

SNAP CRACKIN' POP: A MUSICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF "SNAP MUSIC" AND
HIP HOP JOURNALISM

by

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(Under the Direction of Dwight E. Brooks)

ABSTRACT

This thesis is an autoethnography that examines Southern rap music, specifically Atlanta-based "snap music." "Snap music" is criticized for not having any musical substance and ties to conventional rap music. I examine "snap music" in the form of a "musical autoethnography." My examination of "snap music" challenges *VIBE* magazine's characterizations of "snap music" and its similar artists as indecorous music. I provide a textual analysis of *VIBE's* staff and operation as a form of Hip Hop journalism.

INDEX WORDS: *VIBE* magazine, rap music, Hip Hop culture, Hip Hop journalism, popular music journalism, popular music criticism, Southern Hip Hop, Southern rap music, the "Dirty South," Atlanta, "snap music," African American youth culture, autoethnography, ethnomusicology, "musical autoethnography," and participant observation

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DEDICATION

Let me start by saying, I represent the underdogs. I dedicate this thesis to all of us representing for the South in particular. As an aspiring scholar and intellectual, you all have my support and ear in trying to articulate to people the Southern Hip Hop aesthetic. This thesis will hopefully clarify and celebrate some of that lifestyle. While our idioms and values do not always win over audiences and critics, we definitely won't stop. We are Hip Hop regardless of what anyone has to say. If you from the South or represent for the South, this thesis is for you! One love!

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CHAPTER 1

MAKING ME SNAP: THE INTRODUCTION

Purpose of My Study

Southern rap music is the latest phenomenon in Hip Hop culture and popular music. With the recent influx of *Billboard* chart successes, major distribution deals, music video rotation, ringtones, Grammy Award successes (Houston's Chamillionaire, Atlanta's Ludacris, T.I., and Lil' Jon), and an Academy Award (Memphis act Three 6 Mafia), it would seem as if Southern rap has immense success with no critical or commercial backlash. There is the opposing idea that because of Southern Hip Hop culture's massive popularity, rap music as Hip Hop's sole musical genre has abandoned some of its original criteria. These components include blatantly addressing political and social issues, reciting lyrics in stanzas of 16 bars, and creative wordplay. I believe contemporary popular music studies needs more interactive and direct critiques from "native scholars" of musical genres that can recognize the specific influences that affect the position of indigenous musical cultures.

I recognize Southern rap music for artists' autonomy and self-promotion. Southern rap music, in its grassroots form, is a self-constructed cultural performance and series of business opportunities for African American youth. I am writing this thesis to provide my perspective on Southern Hip Hop culture. I am responding to Southern rap music's idioms and unapologetic subject matters being mischaracterized in popular and mainstream critiques. My examinations of Southern rap music and Southern Hip Hop culture are important because rap music and Hip Hop culture are the most significant contributions of African American youths to contemporary culture. Rap music and Hip Hop culture allows Black youth specifically the moment to make mass culture and society aware of our positions in and orientations with American culture. Rap music is the musical voice of my generation.

Rap music and Hip Hop culture are both victims of homogenization and capitalism. At the present moment, Southern rap music and Southern Hip Hop are the major cultural phenomena in

American popular music and culture. T.I. has become the spokesperson for Chevrolet Impala SS. Oakley introduces a brand of sunglasses to commemorate Lil' Jon's trademark sunglasses. Corporations are now using Southern rap music and Hip Hop culture to sell products, make money, and reproduce cultural trends. Even with geographic ties, rap music and Hip Hop culture are both no longer the cultural products of predominately Black youth experiences and voices. Various companies and businesses also use themes of sex, drugs, violence, gaudiness, and criminal lifestyles to portray Hip Hop culture and to pitch consumer goods. I believe relying on negative imagery for capital causes rap music and Hip Hop culture to deviate from documenting the various lifestyles, concerns, and hardships pertinent to Black youth culture. Rap music and Hip Hop culture have expanded since its late 1970s origins from consumption by predominately young Black audiences to various age groups, ethnicities, and corporate establishments. I question if rap music and Hip Hop culture remains a political and creative agency for and by African American youth.

The Origins of My Study

My intention to write my thesis on Southern rap music and Southern Hip Hop responds to a series of *VIBE* magazine features and commentaries. As Hip Hop journalism's leading commercial publication, *VIBE* magazine acquires popular acclaim in both Hip Hop culture and mainstream print media. Quincy Jones, innovative music producer and *VIBE* founder, says, "*VIBE* is the voice and soul of urban music and culture" (www.vibe.com, 2007). *VIBE*, once oversized but now smaller, is a bound with glossy photographs, quality brand advertisements, music and fashion trend reports, album reviews of various musical genres, and feature interviews. *VIBE* resembles high profile music trade publications *Rolling Stone* and *Spin* but documents Hip Hop culture similar to *The Source* and *XXL*. *VIBE* maintains a present circulation of over 800,000 readers and averages a monthly readership of approximately 7 million. (Pasmore, 2007; *Target Market News*, 2006). *VIBE*'s content embraces solely Hip Hop culture but also features recording artists from other music genres and commercial products. *VIBE*'s position among various media publics and *VIBE*'s developments into mass media forms privileges the magazine to

become what *VIBE*'s staff labels as "the world's leading urban music and lifestyle magazine" (www.vibe.com, 2007).

I am an active reader of *VIBE* magazine. I admire *VIBE*'s selection of cover stories and advertisements pertinent to African American youth culture. I can find features including urban fashion lines, calendar dates for cultural events, breakthrough artists profiles (who sometimes become popular artists), detailed feature stories, album release dates, and tributes to nostalgic elements of Black popular culture. *VIBE* also provides historical information on past and present genres of African American music in many accounts and features. *VIBE*'s layout and content portrays having a loyal responsibility to Hip Hop culture. *VIBE* centers Black cultural productions as nomenclatures of positive, creative, complex, and vibrant reflections of African American youth. One of *VIBE*'s primary objectives is specifically purposed at "strengthening its unique position among young multicultural consumers by giving fans of all colors an important touchstone for the culture" (Pasmore, 2007; *Target Market News*, 2006). However, I question *VIBE*'s attempts at embracing the diversity of Hip Hop culture with *VIBE*'s interpretations and comments on specific geographically-based Hip Hop subcultures.

I think *VIBE* mischaracterizes Atlanta-based "snap music." After reading a feature story on Atlanta-based "snap music" in a June 2006 edition of *VIBE*, two supporting album reviews for "snap music" acts Dem Franchize Boyz and Unk in other issues, and an online brief on D4L from October 2005, I find each of the reports very similar in assessing "snap music" as nonmusical rap. The feature story discusses an ongoing rivalry between rap groups D4L and Dem Franchize Boyz regarding which act is more popular and actually creates "snap." East Coast rap artists such as Ghostface (of the New York rap outfit Wu-Tang Clan) dismiss "snap music" in the feature report. New York rap artist Ghostface (also popular member of legendary East Coast rap outfit Wu-Tang Clan) bashes "snap music" during one of his live performances. The album reviews mark the "snap" artists as "minimalist, bubbly, and lacking any compelling lyrics" (Sarig, 2006, p. 150). I feel what qualifies as "rap" music is changing. After reading the reports in *VIBE*, I find it necessary to study *VIBE*'s objective to become an "important touchstone" that depicts rap and Hip Hop's geographic music scenes. *VIBE*'s "snap music" reports and *VIBE*'s

organization deserve further critical examination from someone who immerses in and understands rap music, Hip Hop culture, and Southern rap music.

VIBE appears to advocate for promoting emerging subcultures and trends within Hip Hop culture. *VIBE* as a major Hip Hop publication can introduce various music audiences to various rap music scenes and its local popular artists. Rap music's and Hip Hop culture's supporters share egalitarian motives to study and highlight cultures with which they may identify with. I support *VIBE* because the magazine centers rap music and Hip Hop culture. I honor *VIBE*'s mission because I believe the magazine aspires to provide positive and complex views of Hip Hop culture. *VIBE*'s mission statement states:

Through the prism of urban music, *VIBE* chronicles the celebrities, sounds, fashion, lifestyle, new media, and business born from this art form. With an authoritative voice, *VIBE* creates trends as much as it records them. *VIBE* covers music, educates its readers, and gives back to the community. *VIBE* serves as a portal to a growing young multicultural audience. By being excellent journalists and innovative marketers, we are champions of urban music and culture (www.vibe.com, 2007).

I think *VIBE*'s staff intends to expand the magazine's audience outside of African Americans. My thesis will examine *VIBE* as a print media institution with intentions of maintaining credibility in Hip Hop journalism. I will also discuss how *VIBE* intends to secure a stable, economically successful magazine. My debate against *VIBE* addressing Atlanta-originated "snap music" is supported by my participant observation of "snap music" in Atlanta.

Rap music and Hip Hop culture produce different perspectives of Black youth culture because of control and authorship. Rap music's and Hip Hop culture's various views and opinions all depend on who portrays and speaks on behalf of the music and culture. In one sense, rap music and Hip Hop culture highlight the celebratory nature and political concerns of Black youth. Rap music and Hip Hop culture is music from oppressed people that demands attention, respect, and understanding. This is how I understand and relate to rap and Hip Hop. On the other hand, I feel that rap music and Hip Hop culture are treated in mass media and popular culture as commodities. Record labels, corporate investors, and now media institutions are motivated by commercial and fiscal objectives in order to increase their

individual profit margins. These various industries and businesses are also marketing negative and essentialist stereotypes associated with African Americans. Various media create lasting images and constructions of our society. Rap music, Hip Hop culture, and Black youth are treated like brands or consumer products for monetary exchange. This thesis will indicate how Southern rap music and Southern Hip Hop culture reflects my experiences and memories of my childhood. In Chapter 2, I will define rap music and Hip Hop culture as general creative expressions and outlets for Black youth. Chapter 3 is an historical account of Southern rap music and Southern Hip Hop evolving from underground phenomena to a series of music scenes in Southern metropolitan areas such as Atlanta. Chapter 4 provides a textual analysis of Hip Hop journalism's pivotal publication, *VIBE* magazine, and the magazine's intentions to uphold Hip Hop culture. Chapter 5 lays out my anthropological methods for my analysis, which leads into my immersions and findings in Chapter 6. For my conclusion in Chapter 7, I hope my audience and readers gain a better sense of rap music and Hip Hop culture beneath what journalists and cultural critics will commonly provide. My thesis makes use of memory and experiences as facts. This analysis features an interdisciplinary, intellectual, and first person analysis of living within and heavily consuming Southern rap music.

CHAPTER 2

BUILDING A CASE FOR HIP HOP CULTURE AND RAP MUSIC

Rap music and Hip Hop culture are often interchangeable terms in the general public and the press. The two are not the exact same thing. Rap music is one expressive, spoken, and performance art within Hip Hop culture. Rap music provides the main vocal and descriptive element. Rap is a modality of expression that reflects the cultural attitudes, values, beliefs, and experiences of African American youth (Walker, 2001, p. 211). Hip Hop culture is the lifestyle that combines cultural elements of music, fashion, art, film, politics, language, and ideologies as reflections of African American youth culture. In this chapter, I frame rap music as a culturally specific performance art that places the creative license and concerns of African American youth at the center of the narrative.

Rap Music

Rap music chronicles a dialogue and self-criticism that is often gritty, descriptive, graphic, and vulgar. Since rap music's origins in the late 1970s, rap music strikes a chord for being resistant and rebellious. During this developmental period, rap music was only synonymous with inner city life because this is where the music originated from. However, rap music is improvisational. Early rap artists would perform over extended playing, instrumental songs that were also recognizable tunes. Sugarhill Gang's 1979 classic "Rapper's Delight" also has the music from Chic's 1979 #1 hit "Good Times." Rap music commonly features polyrhythmic beats, spoken staccato rhymes, and call-and-response refrains between performers and audiences. Some rappers even freestyle, or recite their lyrics without any written lines or rehearsed performances. As rap music becomes sound recordings, the basic components and sparse sounds are courtesy of electronic instruments. Rap music abandons strong harmonies, melodies, and the use of live instruments. Rap music is party-based music set to heighten celebration and pride for Black youth in marginal communities. *Black Noise* author Tricia Rose (1994) provides a creative understanding of rap music as:

a form of rhymed storytelling accompanied by highly rhythmic electronically-based music. Rap tales are told in elaborate and ever-changing black slang. For rap's language wizards, all images, sounds, ideas, and idioms are ripe for recontextualization, pun, mockery, and celebration (p. 2).

Rap music is creative agency for Black youth to voice and express themselves within their selective social spaces without compromise and conformity.

Rap music is like no other genre of music. Rap music documents the experiences of Black youth based on socioeconomic and geographic locations. Rap music displays pride and respect for where Blacks resides or calls home. Black youth often acknowledge pragmatic symbols relevant only to their origins. Various resources and references include street corners, parks, community figures, personalities, inexpensive hobbies, improvised social activities, or collective memories. I recognize these similar components from my own childhood. I use slang in conversations with my peers. The street corners, parks, abandoned lots, and open spaces were our meeting places. Somehow these environmental and social parameters from my community would often arouse fear, apprehension, confusion, and physical distancing. Some of my peers did not want to interact with me. Similarly, my peers did not live in similar communities from which I come from. Rap music arouses a similar understanding of Black youth. I think of rap music as a metaphor for my own life.

I reflect on various ideas of geographic-based rap music and Hip Hop culture from my own interactions with my peers. I remember numerous conversations with my classmates at Johnson C. Smith University, a Historically Black College in Charlotte, North Carolina. Many of my classmates did not rear in the South. These students were from New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Connecticut, and California. Some of the students' first trips to the South came when they attended college. The other students believed Southern Blacks were slow, country, and unsophisticated. They also hated Southern rap, and we argued constantly. My classmates all insisted that the rap artists they enjoyed from their hometowns and regions were great lyricists because the rap artists used punchlines and "16 bars" to prove their talent. I felt this view of rap music was one-dimensional.

As one of the few Black graduate students at The University of Georgia, a predominately White institution, I found numerous White colleagues (and some Black) completely unfamiliar with Southern rap music and some of its associated slang. Many of the students and faculty dwelled on the negative and gaudy images. They believed rap music and Hip Hop culture only promoted sex, drugs, materialism, and violent behavior. Rap music and Hip Hop culture was stuck in a time capsule. They would also say, “Hip Hop used to mean something” or “hip hop is dead.” Under both conditions in school, Southern rap music’s outsiders recognized the symbols that Southern rap artists place in their lyrics and songs as nothing more than worthless reference points, crime sites, and poverty-stricken areas. The perception seemed that I, along with other African American youth, was a product of the ghetto that could not speak properly or articulate my ideas. I disagreed with these ideas. Janis Faye Hutchinson (1997) similarly acknowledges:

the culture of poverty perspective argues that social disorganization, poverty, and inadequate socialization of children are the primary reasons for the high rate of social problems” (p. 140).

The various individuals outside of my community perceived rap music as a major contributor to the wretched behavior synonymous with Black youth. On the other hand, I, along with other Black youth, mainly consume rap music by choice. I listen to rap music to accompany my social interactions and to connect my life to my family heritage. Popular music critic and scholar Andy Bennett (2000) believes,

Popular music is primarily, if not the primary, leisure source for young people. Popular music features in young people’s lives in a variety of different ways and in a diverse range of contexts (p. 3).

