

LOCAL NOISE

Hip-hop as a “glocal” subculture

Ultimo Series Seminar, UTS, 18th March, 1998.

by Tony Mitchell.

Summary:

“...in relation to postmodernism’s decentering relativity, displacement and fragmentation, I think one of its most idiotic embodiments is McKenzie Wark’s mantra ‘We no longer have roots, only aerials’. This expression, parrotted at monotonously regular intervals, and borrowed from the Brazilian musician Gilberto Gil, was expressed in a context of which Wark seems to be entirely ignorant, epitomises the exact reverse tendencies of hip-hop, which is almost always about the celebration of roots in place, neighbourhood, home, family, roots and nation. It is this dominant aspect of topos and geography which makes rap such a fertile area of study, particularly in its manifestations outside the USA.”

- Tony Mitchell.

Given as a seminar talk at UTS all the way back in 1998, this talk/paper represents the beginnings of the Local Noise project and contains – to this day – its main areas of concern: hip-hop’s multicultural history, it’s diaspora, indigenisation and the importance of place, rapping in languages other than English, and hip-hop as a form for the marginalised. Present at this talk were future Local Noise partner Alastair Pennycook and MC Trey.

About:

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Local Noise is an ARC-funded research project from the University of Technology, Sydney. Its focus is on Australian hip-hop, and the localisation of hip-hop in different cultural, societal and educational contexts.

In his Preface to the collected papers of the 1995 IASPM (International Association for the Study of Popular Music) conference at Strathclyde University, Glasgow, Simon Frith noted that it is ‘likely that popular music studies never will be taken very seriously in the academy, and that we’ll all go on operating in the margins of arts and social science disciplines.’ In the current economic rationalist climate in our universities, these margins are becoming increasingly endangered. Academics involved in popular music studies are beleaguered from all sides – other academics don’t take us seriously, music journalists tend to despise us for not getting their hands dirty in the music business, music industry types are contemptuous of our criticisms and musicians treat us with suspicion. (NB – It’s interesting to note that there were only two academics at this seminar – all the rest of the people who attended were either students or people involved in Sydney hip-hop.) I think that academics who write about popular music should be accountable to the subjects of their analysis, and it’s in the context of a few disparaging remarks by Miguel D’Souza in last week’s *3D* about the obscurity and inaccessibility of academics who write about Australian hip-hop but are not read by the hip-hop community, only by other academics in journals such as *Perfect Beat*, that I want to focus this talk. After all, Miguel’s column ‘Funky Wisdom’ and his 2SER radio program ‘The Mothership Connection’ have provided the most important discussion spaces for local hip-hop so they can’t be ignored. Another problem with academic analysis of subjects such as hip-hop is that they tend to fix in space and time what is an essentially fluid, mobile and progressing scene. So first I want to look at some of the interactions that have occurred between hip-hop and the academy.

Hip-hop and the academy

There is a long history of appropriation of academic rhetoric and educational tropes in rap and hip-hop: one example is the term ‘droppin’ science’, meaning spreading knowledge, which became the title of a book of essays on rap and hip-hop edited by William Eric Perkins in 1996 and published by Temple University Press. ‘Signifying’ is also something academics have been trying to do since Socrates, and this is echoed in the title of the first academic book about rap, *Signifying Rappers*, a title appropriated from a track by Philadelphia rapper Schooly D – another educational name. In African-American music culture, signifying means a double articulation, the interpretation of someone else’s musical phrase, versions or variations. In the folk tale of the Signifying Monkey analysed by Henry Louis Gates it also involves a misreading, mistaking or tricking, and has become one of the main rhetorical strategies of rap. A number of US and African-American academics have argued that this means that rap lyrics shouldn’t be taken at face value, but it’s hard not to do this with expressions such as ‘Women ain’t nothin’ but bitches and ho’s’.

But to return to didactic tendencies in hip-hop, it’s no coincidence that early rappers like Grandmaster Flash, Kool Herc, etc. are referred to as ‘old school’ as opposed to ‘new school’ – an indication that rap is seen as a form of education. There is also an emphasis in hip-hop culture on learning history, knowing about ‘back in the day’. One rap group call themselves the Poor Righteous Teachers, and released an album called *Holy Intellect*. Why does Dr Dre call himself ‘Doctor’ – a self-imposed honorary PhD? Then there’s Professor Griff, who had to be sacked from Public Enemy for his anti-Semitic remarks. In 1988 Chuck D of Public Enemy said he wanted rap to be ‘a seminar’. KRS-One has described himself as the ‘teacher of mankind’ and does university lecture tours in the USA. But after Prince Be of PM Dawn questioned what it was that KRS-One thought he was teaching, he was beaten up and dragged off the stage by KRS-One and his gang – one of many examples of rappers solving their intellectual differences through violence.

