

Kendrick Lamar- The Savior of Hip Hop?

In the last decade, rap has undeniably gotten less original, and stopped holding a positive message for black communities, although it is still widely popular. Artists have shifted their focus to superficial concepts like sexualizing women and bling. However, one artist is trying to take Hip Hop back to its roots and echo themes from the Golden Era of the genre. For years, Kendrick Lamar has used his platform to spread messages related to black nationalism and pride, peer pressure, racism, and political themes. His works correspond well with those of KRS-One, Rakim, Wu-Tang Clan, and Nas, and is arguably the closest to restoring the greatness of Golden Era Hip Hop.

Before exploring the culture and genre of Hip Hop, it is important to distinguish some of the terminology. Many people think Hip Hop and rap are the same, and thus use the terms interchangeably, but this is incorrect. Hip Hop is much more than just a genre of music or an art form, it is a culture, a culture in which rap is just a subcategory. Within the the culture of Hip Hop, there are said to be four main elements: DJing, Emceeing, Dance, and Graffiti (Trembath). Rapping is simply the art of rhyming over a beat. Most importantly, Hip Hop “is nation-conscious and often involves social commentary and embedded ethics” (Trembath) . Rap is not necessarily any of these things. Likewise emcees and rappers are different. Emcees are expected to rap about things with cultural significance, and to move the crowd. Rappers are not necessarily expected to do these things (Trembath).

As Chuck D talks about in the book *The Anthology of Rap* “it is impossible to separate hip-hop and rap music from the legacy of creativity from the past. Look within the expression and words of black music and you'll get a timeline reflecting American history itself”(Bradley 792). This means that Hip Hop, especially early Hip Hop often referenced slavery, the Jim Crow Era, and various movements.

For reasons like what Chuck D mentions, to understand the state of Hip Hop/rap today, it is important to take a look back. Though the genre is relatively new, its history starts much before the music itself. Hip Hop is like a tree with many roots and branches. It grew out of years of black empowerment as well as years of enslavement and struggle. Taking a look important time periods in black history, serves as an effective way of understanding the art that came out of it.

After years of suffering, enslavement, and inequality there came a bright spot in black history. This bright spot was the civil rights and black power movements. The Black Rights Movement (1950's-1960's), headed by Martin Luther King Jr called for equal rights. After came the Black Power Movement (1960's-1970's), headed by Huey Newton and Malcolm that called for separatism of whites and blacks and preached black pride. These movements applied pressure, until the Jim Crow era was ended and blacks were (said to be) treated as equals (Trembath). The figures and movements of this time periods are incredibly prevalent throughout Hip Hop (Trembath).

Music that started during the slavery epochs in the United States continued on to form many different genres. In his book *Blues People*, Amiri Baraka examines the evolution of black music in America. He speaks about how work songs became the pillar of music we see now.

Baraka also says that “Blues is the parent of all legitimate jazz, and it is impossible to say exactly how old blues is- certainly no older than the presence of Negroes in the United States” (Baraka 17). As Baraka also acknowledges, jazz soon created its own genres and subgenres like jazz rap and funk. Even to this day, songs like “Funky Drummer”, by the king of funk James Brown, are looped and cut to make beats to rap over. Ultimately black history is responsible for generating both the sound and the lyrics of Hip Hop.

Hip Hop officially started in the early 1970’s when Dj Kool Herc revolutionized the beat break and the art of DJing (Trembath). Although the time periods are different depending on who you talk to, most say from the year's 1988-1993 lived the so called Golden Era of Hip Hop. This time period is regarded highly by almost everyone knowledgeable in the genre because of the quantity of songs and richness of lyrics. With new technological advances, more artists than ever before were able to make more and better sounding songs. Moreover, the lyrics in this time period pointed back to previous artists, time periods, and events throughout black history that shaped them. Many songs were also nation conscious, and touched on political and social issues affecting black communities (Aldridge 190).