Rap music captures many of my childhood memories in a special light. In my community, rap music is a positive environmental factor that is the chosen musical form to accompany Black youth fun, socialization, and understanding of our lives.

My Southern roots are congruent with some of rap music’s subject matter. Growing up in Spartanburg, South Carolina throughout the late 1980s and the 1990s, I mediated between living with extended family and a single parent home. I lived in a neighborhood with many small houses. The families in each of the homes included multiple members and residents. My home had my grandparents,

older sister, an invalid aunt, another aunt, and myself all living in a two-bedroom home with one bathroom. Space was limited for all of us. My sister and I shared a bed. After my grandparents passed, I moved in with my mother. My mother spent endless hours working. I would often see her struggle because she was the only working member of the household. My mother used limited funds to pay bills and provide my sister and me with essentials for school, activities, and survival. I identify with rap music because of rap artists' lyrics addressing similar hard living situations within their homes.

Rap music addresses the anger and disenfranchisement I feel as a Black youth. I remember feeling marginal within my community but appreciated by my community. My elementary school and junior high schools, both predominately African American, were in my neighborhood. The schools were directly across the street from each other. The buildings would often go without any maintenance with leaky roofs, peeling paint, broken floor tiles, no heat, no air conditioning, old textbooks, and broken instructional materials. I remember having temporary teachers who would leave because they did not like the students or the facilities. Students' standardized test scores were constantly documented in the local papers as the worst in the state. The schools were perceived by the city and children from affluent communities as "bad schools" because of the facilities and the location. Four sets of low income housing projects were nearby. Two of the complexes were right across the street from the schools. The police would often patrol the areas. They would even bother me if I was walking from a friend's house, school, or my extracurricular activities. I felt worthless. No one cared about us. Rap music helped me to understand that other Black youth were just as disappointed with their living conditions as I was.

Rap music provided alternative views on drug culture. I saw another side to the drug dealers in my area. The local drug dealers and hustlers were often perceived as bad individuals by the law as well as by my family. My mother would always tell me to not go around them or go to those bad areas. My school teachers would tell me the exact same thing. On the other hand, the drug dealers and hustlers supported many of the neighborhood children. The drug dealers and local hustlers always provided incentives for good grades and achieving excellence. The dealers and hustlers with nice homes and pets invited me and my friends over to play basketball and video games. I saw them attend our school

programs, athletic events, or community events. I respected the hustlers and dealers because of their continuous encouragement for me to succeed. The hustlers and dealers always insisted that I continue to attend school and take control of every opportunity that came at me. I relate to rap music because the music alters negative characters and situations into more personal and positive elements in the lives of Black youth.

Rap music allows Black youth to express their truths and values from their individual conditions and perspectives. Rap artists speak in a direct and personal style with conversational tones and narrative speech similar to local reporters. Rap music is a mode of urban slang and articulation unlike the safe and normalized ethos of American society. Martin Stokes says mainstream music audiences cannot deal with the kinds of events and processes that make up the predominately verbal and visual “real life” in which social reality is assumed to consist (1994, p. 1). Rap music is ethnographic or anthropological art that allows performers and writers to personify familiar community elements that shape the direction of their craft. With rap’s local following in small geographic communities, rappers acquire great latitude to become young artists and writers that self-construct their narratives with events and scenarios prevalent to their experiences. Kaleefa Saneeth believes rappers with strong ties to their neighborhoods and communities create well-defined characters in order to broaden their lyrical horizons (1995, p. 226). James Bernard (1995) suggests that rap music is “a witness: talking about what one sees, feels, and experiences” (p. 256). Walker (2001) speaks of rap music as “Black art actively reflecting the living reality of the movement towards black liberation” (p. 213). Rap music is a glance at Black youth survival from the vantage point of Black youth.

Loose Rap, Bad Rap

Rap music’s creative latitude remains at critical odds and misunderstanding with many rap music fans and critics. The ideas are often based on first impressions of rap’s content and subject matter. Rap music highlights the injustices and problems relating to the Black underworld. Rap’s uncompromising and raw nature also produces some identity crises and mischaracterizations of Black youth. John F. Szwed’s account of rap music in *The VIBE History of Hip Hop* describes the local origins of rap music as

“an African American music and poetic form born out of the inner city. The lyrics serve as a voice for the streets by giving a segment of disenfranchised people the moment to position their identity and experiences against society” (1999, p. 5). As a result of rap music’s unapologetic and confrontational approach to social issues and popular music, rap music is often the blame for romanticizing and portraying negative behaviors and imagery associated with African American youth.

Rap music and Hip Hop culture suffer from a backlash as a scapegoat and contributor to American social ills of negative, violent, racist, and sexist behavior. Rap music often uses local resources that Black youth value, appreciate, recognize, and document as part of our individual identity formations. Rap music creates personal understandings of dilemmas, problems, events, scenarios, and personalities relative to Black culture. Samuels (1995) points out:

The ways in which rap has been consumed and popularized speak not only of cross cultural understanding, musical, or otherwise, but of a voyeurism and tolerance of racism in which Black and White are both complicit (p. 251).

Rap music includes instances of violence, oppression, sex, drugs, crime, poverty, family struggles, law enforcement, entrepreneurship, spirituality, celebration, and politics. The social constructions of African American youth as grotesque based on rap’s content correspond to a tradition of negative images and critiques of African American culture. Rap music, to some, vilifies and portrays Black youth as uncivilized people. David Samuels (1995) state of rap music’s following,

the appeal rested in the evocation of age old images of Blackness: a foreign, sexually charged, and criminal underworld against which the norms of White society are defined, and by extension, through which they may be defined (p. 242).

Negative attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles have become sole traits of both rap music and Hip Hop culture. Rap music actively positions Black youths’ hard living experiences, poor living conditions, and aggressive psychological states. Rap music’s subject matter is synonymous with understanding the harsh realities of the inner city, ghetto life, and survival as a marginal youth culture in America. At times, rap music features rough and edgy moments.

There is some debate on the creative nature of rap music and Hip Hop culture. Hip Hop scholar and critic Bakari Kitwana states that Hip Hop culture is the most significant cultural achievement of our generation that centers Black youth narratives as the subject through music, dance, art, film, fashion, language, and politics (*The Hip Hop Generation*, 1999, p. 22). Rap music suffers from criticism based on sound and lyrical construction. Rap music's heavy use of programmable, state-of-the-art electronic musical instruments abandons using live instruments and studio musicians. Rap music's sparse arrangements with minimal musical depth in sound and production create a union that Bernard considers as:

abrasive, loud, and cruel music that is disrespectful of melody and pop song structures. Rap's emphasis on rhythm rather than melody makes it easier to export. It is catchy, visceral, and danceable where pop songs offer solace from an increasingly perplexing world, rap engages it. Its beats are upfront and impolite, not content to be mere background music. Rap embraces chaos as art (1995, p. 256).

Hip Hop culture concocts a series of practices and performances from Black youth. The complex arts and practices of music, dance, and visual art sustain Hip Hop culture (specifically with rap music as the definitive practice) as not being a cultural fad. Hip Hop culture and rap music are both constructions out of natural resources according to the voice and experiences from the ghettos of urban America. Hip Hop culture forms a self-documentary for Black youth to enhance self-esteem and constructs a creative space. Tia DeNora says that music is a reconfiguration of embodied energy, tempo, and consciousness style by cooling out forms of agency that are comfortable, preferable, and feels right in emotion and embodiment (2000, p. 114). David Schultz (1977) recognizes in his essay "Coming Up as a Boy in the Ghetto" that inner city narratives such as rap music are:

songs sung about the hardship of life born out of urban wastelands and marginal communities that consist of predominately African American youth with constant attempts to document the self in relation to one's environment (p. 22).

Rap music responds to being a socially alienated individual based on Black youths' relationships with their respective environments and communities.

Rap music privileges Black youth to construct ambitious personalities of who they aspire to be. Rap lyrics grant the honor of building confidence and sense of self-worth through performance. Contemporary rap music features rap artists often use this confidence to discuss economic prosperity, material possessions, celebration, excess, and their sexual prowess. Rap music is like theater. Rap is a production with constructed characters. To some, the subject and content of rap music do not allow Black youth to engage in any form of self-criticism. Perceptions from our parents, older African Americans, and social activists often relate to rap music as advocacy of crime, anti-intellectualism, and animalistic behavior. African American music scholar Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. (1995) says:

When attending to music, listeners consciously or unconsciously perceive its tension repose relationships – the rhythmic, tonal, textual, harmonic, and timbral consonances and dissonances, figures and events, individually, and in combination, that constitute the musical work or composition (p. 229).

Rappers often speak of their abilities to write, devalue other opposing artists' ability to compete against them in verse, and to command respect and attention for their performance skills. Rap artists' willingness to express one's talent to rhyme and recite lyrics before an opponent dodges physical confrontation. Rap music allows one to creatively engage in competition with someone without resorting to violent behavior. According to Bernard (1995):

The question of identity has long been a troublesome for Blacks in the United States where a lack of economic opportunity and positive images have stifled self-esteem. But in music, Blacks have formed a haven for self-expression (p. 257).

Rather than rap music allowing the general public to understand the internal struggles of African American youth, rap music produces some subversive effects not in sync with the objectives of Black youth culture. Rap music provides social commentary and role playing for Black youth.

The Future of Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture

Rap music does not always embody literal or static interpretations of Black culture. The lyrics are anti-authoritative forms of expressive and exaggerated speech. Rap music can be political, happy, angry, first person narratives, and dance music. Rap music and Hip Hop culture both maintain popularity

among African Americans and popular culture for anti-establishment capabilities. Rap encourages Black youth to have a good time or to make social change. Rap music's verbal and performance displays are ironic instances of language usage that is often misunderstood. Rap artists can use aggressive tones and lyrics or more soft spoken voices. Adam Sexton's (1995) essay, "Don't Believe the Hype: Why Hip Hop Criticism Isn't Better," recognizes American culture scavenging to victimize and demonize Black youth. Sexton states:

Hip Hop has been on the defensive since the moment it burst into the public consciousness. And the fact that to this day, the form is made predominately by young Black masses, our society's least trusted, least respected by a long shot, and you have a recipe for not just defensiveness but clinical paranoia (p. 12).

Rap artists aspire to move their audience by thinking about social issues or to move in physical motions. Rap music thrives among African American youth because the music centers and allows youth to respond to their individual lifestyles.

Rappers can often recontextualize the negative images of hustlers, criminals, thugs, savages, and outlaws into well-constructed literary characters set to music. The personification of these archetypes and characters renegotiate a pride and analytical position specific to Black youth. Black youth can challenge and devalue the manner in which opposing critiques provide feedback regarding rap artists' musical compositions. Rap music displays Black youths confidence. Rap music is agency that provides,

an element of boastful self-awareness that might not find resonance in other cultures. Rappers at the heart of the narrative exaggerate their own abilities and accomplishments. While such braggadocio reinforces young Blacks' sense of self, it might not play in the same cultures where issues of identity are taken for granted (Bernard, 1995, p. 257).

Rap music leads individuals to believe that the music should subscribe to a specific formula. Rap music is supposedly confined to a specific form of lyrical delivery and machismo performance. Consequently, Hip Hop culture is driven by various local trends pertinent to local African American youth culture. These movements become rap and Hip Hop's more popular voices in temporary phases. Revelations may come in the form of new artists or geographically-based music. Since 2005, the bass heavy, rhythmic syncopated "snap music" is the latest phase of Hip Hop culture that stems from dance

clubs and local Atlanta neighborhoods onto pop radio, music video stations, and cellular phone ringtones. “Snap music” is criticized by non-Southern rap artists such as Ghostface for “snap’s” light music production and abandonment of rap’s common lyrical structure. Non-Southern rap artists and supporting music critics portray rap music and Hip Hop culture as once vibrant arts that can not revitalize the origins of cultural identity, community, and positive nature characterized in early Hip Hop culture. Sanneth (1995) provides insight by addressing:

When many people talk or write about Hip Hop, they talk about this trend as if it were a bad thing. Commentators and historians are always reminiscing about the good old days, when rappers aspire to be nothing more than great rappers (p. 229).

Rap music can have tunnel vision that has rigid standards placed on the quality of the music and culture.

Rap music and Hip Hop culture are being measured by strict Western pedagogic musical standards. The notions of what qualifies as music influence popular ideas that assess Black youth culture and production. Music should be understood as an expression of culture. Rap music and Hip Hop culture are often seen as negative and nonmusical. Popular music journalists, based on the power to influence their supporters, media outlets, and audience segments, can influence public opinion. The writers set the criteria and document many popular music genres. Coincidentally, writers’ characterizations of “snap music” in *VIBE* resemble similar comments from rap music fans from outside of the South. I think what constitutes as “rap music” is becoming more vague and difficult to understand. Rap music and Hip Hop culture diversify the portrayal of Black youth experiences and music. Somehow this is not what is going on. Hutchinson (2005) suggests:

power determines who possesses or lack civilization. The media and majority populations study and interact with Blacks as if they are a homogeneous group that can be reduced to a single variable – race. Majority populations organize and orchestrate the scientific setting and the media (p. 79).

The directions of rap music and Hip Hop culture are becoming based upon music journalists’ perceptions. These individuals make assumptions about rap and Hip Hop culture without any continuous, day-to-day, and ongoing interactions. Many articles are on-time glances of music scenes and the music’s local

idioms. I have not had limited immersions with Southern rap music and Southern Hip Hop culture. As a consequence, the expressive behaviors and analysis of rap music and Hip Hop culture documented in brief accounts do not fully capture the essence of Black youth culture. My thesis compiles my life experiences within the development of rap music and Hip Hop culture.

Media culture's dominant voices attempt to portray rap music and Hip Hop culture. This does not surprise me because the media should provide the public with vital and relevant information on various cultures. However, rap and Hip Hop's media coverage is commonly situated in a negative context. Rap music and Hip Hop culture are victims of corporate and economic interest from predominately White investors, business moguls, and investors. The gatekeepers sanitize and censor content according to editorial discretion and their perceptions of what will yield profits and guarantees a market position. The media, political, and social institutions all carry potent imagery that selects and replicates carbon copies of savagery that serves as a monolithic image of Black youth. George Starks, Jr. (2001) examines "a long interest by non-African Americans in African American music. We can find the words of non-Black commentators on this music because popular mainstream of writers on African American music, tend to dominate popular opinion of the subject" (p. 225). Because of the pervasive nature of negative and violent imagery, corporations latch on to these images because they can capitalize from it. Rap music and Hip Hop culture are lost arts buried mad rushes of capitalism and tough guy/girl posturing (Sanneth, 2004, p. 225). Rap and Hip Hop are being used to situate African American stereotypes as criminals, promiscuous individuals, drug peddlers, drug fiends, and savages. *VIBE* highlights "snap music" as noncreative music made by self-indulgent individuals. Bennett (2000) states:

In the process of producing and marketing pop music, the music industry clearly imposes structures of meaning on particular genres; the sounds in turn serve to frame audiences' uses of popular music (p. 44).

