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Houston Rap Music- Changes, Influences, Southside

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From the late 1980s to early 1990s, rap music has made a huge contribution to the American society. On the west coast, rappers such as Dr. Dre, Tupac Shakur, and Snoop Doggy Dog dominated the rap scene. The east coast was controlled by Biggie Smalls, Nas, and Public Enemy. The explicit and violent music produced in both regions caused major rivalry for the American Hip-Hop/Rap scene. By the late 1990s, rap music had become an extremely popular genre in music, and “out-sold all other forms of popular music” (Orbock, 2008). The Hip-Hop/Rap industry brought a large amount of diversity to its listeners. Also, because Hip-Hop/Rap music is so unique, it gave artists the privilege to create newer music. The lyrics of the music were often explicit and linked to drug usage, gang references, violence, sex, and degrading behaviors.

Entrepreneurs James Smith and Cliff Blodget started the Houston-based, Rap-A-Lot records. By 1988, they had released an album with the artists The Geto Boys. This group was Houston’s first official rap group. The group consisted of three men who basically rapped about drugs and violence. With the help of Smith’s negotiations with Priority Records, the group had their first national hit, “We Can’t Be Stopped.” Soon small production labels began popping up across Houston. People saw the hard work and commitment Smith and Blodget put into producing The Geto Boys, and were encouraged to do the same for other artists.

Within months, the Houston radio station 97.9 The Box, opened. The Box helped Houston become the “epicenter of Hip-Hop and Rap in Texas” (Orbock, 2008). Harris County quickly became a successful region for inspired rappers. The only problem was the market place was very limited. Rappers struggled, but worked hard. For the hard workers, their music would eventually be heard.

Rappers Bun-B (Bernard Freeman) and Pimp C (Chad Butler) first started creating music in their group, The Underground Kingz. They started working together in the mid-1980s, but it was not until their 1996 hit, “Ridin’ Dirty,” when fame would actually hit. By 2000, they would be appearing in songs with rappers such as Jay-Z and Three Six Mafia. When The Underground Kingz were not recording, they would help
give back. They would search for new talent in Houston, and help pro-
mote their music. They greatly influenced rappers who sought to make
a difference in rap music. Because Hip-Hop and Rap music was new to
Houstonians, they would hear this as new music, but to the rappers, this
was old school. Change would soon be on the way in what would be
called H-Town.

Fellow Texans helped produce a new genre of Hip-Hop/ Rap music;
the genre was called “screwed,” which was later known as “chopped and
screwed.” It all started with Robert Earl Davis Jr., better known as DJ
Screw. In the early 1990s, DJ Screw would take regular rap music and
slow it down. He would slow down the music by playing it on his turn
table. He would turn the music backwards, warp it, and turn it again.
This would cause the beat of the music to be a lot slower, and create a
lower pitch in the rapper’s voice. Screw would take people’s requests
and create “screwed tapes” and sell them for five to ten dollars. Eventu-
ally, Screw opened a store in South Houston off of Cullen Boulevard and
named it “Screwed up Records and Tapes.” This became his platform
for music to come. Within the next few years, DJ Screw created a group
called the Screwed up Click. The SUC included rappers such as Lil’
Keke, Big Pokey, Fat Pat, Hawk, and E.S.G. Hawk said, “what Screw
did for so many people out there is he gave us all careers. Each and every
individual in this click will represent Screw for the rest of our lives be-
cause of that, straight up.” One of the careers he created was that of Fat
Pat. An original member of DJ Screw’s, Screw Up Click, Fat Pat was one
of the first to hit fast and die young. Fat Pat, also known as Mr. Fat and
P-A-T, worked alongside his older brother Hawk, and longtime friend
Lil’ Keke. He was signed to Wreckshop Records and quickly began re-
cording. Unfortunately, on February 3, 1998, Fat Pat was shot to death
at his promotor’s apartment. Two weeks after his death, his first album
“Ghetto Dreams” was released. Quickly, his first single “Top Drops”
became a hit. Even with Fat Pat gone, Wreckshop Records and DJ Screw
would not let his music die. His older brother, Hawk, tried to continue
his legacy with the Screwed up Click, and he helped Fat Pat’s name live
on, but unfortunately he too was shot to death. The talented duo’s music
is still regularly played, and without the help of Screw they would not
have been known.