Many songs during the golden years gave a first hand narrative of the struggles of everyday life for blacks. One of the Golden Era’s most influential and popular groups, the Wu-tang Clan came out with a song titled C.R.E.A.M. in 1994 that became one of the most well known and well regarded songs of its time. In the first verse, emcee Raekwon starts the song off with a line that sets the tone for the rest of the song. He raps “I grew up on the crime side, the New York Times side/Staying alive was no jive” (Genius). For the rest of the song, members of the Clan talk about their lives and what it was like to grow up in socio economic turmoil. For

example in the second verse Inspectah Deck says “It's been twenty-two long hard years of still strugglin/Survival got me buggin, but I'm alive on arrival/I peep at the shape of the streets/ And stay awake to the ways of the world cause shit is deep/A man with a dream with plans to make cream/ Which failed; I went to jail at the age of fifteen/A young buck selling drugs and such who never had much” (Genius). While these lyrics may be criticized for their talking about selling drugs and going to jail at a young age, the lyrics are not aimed to promote doing these things. Instead, the lyrics are simply to tell of the struggle which was their reality, and to be relatable to people going through the same thing.

Golden Era songs were also known for having political messages, both underlying and overt. Often emcees would use their platform to raise awareness against injustice and question government. One major topic of debate during the time period was the U.S. invasions of other nations. In the song “Casualties of War,” another major group who helped bring Hip Hop into the Golden Era , Eric B and Rakim add to this discussion. In the first lines of the songs Rakim says “Casualties of war; as I approach the barricade/ Where's the enemy? Who do I invade?” (Genius). This simple line addresses the issue that many times the people fighting the wars do not know who their enemy is, or even what they are fighting for. He goes on to say “The war is over, for now at least/Just because they lost it don't mean it's peace/It's a long way home, it's a lot to think about/Whole generation, left in doubt/Innocent families killed in the midst/It'll be more dead people after this” (Genius). In these lyrics Rakim questions the ethics of war, and the lasting effects it has on civilians. It was important for Hip Hop artists to speak of these issues because rap was an outlet that provided commentary to black communities and was effective in reaching younger audiences.

Although critics of Hip Hop often argue that the genre promotes violence, during the Golden Era there was a big anti-violence movement, especially black on black violence. In fact, one of the era's biggest artists, KRS-One, started a movement specifically for this issue, called the Stop the Violence Movement. The movement eventually released a song featuring famous artists from the time who talked directly about the topic. At the beginning of the song KRS-One has a verse that perfectly illustrates what the movement was all about:

Well, today's topic, self destruction
It really ain't the rap audience that's bugging
It's one or two suckers, ignorant brothers
Trying to rob and steal from one another
You get caught in the mid
So to crush the stereotype here's what we did
We got ourselves together
So that you could unite and fight for what's right
Not negative cause the way we live is positive
We don't kill our relatives (Genius).

Here not only does KRS-One call black on black violence ignorant, he also spreads the message of unity. This song, and the widespread movement was important because at the least it spread awareness for this issue, and at the most listening to lyrics like these could get someone to think twice about committing acts of black on black violence, or any kind of violence.

Not surprisingly one of the biggest topics in Golden Era Hip Hop was that of race. One movement that came before Hip Hop and was largely prominent in the Golden Era was Black Nationalism. Two of the Black Nationalist movement's most famous figures were Malcolm X, who argued for black separatism, and Marcus Garvey who preached a "message of black pride and dignity"("Bio"). Hip Hop artists followed in X's and Garvey's footsteps by carrying his

message forward (“Chapter 3” 54) . In his song “Black Zombies” Nas criticized the state of blacks, questioning them and comparing them to zombies in the way that they blindly accept stereotypes. This is evident when he raps “Yo, you believe when they say we ain't shit, we can't grow?/All we are is dope dealers, and gangstas and hoes?/And you believe when they be telling you lie, all on the media?”(Genius). Not only does Nas question, he also preached that blacks are much better than what they get credit for. He does this as he says “Use your intuition, you are tomorrow...control your destiny, you are a genius”(Genius). Messages like the one of Nas and the Black Nationalist Movement are important because they are motivational and also because often they often were more effective than messages of assimilation (“Chapter 3” 51).

