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Justin Williams's *Rhymin' and Stealin'* provides an in-depth look into the significance of borrowing in hip hop and discusses both how and why artists borrow to establish authenticity. He provides historical context for the concepts he explores by referring to many examples from classic hip hop songs and important hip hop artists. He also spends time discussing jazz as a high art, expanding on claims made in an article he wrote a few years prior to the publication of *Rhymin' and Stealin*'.

Williams begins his discussion of hip hop borrowing by providing a brief history of the origins of hip hop. The four elements of hip hop—DJing, MCing, breaking and graffiti—were born in South Bronx against a backdrop of extreme poverty. DJ Kool Herc is considered the inventor of hip hop. Hip hop’s “golden age” lasted from 1973 to 1979, when the first hip hop single “Rapper’s Delight” was released, introducing hip hop to the world. Williams continues his discussion to explore the “historicization of the backbeat,” explaining how hip hop artists sample to gain historic authenticity. Williams defines historic authenticity

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as the belief that music was more authentic and thus valuable at an earlier point in its history. The notion of authenticity has a complex relationship with hip hop. As a genre that relies solely on reusing materials, to simply sample is not enough. One has to demonstrate an understanding of hip hop history in order to sample in a way that evokes the past while adding to the canon.

Williams outlines seven types of intrageneric borrowing (borrowing from within the genre) commonly used in hip hop, ranging from the importation of visuals to references of nostalgia. Williams argues that borrowing hip hop images is as old as the genre itself, hailing back to its graffiti origins. Hip hop’s beats are often sampled, and borrowing from the hip hop beat canon allows an artist to demonstrate an understanding of hip hop’s history, and create an air of authenticity. Vanessa Chang explains that the “aura” of authenticity artists access by using samples is based on the juxtaposition of the original piece with the intent of the new music. Artists also reference their peers and even quote directly from other artists. Williams outlines stylistic allusion and nostalgia as the last forms of sampling, where artists simply allude to the musical style of another work, or nod to familiar topics in hip hop. William’s first chapter thoroughly explains the origins of hip hop, orienting the reader to hip hop history and methods, and setting the scene for Williams’s later claims especially as concerns the question of authenticity. Indeed, the theme of historical authenticity holds a prominent place throughout the book.

The second chapter situates jazz rap as a form of high art in the hip hop world. His discussion of jazz rap is Williams’s first concerning intergeneric borrowing (borrowing from outside the genre), and Williams largely focuses on the cultural response to the interaction of these two styles. Again Williams provides a brief synopsis of jazz history in relation to hip hop to familiarize the reader. Throughout the 1980s jazz experienced a revival; movies, TV, and print media began romanticizing jazz. Jazz music was generally associated with affluence and wealth and considered “serious” music. Outside of this, the two genres of rap and jazz share similar origins and both place a similar emphasis on the use of a dominant beat and the incorporation of improvisational techniques.

Williams shows how emerging jazz rap artists, like Digable Planets, often had musical parents whose collections they sampled. The bohemian vibe of jazz rap, combined with complex titles and obscure lyrics, helped establish jazz rap as something meant to be thought provoking and expand one’s consciousness. Jazz rappers regularly borrowed jazz codes, such as the walking bass, as well as instruments associated with jazz, such as saxophones and jazz guitars. The

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combination of what many previously considered a “highbrow art” (jazz) with hip hop, undeniably from the streets, intrigued Americans. Williams demonstrates that jazz rap was considered “really cool” by the hip hop community and received rave reviews. The relationship between jazz and rap was mutually beneficial, adding jazz codes to hip hop elevated it while adding hip hop codes to jazz signified coolness. To quote jazz rapper Guru, “jazz rap was about bringing jazz back to the streets” (46). After the success of jazz rap, jazz was no longer considered highbrow; suddenly it became accessible to the hip hop generation. Though Williams’s discussion of jazz rap is interesting, it is tangential to his main argument about intergeneric borrowing and he arguably spends more time on this discussion than the book required.

In the third chapter Williams focuses on the revolutionary rapper Dr. Dre, his innovative methods, and the advent of music designed specifically for performance in the car. Dre’s emergence on the hip hop scene signalled the beginning of “gangsta rap,” a uniquely west coast sound, with sonic signifiers such as high synthesizer riffs. Hip hop was born in boom boxes and dance clubs, but Williams demonstrates how Dre’s G-Funk served exclusively as “shit for people to bump in their cars” (90).

In one of his most interesting chapters Williams shows that cars were a central part of African American culture with origins in the collective memory of slavery and “propertylessness”; cars represented freedom and empowerment. Customizing car audio systems grew in popularity as stereo technology improved, and companies such as Motorola began producing affordable aftermarket stereos en masse. Dr. Dre is largely responsible for taking advantage of this development and creating the sonic signatures that define gangsta rap. Moreover, his method of sampling live music allowed him complete creative control over the sounds he used. In this chapter Williams examines Dre’s new methods of sampling and how gangsta rap not only signaled the beginning of the G-Funk era—also known as the post soul era, 1992-1996—but also prompted producers to consider the spaces in which their music would be consumed.

