

## The Culture of Hip-Hop

Hip-hop is the popular street culture of U.S. big-city and especially inner city youth. Characterized to some extent by graffiti art, and earlier on by break dancing, hip-hop is understood globally through rap music and a distinctive idiomatic vocabulary. Like most nations, hip-hop has its forebears. These include boxer Muhammad Ali, Jamaican Rastafarian and reggae musician Bob Marley, Black Panther Huey Newton, and funksters James Brown and George Clinton. Also like most nations, the hip-hop nation has its origins in the Bronx, in New York City. But it also has much older roots in the West African storytelling culture known as *griot*. The hip-hop nation has enlarged upon those origins, and now hip-hop is both appreciated and produced on six continents. Hip-hop is a nation that has truly globalized, not because its citizens have migrated far and wide, but because its culture has migrated via telecommunications. Hip-hop has become a nation that exists beyond geography in the music, the clothes, and the language of its citizens. Touré, writing in *The New York Times*, describes the hip-hop nation this way:

We are a nation with no precise date of origin, no physical land, no single chief. But if you live in the hip-hop nation, if you are not merely a fan of the music but a daily imbibor of the culture, if you sprinkle your conversation with phrases like off the meter (for something that's great) or got me open (for something that gives an explosive positive emotional release), if you know why Dutch Masters make better blunts than Phillies (they're thinner), if you know at a glance why Allen Iverson is hip-hop and Grant Hill is not, if you feel the murders of Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G. in the 1997–98 civil wars were assassinations (no other words fit), if you can say yes to all of these questions (and a yes to some doesn't count), then you know the hip-hop nation is as real as America on a pre-Columbian atlas.<sup>1</sup>

Although the hip-hop leadership is exclusively black and male, the hip-hop nation crosses all color lines and includes women and gays, though the latter two have been the targets of entrenched sexism and homophobia by a wide range of rappers (Figures 5.A and 5.B). Its pioneers include white graffiti artists and Latinos who influenced break dancing as well as hip-hop DJ (disk jockey) and MC (rapper) styles.

Music is the heart and soul of the hip-hop nation and the geography of U.S. hip-hop—where the most important music has come from—can be crudely divided into East Coast, West Coast, and South Coast,

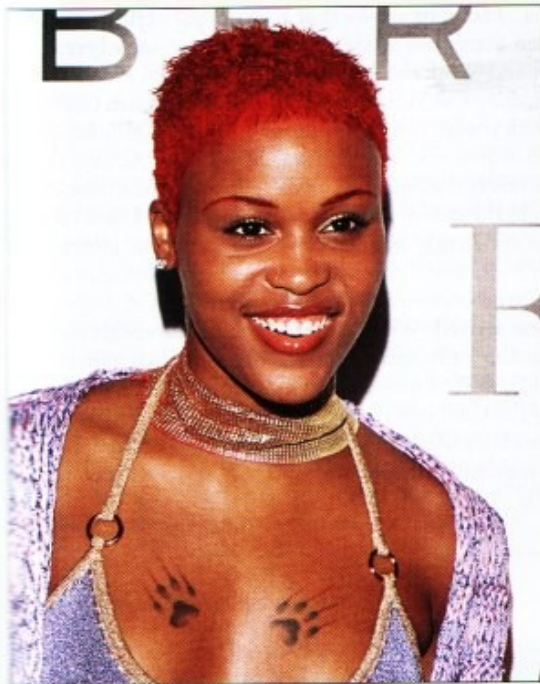


**Figure 5.A** Notorious B.I.G. “Biggie” burst onto the hip-hop scene with his platinum 1994 album “Ready to Die.” In 1995 B.I.G. was named Rapper of the Year at the Billboard Awards. Born Christopher Wallace in New Jersey and raised in Brooklyn’s Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood, the rapper was killed in March 1997. Speculation abounds as to why the murder occurred (as well as the murder of rapper Tupac Shakur). Some believe that B.I.G.’s death was the result of an East Coast–West Coast rap rivalry and payback for Tupac Shakur’s murder in Las Vegas months before. Others believe the murder was carried out by a gang upset by B.I.G.’s growing prominence on the West Coast. The murder was characterized in the mainstream press as a drive-by shooting. No suspects have been arrested, and the case remains unsolved to this day. Both murders point to gang culture as an important source of identity in hip-hop.

and a newer region in and around Detroit where white rap-metal groups have become popular. The East Coast includes the five boroughs of New York, Long Island, Westchester County, New Jersey, and Philadelphia. The West Coast includes Los Angeles, Compton, Long Beach, Vallejo, and Oakland. The South Coast region is made up of Atlanta, New Orleans, Miami, and Memphis (Figure 5.C).

But just as hip-hop has broken out of its regional boundaries, it has transcended national boundaries as well. Hip-hop graffiti art can be found in urban areas as distant as Australia and South Africa. Rap music is as popular in the Philippines as it is in Paris. And individual DJs have had significant influences well beyond their old neighborhoods. For example, Afrika Bambaataa, a former gang member, organized the Universal Zulu Nation over 25 years ago. Bambaataa, or “Bam,” incorporated former gang members into a community-building group that has become a household name in hip-hop circles all around the world. One Web site claims that there are now over 10,000 members of the Zulu Nation worldwide and chapters in every major city in the world.

<sup>1</sup>Touré, “In the End, Black Men Must Lead.” *New York Times*, 22 August 1999, Arts and Leisure, p. 1.



**Figure 5.B Rapper Eve** While rap is unquestionably dominated by men and has historically produced songs that are blatantly misogynist, female rappers are also part of the hip-hop culture and have even become rich and famous entertainers. Pictured here is Eve (Jihan Jeffers) a Philadelphia rap artist with the all-male RuffRyders Records. Other notable female rappers include Bahamadia, Missy Elliot, Lil' Kim, and Lauryn Hill.

But hip-hop is also very clearly about the more local space of the neighborhood or “the ‘hood”—rap’s dominant spatial trope—which is portrayed in all its complexity in songs, music videos, and hip-hop films like *Breakin’* (1984), *Beat Street* (1985), *Wild Style* (1982) and *8 Mile* (2002). While rap and dancing are central to hip-hop, the local context in which the story, music, or dance unfold is also critical. As hip-hop cultural theorist Murray Forman argues: “Virtually all of the early descriptions of hip-hop practices identify territory and the public sphere as significant factors, whether in visible artistic expression and appropriation of public space via graffiti or b-boying [break dancing], the sonic impact of a pounding bass line, or the discursive articulation of urban geography in rap lyrics [and films].”<sup>2</sup> Hip-hop is effectively about how space and place shape the identities of rappers in particular but also African-Americans more generally, showing how race, space, and place come together to produce the contradiction of “home” as a locus of roots and the foundation of personal history, but also as a site of devaluation vis-à-vis the dominant white society.

Hip-hop, as a youth-oriented cultural product commercialized by multinational corporations but originally homegrown, is to the end of the twentieth century what rock was to the middle of the century. Its influence is enormous, and its practices are likely to persist well into the twenty-first century as its appeal continues to spread globally.

<sup>2</sup>M. Forman, “Ain’t No Love in the Heart of the City: Hip-Hop, Space, and Place,” in M. Forman and M. A. Neal (eds), *That’s the Joint! The Hip Hop Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 155.

Sources: Davey D’s Hip-Hop Corner at <http://www.daveyd.com/index.html>; D. Toop, *Rap Attack 2: African Rap to Global Hip Hop*, New York: Serpent’s Tail Press, 1991; N. George, *Hip hop America*, New York: Viking Penguin Group, 1998.



**Figure 5.C The sources and diffusion of U.S. rap** This map portrays the centers of rap music in the United States today, showing how rap, which began in African American inner city neighborhoods in New York City in the late 1970s, moved westward and then southward. Most recently a hybrid form of rap metal has emerged in the U.S. Midwest urban center of Detroit. The Detroit metropolitan area contains large numbers of African Americans and working-class whites who lost their jobs in the restructuring of the automobile industry in the 1970s and early 1980s. What the rap-metal genre confirms is that although hip-hop culture has its roots in the African American experience, it derives much of its power from issues of poverty and class.