Maybe academia or the public intellectual sphere would be more entertaining if these sorts of practices were introduced – you could imagine any number of people sending out a posse of hit men to get Mark Davis for his book *Gangland*, the title of which seems to invite gangster behaviour. Another so-called intellectual who seems to have weighed into the arena of hip-hop violence is Leo Schofield, judging from last Saturday’s column in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (14/3/98). Commenting on the recent defacing of the

Hyde Park war memorial, Schofield wrote ‘This week I noticed another reference to “Aerosol Art”. How pleasing it would be to stumble upon a group of these “artists” defacing public property. One could then perhaps exercise one’s hard-won artistic inclinations by covering the sneaky little shits from head-to-toe with some of their own paint. Better still, given their fondness for the aerosol can, hit ‘em with a few bursts of capsicum spray or mace.’ I see little difference between these kinds of threats of violence and any of the worst rhetorical excesses of gangsta rap. Schofield, of course, is either too ignorant or too pig-headed to discriminate between graffiti writers – whose colourful, spectacular work can be viewed along Sydney suburban railway lines, especially around Sydenham – and taggers who merely scrawl their names over houses and public buildings – usually as a protest against the kind of posh suburbs people like Schofield live in. As Schofield no doubt never travels by train, he is unaware that railway graffiti is a global form of visual signifying than can be found in most major urban cultural centres from Prague to Milan to Tokyo to Sydney. He might also be surprised to discover that some graffiti artists come from a similar social milieu to his – last year one of my first year cultural studies students did a project on graffiti which included interviewing a graffiti artist, who turned out to be a stockbroker by day, and a clandestine writer by night.

But here’s Mystery from local hip-hop group Brethren, giving a scholarly account of the history of graffiti, tracing it back to Egyptian hieroglyphics:

[Extract from Paul Fenech’s film about Sydney hip-hop, Basic Equipment, shown as ABC as part of ‘Loud’ festival earlier this year.]

Academic interpretations of hip-hop – the ‘hip-hop intellectual’.

So notions of teaching, learning, signifying, representing and interpreting are central to rap and hip-hop culture. I want now to look at some academic interpretations of hip-hop. Russell A. Potter’s book *Spectacular Vernaculars* includes an eight-page bibliography of academic books and articles on rap – almost all from the US, and by no means complete. And many of them are uncritical posturings, enthusiastic embraces of rap and hip-hop as forms of urban post modern vernacular expression – almost to the extent that writing about hip-hop has become synonymous with academic hipness. Hip-hop has been analysed in terms of urban sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, musicology, cultural geography, race and ethnicity studies, subcultural studies and of course postmodernism. My interest is primarily in cultural geography – how hip-hop expresses a poetics of place and race and ethnicity – how it expresses the concerns of ethnic minorities all over the world. I find I have a growing dislike of rap music that comes out of the USA and a growing fascination with rap from other parts of the world. But first I want to look at a few notable examples of US academics who have engaged with hip-hop.

Marshall Berman, the author of *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, a book generally regarded of one of the bibles of modernism, is a white Jewish intellectual who grew up in South Bronx, which he has described as ‘rap’s cradle’. As a result, he felt affinities with origins of hip-hop, and in a 1997 essay called ‘Justice/Just Us’ – a title taken from Melle Mel’s ‘Beat Street Breakdown’ – he describes old school rap as ‘powerful protest writing in the tradition of Broonzy and Guthrie, Ochs and Dylan, Springsteen, Bernice Reagon and Billy Bragg’. Surely most rappers would find this ‘tradition’ anathema (except perhaps for Reagon). So Berman starts hanging with the homies in the Bronx, and goes on to draw parallels between rappers and Wordsworth’s ‘man speaking to men’, and hanging with hip-hop intellectuals in the 1980s reminds him of ‘the Russian intellectuals of the 1880s, going to the people’. He sees himself in his hip-hop incarnation as a Gramscian ‘organic intellectual’ – the first of many such dubious references to rappers as ‘organic intellectuals’ in US academic writing. (I think it’s fair to say that only French and Italian rappers have actually read their Gramsci). Berman also invokes James Joyce’s ‘shouts in the streets’ to describe hip-hop culture, and goes on to say ‘Before long, if you listened to rap radio, Machiavelli, Shakespeare and Nietzsche, Sartre and Camus began to appear in the mix, fighting for space with Reagan and Bush, Jesse