Chapter four discusses postmortem sampling and the construction of identities for deceased rappers. Here, Williams focuses on one of the most iconic rappers of all time, Tupac (2pac) Shakur. Williams argues that postmortem sampling fits in with hip hop’s ideology of historical authenticity because it combines collaboration with recontextualization. Williams shows that hip hop has always been about a beat and a flow, so fitting together samples with one’s own content fits the tradition. Rappers like Jay Z and Nas used the voices of Biggie and 2Pac respectively to establish a connection with classic hip hop and create historical authenticity. In Chapter Five Williams further develops his
discussion, explaining the rise of rappers Eminem and 50 Cent through the lens of historical authenticity. Eminem and 50 Cent both strove to link themselves to deceased hip hop heavyweights—Tupac (Eminem) and Biggie (50 Cent)—to connect themselves to a hip hop lineage. Williams quotes Robert P Morgan and posits that musical and artistic lineages are social constructions that do not occur naturally—the most prominent example being the created lineage of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Franz Joseph Haydn and Ludwig van Beethoven. Similarly Dre and Eminem created a hip hop ancestry, identifying 50 Cent as their protégée, and connected him to his artificial, artistic ancestors of Tupac and Biggie. Katja Lee echoes these sentiments in her article “Reconsidering Rap’s ‘I’” explaining:

In exploring Eminem’s music it is important to recognize that his autobiographical impulses and postures do not represent a new trend in rap so much as a return to an older one with new innovations for posturing the complexity of the postmodern self.3

Lee goes further, writing that “[authenticity is] bound up in the performance of self,” and less with the samples an artist references.4

The final two chapters of the book contain a meticulous analysis of several influential hip hop artists. Williams thoroughly explores the artistry of 2Pac and the question of why sampling martyred rappers is so effective. The rise of many rappers since 2Pac and Biggie—both of whom gained notoriety after their deaths—has been similar; many new artists continually align themselves with the memory of deceased rapping “royalty.” Williams explains that though rappers try to establish their stories as unique, they usually all follow the same basic pattern and most are promoted in the same ways. For example, not only did Dre align his protégé Eminem with 2Pac, but Eminem also did the same thing with 50 Cent.5

Overall Williams’s book was enjoyable, containing valuable historical and contextual information about hip hop. He acknowledged that he chose a very narrow slice of what is an infinitely broad subject and even suggests future areas of research that could help expand certain elements of his overall argument. He notes that to focus the book firmly on “music analysis and intertextuality” he


5 50 went as far as to say all rappers growing up in the 90s owe something to Tupac.
chose not to explore, for example, legal or racial contexts of the genre. Though I found this admirable, I ultimately thought ignoring other contexts detracted from the message of the book. While Williams did thoroughly explain hip hop and sampling, his book made no mention of contemporary copyright laws or modern day difficulties of sampling. It almost seems irresponsible of Williams to leave out such an important part of hip hop history, especially when older texts such as Tricia Rose’s *Black Noise Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* discuss how copyright laws helped shape hip hop history. 6

Rose explains that before rap became the multi-million dollar industry it is today, artists could often get away with sampling without compensating the original artist. The successful commodification of hip hop and rap enabled record labels to demand unreasonable fees for samples, which ultimately changed the nature of genre. 7 I argue that a small legal discussion would have fit nicely into the introduction or conclusion—or perhaps even both—of Williams’s book. Williams’s choice not to address contemporary copyright issues is problematic because of copyright law’s affect on the development and direction of hip hop. The conspicuous lack of copyright law history made me question why I so rarely hear samples in today’s hip hop, an answer I did not receive until I read a later article focusing primarily on ?uestlove and the Roots.

In his article entitled “Giving up Hip-Hop’s Firstborn: A Quest for the Real after the Death of Sampling,” Wayne Marshall discusses how the Roots maintained authenticity without hip hop’s historic need for sampling. 8 Though Williams does cite Marshall’s article when he mentions the Roots in his book, he does not engage with the text’s content. In harmony with Williams’ though, Marshall explains that it is the Roots’ sonic markers and even their display of classic hip hop medleys during live shows that help them establish authenticity despite their lack of samples. 9 Marshall makes a compelling case, backed mostly by quotes from ?uestlove, for the authenticity of The Roots despite their lack of

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7 Ibid, 90-92.


sampling. While Williams’ own work suggests he would agree with Marshall’s assessment, he fails to engage with this question in his book, to his detriment.

I would have also liked to see the discussion of spatially situated hip hop revisited throughout the book, but Williams restricts this discussion entirely to chapter three. As mentioned earlier, Williams explains that Dr. Dre focused primarily on creating music that people would enjoy in the car and provides an extensive discussion of the car and hip hop culture. Though the automobile is discussed thoroughly in this early chapter, other listening spaces are not. Williams’ focus could have been more effectively contextualized through an examination of other kinds of listening spaces and devices, such as dance halls or the beatbox.

Conversely Williams seems to spend too much time exploring jazz rap. At the outset of the book Williams makes it clear that his focus is intergeneric sampling, and his chapter on jazz rap and intrageneric sampling does not seem to fit with the overall book. That said, Williams’s line-by-line examination of jazz rap songs with jazz songs is very effective in explaining the use of jazz codes. This exploration, though interesting, is divergent from the book’s main focus, and overall the text would have been stronger without this section.

Williams spends a considerable amount of time in *Rhymin’ and Stealin’* discussing how Eminem constructed a place for himself in hip hop, and ultimately concludes that Eminem’s construction of his sonic signature is what makes him a successful hip hop artist. Despite Lee’s article predating *Rhymin’ and Stealin’*, Williams does not engage with the article, leaving the reader with significant questions about the exploitative nature of present day rappers and hip hop artists. I am slightly inclined to overlook this absence because Lee’s article does not explicitly engage with hip hop, but with rap, a component of hip hop. And yet his avoidance of this secondary literature detracts from the effectiveness of the book.

Williams’s study contains a comprehensive look at the evolution of hip hop and the importance of sampling to establish authenticity. Tricia Rose frames the question of sampling in hip hop best by saying “sampling... is about paying homage, an invocation of another’s voice to help you say what you need to say.”10 Hip hop is a genre concerned with creating something new from something old; sampling is a way to be creative with found materials. Hip hop is about creating a new sound based on the collective historical consciousness, and authenticity in hip hop is of paramount importance, something Williams emphasizes throughout his book.

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For further reading:


