
In 1981 Cheryl Lynette Keyes was studying ethnomusicology at Indiana University and was the teaching assistant for an African-American music ensemble when she heard Rapper's Delight and became fascinated with this new genre: rap music. Over the next 20 years Keyes travelled throughout the United States attending rap performances and conferences, seeking interviews, writing articles, and studying history and cultural theory. The result is a lovingly comprehensive history and analysis of rap and the hip hop movement.

Rap Music and Street Consciousness is a scholarly text written from the academic standpoints of cultural studies, ethnomusicology, and folklore. From that interdisciplinary base the author builds an approach to the study of rap music that includes nationalist, feminist, and queer theory; political and legal history; and the philosophies expressed by the artists themselves. Keyes consciously integrates street language into her academic nomenclature, trusting the unfamiliar reader to make use of the “Glossary of Common Rap Terms” she has provided. She weaves these languages and theories together in her calm and steady way to reveal a paradigm essential, it seems to me now, to an understanding of hip hop and of urban communication systems in general. In the book’s preface, in which she carefully defines her own subjectivity, she explains the basic nature of that paradigm: “When my folklore studies led me to understand rap music as a part of a continuum of black expressive forms, I realized that this music is grounded in the aesthetic and ideology of urban street culture” (p. xii). Keyes’ argument throughout is that rap music emerges from street culture and that its style and vision are still fundamentally rooted in and reflective of that culture.

For Keyes, as for other theorists and historians of the African-American experience, the streets represent a social matrix, which provides an alternative education, an alternative economics, and an alternative ethics, identity, and language for people segregated into otherness by the predominantly White economic hegemony. “Here one learns about the ghetto, how to survive in it, and how to combat unwarranted economic and social oppression from mainstream society. A major requisite for survival in the streets is learning how to communicate effectively” (p. 29). As Keyes’ history shows, mostly by way of interviews with many of the original innovators of the genre, especially Africa Bambaata, hip hop is invented out of this otherness as a way to further communication and to channel the differences dividing the community into creative expression and unity.

In general Keyes’ text moves in a spiral pattern circling the history of specific elements, adding touches each time to her central theme. Fashion trends, radio plays, technological advancements, sampling laws, and political battles have their story told. One highlight of this history is its particularly oral quality. Most accounts of the early days of rap are first-hand, and many were originally narrated to the author. Keyes makes use of this oral quality to avoid the trap of a technologically determinist or individual genius-driven history. The oral accounts represent a discourse in development and this makes for fascinating reading.

The book is divided into two sections: in Part 1, “The Sociocultural History and Aesthetics of Rap Music,” Keyes tells the history of the development of African-American poetic speech, including the West African griot tradition, the religious sermons of the American South, the Jamaican dance hall, reggae, and rude boy cultures. Once this context is established, the narrative moves to an economic and cultural history of the South Bronx, the birthplace of rap music. Thus situated the history can then turn to the story of the new genre’s development: the rise of individual artists, the birth of the hip hop movement, the shaping of a symbiotic relationship between DJ and MC, the distribution of mix tapes, and the eventual integration of rap music into the nightclub scene.
In the second half of Part 1 Keyes tells the recent history of the commercialization of rap alongside a history of its evolution and expansion as a genre. In support of the inherent argument she is making about the adaptability of rap that has allowed it to expand in the impressive way that it has, Keyes presents an analysis of the “aesthetics of style and performance in the rap music tradition” (p. 122). Here the author’s background as an ethnomusicologist serves the reader well. Keyes is able to provide a comprehensive list and history of the technical terms employed by rap DJs and producers as well as a structural analysis of the music itself. Her notational system includes the rhythm and emphasis of the spoken rhymes, the repetition of the breaks, and the punctuation of the drumbeats, thus providing a holistic portrait of the artistry and originality of rap music.

In Part 2, “The Critical Perspectives of Rap Music and the Hip Hop Nation,” Keyes addresses several of the contentious issues present in any discussion about hip hop: drugs, sex and sexually transmitted disease, the role of women, and the glorification of violence. Although these issues are present throughout the historical half of the book, it is in the second half that major criticisms are raised. In each case Keyes explains the problematic element—for example, the violence depicted in the lyrics of gangsta rap—provides appropriate examples from the music and industry, then provides a perspective on the issue from within the hip hop community.

Keyes’ discussion about gangsta rap is representative of her approach in general: while providing a historical account of the rise of gangsta rap, its ambivalent reception within the community, and its strange and incomplete prosecution throughout the congressional hearings of 1994, she insists that the reader not only analyze the issues but also examine their own assumptions about hip hop. For Keyes, misconceptions about rap derive from a lack of understanding about the relationship between rap music and the streets. The violence, unprotected sex, drug abuse, gang wars, and misogyny in some rap songs reflect the presence of those elements in inner-city life. What the general public does not hear about are the enormous advances that have been made against violence, crack cocaine, and the ignorance surrounding AIDS by members of the Hip Hop Nation. “The Hip Hop Nation has undoubtedly served as a conduit by which to educate their communities about intra-community epidemics, on and offstage…. It is embedded in a community based system called the Zulu Nation, which endeavors to provide inner-city gang members with an alternative to violence” (p. 184). Generally, writes Keyes, due to biased, sensationalist, and out-of-date information, U.S. congressional hearings and the news media focus only on censorship and avoid addressing the “devastating realities and consequences of ghetto life” (p. 164). Keyes’ sources agree that “clean” music, without the true stories of gang violence and police brutality and prostitution, without the down-and-dirty production, would be considered inauthentic by the rapper’s community.