Rap music is simply an entertainment and musical vehicle in use to perpetuate specific ideas of Black culture. Rap music's messages are crucial because of active youth participation to create and showcase Black cultural ideas. In the next section, I will examine Southern Hip Hop culture and Southern rap music as an series of independent music scenes that continues with Atlanta's "snap music."

CHAPTER 3

SOUTHERN HIP HOP CULTURE AND SOUTHERN RAP MUSIC

Defining Southern Hip Hop and Southern Rap

One layer of geographic-based rap music and Hip Hop culture is the insular turned immensely popular Southern rap music. Tamara Palmer, author of *Country Fried Soul: Adventures of Dirty South Hip Hop* (2005), provides us with some criteria for Southern rap music, which is parallel to bulk of rap music production. Southern rap music comprises “bass heavy tones and 808 drum machine rhythms influenced by electro-funk as well as hot-stepping riddums of Jamaican dancehalls and the call-and-response chants popularized in Atlanta and Miami club scenes” (p. 17). In order to solidify a thriving but well-established music scene without the chagrins of music critics and rap music audiences, Southern rap music creators and artists become actively autonomous in creating awareness for their musical compositions. Throughout my youth, I know of Southern rap music as local cult followings that evolve into various self-sufficient opportunities for Southern rap artists. Throughout this chapter, I will provide some historical and personal accounts of Southern rap music.

Southern rap music is predominately independent streams of rap music. Southern rap music is a musical culture with variations. Around the early 1990s, rap music and Hip Hop culture seemed static in terms of geographically-based musical production. African American youth out of New York (East Coast) and Los Angeles (West Coast) set the hegemonic standards for personalities and narratives vital in defining Hip Hop culture and rap music. East Coast rap featured mostly clever metaphors, punchlines, and nonmelodic rhythm tracks. West Coast rap, or commonly known as “gangsta rap,” featured highly synthesized but funky tracks that usually speak of issues with the police, gang culture, and the gritty urban landscape of California. The two regions’ immense production, mainstream recognition, and economic potential of rap artists constructed the idea of East and West Coasts producing more marketable and respected popular rap music. As a fan of many rap acts from both regions, I admired how rap artists

utilize their local resources and personal experiences prevalent to their rearing in New York or Los Angeles. I would hear off the projects in Harlem or Brooklyn or a low rider in Compton. Likewise, I would often wonder if any popular rap artists even reared from Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, and other Southern states. At the time, Southern rap artists were virtually invisible on television, in magazines, and in record stores. My family's own album crates had a void of Southern rap artists. Southern African American youth's challenge rested in the ability to construct a countercultural stream of rap music and Hip Hop culture relevant to Southern Black culture. Palmer (2005) states:

With national attention elsewhere and disrespect hanging thick in the air for so many years, the South had to focus inward to find success. Without the guidance and infrastructure provided by conventional record companies in New York or Los Angeles, Southerners took a cue and formed their own independent record labels (p. 19).

In the popular press and conventional rap music, Southern rap music was impossible to imagine and forecast.

I am a Southern African American male. I grew up in South Carolina throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s. During this time, Southern rap music was beginning to emerge and take shape. Southern rap had some basic tendencies such as loud chants and polyrhythmic beats. Southern rap keeps these specific aspects of its culture. As I got older, I realized that Southern rap music was not a static set of conventions. As a music scene, Southern rap and Southern Hip Hop include what Dan Laughley (2006) says are a pool of musical tastes and values that are constantly susceptible to change (p. 100). Some Southern rap is fast such as Miami and Atlanta "bass." Other Southern rap songs are slow such as Houston "screw." Southern rap features bass licks and guitar funk. Other Southern rap songs are loud and whiny courtesy of drum machines and synthesizers. The spoken verses may feature strong lyrical deliveries matched by creative wordplay. Some Southern rap artists display a lazy, drawl in their voices with minimal vocals. Among some of the Southern rap artists that I consumed in my teens (as well as currently) are Afro Rican, DJ Magic Mike, UGK, Geto Boys, Big Mike, 2 Live Crew, 95 South, 69 Boyz, the Dungeon Family (OutKast, Goodie M.O.B.), MC Shy D., Tag Team, Dirty, David Banner, Kriss Kross, Jermaine Dupri, YoungBloodz, T.I., Three 6 Mafia, Ludacris, Young Jeezy, Juvenile, Lil' Wayne,

B.G., the late Soulja Slim, the late Camouflage, Eightball and MJG, Tela, DJ Screw, T.I., Slim Thug, Mike Jones, Lil' Flip, Master P. and his No Limit camp, Trick Daddy, Trina, Jacki-O, and Chyna Whyte. The various artists and geographic areas within Southern rap music and Southern Hip Hop culture reflects various forms of cultural distinctiveness (Miller, 2004, p. 205).

At first, I knew of Southern rap as only underground music. I was not introduced to Southern rap in the press or in music videos. I found Southern rap music inaugurated into underground nightclubs, outdoor barbecues, house parties, block parties, public schools, blaring automobile sound systems, skating rinks, peers' homes, basketball courts, abandoned parking lots, and the neighborhoods I reared. I watched Southern rap music take shape in these environments with intense dancing, loud blares, jeers, catcalls, and the inhabitants reciting the lyrics verbatim. Southern rap music was popular music to my close friends and me. Southern rap was our own distinct music culture. Southern rap did not have a core sound. Southern rap music developed strong followings in Southern metropolitan areas such as Miami, Houston, Atlanta, New Orleans, and Memphis. To us, Southern rap was different across various areas.

Southern rap has some basic elements. Southern rap music's criteria in the various areas often include syncopated drum and rhythm tracks accompanied by thunderous bass riffs. Southern rap music is usually loud. The music would create this incredible sound to me and my peers if the bass and drums were both equally loud and cause us to nod our heads to the thump of the beat. The spoken verses and lyrical composition reflect a distinct, slow drawl in dialect that diverges from the utterances of East and West Coast rap artists. The vocals are similar to how I speak to others in conversations. People would laugh, tease me, and not understand the language. These people also did not understand Southern rap's musical components. Often known to critics and cultural interpreters as "country rap," "booty music," or "Dirty South," Southern rap music is often perceived and rampant and indecorous. Tony Green (1999) agrees by citing:

The South, truth be told, is full of contradictions, conundrums, and tautologies. It is a place where Black middle class aspirations do an uneasy tango around old-school racism and seek refuge from northern urban angst. The South offers infinite interpretations (p. 266).

Southern rap music was my local and personalized strand of Hip Hop culture that I could identify with.

Southern rap music's origins actualizes a spirit of self-sufficiency to produce and market rap music. Southern rap music responds to an invisible space in mainstream Hip Hop culture and rap music. Southern rap music actively incorporates fun dancing and bumping sounds over various performance styles. Like East and West Coast rap, Southern rap's lyrical content recalls Southern Blacks' hobbies, pastimes, family structures, neighborhoods, drug cultures, materialism, ambitions, insecurities, fantasies, values, and customs. Southern rap music is often, personal, confessional, detailed, graphic, crude, thunderous, laid-back, weezy, heavily synthesized, bass-loaded, funky, and syncopated. Southern rap is a hybrid. According to Kalamu ya Salaam (1995), Southern rap music could reflect "a gift to the world that makes it possible for every human to articulate his or her own history, presence, and aspirations" (p. 182). Green (1999) acknowledges, "trying to draw an entire region under a single stylistic rubric is a tactical nightmare. Southern rap is a quaint mutation and a pretty tricky thing" (p. 265-266). Southern rap music produces a variation of artists who maintain popularity among mostly Southern African American youth. Southern rap music thrives without following the norms of conventional rap, which is what connects me to it.

I consider Southern rap music as "popular music" because of the heavy consumption and enthusiasm by African American youth from similar communities and environments to mine. According to Portia K. Maultsby (1995), rap music succeeds African American musical traditions becoming forms of individual and group expression that embraces a complex of subdivisions (p. 183). "Popular music" in my community did not include any music hierarchies and tastemakers. Southern rap artists intend to control their own profits. Many Southern rap artists insist on performing live shows at small venues and arenas before intimate but massive crowds. Southern rap performances produce strong loyalties that allow Southern rap artists to not anticipate record sales certifications, or peak with *Billboard* chart positions to enhance our devotion for Southern rap music. According to Roy Shuker (2004):

Popular is a contested term. For sure, it simply means appealing to the people where as for others it means something much more grounded in local community based production and individual craftspeople or of the

people. Popular indicates that something, person, product, or belief is commonly liked or approved of by a larger audience or general public (p. 3).

Southern rap's popularity stems from its various performers. Southern rap artists such as Houston acts Scarface and UGK include clever wordplay, punchlines, and narratives in their lyrics. Southern rap artists usually provide vivid and colorful images in lyrics regarding their immersion in their own environments and the people they encounter. UGK's musical accompaniment is often full of live instruments and accompanied vocals similar to soul music. In other cases, Southern rap music is often filled with heavy dance rhythms, chaotic chants, minimal wordplay and punchlines (in some cases). Southern rap music defies the standards and constructions of conventional and mainstream rap music. Rap music enables underclass Black youth to develop a critical voice or 'a common literacy' to project a critical voice, explaining, demanding, and urging (hooks, 1998, p. 420). Southern rap music marks a means to reconcile African American musical aesthetics from jazz, blues, rock, soul, and rap from being assimilated from its geographic roots in the South. Palmer (2005) states:

Some things rarely change, it seems. The South has never been properly celebrated for its musical innovations, including its contributions to Hip Hop. Up until this point, the tale of Hip Hop has been written and rewritten to mythological proportions always with New York at the forefront of the story (p. 20).

Southern rap artists cultivate innovative ideas and practices into their work in order to secure a new position as creators of rap music and Hip Hop culture.

Southern rap artists often develop their own networks to build credit for their musical productions and entrepreneurial intents. Southern rap artists' followers create underground support and artistic credibility absent of mainstream critiques, economic mismanagement, and shady business practices from within the recording industry. Southern rap artists, along with other enterprising individuals, commonly perform dual roles as the recording artists and independent record label moguls. Southern rap artists and entrepreneurs gain first hand knowledge of learning to negotiate their own business deals and control their individual music production procedures. Local Southern rap music imprints such as Houston's SwishaHouse and New Orleans' No Limit Records manage to have massive success in part to local

distribution success in those respective cities. These labels have acquired nationwide success. With tag lines such as “Major without a major deal” for SwishaHouse and “We can’t be stopped” for No Limit, Southern rap artists are taking charge in order to yield significant profit. Southern rap artists can possibly acquire the economic and creative resources to help fund, support, and create their music absent of major labels. Southern rap artists’ ability to create their own music business and culture leads to resistance and reluctance from the music industry, Hip Hop audiences, and the music press to believe in Southern rap artists’ cultural productivity. Following the ideas of Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. (1995), Southern rap music could reflect:

the virtue of rural plainness as urban naiveté. African Americans at first use the talents and skills of the ‘trickster’ as the substitute for the knowledge and sophistication they would need to negotiate the urban landscape...Signifyin(g) allows the performer to be in two places at once. It is sheer, willful play – a dynamic interplay of music and aesthetic power, the power to control and manipulate the musical circumstance. In this way, performers combine the ritual teasing and critical insinuations of Signifyin(g) with the wit, cunning, and guile of the ‘trickster’ in a self-empowering aesthetic and communicational device (p. 94, 96).

Southern rap music indicates how artists develop their work ethic and personal goals to promote their musical compositions. In addition to Southern rap artists’ objectives, Southern rap artists create a niche for Southern rap music as a subgenre of rap music and Hip Hop culture.

Southern rap artists are involved businessmen. Southern rap artists take pride in their work by actively promoting their material. Southern rap artists and record label moguls such as Luther “Luke” Campbell of Miami, Percy “Master P.” Miller of New Orleans, James “J.” Prince, and the late Robert “DJ Screw” Davis, Jr. both of Houston are Southern rap music pioneers that create alternative methods of distribution with local record labels synonymous with their hometowns. Southern rap artists build their own distribution centers through local record stores, neighborhood parties, outdoor festivals, cases in the trunk of automobiles, and street corners. As a teenager, I would often visit a local record store and/or flea market that specialized in mixtapes and album samplers that fused various recordings of Southern artists over rhythm tracks that I knew of from my own social environments. Southern rap music operates

through consistent personal advertisements that would still guarantee a strong audience base for rap artists without gatekeepers or editors. The songs on these tapes were not on radio or television. The neighborhood youth would all have access to the music. Major record labels were not printed on the labels. Instead, there were odd emblems from independent labels on the packages. These imprints such as Suave House, Rap-a-Lot, Cash Money, No Limit, and So So Def became profitable businesses that Black youth could recognize. My peers and I would learn the words very quickly and make regular visits to the vendors to find new recordings and acts. Southern rap music is a Black youth utopia world for music, business, and culture. Allen (2001) says that rap music:

rebuilds a disintegrating sense of community among the youth and has related to them in a special way. Moreover, some of its crude forms and representations have been influential in grappling with the issue of self-definition in the African American community and in combating the many forces of inferioritizaion (p. 42).

Southern rap artists dodge large scale gatekeepers within the recording industry. Since recording contracts from major recording labels require moving a quota of units prior to the artists receiving any royalties, all profits and revenues from independent music return directly to the artists. Southern rap music allows Black youth to control their music and their distribution.

On the other hand, Southern rap artists' alienating major labels and distribution creates some disadvantages for the artists. Major record labels could guarantee nationwide distribution with record store chains, music video rotation, instant radio airplay, and possible music chart positioning. Southern rap artists rarely have the stress of acting as their own promotional team and investment group to market their music. Southern rap artists' entrepreneurship would sometimes lead to dilemmas of maintaining independent wealth and stability or gaining fame with corporate and major label support (Palmer, 2005, 19). On the other hand, Southern rap music allows African American youth to actively monitor the distribution of their music. Because these artists actively monitor their music, Southern rap artists uphold their loyalty to their neighborhoods and communities because the individuals become their core audience. Southern rap music personifies what Floyd (1995) recognizes as:

an increasing separation of Blacks from rural America resulting in new tensions for African Americans who are seeking new roots and comforts modernism accelerates the process of social differentiation among African Americans and brought new processes in which economic, social, and artistic success could be obtained only in the basis of skills marketable in the urban setting, through the artificial value of materialism and through forms of creativity that is acceptable by White society” (p. 89).

The detractors of Southern rap music attempt to determine the internal cultural vibrancy that exists with Southern African American youth fans. The majority of Southern rap music is loud, thunderous, and explicit. The suggestive content regarding sex, violence, drug culture, and criminal lifestyles would become part of the music in some cases. On the other hand, Southern rap music would remain a fixture among us because of the solid beats and music. Southern rap music gets us excited, encourages us to dance, respect who we are, and where we come from. Southern rap artists speak how we speak in dialect and slang words. Southern rap music’s content during celebratory moments would not matter to us because we did not pay any attention to it. Southern rap music allows us to celebrate and mingle with our peers. Still, our enjoyment with Southern rap music does not matter because of people attempting to interpret the music and lyrics. In the midst bonding with my friends and peers, constituencies of law enforcement officers, parents, and community officials would often attempt to stifle the spirit of our ceremonious times for everyone to socialize, dance, plan daily agendas, isolate ourselves from our daily routines, family life, school, and part-time employment. We were often told to not meet, risk arrests for not adhering to authority, go home, turn down the music, or to completely turn it off.