James and Al Capone.’ Elsewhere he invokes the *Iliad*, the *Mahabharata*, Schiller’s play *The Robbers* and Plato. he also suggests we should ‘lighten up’ about the degree of violence in gagsta rap, seeing it as a strategy of exaggeration. But he then makes the discovery that by the early 1990s ‘rap doesn’t need me any more’ (no wonder, with all his high culture name-dropping):

What I felt is linked to something that Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg must have felt about Abstract Expressionism sometime in the 1950s, and that Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt must have felt about Romantic Poetry in the 1800s, and that Dr. Johnson and Diderot must have felt about the novel in the 1750s: the movement is getting over on its own ... rappers are going to have to reinvent it from the inside, just as Karl Marx and his friends did, just as my generation of the New Left did for ourselves.

He doesn’t say what ‘it’ is, but it was no doubt with great mutual sighs of relief that he and the homies of the Bronx parted company. Nonetheless Berman is still quoted respectfully in *The Source* – the main organ of US mainstream hip-hop culture – and despite his bombast he does make the point that Latino youth were just as marginalised and dispossessed as the African-American youth who contributed to the hip-hop scene. The main problem with Berman is that he brings along all his high cultural, high modernist idealist trainspotting and name-dropping baggage and tries to colonise rap music. And of course he was wrong – gangsta rap became progressively more brutal, ugly, misogynist, racist, violent and narcissistic, and its most potent role model became the Mafia, as perceived through the distorting lenses of Martin Scorsese movies. As British-Jamaican academic Paul Gilroy has pointed out in a 1994 essay called ‘Where Love is Gone’, 1990s rappers like Snoop Doggy Dogg and R. Kelly and many others replaced the early rhetoric of freedom and justice in rap with joyless sex, abjection and male physicality. As Gilroy says: ‘Hip-hop’s marginality is as official, as routinised, as its overblown defiance; yet it is still represented as an outlaw form’. He goes on to identify a need to interrogate ‘the revolutionary conservatism that constitutes its routine political focus but which is over-simplified or more usually ignored by its academic celebrants.’ (1994, 51.)

Houston A. Baker Jr is an African-American intellectual who published a book in 1993 with the university of Chicago Press called *Black Studies, Rap and the Academy*. In it he slams Gates and other ‘expert witness’ academics who ‘exalt and justify the sexist mediocrity’ of groups like 2 Live Crew and try to explain rap in ‘pseudoacademic pastiche’ which tries to commodify rap music as high art. (Gates was called in as an ‘expert witness’ in the defence of 2 Live Crew in court against charges of obscenity for their album *As Nasty as they Wanna Be* which was the first record to be deemed criminally obscene in a US court. He described them as ‘taking stereotypes and destroying them through satirical lyrics.’) Baker one of the few US academics to acknowledge that rap music is a global idiom, and an ‘international, metropolitan hybrid’. But he ends up doing something similar to Berman in uncritically embracing rap (and MTV) as postmodern poetry:

To prepare myself for a talk I was to give at New York’s poetry project symposium entitled “poetry for the Next Society” (1989) I decided to query students enrolled in a course devoted to Afro-American women writers. “What,” I asked, “will be the poetry for the next society?” To a man or woman. my students responded “rap” and “MTV.” (94)

Gilroy has argued that rap is a modernist form in that it is searching for wholeness and integrality by sampling history rather than celebrating a Eurocentric postmodern fragmentation, displacement and relativity. In what he has described as anti-anti-essentialist view, Gilroy argues for the notion of a black Atlantic diaspora which unites a multiplicity various black popular musical forms into a cohesive sense of modernist continuity and tradition which is a vital expression of an Afrocentric vernacular. This modernist argument was adopted and distorted by Potter in *Spectacular Vernaculars*, which he subtitles ‘Hip-hop and the politics of Postmodernism’ in a travesty of Gilroy’s argument. Potter even goes do far as to suggest that

as [hip-hop] gains audiences around the world, there is always the danger that it will be appropriated in such a way that its histories will be obscured, and its messages replaced with others ... even as it remains a global music, it is firmly rooted in the local and the temporal; it is music about ‘where I’m from,’ and as such proposes a new kind of universality. (146)

In other words, its only universal if it remains rooted in black urban USA. For someone whose entire argument is predicated on an essentialist mis-appropriation of Gilroy’s concept of a modernist black Atlantic diasporic vernacular into what he calls the ‘resistance postmodernism’ of hip-hop, Potter is surely taking his self-assumed role as an academic gatekeeper of the secrets of African-American hip-hop too far. Why should rap be not just as ‘rooted in the local’ in Naples or Marseille or Eindhoven or Sydney or Auckland or the Shibuya district of Tokyo as it is in Compton or the South Bronx?