Screw became a local celebrity, but his music did not go far beyond
Houston. Lil’ Flip, an upcoming Houston rap artist, took Screw’s con-
cept of screwing down music and decided to release his music in both
screwed rap and regular rap. This quickly created instant fame for the
star. Others soon followed and decided they too wanted to “screw” their
music. DJ Michael “5000” Watts started to release his screwed music in
North Houston. This was the first time screwed music was introduced as
music for North Houstonians. Once Watts decided to introduced screwed
music to the Northside, rivalries began. Southside gangs complained
about Northside stealing their music, while the Northside pleaded they
wanted the Northside to be represented as well. The gang affiliations created animosity in Houston. Watts decided to call his music "chopped and screwed," so the south would not be offended. Afterwards, he opened a rap label named Swisha House Records. Swisha House is now located in North Houston in the Space City Mall. Most rappers, such as Paul Wall buy their Grillz from Swisha House. Grillz are worn over the front teeth, and can be described as a more expensive "blinged out" version of brac- es. Grillz are made from platinum silver, white gold, or yellow gold, and even diamonds. Swisha House attracts hundreds of clients per week.

Many other major recording labels in Houston created music from now very well known artists. Artists such as Lil Troy, Trae the Truth, Slim Thug, Mike Jones, Paul Wall, Big Moe, Chamillionaire, and Z-Ro are all Houstonians. Their music influenced Houston. With a new radio station and new musicians, new opportunities were bound to happen. The youth of Houston began free-styling in the schools, parks, and alleys of Houston. They were greatly influenced by rapper Z-Ro, who has been known for spreading his screwed music to people who have never heard the style before. He combines his flows with fast beats to quickly grab peoples' attention. He has been known for recording his freestyles and screwing them down in many different forms. Z-Ro would speed up, slow down, chop and screw the same song and make it so that there were four to five different versions of the same song, to please whoever the listener is, and he spreads freestyling to Houstonians to inspire them to once again make a change in Houston.

Recordings of their freestyles can be found at places such as Swisha House, Southside Records, and even online on Web sites such as Limewire. Even for those who do not want to pursue a career in the music industry, they still sit back and flow. Houston was motivated to make a difference in their change of music, and it would soon be heard nationwide. The "Southside" and "Dirty South" quickly became popularized for their drug use and pimping in Houston.

Musicians for many years have put drug usage in their lyrics. Whether it is about LSD, Marijuana, or Cocaine, the drug references have always been there. When rappers put drug usage into their lyrics, they did not rap just about smoking Marijuana, or abusing Cocaine. They brought a new kind of drug into their songs. "Syrup," "Purple Drank," and "Texas Tea" were all references to a cough syrup called Promethazine with Codeine. Rappers would mix the cough syrup into their drinks and abuse it, while smoking Marijuana. This would cause them to "slow down." This gave meaning to the whole purpose of chopped and screwed music.

Purple Drank quickly became a popular substance used amongst Houstonians as a recreation drug. Young teenagers would listen to the music and would realize they too live in South Houston, and they too can get a hold of the drug. "Sippin on Some Sizzurp," "Codeine Fiend," "Sippin of a Fo," "Purple Stuff," "Sippin on Codeine," and "Pourin' Up"
are all songs which are about Promethazine with Codeine. Houston's own rapper Chamillionaire rapped about driving with drugs in his procession. This song was called "Ridin' Dirty," meaning one is driving with illegal substances in their procession. "They see me rollin', they hatin', patrollin' they try to catch me ridin' dirty. My music so loud, I'm swaggin' they hoping that they gon' catch me ridin' dirty." The hope is that police will not catch them in procession.

Songs such as "Smokin' on Da Dro," Big Moe's "Barr Baby," and "Pill Poppa" are well known for being songs about drugs, "(Big Moe) was the godfather of sipping drank, or making it what it is on record," Crisco Kidd said (Peralta, 2007). Unfortunately, artists such as Big Moe and DJ Screw both died from heart attacks, which were caused by drug usage. These are all songs which have been regularly played on radio stations across Houston and across America. Anyone with radio access could hear these songs and easily be influenced.

When Clear Brook High School Senior, Ra Shard Turley said the lyrics to some songs can be quiet destructive. "Most rappers glamorize the use of drugs making it more 'acceptable' for teens to try and/or get addicted to drugs," said Turley, an African-American student who is involved in the music industry. "A good percentage of rappers came out of situations where the selling of drugs was the only means of income. For teens they idolize the fact that doing something so wrong could in fact have positive effects in the end. However, in most cases, teens get addicted, sent to prison, or worse," Turley said (2009).