Allen (2001) further acknowledges African American music such as rap music as:

the richest and most vibrant domain of African American culture, where the representations, revelation, celebration, and debate of African American culture and experiences take place. At the same time, it has social, political, and artistic content, which represents a reaction to middle class industrial values. As social and political music, Black music is a rebellion against humiliating deadness of western culture, a rejection of White culture values, and affirming a political alternative for African Americans. Historically, Black music reflects the pain, the hurt, and the sadness of an oppressed and uprooted people while simultaneously expressing feelings of release (p. 40-41).

My patriotism for Southern rap music reflects what hooks says is “hopelessness to create longing for insight and strategies for change that can renew spirits and reconstruct grounds for collective Black liberation struggle” (1999, p. 418). I value Southern rap music and its environmental parameters for providing escapism from such restrictions and authorities. Southern rap music reflects what Hutchinson (1997) says is:

African Americans varying in their attitudes towards Black racial identity and in their public and private presentations of Black racial identity. African Americans are determining their images and how it should be presented to the public. Self determination of Black racial identity is taking place among Blacks and not those who simply want to categorize and predict their behavior (p. 148).

Atlanta’s Southern Rap

Atlanta, in particular, stands out as a premier city that has a consistent flow of Southern rap music with various incarnations and identities. A city not too far in proximity from my own hometown, I remember as a teenager being exposed to various Atlanta acts and noticing the city for its diverse Hip Hop scene big enough to accommodate every shade (Green, 1999, 271). OutKast, Goodie M.O.B., and Arrested Development were among some of the more conscious and lyrical rap artists that created complex narratives and depth that verbally examined their living conditions and social concerns. In no way did these artists play into the overused stereotypical personalities of “gangstas” and “thugs” in their rap music. As more conscious artists, their music often provided thick accounts of growing into adulthood, family acknowledgments, civil rights, poverty, current events, relationships, their careers, and negotiating their business deals. Not to mention that their music did not always include electronic instruments but embraced live instruments, background vocalists, and studio musicians. This side of Atlanta rap music is more in line with the components of conventional rap music.

On the alternative side, Atlanta-based rap music gears toward party atmospheres and open social settings. Raheem the Dream, Kilo Ali, and Lil’ Jon and the Eastside Boyz are among some of the acts that really do not have a lyrical agenda in their music but created another popular buzz in the South based on accompanying rhythm tracks. First with “bass” and its heavily synthesized offspring “crunk,” Atlanta

area music features a light melodic, danceable, syncopated, loud, chant-heavy sound that would send its local audience into another zone. Atlanta “bass” and “crunk” hold similarities to the pioneering “Miami bass” with crowd-pleasing anthems, call-and-response chants, and polyrhythmic drum tracks. These songs would not have “16 bars” as lyrical structure but electronic dance music as the accompaniment. Atlanta’s music culture would become a critical target for the music’s abandonment of tight lyrical structures with no strong verbal rebuttals in verse. Critics imply that Southern rap artists do not have a serious focus or talent to produce Southern rap music. Southern rap music would not even have the consideration of becoming valid rap music. As I recognize the norms and standards that form commercial rap music and Hip Hop culture, I see Southern rap music rebelling against other rap music styles and Hip Hop cultural communities. As Swindell (2001) suggests, “Black popular art or culture is the product of the Black masses, and it is significant that this culture is largely and product of the Black underclass” (p. 22).

Southern rap music presents a more performance-based rather than a spoken form. The high energy and pride associated with “bass” and “crunk” at one time was insular to only similar communities and neighborhoods. Often characterized by profane and vulgar chants, everyone would sing along, rock alongside their peers, throw around numerous arms and hand gestures, gyrate their bodies, and appear to engage in a celebration with no purpose at all. Southern rap music would often create “mosh pits” with numerous youth engaging in extreme freestyle and locomotive body movements purposed at releasing captive emotions. At times, “crunk” would cause a stir that results in occasional fights and intense catcalling. On the other hand, Atlanta’s rap music culture symbolizes a social movement that prompts Black youth to respond to one another and cooperate with each other in our closed and celebratory spaces. Coincidentally, the same energetic, social, and communal tendencies also appear in Atlanta’s recent development, “snap music,” but I shall analyze how in Chapter 6. In the meantime, I see Atlanta’s brands of Southern rap music as “a benefit that absorbs the lessons of the North and adds its own flavor” (Green, 1999, p. 266). In the next section, we will examine how *VIBE* magazine as a media institution seeks to

defend Hip Hop culture while actually succumbing to social and economic pressure to maintain and enhance their market.

CHAPTER 4

FEELING THE *VIBE*: EXPLORING HIP HOP JOURNALISM

VIBE Magazine and “The African American Press”

In this chapter, I define *VIBE* as a major source of “popular Hip Hop journalism” that documents and centers contemporary African American youth culture and music. *VIBE* is also an example of “African American press,” or print media with content directly marketed to and documenting specific African American populations. The “African American press” seeks to advocate against anti-Black attacks in print before a mass society (Pride and Wilson, 1997, p. 265). A Black music magazine based out of Manhattan, New York that features Hip Hop, soul, R&B, reggae, jazz and “any culture that surrounds African American youth” as core objectives, *VIBE* defines rap music as “popular music” because it generates profits and increases readership. I anticipate analyzing *VIBE* as “popular African American press” that weighs both creative and economic motives with aspirations to become an established source in “Hip Hop journalism” (Young, 1999). This section critiques *VIBE* conforming to popular mainstream media values in order to maintain economic stability and actively interpret Hip Hop cultures. This chapter provides a textual analysis of the staff and business objectives of *VIBE* magazine.

Hip Hop culture follows a tradition of commentaries that perpetuate an inferior status of African Americans in the press. *VIBE*’s commentaries base Southern rap’s elements according to stereotypes of Black youth as cocky and constantly at odds with one another. The feature story on “snap music” in the June 2006 edition, titled on the cover “Snap to It: D4L vs. Dem Franchize Boyz,” portrays a conflict between “snap music” groups D4L and Dem Franchize Boyz. The article begins with the two groups celebrating at two popular Atlanta-area clubs on the same night. The two acts engage in mudslinging regarding which group is more successful and credited with creating “snap music.” *VIBE* portrays Atlanta artists as Black youth with uncontrollable urges to compete against each other. One member of D4L refers to Dem Franchize Boyz as “Dem Franchize Girls” and “label prostitutes who are trying to take

credit for anything anybody do in Atlanta” (Conway, 2006, p. 135). Producer Lil’ Jon produces and records the popular synthesizer/808 snap fusion “Snap Ya Fingers” as a contrast to his often energetic and loud “crunk” material. *VIBE* says Lil’ Jon as “the megastar fully entrenched in the movement in order to undertake it” (Conway, 2006, p. 137). The article features New York rapper Ghostface saying that “snap music is wack” and states that Ghostface scolds his fans for listening and liking the music (Conway, 2006, p. 137). The album reviews for Unk and Dem Franchise Boyz paints “snap music” as lacking any artistic or creative depth. The reviews characterize Southern rap music as combinations of weezy synths, hyperchants of crunk, and very little variation in the production (Sarig, 2006, p. 150). The same reviews say in regards to Dem Franchise Boyz’s album, “Until they offer compelling lyrics to perk up their standard flexing and sexing, our crazy obsession with them will remain just that,” (Sarig, 2006, p. 150). *VIBE* appears to highlight unfavorable attitudes and chosen musical attributes relating to Southern rap music and Southern Hip Hop culture according to journalists’ musical preferences.

The generalizations do not end there. A supporting online article from *VIBE.com* portrays D4L as extremely cocky. The group states, “We are the originators of the dance. We appreciate everything that [Dem Franchise Boyz] are doing for us, but evidently, they thought we were going to be some local jokers” (Garland, 2005). There are no reports of weapons, physical threats, or profane comments in the articles. On the other hand, there is still an internal strife constructed being documented about Southern rap music. The articles are cases of rap music journalists displaying a weakness for timeworn stereotypes about the poverty and backwardness of Southerners (Miller, 2004, p. 197). Kembrew McLeod (2004) states, “negative perceptions rooted in magazines and newspapers have historically cast Hip Hop in a negative light and when they have attempted a more even handed approach, these publications inevitably get something wrong (p. 156). *VIBE* magazine documents essentialist qualities about rap music and Hip Hop culture even with positive motives and objectives to examine and portray the layers and dimensions of African American youth culture. This does not come as a shock considering the portrayal of Blacks in media are often uncivilized, crude, or extremely boastful. The history of American media culture

commonly jeopardizes African American culture and our contributions. Hutchinson (1997) entertains this notion by stating,

The media has always been conveyors of identities, impacting readers, viewers, and listeners' perceptions of social phenomena. Today we still live with a legacy of historical racism. As a result, negative portrayals of African Americans continue to be perpetuated in popular and scientific forums (p. 79).

“Snap music’s” commentaries and reports in *VIBE* recall an objective for print media publications to obtain groundbreaking stories and phenomenon prior to other sources interpreting cultural events. *VIBE* is an example of popular music journalism that is a “quickie publication aiming to cash in on the latest pop sensation that do not simply deal with music but are also purveyors of style” (Shuker, 1994, p. 85). *VIBE*’s writing and editorial staff supports what Shuker (1994) believes are high profile critics performing an influential role as gatekeepers of taste and arbiters of cultural significance (p. 85).

To understanding the journalistic motives of *VIBE*, I will some historical information on *VIBE*. *VIBE* originally begins as an idea by Quincy Jones in 1993. *VIBE* aspires to address Hip Hop culture as a series of social and creative impulses that centers contemporary African American life. Based out of New York, *VIBE* would primarily gain notoriety for focusing on Hip Hop culture’s East Coast roots (Palmer, 2005, p. 17). The high profile Hip Hop magazine could only go into production with relevant and fresh voices to represent and embody Hip Hop culture. Music mogul and Hip Hop entrepreneur Russell Simmons becomes a contributor along with college classmates turned business partners Leonard Burnett, Jr. and Keith Clinkscales. Simmons, Burnett, Clinkscales, and Jones were requested to create a proposal for media conglomerate Time Warner. The pitch is to establish a niche magazine pertaining to Hip Hop culture based on perceptions of involved, knowledgeable, and business-conscious African Americans who could become major spokespeople for Hip Hop culture. *VIBE* compensates for an absence of balanced coverage for African American music genres not commonly documented in popular music journalism (Pasmore, 1997; Young, 1999). Based on Jones’ success profile in music production, *VIBE* acquires financial support from Time Warner if Jones, Simmons, Burnett, and Clinkscales could provide readers

with insight and credibility relating to Hip Hop culture. The agreement between Time Warner and the four individuals exemplifies what Floyd (1995) considers as:

Aesthetic communication taking place when resonant contact is made between listeners' social, cultural, and psychological histories, on the one hand, and, on the other, the struggle fulfillment configurations idealized in the music (p. 225).

Time Warner perceives that the four African American men could provide Hip Hop culture with a musical, economic, and cultural depth unlike other music trade publications.

The corporate authorities' opinions to select specific Black voices and editors suggest that Black cultural credibility will appear in *VIBE*. The Hip Hop magazine is parallel to the objectives of African American press. *VIBE*'s mission statement (listed on page 4 and 5) intends to respond to what Stephen Harold Riggins (1992) states is "mainstream media ignoring ethnic minorities but presenting them essentially" (p. 2). With influential and relevant representation among *VIBE*'s editing staff, *VIBE* features a staff with learning of the same magnitude and involvement with Hip Hop culture. Simmons insists in his autobiography *Life and Def*, "You must surround yourself with people who understand and are familiar with the culture" (2001, p. 171). Tensions between Simmons and Time Warner over selecting *VIBE*'s editor-in-chief cause Simmons to pull out of *VIBE*. Time Warner appoints *VIBE*'s inaugural editor Jonathan van Meter, a White and gay male, without the consulting the original editorial staff. According to Simmons, van Meter would frequently confuse Hip Hop culture with being "the same as mainstream dance music." Simmons credits van Meter with having publishing experience, knowing about managing a magazine, but not knowing the first thing about Hip Hop culture (2001, p. 171). The initial tensions between Simmons and Time Warner over creative decisions and editing regardless of Jones' input hints that *VIBE*'s credibility as source for "Hip Hop journalism" would not fully reflect the attitudes and aesthetics of Hip Hop culture solely from the vantage point of African American youth culture. Media institutions value the professional roles of editors and journalists to portray cultures and people in a marketable fashion. The objectives of media to sell images outweigh accurately documenting and interpreting cultures and their productions. Time Warner's editorial decision suggests that *VIBE* is a

media organization that is not a socially autonomous entity because of what Riggins (1992) identifies as minority media businesses' integration in a larger socioeconomic system (p. 8). The editorial strife between Time Warner and Simmons also reflects:

Black publishers and editors being more disposed to regard the intrusion of general organs on their hitherto private domain as a test to their own powers to survive in a competitive society. They have preferred to look on their own properties as already peculiarly fitted to cater to a formidable minority even after the group's social goals are realized (Pride and Wilson, 1997, p. 263).

VIBE indicates how investors and corporations are the major editors and decision makers of what content relating to Hip Hop culture gets included in the magazine.

I could not imagine such personal influences to affect what subjects and images I receive in *VIBE*. As an avid reader fascinated with the artists and music covered in *VIBE* since its 1993 debut, I like layout and subject matter of *VIBE*. *VIBE* rival popular mainstream music trade publications *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*, *Guitar*, *The Source*, and *XXL*. *VIBE* is the cream of the crop for "Hip Hop journalism." In addition to the magazine's oversized look, the advertisements promote current blockbuster films, album releases, contemporary fashion lines, cultural events, conferences, news stories, and current events. I find a plethora of relevant information and dates pertinent to media products and rap artists that I consume and enjoy. As a conjoined faithful reader of *VIBE* and consumer of Hip Hop culture, I recognize *VIBE* as a relevant Hip Hop publication that follows what Allen says is "portraying positive aspects and uplifting images of African Americans" (2001, p. 145). In the words of Riggins (1992), *VIBE* would "peacefully preserve the linguistic and cultural identity of a population that political and economic factors have put in a threatened position" (p. 287). *VIBE*'s content, look, and composition set the standard for "Hip Hop journalism."

A Credit to the Race: Editing Hip Hop Journalism

The staff members and editors of *VIBE* uphold editorial opinions and ideologies of Hip Hop culture that are congruent to my views on Hip Hop culture and rap music. Black music fans are the target demographic for *VIBE*. *VIBE* is the media device that performs what Pride and Wilson (1997) believes

will “unify the African American community [in popular music] against its foes and lead it onto the full citizenship and into the maximum realization of civil rights (p. 263). The staff at *VIBE* prides the magazine to rival other music trades and hold standards similar to mainstream journalism. Clinkscales, also former president of *VIBE*, believes, “*Rolling Stone* created the category of music journalism. We wanted to be *Rolling Stone*, only with a different look” (Young, 1999). Current Editor-in-Chief Danyel Smith supports Clinkscales’ views. Smith believes “*VIBE* can compete against everybody – *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*, and *The New York Times*. It is hard to speak for them, but what’s discouraging is the idea of what’s ‘urban’ and ‘mainstream’ and that lives in between” (Stableford, 2006). In another interview, Smith values strengthening editorial traditions and overall music, fashion, culture, and style coverage on behalf of *VIBE* readers (*Target Market News*, 2006)., *VIBE* portrays urban culture as the mainstream culture with rap music and Hip Hop culture as its core content and mission. The remaining staff of *VIBE* would have to actively promote the knowledge, wisdom, and anthropology that relate to rap music and Hip Hop culture. *VIBE* follows Pride and Wilson’s (1997) idea of Black media including “young, talented, and experienced staff that serves the expanding tastes and interests of Black professionals, businesspeople, students, researchers, public servants, and various connoisseurs through a specialty magazine” (p. 252-253).