But in relation to postmodernism’s decentring relativity, displacement and fragmentation, I think one of its most idiotic embodiments is McKenzie Wark’s mantra ‘We no longer have roots, only aerials’. This expression, parroted at monotonously regular intervals, and borrowed from the Brazilian musician Gilberto Gil, was expressed in a context of which Wark seems to be entirely ignorant, epitomises the exact reverse tendencies of hip-hop, which is almost always about the celebration of roots in place, neighbourhood, home, family, roots and nation. It is this dominant aspect of topos and geography which makes rap such a fertile area of study, particularly in its manifestations outside the USA. The rhizomic (to use Deleuze’s term) global diaspora of rap music has been spreading ever wider and reaching more far-flung places and obscure ethnic minorities: one of many examples of this is the Nuuk Posse from Greenland, who rap in their native language about such issues of the dominance of their country by the Danish language.

Simon Frith has written convincingly about popular music and identity, stating that it is fruitless to look for reflections of locality and place in popular music, since it is more about the imaginary construction and production of an often idealised local identity, and this is particularly true of hip-hop. Nonetheless I don’t entirely agree with Ian Maxwell’s emphasis on Sydney hip-hop as a ‘social imaginary’ or an imaginary community – it may use a constructed rhetoric of place but it’s real enough, as is proved by its increasing number of followers, albums, groups and media attention. Ian criticises the fact that D’Souza included a top ten of local hip-hop recordings in the *SMH* at the end of last year as a sign of commodification and institutionalisation, but I suspect what he was lamenting was the scene’s loss of its sense of fragility and imaginarity. But the rhetorical forms of MCing, and DJing – which have their roots in Jamaican sound systems, as well as graffiti writing and break dancing, are all ways of celebrating a poetics of place, or talking about where one is from, and signifying one’s place in a subculture that is both local and global at the same time. The hip-hop national is international as well as national. This is where my title comes in – Roland Robertson (1995) uses the term ‘glocal’, combining the global and the local, to emphasise that each is in many ways defined by the other, and that they frequently intersect, rather than being polarised opposites. Robertson adopted this blend of local and global from its use in Japan to describe the adaptation of global farming techniques to fit local conditions, and its subsequent use as a marketing buzz word to refer to the indigenisation of global phenomena. In his work on Japanese rap music, Ian Condry notes a Japanese rapper, ECD, who uses the metaphor of ‘a flame flying across the ocean’ to describe the local hip-hop scene. This indicates that although US rap was the inspiration, the local scene caught fire on the fuel that was already there. While indigeneity and ethnic identity are perhaps more complex issues to define in Australia than they are in Japan, I think the metaphor can be applied here too.

But this doesn’t mean that rap’s roots aren’t problematic. It’s usually supposed that rap and hip-hop originated in the south Bronx in the early 1970s when Kool Herc and others began holding street parties with turntables and break dancers and MCs started rapping. Kool Herc was recreating the sound systems of his native Jamaica, complete with toasting – an early form of rapping – and break dancing was derived from Puerto Rican dance steps – and a lot of the early break dance crews like Rock Steady Crew were

predominantly Puerto Rican, as were some of the graffiti artists. And according to early protagonists like Africa Bambaataa, there were also quite a few white kids around too – so rap’s origins are, if anything, a multicultural hybrid rather than an expression of an African-American monoculture. This has made it easier for rap to be adopted in other parts of the world, where hip-hop’s advocates’ claims to an essentially (or essentialist) black identity are not so pressing, and it is often further hybridised and combined with local idioms, musical forms and dance moves. And rap’s multicultural origins are frequently magnified in other parts of the world: in France, which probably has the biggest hip-hop scene after the USA (the January 1998 *Source* states there are 120 French hip-hop crews, but that is a conservative estimate), there is a high proportion of rappers from West African, North African, Arab and Mediterranean migrant origins; in Germany there is a significant proportion of Turkish, Croatian and other ‘guest worker’ migrant rappers, while in Australia there are rappers from Lebanese, Pacific Islander, Chilean and Filipino backgrounds. This multicultural diasporic flow in hip-hop suggests it is a form which can be adopted and adapted to express the concerns of ethnic minorities everywhere.

But most US academics claim that the ‘roots’ of US hip-hop are undeniably Afrocentric, like Tricia Rose in her book *Black Noise*, probably the most acclaimed academic book about hip-hop. Gilroy has denounced these pretensions to Afrocentricity of US rap as being US-centric rather than Afro-centric. In the rhetoric of many African-American rappers, Africa becomes an idealised imaginary. (And it’s interesting that similar views of the Nation of Islam, 5 Percent Nation and other Islamic and nationalistic tendencies in US rap have been expressed by Arab and North African Muslim rappers in France, who see them as ‘fake’ Muslims.) Rose reduces Gilroy’s multiple modernism to a tunnel-visioned essentialism which sees rap as an exclusively African-American art form, and she even tries to argue that disco is an inherently African-American musical form. In the one paragraph of her book that deals with Latino rappers in the US she manages to mistakenly focus only on Cypress Hill, who more often than not reject their Latino origins. Gilroy has summed up the two perspectives that predominant in debates about rap as follows: ‘it’s a black thing, and you wouldn’t understand’ as opposed to ‘different strokes for different folks.’ And part of Gilroy’s project has been to try and combine these different perspectives.

I think I’ve given enough evidence of the myopia, essentialism and uncritical celebrations of many US hip-hop intellectuals, and their tendency both to claim US ownership of all forms of rap and to idealise it as an outlaw African American art form which produces frissons of street credibility. When US academics do acknowledge rap music in other parts of the world, they tend to see it rather patronisingly as derivative evidence of the influence of African-American culture on the rest of the world rather than looking at it on its own merits as a transplanted idiom. I want to conclude this section with a quote from African American writer George Lipsitz, whose book *Dangerous Crossroads* (1994) is only partly about rap music, but is one of the few attempts in the US popular music academy to look at non-African American musical hybridities, and music and the poetics of place. Lipsitz examines the globalisation of popular music in its US and African diasporic contexts, but goes out of his way to refer to ethnically-inflected popular music in other parts of the world, including Australia and New Zealand. One sentence in his book which has always amused me, in which he tries to sum up the global parameters of popular music, will lead me into my discussion of Australian hip-hop:

Through the conduits of commercial culture, music made by aggrieved inner-city populations in Canberra, Kingston, or Compton becomes part of everyday life and culture for affluent consumers in the suburbs of Cleveland, Coventry or Cologne.

Music made by aggrieved inner city populations in Canberra? Compared to Kingston, Jamaica, and Compton, Los Angeles? But maybe it’s not as crazy as it sounds. Here’s Koolism, a rap group from Canberra, and specifically a track from their self-produced tape called ‘Juss a Brown Fellow’. In it, Tongan rapper Fatty Boomstix maps out the diaspora of what he refers to as ‘Australasian rap’, following a rhetorical track from Australian to New Zealand through the Pacific Islands.

[Extract from *Koolism*]

Koolism’s tape is peppered with Aussies references from Shane Warne to John Howard to Crocodile Dundee to Dawn Frazer – who are all dissed or criticised – and Boomstix’s accent in unmistakably Antipodean, but there are ethnic undercurrents here which take it beyond a self-conscious celebration of Australianness. And it’s unlikely that this Canberra group will be heard in Cleveland, Coventry or Cologne, since only 50 copies of Koolism’s tape have been released, and Australian hip-hop is still a distinctly underground phenomenon, both in terms of its oppositional stance towards mainstream Australian and the way it is ignored by the Australian music industry. Koolism shows how the black ethnic identity markers of much US rap have become brown ethnic identity markers in Pacific Islander rap. This is something which is much more predominant in Aotearoa/New Zealand, where rap was much more easily absorbed into Maori and other Polynesian rhetorical traditions – like *patero* in Maori, which means a form of abusive public discourse – one Maori dictionary even translates it directly as ‘rap.’ Maori rappers such as the Upper Hut Posse, Dam Native, the Lost Tribe, Moana and the Moa Hunters, DLT, OMC and Che Fu have thus successfully managed to combine rap with vernacular expressions of Maori militancy which often incorporate the use of the Maori language, and some have even managed to obtain commercial success. Some of these hybrid appropriations Polynesian of rap have manifested themselves here too. Here’s the Fijian rapper Trey, one of the few women rappers on the Sydney scene, in another sequence from Paul Fenech’s (aka Sir Rec from Def Wish Cast) film *Basic Equipment*:

[Extract from *Basic Equipment* with Trey.]