Following her history and analysis of gangsta rap Keyes writes: “It is clear to me that the standard of evaluation for artistic depictions of white gangsters and black gangsters is blatantly biased” (p. 166). The second section of the text, as I have already suggested, situates the typical critiques of rap within the artists’ cultural context and points out the race and class biases that often undergird those critiques. The role Keyes adopted for this ethnomusicology—that of the participant-observer—has allowed her access to the true experience of rap in the streets. Her experience gives her an authenticity and an intimacy with the material that exceeds my expectation of the typical scholarly historian.

In several instances, however, I felt Keyes touched upon an issue without drawing it out fully. Before entering into a critique of these minor letdowns, let me acknowledge that not all facets of the history and culture of rap music can be examined in one tome. After all, to tell the history of hip hop in all its depth is to unearth the political, cultural, and economic development of inner-city America and its relationship with race and class identity and artistic expression. This is not a subject to be taken lightly. Nevertheless, even within
the limitations of the project, I feel that a questioning of gender identity in hip hop and a study of the textual complexity of a complete rap song are missing from Rap Music and Street Consciousness.

In true anthropological fashion, Keyes lists the male and female roles typical of street culture and hip hop performers: hustler, pimp, militant, working-class, thug, gangsta or queen mother, fly girl, sista with attitude, the lesbian. The problem arises when, in the context of her reading of the lesbian role, she dismisses the question of homosexual experience in hip hop and in the streets. “Though other black artists rumored to be gay or lesbian have chosen to remain closeted in a scene described as ‘notoriously homophobic’ (Dyson quoted in Jamison 1998:AR34), Queen Pen’s ‘Girlfriend’ (1997) from her debut album My Melody represents a ‘breakthrough for queer culture’ (Walters 1998:60)” (p. 206).

Keyes makes no further mention of the male experience of homosexuality in hip hop culture. It is not even mentioned in the context of the Black urban communities’ tragic AIDS statistics. Although this may reflect the silence surrounding the issue within the culture, it does nothing to open this particular experience of marginalization up to scrutiny, a task the author does not generally shirk from. The book would have benefited from an analysis of the music’s notorious homophobia as it, as much as gangsta rap’s violence, reflects a disturbing feature of ghetto life.

My other qualm with the text comes from my own background as a student of literature and from my fascination with the complexity of the composition of many hip hop tracks. While Keyes does provide detailed breakdowns of the rhythmic structure of certain verses from popular rap songs, she does not do a prolonged reading of any song as a text. Given rap’s double nature—half musical innovation and half lyrical, poetic skill—a reading of a complete set of lyrics would have facilitated a deeper understanding of the intricacy of rap’s rhyme structure, meter, historical awareness, cultural references, character, performance, and narrative. A detailed reading of Public Enemy’s oft-cited “Fuck Tha Police,” for example, would have disrupted most people’s preconceived notions about the song. This kind of literary analysis would only have strengthened and added complexity to Keyes’ arguments about the ideology and aesthetics of rap music.

The basic argument made in Rap Music and Street Consciousness, that rap music as a genre is bound aesthetically and ideologically to the culture of the streets, is proven beyond a reasonable doubt by the evidence and analysis Keyes provides. What is perhaps more contentious, though to this reader equally convincing and slightly more inspiring, is the argument that underlies the entire text and is only explicitly stated in the epilogue: “This study posits that even though rap music began as an outgrowth of black youths’ socioeconomic and cultural marginalization within the United States, the music nevertheless functions in a number of positive ways for youth in the street context” (p. 229).

Keyes’ text is valuable not only for its historical grounding but also because this was a history that needed to be told. Hip hop is so fully integrated into contemporary media that it is no longer exclusively the soundtrack of the inner city. It dominates radio and music television, is the most popular kind of music among suburban teenagers, and its history includes the point of origin of some of the most interesting (to this young, urban reader) subcultures of the day: rave culture being the obvious example. This history and analysis of rap turns a critical light on the innumerable interlocking cultures that make up the United States and reveals the memory, integrity, and passion of a marginalized society, all of which are often obliterated by the bright surfaces of the media.

In Rap Music and Street Consciousness Keyes makes a conjunctural analysis of hip hop in order to explain the relationship between the music and the streets. She integrates the role played by economics and politics into her study of hip hop’s history and aesthetics, just as she integrated herself as a participant-observer into the scene, and it is the resulting
balance and comprehensiveness of her text that I most admire. Keyes does leave a few gaps in her thesis; nevertheless, this is cultural studies at its best.

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