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Better Understanding Rap Music

Rap is a relatively new genre compared to any other. It wasn't brought to public attention until 1979 when the Sugar Hill Gang released "Rapper's Delight." Since then, rap's fan base has rapidly increased and, as of late, has become arguably the most popular genre of today's generation.

Over the 35 years of its mainstream existence, rap has undergone many changes in styles and subject matter; at least this is what is perceived. In reality, neither the style nor subject matter have strayed from its origins, the genre has branched out and made subgenres with different ideals, but in no way is this indicative of the entire rap music division. Rap throughout the 80's was very upbeat and joyous, just as some of the rap sub-genres still are today. The genre of rap has fallen victim to the reputation of the gangster rap subgenre and its provocative lyrics and negative messages.

As an avid rap music listener for its encouraging or storytelling aspects I wanted to disprove the overgeneralization and help people not be afraid or demeaning towards the genre. I want to show the overlooked positive influences the genre has had and help "clean up" its image. It would be a tragedy to see the genre fall back or even plateau, in terms of popularity, when it is actually a great and integral piece in today's society.

I conducted two very brief interviews of fellow first-year Emory students. I asked them for two responses each, these were their first responses:

When asked about rap music each of my subjects took a decent amount of time to mull over what they would say. It was evident that positive things didn't come to mind

immediately; they took time to find wither find positives or find a "politically correct" way to word their initial thoughts.

The first interviewee, Ean Kitchens, said rap music was "not my cup of tea." It wasn't until I pushed for details that he described what he meant by that. He went on to say he preferred music that had more of a story or meaning behind it, he also gave an example of liking bands because the members are more musically talented than a rapper. I was surprised he didn't downplay the genre more than he did, he chose to praise another genre instead of telling me what he saw wrong with rap music, but my second subject covered that exact topic.

Will Kelly, the second interviewee, took the question in a more literal sense. He said rap music was a depiction of a culture he just can't relate to. When I prodded for further explanation he said: "it's all about either doing drugs, murdering people, mistreating woman, or bragging about their material possessions."

I took both of these responses with tongue in cheek as I nodded along. I did this because it was part of the process for the second half of the interview.

As soon as I began conducting my research, I was surprised to find so many results on my first attempt searching. A simple search of the phrase "positive influences of rap music" brought back immediate hits of relevant information. It was apparent to me that many people had the same stance as me and wanted to voice their concerns so they can try and make a difference. I was able to deduct that from the fact that almost all of my results were from blogs or some other type of informal publishing. A high school student even did a similar project as his final senior thesis [2]. This made those sources not very trustworthy, but I backtracked where they obtained their information and used

those as my research material combined with other sites, facts and organizations that I had already been aware of.

At the heart of the rap industry it is truthfully meant to be a positive influence on society [5]. With that being said, there is a great misunderstanding with rap music and its subgenres [1]. Even though some of the sub-genres are straying away from the main goals and origins of rap, it has still reached out and touched the hearts of listeners today on a personal level [3]. Also, there are a vast amount of incredible organizations and programs for today's youth that uses hip-hop as a common ground to relate to one another, these organizations are discouraging violence, gangs, and drug use as well as setting them up for success by having them focus on school and giving them opportunities for careers in the music industry itself [4][5][6].

I used the information gathered from my research to better educate both of my subjects on rap music and try to disprove their preconceived notions. After giving them each more information on the subgenre misunderstanding as well as how it gives urban America a public voice and the organizations that have stemmed from this, they both changed their tune.

Both Ean and Will agreed almost instantly that they would give rap music a chance. They also felt bad for having such loaded views on a genre that they really knew little to nothing about. Ean was even very intrigued with the organizations, he thought they were each very unique in their own way and very positive in filling that necessity to help the troubled youth crowd.

The general purpose of music is for the artist to express themselves through the form of melody and/or written word. If this view of music is accepted for all other forms (genres) of music, then why isn't it accepted for rap music?

The difference is that rap artists have different scenarios happening in their lives than say country artists or rock groups. Society doesn't like publicizing what is happening in these parts of the nation; therefore, rap music is repulsive to them. Not to say there is a double standard, but an interesting viewpoint that often goes unnoticed is that country artists (or any other musicians) can sing about a family member dying in any form or fashion and nobody looks down upon the genre, but when a rap artist brings up losing a brother to gang violence it is not accepted as easily.

The sad part about this is that many of these rap artists truly did grow up under these circumstances. They endured gang violence or drug abuse and all of these other things they rap about. That truly was their life and what they went through, but when they put it in music it is almost as if society is rejecting it. In many cases, rappers are able to get public attention for things happening in their part of society when they aren't receiving the necessary news coverage or government help. Rap music is their way of making the rest of America aware of the sad reality of things happening in these parts of the nation.

Rap made it to the public audience in the late 1970's and by the late 1980's subgenres were already created. "In 1989, rap music changed drastically when a gangster rap group appeared on the scene and altered the message of the music. Gangster rappers' lyrics contained explicit depictions of violence, drug use, and urban gang life. These lyrics even expressed hostility toward Caucasians, women, and civil authority. Gangster

rappers sent brazen messages of disobedience and defiance that produced negative reactions in teens" [3].

There are over 20 subgenres of rap/hip hop, yet the genre as a whole has adopted the perceived characteristics of this one small division. This reputation is what scares most people away from the genre which is unfair because those types of songs only make up a very small portion of the rap songs. In other words, people should never assume these characteristics when they hear the word "rap," the genre is undeserving.

All in all, I believe rap music has had a positive impact on today's society. By giving urban America a public voice it has enabled society to open its eyes to the problems and realities of growing up in these tough areas. The subgenre misunderstanding is quick to clear up but people need to be exposed to the truth about it. "Rap music is a tool, and like most tools it can be used in positive ways and negative ways the choice is up to the artists and the listeners. Rap music can be used in away to promote violence, sexism, drug use etc., but it can also be used to promote solutions to problems in urban America and to promote anti-violence and anti-drug movements." [2] Lastly, it has opened the door for incredible organizations and ways to give back to the community. New listeners should never be scared or think twice before listening to rap music.