With rap music in *VIBE* as “popular music,” this term “popular music” needs further examination as well. *VIBE* upholds rap music and Hip Hop culture as the major subjects, so I would insist that rap music and Hip Hop culture as “popular music” would indicate what many young African Americans and I consume and enjoy. According to Shuker (1994), popular music trades include writers and editors who coincidentally become cultural creators that construct independent versions of traditional “high” and “low” culture around notions of artistic integrity, authenticity, and the nature of commercialism (p. 2).

Shuker further believes:

Popular music and associated terms such as ‘rock and roll’ and ‘pop’ are used by musicians, fans, and academic analysts in a confusing variety of ways. It is difficult to define social practices as well as economic products or pedagogic concepts, and which are not static but constantly evolving (p. 2).

The reports in *VIBE* include biased perspectives when documenting specific events or ideas that relate to rap music and Hip Hop culture. This type of reporting may occur when new artists or emerging music scenes such as “snap music” become magazine highlights. The personal views and interests of many writers and critics are present in their accounts. Particular performers and music scenes are heaped with praise by one reviewer and denigrated by another. Evaluators reflect personal preferences and matters of taste with rare cases of evaluative criteria to consider for critical scrutiny (Shuker, 1994, p. 96). *VIBE* as “popular music journalism” in this context is a consolidation of various trend reports from the perspectives of aspiring trendsetters and tastemakers of Hip Hop culture.

Popular music journalism is based upon editorial choices. *VIBE*'s writers provide information about Hip Hop culture based on their interests and idiosyncratic ideas about Hip Hop culture and rap music. I would imagine for the journalists to provide a certain depth and credibility to *VIBE*'s reports. The writers' ability to contextualize Hip Hop culture and rap music is partly what encourages me to read *VIBE*. *VIBE*'s decision to include other ethnic minority journalists' perspectives of rap music and Hip Hop culture allows minority journalists to actively pursue news stories about minorities worldwide who confronting circumstances similar to those confronting the journalist's own group (Riggins, 1992, p. 17). According to *VIBE*, the writing staff is competent creatively, culturally, and journalistically to actively reflect the complexities of Hip Hop culture. According to Burnett (also *VIBE*'s current Associate Publisher), *VIBE* “hires the best and brightest writers and photographers who live the culture with talent and thinking that gives urban culture added urgency and makes Hip Hop more than just beats” (Pasmore, 1997). The parameters for Hip Hop culture and rap music extend beyond lyrics, music, and performance. Hip Hop culture, according to *VIBE*, is the information and advertisements included in the bind of *VIBE*. Hip Hop culture becomes media product in the form of advertisements, feature stories, and commentaries. According to Floyd (1995):

For the evaluation of Black music, critics must prepare themselves with to experience and appreciate and appreciate the relations that exist between their find of emotional meanings and the configurations in the music, which suggests that they must also be familiar with the broad

range of genres and performance styles and their associated myths and rituals. The task of evaluating Black music is not a small one. In executing it, the critic must be able to recognize, relate to, and explain qualities, and properties (p. 235).

“Hip Hop journalism” is a new terrain of Hip Hop culture that acts similar to rap music but features a business conscious attitude. *VIBE* provides information from the perspective of journalists that seem like first hand accounts and narratives on individuals, events, and productions relevant to African American youth culture. The writers who are Hip Hop journalists and cultural critics have the responsibility of portraying the vibrancy of Hip Hop culture. *VIBE* must provide its audience and readers with breaking developments on Hip Hop culture. Former *VIBE* Editor-in-Chief and contributing staff writer MiMi Valdes states:

As a fan it's beautiful. As the editor-in-chief of *VIBE*, our challenge – all of us here have to make sure that we are the premier place to find information about these urban youth stars. My big thing, when you consider my reign as EIC, I'm really trying to find out who those new superstars are going to be (Creekmur, 2006).

On the other hand, magazine's survival relies on economic stability to further ensure success. *VIBE's* Chief Executive Officer Eric Gertler believes *VIBE's* appeal rests in “diverse, trendsetting young style makers who enjoy and are passionate about urban music, fashion, and culture” (*Target Market News*, 2006). In the case of *VIBE's* expansion into other print and Internet options, selling advertisements determine if media can survive or become profitable businesses. *VIBE* features advertisements that reflect Black youth as the target audience in *VIBE's* demographics. I commonly find advertisements for alcoholic beverages, urban clothing designers, haute couture fashion designers, recording artists, recording labels, films, television specials, and electronic devices. *VIBE's* choices for advertisements also symbolize how *VIBE* has intentions to represent Hip Hop culture with hopes of appealing to other audiences. Editors would have to expand on choosing *VIBE's* subject matter and advertisements. To quote Riggins (1992), *VIBE's* motive to obtain power as well as a position among media culture's elite class of popular music trades suggests:

unintentionally encouraging assimilation of audiences to mainstream values...The unique group identity of a relatively marginal population is

revitalized from within and the politics of multiculturalism are advanced. On the other hand, at the same time, the minority is likely to become more integrated into rational life because short of reaching total political independence, a high level of assimilation seems to be a prerequisite for achieving empowerment (p. 4, 17).

With its business objectives, *VIBE* aspires to become a media brand in addition to become a source for documenting rap music and Hip Hop culture.

Branding *VIBE* into Mass Media

Though *VIBE* aspires to become a popular media brand, significant advertising is a pivotal step for *VIBE*'s that determines the direction of the magazine. According to *VIBE* president Ari Horowitz, *VIBE* is perfectly positioned to be one of the greatest brands of the 20th century. Horowitz acknowledges “*VIBE*'s ability to create content that appeals to a savvy group of stylemakers” (*Target Market News*, 2006). *VIBE*'s appeal seeks to extend beyond African American audiences and African American – based subjects. Burnett acknowledges the growth of Hip Hop culture beyond *VIBE*'s predominately African American audiences. Since contemporary Hip Hop culture turns into massive revenues and incredible markets, Burnett's media ethics supports the inclusion of subject matter that would aid in increasing *VIBE*'s readership. Burnett says:

We knew for a fact that rap music was being listened to by more than just Black audiences. We set off to produce a magazine that spoke to that popularity. If we were able to tap into that vein, we'd have something special. However, make no mistake, our success was driven off the fact that Black culture drives popular culture. In music terms, our strategy was not to make a crossover magazine. *VIBE* is a magazine that, at its core, is responsible for chronicling Hip Hop culture. It was our job as a journalistically sound publication to record it (Pasmore, 1997).

VIBE's expansion into other media forms pursues expanding their audience and position with specialized media products and technological advancements.

VIBE seeks to tackle mass media opportunities to honor their audience expansion. According to Valdes, the best-selling covers are the “Hip Hop covers” (Creekmur, 2006). I think *VIBE* attempts to capitalize on expanding Hip Hop culture into other demographics and subcategories in their media offspring. *VIBE Vixen*, a women's magazine, has secured over 4.5 million readers (www.vibe.com,

2007). The website, *VIBE Online*, acquires over 1.6 million visitors monthly and is considered “the most comprehensible and attractive Hip Hop culture site in cyberspace” (Young, 1999). *VIBE* also publishes books with major subject including a history of Hip Hop culture, an anthology documenting African American female recording artists, and biographies on 2Pac and The Notorious B.I.G. Other branches include *VIBE* Awards, fashion shows, and online music services. Though it seems the opinions of *VIBE*'s staff performs a humanitarian service to Hip Hop culture, I find *VIBE*'s motives to make profits by expand *VIBE*'s name and increasing their advertising will override the creative objectives to positively breathe substance into Hip Hop culture. Daniel Black of Wicks Group, the private equity that invests in communications and media industries such as *VIBE*, suggest *VIBE*'s expansion into other media forms will solidify *VIBE* as a viable brand for Hip Hop culture. Black states:

As the leading brand in the urban market, *VIBE* has all of the hallmarks of an outstanding media property and this transaction creates a strong platform from which to address its growing potential. Combined with the talents and skills of our management team, we think *VIBE* is well-positioned to become a leading media company with multiple revenues and growth opportunities (*Target Market News*, 2006).

VIBE's position in popular and mainstream media is a successful move for Hip Hop culture. On the other hand, I feel that the capitalist motives of *VIBE* will override the positive and cultural protection of Hip Hop culture in *VIBE*'s content.

VIBE's expansion into mass media allows corporations to commodify Black youth culture as a series of opportunities to increase *VIBE*'s media and technological visibility. The possibility of Hip Hop culture being exploited based on corporate media objectives does not seem to affect the editors and investors. *VIBE* is a series of businesses to the magazine's editing staff and Time Warner. Gertler further explains, “We think there are tremendous growth and value creation opportunities that leverage the brand across multiple media platforms, and we are excited to build upon that great relationship that *VIBE* has with the community” (*Target Market News*, 2006). Regular and consistent advertisements in many publications determine the expansion of magazines into other recognizable forms. Burnett states it is not unusual for *VIBE* to receive advertising from the same clients from both “the general market and the

ethnic budgets” (Pasmore, 2007). In addition to *VIBE*’s strong dedication to document Hip Hop culture, *VIBE*’s editorial staff attempts to create a media enterprise. *VIBE*’s corporate staff aspires to become a definitive media channel that markets and distributes information on other consumer products. Burnett purposes *VIBE* at:

creating stronger advertising, promotions, and brand positioning for *VIBE* across multiple platforms, with the goal of reinforcing and advancing our leadership position in the marketplace. We look forward to bringing new products and capabilities to market in short order. While it is still a solid barometer, it is not the only way. Today, I think it must include the magazine’s ability to connect with consumers in various aspects of their lives and thereby providing advertisers with the opportunity to connect with them (Pasmore, 2007).

VIBE defines Hip Hop culture as its primary media business. Hip Hop culture is often the belief of being “ghetto” or “street” culture. African American youth are portrayed as ungraceful and lackadaisical individuals with no musical training, tastes, or values. Writers, journalists, and critics compromise their immersions into Hip Hop culture by conforming to socially acceptable ideas of Black youth in print. The writers’ attempts to appeal to other readers outside of *VIBE*’s target readership. This dilemma helps writers become widely known cultural interpreters. For Swindell, this idea of Hip Hop culture in media accounts is a case of:

Professional and academic critics tending to embrace elitist art philosophies while either ignoring or placing Black popular art on the lowest ringer on the hierarchal ladder. Middle class blacks may be preoccupied with trying to conform to the values and cultural expectations of a larger society that they have failed to create anything comparable to the extant works produced by the Black underclass” (p. 25).

Journalists center the essentialist tendencies associated with Hip Hop culture. Since Hip Hop culture often generates negative and trivialized ideas regarding the displays of African American youth, critics often include similar narratives in their features and accounts in order to satisfy the popular mainstream views of Hip Hop culture in American society. Hip Hop critic Jeff Chang (2002) believes that *VIBE* magazine is “a full blown myth-making machine” and subscribes to the constant formula of media and cultural politics. Chang believes:

Hip Hop journalists are regularly forced to confront holy-rolling baby boomers whose reactionary politics obliterate to save the cancer. So those kinds of narratives serve as defense mechanisms as a way of protecting and justifying the existence of a generation debased by outsiders and elders. Intimidated by such hypertextuality, writers reduce themselves to conforming to a 'rapper's reality' or conforming to it in order to 'defend it' (p. 71).

Hip Hop writers often abandon their personal tastes and interests in order to appeal to their editors and individuals outside of the realm of *VIBE* as well as Hip Hop's audiences. In conjunction with the fabrications of Hip Hop culture from the perspectives of these writers and critics, it is apparent that *VIBE* loses its original focus regarding positive and vibrant portrayals of African American youth. *VIBE* follows hooks' idea of "the ways Black folks address issues of identity conforming to a modernist universalizing agenda" (1998, p. 417). *VIBE* is another trade magazine that seeks to discredit and devalue the nature of Hip Hop culture and rap music for the sake of profit. To quote Chang (2002), the layout and content of *VIBE* symbolizes:

Hip Hop journalism at its worst looking like an endless parade of flossed and glossed ghetto stars, People magazine for the new majority. Like the flash and sizzle of a rap video, "keeping it real" in the writing seems to become synonymous with confusing surface over depth (p. 70).

Referring back to the infrastructure of *VIBE*, the staff insists the editors, writers, and journalists are in line with Hip Hop culture and rap music. *VIBE*'s writing staff seeks to remain active in providing readers and music fans with up-and-coming narratives to powerfully speak on the behalf of its demographics. Allen (2001) acknowledges similar African American print media as a vehicle to galvanize support and solidarity for the African American community in general (p. 144). Print media for African Americans may not always fulfill its complete obligations to Black audiences. However, Black print media maintains an internal social power among African Americans because of editors' abilities to interact among various political and communications networks. For Smith, she considers *VIBE*:

the same, best music magazine in the entire world. We have relentlessly, thorough, and excellent writing. I think there are some music stories that are criminally undocumented – some really beautiful music, and it's of service to our audience to find it. I view that as my job (Stableford, 2006).

On the other hand, *VIBE* is housed in New York. There is a tendency for *VIBE*'s writers to misrepresent Southern rap music because of tunnel vision that develops in Hip Hop culture based on geographic location. I think that because Hip Hop culture's roots originated in the Northeastern United States, media imperialism allows *VIBE*'s editors and journalists to frame regionally-based Hip Hop culture with skewed perspectives. *VIBE*'s publishing location and Hip Hop culture reflects a regional affiliation that resembles "local conversations collectively constituting a whole organization" (Oswick and Roberts, 2004, p. 109). Ironically, Burnett upholds Hip Hop culture being protected in print by saying:

However, the music and most importantly the culture is more important than ever. The audience that we reach is in fact now the new America, the new general market; an America where a diverse generation of young adults has grown with urban music as part of their lives from the beginning. The interesting thing about Hip Hop is that it always transforms and evolves itself. Hip Hop is not just about the music, it's a culture and a mindset. That's what makes it is so great and why it's here to stay (Pasmore, 1997).

Southern rap music subgenres such as "snap music" are not as popular with *VIBE* reporters as the localized popular New York-based lyrical heavy rap music being massively produced. According to Kevin Featherly and Steve Jones (2002), popular music has meaning beyond the aesthetic with the consideration of its construction, constitution, and communication occupying many critics (p. 21). I intend in the next chapter to give a description for how I will measure Southern rap music. My exposure to "snap music" and its accompanying club culture as "popular music" will involve an anthropological scheme to determine the potential of Southern rap music and Southern Hip Hop culture.