It was songs like these that are the reason the Golden Era is so respected. The lyrics inspired blacks change their vices and realize their importance, taught blacks to appreciate their history and culture, and challenged governments and institutions. This is not to say the era was perfect. Not all songs held an important message, and often lyrics were homophobic and misogynistic (Cheney 295) . However, collectively the Golden Era was vital for the genre and in the lives of many.

After the Golden Era, Hip Hop’s landscape began to quickly change. The change came in the form of gangster rap (Cheney 286). Arguably the first gangsta rap song was NWA’s “Fuck Tha Police”. In the song, the famous rap group spoke about police brutality. While the style was new, and the lyrics were brash at times, the song still carried an important message about racial discrimination. However, after the creation of gangsta rap, artists began to realize they could sell records by just talking about their “thug” lifestyle, without any kind of evident message (Cheney

286). Rappers started to even go as far as glorifying killing in their music. Today rap seems to be even more prominent than in the Golden Era, but it also seems to hold much less importance.

Prominence and importance are very different things. While Hip Hop is still prominent in black communities, it undeniably holds much less importance. This becomes obvious in looking at a study conducted by author Rachel E. Sullivan. For the study, Sullivan asked four questions to a group of 51 respondents comprised of white, black, and latino students. One of the questions asked if they listened to Hip Hop. On a scale of one to ten the average answer was an eight, with no major discrepancies between different races (Sullivan 613). Another interesting question asked in the survey was if the respondents agreed with the statement that rap affected their opinions about racism. Sullivan found that “overall the respondents moderately disagreed; they did not believe rap has had of an effect on their opinions about racism” (Sullivan 614). This survey was effective at showing a few different things. It showed the increasing popularity and diverse audience of rap. More concerning was the answer about racism. Racial pride and racism (often institutional racism) were major themes in the Golden Era. However, it can be said that this answers shows the disappearance of commentaries on racism in Hip Hop, or at least the lessening effectiveness of these messages.

This change in the genre can be chalked up to a number of external factors aside from gangsta rap. Some critics of new rap music think that this change was a product of record label executives who might have been trying to appeal to a larger audience. It is also possible that the change happened because of the growing number of white listeners who simply didn't want to hear songs that touched on social and political issues that mostly criticized people of their same skin color. No matter what the reason for the change really is, it is impossible to look past the

fact there has in fact been a change. rap, especially mainstream rap, tends to not address any issues. Sure, there are still artists that are similar to Golden Era artists like J. Cole, Lupe Fiasco, and Kendrick Lamar, as well as many underground artists.

One artist stands out for their mirroring of Golden Era artists. His name is Kendrick Lamar. It is hard to find a song by Lamar (especially in his more recent works) in which there is no message, either readily apparent or hidden beneath intricate metaphors.

In many of his songs, Lamar speaks of everyday life in similar ways as Golden Era artists like Wu-Tang did. One of his songs, “The Art of Peer Pressure” does a good job at giving a thought provoking and accurate depiction of peer pressure with beautiful lyrics. In each verse Lamar talks about a different journey within Compton, making trouble with his friends, and ends it off by saying how he only acts that way when he is influenced by his peers. This is the case when he raps “I got the blunt in my mouth/Usually I’m drug-free, but shit I’m with the homies” and “Rush a nigga quick and then we laugh about it/That’s ironic ‘cause I’ve never been violent, until I’m with the homies” (Genius). The song is not glorifying violence or drugs, like many songs now tend to do now, it is merely examining the behavior and influences of black youth.

Similar to Golden Era artists, Kendrick Lamar talks about black nationalism and pride in his songs. For example in his song “Hiiiipower” he says: Visions of Martin Luther staring at me/Malcolm X put a hex on my future, someone catch me/I'm falling victim to a revolutionary song” (Genius). Here Kendrick is speaking about the leaders of the Civil Rights and Black Nationalism movements, and recognizing the influence they have had on him, both good and bad. In the song “The Blacker the Berry” Lamar raps “My hair is nappy, my dick is big, my nose is round and wide/You hate me don't you?/You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my

culture/ You're fuckin' evil I want you to recognize that I'm a proud monkey” (Genius). In these lines Kendrick is doing a number of things. He is acknowledging racism and stereotypes of blacks as well as claiming parts of these stereotypes while still being proud of his skin color (similar to Garvey).