Not only did rap music have many references to drug usage, it also degraded women greatly. Rappers lyrics would often refer to women as "tricks," "hoes," and even worse. Many women thought this extremely rude and sexist. The fact of the matter was rappers just spoke what they knew. The majority of rappers grew up in very low class societies, which were often known for degrading, and even pimping women. Their prostitute girlfriends did not help much with changing their lyrics either. Columnist Bell Hooks said "some women 'carry' themselves in a manner that determines how they will be treated." On one hand, women are degrading themselves. Women, specifically African-American women, would appear in music videos practically naked. They dance in suggestive manners, and take part in "dirty" behaviors. Those are the women who the rappers are portraying in their music.

In Mike Jones' music video of "Still Tippin,'" a young lady dances in provocative manners and implies many sexual positions. Even if you are getting paid to dance on camera in such a manner, it is basically the same thing as prostitution. On the other hand people, like Asha Jennings, a 21-year-old law student in New York, are greatly affected by the way the rappers negatively speak of women. "We're telling people [black women] are ... hos and sluts and not worthy of respect," she said. "And that's exactly how society is treating us" (CNN). The basic points all come down to, act the way you would like to be treated. Those who take
part in explicit behaviors will be labeled for them.

Putting aside the drug use, violence, and sexist remarks, rap music has also done some good for the city of Houston. Rappers who have gained something have also given back. The Underground Kingz, Trae the Truth, and Paul Wall all give back to the city of Houston. Every year rapper Trae the Truth sets a day aside and calls this day “Trae Day” (Serrano). Trae the Truth gives to his fans, friends, family, and specifically the children in the city of Houston on July 22. The day is basically a carnival for South Houston. Trae encourages his fans to take part in the day, to have pony rides, face paint, and enjoy a complimentary performance by the rapper himself. Also, along with the fun day, Trae offers free school supplies for the youth. He encourages children to go back to school in the fall, work hard, and have a great year. Trae provides gifts such as backpacks, pencils, pens, paper, binders, markers, scissors, glue sticks, everything a kid would need to go back to school. Also, other rappers often go to Houston’s smoke shops and visit their fans. Rappers such as Z-Ro, Slim Thug, and Paul Wall have often been seen in Southside Smokeshop. They set up meet and greets with their fans, and sometimes even smoke with their fans as well. They like letting Houstonians know that even though they have the fame, they are still normal people just like them.

Many other rappers often have surprise visits at nightclubs, smoke shops, Space City Mall, or venues that they know many fans will be at. They give free live performances to their fans. They encourage the youth to take chances, make a difference, and make a change in society. Rappers encourage the youth to not get caught up in the illusive life of drugs, pimping, prostitution, and violence.

The radio station, The Box, also gives back by encouraging people to come out to venues across Houston and get HIV tested at least once a year. They give free concert tickets, day passes to amusement parks, radio gear, and extra goodies for those who come out and get tested. Also, they frequently offer things to the less privileged, whether it be paying off a bill, helping a child through school, or helping people find a job. The Box tries to help out as much as possible. The Box provides information online they believe will be helpful to Houstonians. They offer everything from finding housing and jobs, all the way to what are the coolest restaurants and hot spots of Houston.

Houston is now known as H-Town. South Houston is now known as the Southside. And the southern states in America are now known as the Dirty South. Whether the influences are negative or positive, hip-hop and rap music have made a change in Houston, Texas. Not only has hip-hop and rap and chopped and screwed music made a difference to America, it is well known internationally as well. I, being an Iranian-American, music major, am very cultured in a vast amount of variations of music. I have not only heard chopped and screwed, hip-hop and rap music in English, but I have also heard it in Farsi (Iranian language) as well. Per-
sian rap music has been influenced by the illicit drug usage, political, and sex references, just like American rap. Most of their rap music comes in both regular versions and chopped and screwed too. They too have music which speaks of women in degrading manners. For some women, it is just music. It does not affect their lives. The same thing can be said for songs that imply drug use and violence—it is just music. The impact that rap music has put on the world’s cultures is great. Even though in some ways the lyrics may be portrayed as bad, they are well known and popular. Millions of listeners still listen to rap music every day. To most listeners, they do not listen to the lyrics they listen to the accompaniment of the music. They listen to the background and the beat. Most people do not listen to the negativity of the music. Hip-hop and rap culture has been impacting American society since the late 1970s. It is all about making a change. It is all about making a difference.

Works-Cited