CHAPTER 5

METHODOLOGY

My thesis deploys an anthropological frame that centers my own interactions with Southern Hip Hop culture and its rap music. Upon being born and raised in Spartanburg, South Carolina during the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, I bear witness to many of the criticisms and shared pastimes associated with Southern rap music. Southern rap music appears to the general public and diverging rap music fans as “not saying much” or “country rap” because of consistent narratives documenting material culture, spatial relations, and childrearing practices of Southern Black life (Miller, 2004, p. 187). Rather than to rely on massive distribution of such insights of Southern rap music courtesy of journalists and music critics, I carefully consider various interdisciplinary perspectives from cultural scholars, anthropologists, and ethnomusicologists to study and guide my readers through my “musical autoethnography” of “snap music” as an offspring of Southern rap music.

I seek to provide my readers with accounts of my personal relationship with Southern rap music. The negative and essentialist criticisms are adverse to my own life being raised in a Southern environment. I want to combat ethnocentric attitudes about Southern Hip Hop and Southern rap. I will perform throughout this analysis what Swindell (2001) calls a dedicated and committed Black writer and intellectual who understand deceptive strategies used to confuse Black masses in a unique position to reverse a downward spiral (p. 30). I remember as a child a consensus of critics, rap artists, and people that I personally knew insisting that Southern rap music was “not music.” The essential qualities and components specifically highlighted include the syncopation in the rhythm tracks and the images of females’ gyrating body parts (mainly the “butt” or “booty”). At one point if Southern rap songs would advance to radio and video programmers, Southern rap would always flourish during the summer months and later hibernate until the next summer. Southern rap music could be nothing more than seasonal highly sexualized music without a niche in pop music and socially acceptable rap music.

Southern rap music would have further criteria issues beyond only sex and media rotation. The remaining components include inconsistent deliveries of sparse verses with no true rhyme schemes as well as the shouts and screams. Many Southern rap artists move away from “16 bars” and clever wordplay. Because of these traits, our music and geographic space becomes known primarily as “the Dirty South” to listeners, commentators, and artists from within and outside of the American South (Miller, 2004, p. 175). Throughout the 1990s, “the Dirty South” would imply that Southern rap music lacks any substance and could not thrive as strongly as rap music from East Coast and West Coast states. In the press, articles and reviews on Southern Hip Hop were barely visible or written in very short paragraphs. I would enjoy the music like some of my peers and listeners, but no commentators would acknowledge how popular the music would rest and thrive within Southern Black youth audiences. Upon noticing this trend, I wonder what could make Southern rap music specifically sensitive to criticism, the risk of rejection, source of negativity, and occasional pain (Goodall, 2000). For such scenarios and conflicts with African American music, it is a suggestion for:

Black artists, writers, intellectuals and critics to concern themselves with the realities of life. Their responsibilities should not be taken lightly. In order to competently carry out his or her responsibility, the critic should have keen sensitivity to social concerns, to literary offerings, and to both popular and academic art (Swindell, 2001, p. 26).

A curious listener and compelled observer, I perceive the opinions of Southern rap music to reflect what hooks (1998) refers to as “a failure to recognize a critical Black presence in the culture and in most scholarship” (417). It is through the personal and descriptive lyrics of Southern rap music from artists such as Houston acts Underground Kingz (UGK), Scarface, Atlanta’s OutKast, and Goodie MOB that I could actually find lifestyles similar to my own as reenactments of Southern Black culture. Tia DeNora (2000) says:

Music is a part of the cultural material in which cultural material through which ‘scenes’ are constructed, scenes that afford different kinds of agency, pleasure, and ways of being. Music’s force is made through appropriation and reception. Music is a material of social organization because styles of movement, emotional, and social roles come to be associated with it and may issue from it. Music’s meanings and effects are constructed and dependent upon how they are appropriated. Patterns

of appropriation are associated with particular music styles with particular settings emerge and accrue over time (p. 123)

My Southern Hip Hop – My Life

I remember growing up in a house always surrounded by my extended family. The actual rearing family included at the time my grandparents, older sister, an aunt diagnosed with cerebral palsy, cousins, and neighbors. At a young age, my grandparents would emphasize the importance and the power of strong community because my family and non-family members comprise a strong bond. I remember hearing their various narratives regarding their past lives and experiences. The smell of large home cooked meals would often fill the air. My older uncles and male family members would partake in consuming alcohol and marijuana in other areas of the house, specifically the back porch or backyard. Life for me would seem simple but a reflection of the simple life Southern rap artists would discuss in their lyrics and music.

The material culture to us was very simple. Southern rap music similarly acknowledges this aura of simplicity. Southern rap artists often speak of vintage automobiles as a preference over imported luxurious automobiles to reflect a laid-back and relaxing atmosphere. This is indeed our car culture.

According to Martin Stokes (1994):

Music informs our sense of place. Musical events evoke and organize collective memories and present experiences of place with an intensity, power, and simplicity unmatched by any other social activity. The 'places' constructed through music invokes notions of difference and social boundary. In this particular process of relocation, the places, boundaries, and identities involved are of a larger and collective order. People can equally use music to locate themselves in quite idiosyncratic but plural ways. Without understanding local conditions, languages, and contexts, it is impossible to know what these practices and meanings are (p. 3)

Outside of the house, everyone could be seen parked or in the neighborhood in a big-bodied Cadillac, Lincoln, Pontiac Bonneville, a Monte Carlo, or Chevrolet Caprice Classic. We would always touch the cars, pretend that we were driving them, and would even debate over which cars supposedly belongs to us. To us as innocent youth, these automobiles were the ultimate material cars to own rather than a Mercedes or BMW.

Our house would always have family enjoying themselves and instructing the younger generations. Other activities that would persist in the house include spades, shooting dice, listening to vintage albums, and endless conversations. Though many of the men in my home did not receive a formal education in classrooms, the conversations would always consist of current events, the community, and our successes in school and extracurricular activities. The younger children would always race, climb trees, or play with other neighborhood kids but always would tune in whenever the older gentlemen would speak to us or offer advice. I would uphold respect at all times for my elders during their speeches. The ability to socialize and learn alongside my elders is what Hutchinson (2005) acknowledges as “a reward to experience the impact of a less stressful social environment with life experiences as field experiences” (2005, p. 79). I learned a lot about having pride in myself because of my upbringing.

In contrast to the fear and apprehension felt for negative stereotypes of African Americans, Southern rap music provides alternative ways of viewing certain personalities and community leaders who could be human and positive influences on me. I would normally see hustlers, numbers runners, drug dealers, and local businessmen. By coincidence, these men were also family, family friends, and respected community leaders. I learned of their hard work ethic and determination to provide for their families. Whenever I needed sponsorship for school, church, or community activities, these individuals would provide the necessary resources to help me. As a child, I did not perceive these people and raw materials around me as ignorant and irrelevant. I felt my life could have no potential high maintenance tendencies because of being taught to succeed in life and value myself as a person. I related to Southern rap music and rap music for these similar messages of humility and humanity in general because:

Music is a fundamental challenge of communication. It provides a means by which people can share emotions, intentions, and meanings even though their spoken languages may be mutually incomprehensible. Music is used to generate infinitely subtle variations of expressiveness (Hargreaves, MacDonald, & Miell, 2002, p. 1).

My family and community create a constituency of Hutchinson’s description of “African Americans as combinations of cultural elements and viewpoints that creates something broader or enormous variation in terms of cultural orientation, way of life, class differences, and educational variation” (2005, p. 79). I

acknowledge my development as intimate knowledge of Southern Black life that arranges my version of community, cultural, and material dimensions often overlooked or ignored (Schroeder, 2004, p. 61). My story is one that is often seen as bad, uncivilized, or impossible to imagine.

The Autoethnography

The autoethnography is a method and body of academic work that involves examining marginal cultures, separate value systems, participation, and critical interpretations. Autoethnography involves locating “the Self” as the major subject as the source up for analysis. The writer or scholar observes his or her immersions and positions in the group he or she analyzes. Among some of autoethnographer’s concerns deal with the culture or group’s customs, traditions, values, and ideas as everyday routines and practices. The fieldsite is the focal point that is also crucial to the study the researcher conducts. The fieldsite is where he or she learns and builds a self-understanding of experiences. The writer or researcher must examine what ideas are familiar as well as foreign to his or her way of living. David Fetterman (1998) says ethnography mostly “involves the routine daily lives of people...with a native perception of reality” (p. 1, 20). I respect Southern rap music because most of the imagery and sounds are parallel to my own experiences coming-of-age in the South.

My anthropological study of Southern Black culture is an autoethnography. I am able to provide my personal experiences that are also an analysis of Southern culture. Carolyn Ellis (2004) says writers must connect their writing to the memory and actual people and events (p. 333). William Banfield believes interpreting cultures depends upon sites and places where people live as the lens of reference (p. 62). Ethnography allows me to describe and analyze my version of living Southern Black culture with literally a first hand interaction, daily observation, and active participation. I am a product of Southern Hip Hop. I grew up young, Black, male, and from the inner city. My life story and experiences are combinations of personal ties and various narrative stories in relation to Southern rap music and Hip Hop culture. My reflection of family and the community forms a cultural relationship that displays multiple layers of consciousness through social settings and music (Ellis, 2004, p. 37). To hear from outsiders that

Southern Blacks are too simple, slow, and does not say much of anything deserves a first person analysis to contrast the static characterizations of Southern Blacks. Hutchinson (2005) states:

Historically, Blacks have not been studied unless it was to deny people of African ancestry ever did anything of significance. Either we were portrayed as never had contributed anything to civilization or our culture and way of life were devalued and made less significant (p. 79).

I reference African American youth frequently and use “I” and may use “We” to denote young Southern African Americans. I myself am part of this culture. I relate to “youth” as central to rap and Hip Hop as “a musical identity resulting from cultural, ethnic, religious, and national context in which people live” (Folkestead, 2002, p. 151). The term “youth” is becoming vague when discussing Hip Hop culture in general because of Hip Hop culture’s integration into mass and popular culture. Age is not the major criterion to understand “youth” culture. Rap music is consumed by various audiences, ethnicities, and listeners. I am able to negotiate these various social circles by interacting with individuals close to my age, older siblings and relatives, other ethnicities, club participants, Hip Hop fans, and music fans. Hip Hop as “youth culture” conceals more than age as a social category because “youth” embraces various taste groups, subcultures, and fandom (Shuker, 1994, p. 195). We can also see “youth” as human variation and social landscapes (Hutchinson, 2005, p. 80). Valdes also says of *VIBE*’s demographic in comparison to Hip Hop’s audience constructions,

We try to reach a wide range of people, 18-35 is the demographic. If you are 35, your 18-year old brother or sister might not be listening to what you are listening to. I think the love of urban music and music makes the bridge (Creekmur, 2006).

I think “youth” is a vague term when discussing rap music and Hip Hop culture. “Youth” encompasses other social parameters that involve individuals consuming culture and music as products. “Youth” does not always constitute the ages of the performers, consumers, participants, and creators. After I became aware of the fledging “snap music” scene in Atlanta specifically around summer 2005, I would visit a variety of establishments and nightclubs that includes various African American age and taste groups. These spots include the Poole Palace, Club Primetime, The House, Trap House, Sugar Hill, Club Ritz, The Living Room (now defunct), and Club Frequency. These clubs primarily features college-

aged and twentysomething individuals who are also close to my own age and peer groups. Many of the club participants were local Atlanta natives draped in trendy t-shirts, blue jeans, and sneakers. I would also visit the famous but now defunct Vision's Nightclub and Lounge, the immensely popular Club 112, The Compound Club, and Shout. The audiences were in their late twenties and older individuals who makes up a working class group of African Americans dressed in business casual attire. Though the taste and ages of these primarily African American audiences have some variations, the nature of celebration and interaction would produce the same results. I admire Clifford Geertz's perception of gaining a working familiarity with the frames of meaning within which people enact their lives and learn from how being from elsewhere and living with them (1999).

A "Musical Autoethnography" of Southern Rap Music

My life experiences as a Southern Black male and love for rap music and Hip Hop culture is life long. I wish to create a narrative that could sense and rely on ethnomusicological tendencies. "Auto" refers to me as the interpreter. "Ethno" relates to ethnic affiliation, and "musicology" acknowledges the historical and scientific study of music (2001). Ethnomusicology often refers to a discipline or series of disciplines that studies marginal musical cultures. In my life, Southern rap music was marginal music. Many scholars and intellectuals who study ethnomusicology believe that studying musical cultures requires extensive training in formal education and visiting numerous fieldsites to interpret the musical meaning and its related symbols. I have watched Southern rap music flourish in its appropriate places and spaces. While I myself am a graduate student, I do not wish to disrespect and discourage these scholars from doing the necessary work that involves studying music and culture. I have been present in the specific settings where Southern rap music appears to have a placement. I have a story and learning based on where I have been and what I listen to frequently. I also listen to the music actively and rear from an area where Southern rap music and Southern Hip Hop culture have taken shape. I feel my account of Southern rap could bring a positive perspective to my audience and readers.

I respect the necessary training and related disciplines, but I do wish to provide a more insular and emic approach to study Southern rap music. Southern rap music describes similar people, scenarios,

and experiences I closely identify with. I also listen to Southern rap for pleasure. Music is not separate from the everyday existence of people because music is a celebration of life (Starks, 2001, p. 226). With ethnomusicology, scholars identify with an allegiance to music of that particular culture, area, or society. Ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl (2005) believes studying music comes from backgrounds in popular music with motivations from a prolonged residence in that particular culture (p. 7). Considering that rap music centers Black youth identity and performance, the idioms of self-boasting, confidence, and the willingness to express all pertinent experiences and lifestyles construct culturally significant musical elements for African American youth. According to Floyd (1995), listeners must possess knowledge, perceptual skills, emotional histories, and cultural perspectives appropriate to various genres (p. 229).

In order to avoid any conflicts with academically certified ethnomusicologists, I wish to write what Nettl considers a “musical ethnography.” I will not consider myself an “ethnomusicologist” because scholars at academic institutions work to obtain this title. Ethnomusicologists may travel extensively to various sites and locations to study. Ethnomusicologists use various techniques such as interviewing and transcribing to collect their data. I am writing about what I know about and have a passion to discuss with others. I have not had any extensive travel opportunities or aspirations for tenure at a university. My thesis only supports what I have seen in my own life. I am the subject in this “musical autoethnography.” According to Nettl, a “musical autoethnography” relates to insular music cultures’ recognition of instruments, professional performers, patrons of music, occasions in which music is performed, and the actual music performance (2005, p. 234-235). Southern rap music continues to thrive on being massively produced from urban areas, acknowledge local communities, and show respect for landmarks. Because of the various locations that Black youth value and call “home,” I recognize rap music also produces various offspring of performance styles that are either more spoken or physically demonstrations. Rap music translates everyday experiences and living sounds into narratives that document the dynamic nature of African Americans and the expressions of Black cultural identity (Maultsby, 1995, p. 183). According to Schultz (1977), a Black youth’s identification with rap music could reflect “fields of entertainment offering (far) the most conspicuous avenues for upward mobility for

ghetto youth with the need to create a world with the appearance of success and personal competence” (p. 18). Regardless of one’s location, regionally constructed rap music requires having some basic knowledge of the narrow and confined spaces from which this creativity flourishes.

