States: 1990s* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2008), p. 264.

²²¹ Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: a History of the Hip Hop Generation* (London: Picador, 2006), p. 127.

used to prove that hip hop's stories are being entirely self-generated from the black community'.²²²

As we have discussed, in the 1980s hip hop was a diverse genre and gangsta rap's emergence was necessary for social commentary, if the streets are going to be violent, as is the case in many inner-city communities, then to some extent it's only natural that hip hop artists from these communities would discuss violence in their songs. The themes in hip hop may have changed over the last thirty years, but as Mickey Hess notes it was a natural progression, he claims that 'hip hop changed because it had to – no one would buy it if it sounded like it did 30 years ago'.²²³

So perhaps hip hop's demise started when the aesthetic moved away from Afrika Bambaataa's original message of peace with Schoolly D's *PSK, What Does it Mean?* Perhaps it was the emergence of the hip hop lifestyle, but then if we are to trace hip hop's aesthetics back to Afrika Bambaataa, hip hop always was a lifestyle, as Bambaataa states 'hip hop has always been a lifestyle, it encompasses more than just the music'.²²⁴ Yet if we trace its aesthetics back to Kool Herc, hip hop at its most basic is a form of entertainment or 'a social event, a practice not a product'.²²⁵

It could also be contested that hip hop is not dead; as Andrew J. Rausch claims, 'it's not dead. It's just that the style of hip hop that we all grew up with and loved is no longer

²²² Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip-hop and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), p. 143.

²²³ Mickey Hess, *Is Hip Hop Dead?: the Past, Present, and Future of America's Most Wanted* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), p. 2.

²²⁴ *The Art of Rap: Something from Nothing*, dir. by Tracy Marrow (Kaleidoscope Home Entertainment, 2012), 1:34.48.

²²⁵ Mickey Hess, *Icons of Hip Hop: An Encyclopaedia of the Movement, Music, and Culture, Volume 2* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), p. 19.

the style that's in'.²²⁶ The hip hop culture is a driving force of the culture industry with Zack O'Malley Greenburg predicting 2013 to be the year that the hip hop industry sees its first billionaire.²²⁷ As Patrick Neate claims, 'some people may not have noticed and some may not like it, but the truth is we are living on a hip hop planet'.²²⁸

Whatever your perceptions on the condition of the hip hop industry it could be argued that its potential was not carried out. Hip hop could be a viable industry for promoting political messages or commenting on social unease, as Assata Shakur explains:

Hip-hop can be a very powerful weapon to help expand young people's political and social consciousness. But just as with any weapon, if you don't know how to use it, if you don't know where to point it or what you're using it for, you can end up shooting yourself in the foot or killing your sisters and brothers.²²⁹

A great deal of responsibility should be taken by the people promoting the hip hop lifestyle. Perhaps literature like *The Source* magazine could be more understanding of the messages they are sending out, or as Ronin Ro notes: '[they] would rather use their pages to promote albums and stereotypes than to reveal the truth and urge their predominantly Black and Latino audience to pursue more positive paths'.²³⁰

²²⁶ Andrew J. Rausch, *I am Hip Hop: Conversations on the Music and Culture* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011), p. 73.

²²⁷ Zack O'Malley Greenburg, *The World's 25 Highest-Paid Musicians 2012* (Forbes, Inc.) <<http://www.forbes.com/pictures/eeel45mjgk/the-worlds-25-highest-paid-musicians-16/>> [accessed 1 March 2013]

²²⁸ Patrick Neate, *Where You're at: Notes From the Frontline of a Hip Hop Planet* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2004), p. 6.

²²⁹ Assata Shakur, 'Assata Shakur the Interview', in *The Talking Drum*, (2010) <<http://www.thetalkingdrum.com/bla4.html>> [accessed 2 April 2013]

²³⁰ Ro Ronin, *Gangsta: Merchandising the rhymes of Violence* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1996), p. 12.

The greatest responsibility, however, falls onto the shoulders of the rappers themselves. What could have been a sounding board to a generation has instead become a laughable commodity, a parody of its former self. As one half of rap outfit Run DMC, Darryl McDaniels states:

Rappers don't understand rap is the big influence in the world, not politicians, not a priest, rap dictates what the world is going to eat, what they are going to drive, how they are going to dress, we don't know the power that we have. We could change the world. We just refuse to do so.²³¹

²³¹ *Guns are Cool*, dir. by Ben Chanan (C4, 2003), 23.12.

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