Also similar to Golden Era artists, Lamar often touches on political issues. He challenges governments and bad institutions both old and new. In an interlude titled “Chapter Six” a man says “There is an even more important topic I'd like to discuss. The dysfunctional bastards of the Ronald Reagan Era. Young men that learned to do everything spiteful” (Genius). Here, and in the song “Ronald Reagan Era (His Evils)” Kendrick addresses policies of Ronald Reagan that widened the wealth gap and are responsible for keeping blacks in poverty even to this day. Like rappers before him, Lamar calls out police in the song “Alright”. In the pre-hook Kendrick raps “Nigga, and we hate po-po/Wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho” (Genius). These lyrics criticize police who have been plagued racial issues throughout their existence in the United States. This song not only addresses political issues, it became an anthem for black pride and motivation. In fact, the famous line “We gon' be alright” was chanted during Black Lives Matter protests.

Kendrick Lamar talks about issues that mirror that of the stop the violence movement from the Golden Era. Again from his song “Blacker the Berry”, Lamar addresses the issue of black on black violence: “So don't matter how much I say I like to preach with the Panthers/Or tell Georgia State "Marcus Garvey got all the answers"/ Or try to celebrate February like it's my B-Day/Or eat watermelon, chicken, and Kool-Aid on weekdays/ Or jump high enough to get Michael Jordan endorsements/Or watch BET cause urban support is important/So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street when gang banging make me kill a nigga blacker

than me?/Hypocrite! (Genius). In these lines Kendrick is speaking from the viewpoint of someone else and criticizing blacks for their hypocrisies. Essentially Lamar is saying it doesn't matter how much black culture you embrace or if it relates to common struggles if you kill one of your own.

Something that Kendrick Lamar does that the Golden Era artists could not is comment on modern rap. This shows when Kendrick raps “I can dig rappin’/But a rapper with a ghost writer?/What the fuck happened?/I swore I wouldn't tell/But most of y'all sharing bars/Like you got the bottom bunk in a two-man cell in the song “King Kunta” (Genius). Kendrick is criticizing new rappers for having ghostwriters and taking lyrics from other songs. Pretty much he is questioning today's rappers because real emcees do not need to use these tactics to produce meaningful material. Lamar does not just address the state of Hip Hop in his songs, but also does so in his music videos. In his video for “These Walls” Kendrick says “We gon’ go in here, get the money, and get out. Simply as that” then proceeds to dance to a song called “Hit the Quan” in what looks to be a talent show. It can be concluded that this scene is just a comical interlude with little meaning, but I believe it is a well veiled metaphor. The song that he is dancing too is a good representation of today's popular rap because its lack of any meaning or message. Thus it can be hypothesized that Kendrick is playing the part of what he thinks to be a contemporary rap artist, whose sole motivation is to make money without having any talent or intention to speak of anything with importance.

Overall what Kendrick Lamar is doing holds importance beyond the genre of Hip Hop. Lamar reaches back to Golden Era Hip Hop in his lyrics with messages of black pride, criticisms of institutional racism, and tales of the everyday struggles. However, he does not just follow

other artists. Lamar talks about issues that are relevant now, and challenges black people to be the best they can be. Unlike many artists of his time, it is clear that Lamar is not just trying to 'get the money and get out'. He is trying to uplift and black community and raise the bar in Hip Hop.

Hip Hop is not dead, it is just struggling. The Golden Era was golden because of its commentary on relevant issues and its celebration of an old and beautiful culture. Unlike today's rappers, emcees in the Golden Era did not have greedy motives. For the most part they used their platform to try to make a difference in their communities. Yes, if you look hard enough you can find real emcees in mainstream Hip Hop today. However, most of these emcees reside in underground Hip Hop and do not get the credit they truly deserve. In a genre now dominated by unoriginal and meaningless songs, Kendrick Lamar sticks out. Lamar is doing everything he can to recreate the positives of the Golden Era, and restore the genre to the greatness it once had. With more artists like Kendrick Lamar, Hip Hop would thrive like it once did. But as long as all the monetary incentives are in talking about things that really don't matter, nothing will change.