Many scholars and anthropologists agree that embarking on any form of social analysis with a personal perspective involves a great degree of personal history and exposure to the basis of the study. Music should be valued as a special, social, and autonomous experience (Stokes, 1994, p. 1). African American music in itself often incorporates Black-based language styles, interests, and values in the construction of the compositions. African American music in itself involves self-validation and self-criticism (Floyd, 1995, p. 232). Starks (2001) believes any attempts at ethnomusicology that documents African American music should always ground the study with a Black perspective because “the field gets more exciting when new and important work is done, providing us with a way of seeing ourselves as players in the world stage” (p. 232). My thesis only makes use of my Black perspective. Starks also believes:

Native scholars have brought insights and understanding to the study of various traditions that seemingly only an insider could bring. We must record the words, preserve the scores, and write the histories. In the end, the safekeeping of this music and the direction that African American music takes in the future will be determined by what we do as people (p. 233).

Rap music maintains a pervasive presence in various spheres of my life. I find that my immersion in rap music is an advantage that involves African American music as a primary interest becoming my field research being conducted on a daily basis (Starks, 2001, p. 231). Rap is present in my personal listening pleasures, interactions with my peers, my area of academic interest, and in many of my conversations with others. Southern rap music, in particular, would incite us to have fun with others in our private but communal areas of interaction. Hip Hop critics should behave as any other critic because:

To discuss any subject intelligently requires both adequate knowledge of that subject and the ability to illustrate that knowledge. The ability to distinguish qualitatively, between good and bad rap requires sufficient knowledge about a variety of rap music, past and present, popular and less well known (Salaam, 1995, p. 303).

Southern rap music's raw dialects and geographic references provide us with images of performers similar to individuals that we could relate to. Banfield (2004) observes of first hand interaction, "One has to hang out in the playground where things are being worked out... the 'I' story is crucial to cultural interpretation" (p. 63, 66-67). For Southern rap music to reflect the "Dirty South" as fun and communal symbolizes:

an association of pleasure, license, and a festival atmosphere with music and dance makes experiences which distinctly 'out of the ordinary.' Even though they are out of the ordinary experiences, music and dance do encourage people to feel that they are in touch with an essential part of themselves, their emotions, and their community (Stokes, 1994, p. 13).

The major component to keep in mind when performing an ethnomusicology, or in my case "a musical autoethnography," involves having a passion and enjoyment of studying musical cultures and its relative parameters. Fetterman believes emic, or insider and native perceptions of realistic spaces, involves "an ongoing responsibility and joy...to reveal the sacred subtle elements of culture because one articulate individual can provide a wealth of valuable information" (1998, p. 3, 9). As the "Southern rap music ethnographer", I mediate between listening to Southern rap music because of the music's presence being parallel to my absorption and life origins in South Carolina. I alter between explaining Southern rap and functioning as an active member of Southern rap's audience. Since Southern rap music appears nonmusical, loud, indecorous, and unsophisticated to individuals who are not fans of Southern rap music, I seek to discover, distinguish, and explain cultural and musical values by identifying the elements that have captivated my attention as well as deepens my perceptions of my Southern culture. As I continue to unravel my experiences with Southern rap music and Black culture beyond this section, one must begin to recognize my upbringing, the dancing, musical elements, and Southern landscape as elements in which those within and without the culture commonly, potentially, consciously, or unconsciously respond (Floyd, 1995, p. 233). Floyd (1995) also states:

The key to effective criticism of Black music lies in our understanding of its tropings and in our recognition that such practices are themselves critical acts – expressions of approval and disapproval, validation and invalidation. Good critics of Black music comes to grips with the Signifyin(g) act, the ultimate artistic manifestation of human play

instinct, playing with musical ideas, feelings and emotions but will not confuse genuine dialogical music making with the musical dilutions that pass for it (p. 233).

Thus, the appropriate lens will embody primarily my participation, personal knowledge, and history in relation to Southern rap music and Hip Hop culture. The next section is the analysis of “snap music” and its ties to traditional rap music and Hip Hop culture.

CHAPTER 6

ANALYSIS

Doin' the Analysis and Snappin' To It

This chapter relates “snap music” to traditional rap music and Hip Hop culture. Before I even knew of “snap music,” I perceived rap music to make political responses to mainstream American culture and values. Rap music’s mass production and initial success into popular culture is often referenced in relation to the Reagan administration. Similarly, the consecutive terms of the Bush administration also challenges Black youth to respond to certain political issues and agendas. My analysis in this chapter indicates how “snap music” is an extension of rap music that is an indirect political response that is also ceremonious music for Black youth.

During the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan’s consecutive terms in office mark another period of struggle for African Americans. Reagan’s platform promoted widespread individualism and self-sufficiency through lower taxes. Reagan’s “trickle down theory” supported the idea of decreasing taxes guaranteeing a more stable economy. Reagan proposed to decrease social expenditures and terminate social programs such as public assistance. Somehow, my family’s situation worsened. I remember some of my aunts constantly talking about not being able to survive with their assistance and paychecks. They could not pay certain bills or afford certain necessities. Many of them had to live with us for brief periods because they could not afford to live on their own. Under Reagan’s administration, employment was limited and poverty rates increased. Crack was introduced, and many Blacks became more disenfranchised and impoverished as drug addicts. Reagan’s ultra conservative views placed many African Americans at a disadvantage. With rap songs such as “Hard Times” by Run DMC and “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash featuring Melle Mel and the Furious Five, rap music became the voice that Black youth would use to speak about how Reagan’s policies impacted their lives. Rap music was used as a verbal means to address social problems.

Similarly with President George W. Bush's consecutive terms, Black youth remain with similar political issues targeted at us. Around 2000, there was the "VOTE OR DIE" campaign that encouraged first time voters, young people, and non-voters to vote. The campaigns encouraged people to pay attention to the various platforms and ideas about youth culture. I, myself, was a first time voter. I felt as though I could make change by helping to select the more qualified administrator for America. I felt cheated and disturbed by various social and political events. The Florida recount occurred, the ongoing war in Iraq was stressful. I knew of numerous family members and friends who had not seen their loved ones in years because of the war. Gas prices continued to increase. The September 11, 2001 attacks led the nation to believe that Americans should unite in a time of crisis. For about six months, I saw American flags on cars, lawns, and clothing. Patriotism was a fad. Bush's late response to Hurricane Katrina and his reference to Blacks as "refugees," during the aftermath, left me with the impression that Bush was apathetic towards African Americans in New Orleans. "No Child Left Behind" supposedly ensured that racial and ethnic minority students in urbanized communities would have access to various educational incentives and opportunities as any other student. I felt disillusioned and disappointed with such policies and outcomes of these events. I would begin to find solace in rap music because I did not have to always confront these issues. Coincidentally, Southern rap artists were attempting to find solutions to these social problems.

Southern rap artists are conscious and responsible individuals helping to enhance the spirit of African Americans. Lil' Jon becomes a spokesperson for the "VOTE OR DIE" campaign. In the past, Lil Jon was in several concerts, made television appearances, and featured in advertisements wearing the signature t-shirt with the "VOTE OR DIE" phrase. Other Southern rap artists such as Mississippi's David Banner, Atlanta's T.I., Young Jeezy, and New Orleans' Juvenile, Lil' Wayne, Baby, and Master P. all played live concerts and organized benefits to raise money for the victims of Hurricane Katrina. Southern rap artists would go to various neighborhoods and communities in attempts to help and give back to the community. Atlanta rap artist Ludacris started "the Ludacris Foundation," to provide community service

and monetary support for youth nationwide. Southern rap artists maintained senses of respect for and loyalty to other Southern areas and Blacks in a time of crisis.

Rap music is now “feel good” music that is portrayed through “snap music.” “Snap music” originates around 2001 in Atlanta’s predominately African American “Westside/Bankhead” community. Local clubs such as “the Poole Palace” became the haven for local acts and songs to gain a following. “Snap music” continues with characteristics of celebration and confidence traced in Southern rap music. Upon moving to Georgia for graduate school in summer 2005, the music that many of the African American students and locals were consuming was unique. I recognized and related to most Atlanta music as bass heavy tracks and loud hooks with niches in clubs (Baraka, Dillard, & Hall, 2003, p. 85). As the beat dropped, the music featured a pattern of syncopated snaps courtesy of an 808 drum machine. Thick bass booms accompanied the melodic keyboard patterns. A lighter sound was created with simple content. I was accustomed to recognize these components as the South’s definitive sound (Conway, 2006, p. 134). The music produced a “call-and-response” exchange that I did not recognize initially. I was still fascinated by the music because the local citizens produced a relationship with the sound.

In the past, I knew of Atlanta-based music and traditional rap music to feature the audience responding to an artist through verbal exchanges. Rap music moves the crowd. This audience was dancing in ways that I had never seen. I was not from Georgia, so “snap music” and its dances were foreign to me. I did not dance like the students or know any of the local songs. I could not immediately understand this music. I watched the students interact with each other, sing the songs, and make up dances with the music. I had to observe “snap music” from a distance in order to connect my memory of Southern rap music to actual people and events that conjure my emotional, visual, and sensory images of real people engaged in actual events (Ellis, 2004, p. 333). With “snap music,” the dancers and supporting participants engaged in rhythmic but simple inclined body movements above the lower torso. Everyone performed these dances, but they were not too hard to learn. From left to right, individuals created a “one-two bounce with cadenced finger snaps” in unison with the beats (Conway, 2006, p. 134). The more that I would find exposure to the music from the college house parties, Atlanta clubs, and school

celebrations, it was clear that the music still had this aura of community because of individuals not following a voiceover as a source of command. Everyone would respond with unison movements with similar timing and direction. The scene of community interaction produced a “salience of non-verbal aesthetics as means for instigating scenarios, associated desires, and heightened conduct forms” (DeNora, 2000, p. 114). “Snap music” recalls the roots of Hip Hop culture and rap music because of “snap music’s” crowd participation and ability to yield uniform responses.

“Snap music” keeps the party in motion. People dance and cry out “Aye.” The crowd turns these cries into crescendos and become more intense. The crowd persists in inclining their bodies and snapping their fingers. The dances are very crisp and clean. There is no rough behavior or catcalling while “snap music” is on. I follow Southern rap music because the music creates active registers and manners that give “snap music” a distinct character. Southern Blacks’ dancing and shouting recalls “call-and-response” as:

the recall of cultural meanings - the subliminal, inarticulate, and implicit perceptions and relationships that interact with and illuminate the cognitive musical events in works and performances of music. The execution of call-response opens the symbolic field, where reside the long-standing, sublimated conflicts, taboos, and myths of personal and group experience and our relationships to them. On this level the symbolic field reside the musical instincts and intuitions that drives the creative impulse (Floyd, 1995, p. 230).

“Snap music” utilizes “music as a resource or template against which styles and temporal patterns of feeling, moving, and being come to be organized and produced in real time and operates on an interactive plane” (DeNora, 2000, p. 111). I am a foreigner to “snap music” because of my South Carolina roots. As a follower of Southern rap music, I honor the fun and extreme excitement over violence in the clubs (Baraka, Dillard, & Hall, 2003, p. 86). As everyone dances, I sense excitement with smiles, calls, intense gyrating, and peers dancing with their arms around each others’ shoulders. Everyone is having a good time rather than feeling discontent and angry. This is the good time that I relate to in Southern rap music. Floyd (1995) states in regards to Black music and its accompanying dances:

When dancers are dancing, it is how they relate to what the musicians play and how the musicians react to their movements, gestures, and

urgings to make the dance a success, for it is the dancers' physical Signifyin(g) that excites other dancers and musicians alike: a bump here, a grind there, a nod here, a dip there (p. 97).

“Snap music” acts as an intimately known rap music form that encourages Black youth to feel good, happy, and fun.

At its finest, “snap music” creates a similar feel to the Atlanta sounds I would grow up immersing myself in and dancing to. “Snap music” is highly danceable with an energy from the crowd that is not as violent, intense, and weezy as “crunk.” “Snap music” still blares and features mostly sparse music and vocals. As everyone dances, I find no past remnants of “aggression, bow throwing, and mean mugging” (Conway, 2006, p. 135). “Snap music’s” dancing and lyrical organization generates nonphysical confrontations. “Snap music” is a more gentle crunk but offspring of Atlanta’s musical and cultural innovation (Conway, 2006, p. 134). Throughout the various parties and celebrations, the dancers would often forge their own dance steps to accompany the tracks. Atlanta has a track record for dances to accompany the region’s music.

Atlanta’s dance culture features past dances with “crunk” and “bass” such as “the ragtop,” “tweaking,” “the Bankhead Bounce,” and the “A-Town stomp.” “Snap music” features similar dances. The inclined bodies accompany a shoulder rock, or “leanin’ and rockin,” that involves opposing dancers attempting to heighten these movements. Dancers rock their shoulders and arms harder than each other in attempts to look cooler than their opponents. Others would stretch their arms out and motion as if their revving “a motorcycle.” Coincidentally, “the motorcycle” is a dance. “The motorcycle” is done in a still position. The most energetic dance, “the Poole Palace” or “the Westside walk,” involves bending knees with rocking hips. Dancers will typically motion in a circle or from side to side. Sometimes people will “walk it out,” which combines the “Poole Palace” with people stepping. “Snap music’s” sound and dances interweave:

the pelvic and shoulder gesturing of Black dancers. Black dance involves the whole of a body in movement. Black music and dance continues to interact as mutually influential African American artistic media. As one goes, so goes the other, each propelling the other into

wider realms of exploration and aesthetic communication (Floyd, 2001, p. 118).

“Snap music” creates a vibrant mix of song and dance that breathes positive air into Southern rap music and Southern Hip Hop culture.

As I continue to watch “snap music” in amazement, I became an active participant. I danced and learned the words to many of the local songs. “Snap music” resembles rap music’s roots for its basic functions as dance culture and music (Samuels, 1995, p. 243). Many of the records played were once insular, and in some cases remain underground, records that would escort the dance steps as instructional songs. Among some of the more popular of these records include BHI’s “Do It (The Poole Palace),” Baby D.’s “Do It,” Street Runnaz Click’s “Jig Wit It,” Unk’s “Walk it Out,” “2 Step,” Dem Franchize Boyz’s “Lean Wit It, Rock Wit It,” Lil’ Jon’s “Snap Ya Fingers,” and Da Heizman Boyz’s “Do the Heizman” among others. Other songs organize the self-esteem in Southern rap to become catch phrases commonly used. Among these singles include D4L’s “Betcha Can’t Do it Like Me,” “What Can You Do,” “Do It Like Me, Baby,” Ben Hill Squad’s “Do Ya Dance” Dem Franchize Boyz’s “I Think They Like Me,” P-Stones’ “Get Like Me,” and the more recent Shop Boyz’s “Party Like a Rockstar.” “Snap music” is Southern Hip Hop culture because:

Hip Hop is used to replace physical violence with artistic warfare and style wars. As a contemporary phase of Black musical expression, Hip Hop is not solely expressive of the burden of being Black in a racist society; it is primarily an expression of the honor of being Black in racist America” Many Hip Hop artists recognize that they themselves must determine the direction in which culture moves. The Hip Hop community recognizes an urgent need to wrest control of the culture from the music industry (Walker, 2001, p. 214).

“Snap music” departs from conventional rap music. “Snap music” artists do not really place a heavy emphasis on narrative based rap music styles. “Snap music” is performance-based music. The dancers dance as the artists and music keep the party in motion. “Snap music” speaks about club culture and having good times. This is why most Southern rap music is popular in the South. The good time content is also why “snap music” is perceived as unintelligible to mainstream culture and traditional rap music circles. “Snap music’s” detractors target the beats’ and rhymes’ simplicity that seems to highlight

flashy and hedonistic lyrical content. “Snap music” is escapism music when Black youth are in the clubs. “Snap music” has no primary goals of achieving complexity and depth in Western music culture (Frauenhofer, 2006). Southern rap music is disobedient. Southern rap artists do not subscribe to traditional rap’s performance and style conventions. “Snap music” continues to reference neighborhoods, use slang, and play up various regional accents. “Snap music” is “popular music” that emphasizes interpretation through performance and reception in body, emotions, pleasure, and materialism. “Popular music” utilizes the relationship of the body to feelings and sexuality rather than pure text (Shuker, 1994, p. 140). “Snap music” is anti-establishment.

“Snap music” persists as a new legacy of Hip Hop culture portrayed by Southern Black youth. “Snap music’s” fertile production because of other underground Southern rap artists rearranges African American stereotypes. Black youth as demons and American social threats are renegotiated and altered as cool icons and heroes. Rap music allows:

African Americans to employ both strategies, using masking and deformation equally in their quest for liberation. This was the African American modernist field of discourse. The modernist sensibility requires the rejection of many of the values, techniques, and procedures of the past and the embracing of new ones” (Floyd, 1995, p. 88).

“Snap music” creates a critical backlash as “the usual crunked up D-Boy sound of the South” (Garland, 2005). Rappers often boast in “snap music” about acquiring massive amounts of wealth, selling large quantities of cocaine/crack, material possessions, becoming victims of law enforcement, having numerous women engage in sexual acts, consuming large quantities of quality drugs (mainly high quality marijuana or “purp”) and alcohol (mainly Grey Goose vodka and Patron tequila). These personalities are usually the high profile individuals that are present and known in club circuits. To some people, these people and activities are bad representations of Southern Black culture and identity. To me, these individuals are local celebrities that live the good life. They are also good friends of mine. They eat the best food, always wear nice clothing, keep large amounts of cash, and drive nice cars. I remember always receiving small incentives from hustlers and drug dealers because I was a good student, and I did not get into any trouble in school or with the law. As a child, I aspired to want the expressive lifestyle like hustlers I knew

because they were the epitome and idols of cool. My friends and I looked up to these individuals because they were business conscious and sociable. They encouraged me to stay away from negative activities because I had potential to succeed. I interpreted “succeeding” as moving out of the neighborhood to attend school, getting a career, start a family, and create a good life for myself. The hustlers’ and drug dealers’ logic behind their chosen activities reflects what Schultz says is “not of deep pleasure but an essential asset for their survival” (1977, p. 51). I would listen to rap music because the music made imaginary characters out of these personalities. Hustlers and drug dealers as musical symbols reflect excess, success, and the good life. Southern rap music’s good life because of money, fame, and tangible goods portrays a positive form of rebellion against straight society and normalized, mainstream ways of behavior (Perone, 2004, p. 112). Southern rap music, in relation to Sanneth’s account, does not display low self-esteem but artists who think highly of themselves as people, hustlers, master criminals, sexual athletes, and businessmen (2004, p. 224). The hustlers and dealers I know make money, take care of their families, and provide resources for my friends and me. Excess and hedonism does not really stand out when Black youth are in celebratory mode or the music is in play. To some critics, Southern rap music creates a stagnation of musical options and subjects for rap music. Rap music’s characters, fantasies, and aspirations create more fun and means of “The American Dream” for Black youth.

Southern rap music challenges conventional rap music by utilizing these character types and experiences as “natural resources” that provide many aspiring artists and performers to gain other insights from these individuals. According to Starks (2001):

Music is not separate from the everyday existence of the people. Music is, in fact, a celebration of life... As more and more of us moved from rural areas to towns and cities, and from the South to the North and West, our music changed to reflect our change in environment... We must put our ingenuity to work and use the mask even as we wear it. We bring a measure of humanity to the Black presence on stage while we wondered if the dehumanizing stereotypes were correctly fixed in the first place. After all those were not our plantations. We begin to use the minstrel show to meet our needs rather than those of the mainstream (p. 226, 229, 230).

Southern rap music allows negative characters and personalities to become different rather than nasty and uncivilized with an ethical relativism ultimately hard to deal with in mainstream culture. This act for Southern rap music involves what Floyd (1995) says is:

Signifyin(g) as a way of saying one thing and meaning another. It is a reinterpretation, a metaphor for the revision of previous texts and figures. In African American music, musical figures Signify by commenting on other musical figures, on themselves, on performances of other music, on other performances of the same piece, and on completely new works of music (p. 95).

In Southern rap music, the audio environment is the basis for reflexive monitoring of situations with music as an active ingredient in relationships and intimate settings (DeNora, 2000, p. 111). Southern rap artists alter how individuals perceive these character types. Southern rap artists translate the efforts of hustlers, drug dealers, and rap artists into messages of hard work, dedication, drive, discipline, self-esteem, and prosperity. Rap music does not embody mainstream American's static and stereotypical views of Blacks. Rap music allows Black youth to create self-sufficiency in how they articulate their experiences, make income, and create their good times. According to Laughley (2006), my understanding of Southern rap music resembles a "choice restriction and regulation imposed on clubbers which can exclude rather than include their presentation of personal tastes and identities" (p. 45). Southern rap music is creative and conscious agency for African American youth.

Southern rap music and its components emerged as forms of "neo tribalism" because the functioning of these archetypes and representation of Blackness do not serve the same purpose and meaning as it would in mainstream culture. Neo-tribalism refers to "the inability to react to political structures of domination but instead come together through localized collective sensibilities. Neo tribalism clearly favors emotional agency above the rational structure implied by the habits in the social construction of taste" (Laughley, 2006, p. 45). "Snap music" and its dances comprise an urban dance culture that involves people engaging in localized but individualistic practices. The club participants, performers, and artists construct their various identities. These individuals do not rely on social

constructions courtesy of media companies and recording labels. Southern rap artists construct their own reality with raw materials courtesy of their social interactions and environments.

Many Southern rap artists attempt to escape any potential political confinements courtesy of the recording industry. Artists such as D4L and Dem Franchize Boyz acquire major label support with chart success and sales certifications. Many “snap music” artists continue to promote their music through local distributions agencies and channels. They mainly perform in clubs, small arenas, outdoor shows, and festivals. *VIBE* labels the “snap” artists as “silly novelty acts” (Garland, 2005). I think this is because “snap music” produces a plethora of acts that only have one to two songs to their credit. The underground builds loyal fanbases and ensures success without mainstream gatekeepers. The clubs rotate the local songs on their playlists. There are underground mixtapes and social networking engines via MySpace and Soundclick that are the latest methods to gain access to many of the songs. Local and mainstream Southern rap artists all manage to set up Web pages that enable fans and audiences to download their materials free of charge. The small venues, concert halls, and clubs secure Southern rap artists’ ability to substantiate a core audience while generating a substantial amount of income and security for themselves. Southern rap music displays a Hip Hop aesthetic because of:

an attempt to maintain control of the so-called Hip Hop nation and protect it from misrepresentation or erasure by mainstream acceptance. Hip Hop community members have gone through great lengths to draw borders around their culture, a culture they feel is under attack” (McLeod, 2002, p. 166).

Southern rap artists continue to maintain creative autonomy with economic and distribution options. Rap music does not solely relate to the sound and subject matters of Black youths’ musical products. Shuker says, “While the cohesion of their common musical signatures is frequently exaggerated, local sounds provide marketing possibilities by providing a brand name which consumers can identify with. Interest in particular sounds has concentrated on the significance of locality and how music may serve as a marker for identity” (Shuker, 1994, p. 210). Southern rap music as “not saying much” appears misleading because many of the artists are taking more active roles in ensuring that their products guarantees accessibility to their fans while ensuring some benefit for the artists themselves.

Southern rap music's latest offspring, "snap music," continues as an African American youth response to "passive resistance, segregation, social aggression, and violence with a resulting Black cynicism accomplished by psychological self-defense and self-empowering strategies" (Floyd, 1995, p. 92).

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Hip Hop culture and rap music remain active practices and cultural forms of expression. The problem with rap music and Hip Hop culture lies in many of the trends and subcultures associated with becoming stagnant transitions in popular music. In the process, Black youth culture is constantly renegotiated as various business and creative opportunities. Rap music's and Hip Hop culture's origins center Black youth experiences and voices. Hip Hop culture and rap music also comprise a series of diverging cultural meanings according to the control and mass consumption of the products. Once products or ideas in Hip Hop culture become recognizable and popular, those products become mass productions as carbon copies in order to capitalize on it. Hip Hop culture is gold mine.

This is indicative of "Hip Hop journalism" becoming one of the latest industries and business opportunities for corporations and investors to take part in. Readers of *VIBE* may consider the magazine as a strong source to document Hip Hop culture and rap music because of the magazine's appearance and content. To the staff and corporate participants, *VIBE* as "Hip Hop journalism" is yet another opportunity to commodify Hip Hop culture into another finely packaged product. Hip Hop culture, in this context, is a business that has no benefits for Black youth. Hip Hop culture and rap music are both viable industries in American culture. There is continuous action taken by rap artists and various corporations to capitalize on every development of it. Likewise, these developments extend the possibilities for more critical works of music, culture, media, and its participants to understand who determines rap music and Hip Hop culture's criteria and standards. Music is one of the cultural elements for Black youth that is seldom stable in the midst of social change (Stokes, 1994, p. 17).

I encourage all readers and followers of Hip Hop culture and rap music to engage in more critical autonomy in regards to the images, subjects, owners, and messages in the music and culture. Media literacy allows us to look beneath the surface of texts and images to understand media objectives,

missions, and ownership of the products we may consume. Many of us recognize that music, language, and geographically-produced art are not static. I challenge my readers to not take every message from a rap artist or story written in a magazine at face value. Some of our reference points, characters, and words used in rap music do not always have literal meanings. Record companies and media institutions such as *VIBE* are not individuals and sources out to protect Hip Hop culture and rap music. The corporations, investors, and businessmen are not out to gain a realistic sense of who Black youth are as well as attempt to understand Black cultural personalities and values. Featherly and Jones (2002) agree that “authenticity is the most invisible and opaque of the concerns that occupy popular music critics because it is the most frequent topic that brings popular music’s inherent eliticism to the fore” (p. 31). Finally, I encourage my readers to understand the difference of rap music and Hip Hop culture between media representations and the cultural consumption among African American. McLeod (2004) says:

Hip Hop was a rebellious youth subculture associated with Blacks that went on to become one of the most significant elements in the mainstream music industry. Subcultures threatened with assimilation, particularly musical subcultures, tend to emphasize authenticity within discourse to create in-group and out-group boundaries that help protect the ‘purity’ of the culture” (p. 162-163).

On the other hand, rap music and Hip Hop culture are constant reinventions of African American youth culture. When rap music and Hip Hop culture are internal creations from Black youth, then the music and culture could validate and express our experiences. Rap music and Hip Hop culture allows African Americans to take whatever local resources and elements are present and turn them into a craft, story, dance, or a lifestyle such as “snap music” in Atlanta. Rap is our voice. Rap music is anti-establishment, so there are no boundaries, rules, or confinements for us to follow. As a branch of Hip Hop culture, rap allows Black youth to maintain what Walker (2001) states is “a positive interaction of rhythm, symbols, and the community that unifies through the creative expression of common socio-economic experiences as means of fighting against human exploitation and oppression” (p. 214). Rap music evolves from its East/West Coasts origins as primarily spoken, descriptive, and manipulative in lyrical form, proving that Black youth culture is not a static practice. Rap music also can include more

sparse arrangements and more body-oriented movements in association with it such as Southern rap music. In both cases, rap music provides a mode of escapism outlet from hegemonic American values and issues. Rap music, in this sense, could symbolize:

African American culture drawing on everything the world has to offer. We are lovers and prone to find the good in anything that exists. We are humble. Bad is beautiful no matter who produces it, what we learn from others when combined with our own indigenous stuff only makes us badder (Salaam, 1995, p. 181).

When examining Hip Hop culture and rap music, scholars and academics do not have to take on the personal perspectives that I have in this thesis. On the other hand, I would not totally discount a personal glance when cultural forms such as Hip Hop and rap generate complex viewpoints. Hip Hop culture and rap music could reveal common ways of living and understanding certain environments. This does not mean that the various viewpoints are wrong or right, they are just complex ideas on interpreting culture. As I demonstrate in this work, “snap music” and Southern rap continue in the wake of the groundwork laid by previous rap music styles. Critics and scholars of Hip Hop may not agree with me. To some, rap music and Hip Hop culture are nothing more than confirmations promoting wretched behavior and negative attitudes. Swindell (2001) suggests with criticisms relating to practices such as rap music and Hip Hop culture:

In order to solve the problems of the Black underclass, Black intellectuals first of all will have to diminish their obsession with racial integration. Instead of concentrating on totally abandoning their culture in order to be accepted by White society, Black people must do more of an effective job of improving the condition of the Black community. This implies recognizing the duality of being Black in America where one is African American and at the same time American” (p. 21).

For Hip Hop criticism and future scholastic work, the sky is the limit. Rap music and Hip Hop artists, producers, scholars, intellectuals, survivors, anthropologists, and similar participants must shine light on many of the confusing terms, messages, and scenarios that may not translate cross-culturally. Our jobs as lovers and followers of Hip Hop culture provide outside individuals and each other with the opportunity to explore each other. My purpose for writing this thesis involves providing a perspective on

a rap music subculture that has some misunderstanding with both mainstream audiences, rap music listeners, and the Hip Hop community. Swindell (2001) again says:

Among academicians and elitest critics, criticism is generally designed almost exclusively for making discriminations within the scope of 'high' art and 'high' culture. Just as critics hold positions of power and prestige in a larger society, the Black community, too, must have critics whose ultimate goals are to improve the quality of life for Blacks who have been shut out of the mainstream (p. 28).

The various dialogues from scholars and writers in association with rap music and Hip Hop will allow readers and scholars to solely not consider criticism as a means or pointing out negative attributes and ongoing problems.

For this particular study of my personal relationship with Hip Hop culture and rap music, there are some limitations of my study. My account is only one of several that can be written, constructed, and analyzed. This account is only my relationship with Southern rap music that coincidentally may be similar to another reader, critic, or music lover. On the other hand, rap music and Hip Hop culture constitutes negative and foul behavior in some cases based on profane lyrics and music video imagery, so I must consider the inability for some people to understand my relationship of Southern Hip Hop. Because I have such an intense relationship and closeness to Southern rap and Southern Hip Hop, my perspective may seem almost one-dimensional or too personal. There are possibly other articles in *VIBE* that I could examine to determine if all of the accounts are similar to the ones that I examine. I also could examine another Hip Hop magazine or a series of them. Other than to write from an anthropological position, I could have written this thesis in a combination of ways including case studies, content analysis, or textual analysis. Hopefully, my readers can recognize that my immersion into Southern rap music, Hip Hop culture, and rap music is only one of several accounts that can be written.

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