Trey’s reference to Pauline Hanson is no accident – one of her tracks on her self-titled tape is called ‘One Nation Party’ and she is perhaps the first Australian rapper to have recorded a diss of Hanson. But her references to equivalences between hip-hop and Fijian cultural formations indicate how rap music can become indigenised in the Pacific region.

Australian Hip-hop: Kickin’ to the Undersound

Ian Maxwell has noted that the two rap albums by Australian artists which had any noticeable impact on the local music scene in the mid 1990s both contain references to Australian hip-hop’s underground status in their titles: Sound Unlimited’s *A Postcard from the Edge of the Under-side*, released by Columbia/Sony in 1992 – the only Australian rap album to come out on a major label – and Def Wish Cast’s *Knights of the Underground Table*, released on the independent Random Records in 1993. (Maxwell 1995) It is also no coincidence that both groups originated in the Western Suburbs of Sydney, an area traditionally regarded as working class, underprivileged and crime-ridden, with a large proportion of immigrant inhabitants, and deprived of many of the social and cultural amenities enjoyed by the inner and northern suburbs of the city. As Diane Powell has stated in *Out West*, her book about the Australian mass media’s ‘demonisation’ of Sydney’s Western Suburbs, the area is comparable to a ghetto:

Ghettos do not exist in discourse about Australian cities. Yet most Australian cities contain areas that are segregated along class, economic, cultural and ethnic lines. Ghetto is not an appropriate word for these low density suburban, rather than high density inner-urban, areas. However, in Australian culture, to live in some suburbs is to suffer an equivalent stigma to that borne by people living in the ghettos of Europe or America. (1994, xiv)

The Western Suburbs are generally perceived as the main historic centre of hip-hop culture in Sydney, partly due to the strong concentration there of non-Anglo migrant communities such as Greeks, Italians, Lebanese and Vietnamese, whose youth were attracted by the racially oppositional features of African-American hip-hop and adopted its signs and forms as markers of their own otherness. Muggings, killings and heroin dealing attributed to the Vietnamese street gang the 5Ts in the suburb of Cabramatta have also fuelled the mass media with discourses about ghetto-styled street wars and migrant criminal subcultures

which are often highly exaggerated. In their song ‘Tales from the Westside’, Sound Unlimited reconstructs a history of the Sydney hip-hop scene in the Western Suburbs, locating its origins in the suburb of Burwood in 1983: ‘Let’s get back I’ll start at Burwood park hip-hop breakin after dark many crews would join the fray travel from east to west upon the train some to break some to inflict pain.’ This breakdance scene, initially influenced by Malcolm McLaren’s video *Buffalo Gals*, echoes similar phenomena in a number of countries throughout the world. Sound Unlimited began as the Westside Posse, and were first featured with a track called ‘Pull the Trigger’ on a compilation of Australian rap called *Down under by Law* released on Virgin Records in 1988. This compilation, to my knowledge the first collection of Australian rap. shows how far it has progressed – nearly all the tracks here show their US influences in very obvious ways. A number of other rappers have built on the mythology of the West as the originary source of Sydney hip-hop, including the White Boys and the more satirical Fathom, who sample the line ‘There’s a feeling I get when I look to the West’ from Led Zeppelin’s ‘Stairway to Heaven’ to make their point on their track ‘Westerly winds.’

Def Wish Cast have also drawn on Westside mythology and they identify themselves in strongly nationalistic terms in their 1992 debut EP, entitled *A.U.S.T. Down Under Comin Upper*, which announced the arrival of Australian hip-hop in no uncertain terms. The track ‘A.U.S.T.’, which Maxwell has described as ‘the unrivalled anthem of Australian hip-hop’, (1994a,7) attempts to give the Australian hip-hop scene equal weight to those of the USA and UK:

A.U.S.T. ... an island that many never look twice at as being associated with rap - on hip-hop charts they come across a new discovery U.S., U.K., U.S., what A.U.S.T. ... Hold up a new flag our own turn for the better/The letters that stand alone not in the shadow of any other country Def Wish Cast from A.U.S.T.

Lead rapper Def Wish’s rapid-fire ragga rap, which has been described as ‘syllable ballistics’, was influenced more extensively by Jamaican rappers from the U.K. than Afro-American rappers, and is almost incomprehensible at times.

Maxwell uses Def Wish Cast’s hybridity of influences to contest the American cultural imperialism thesis which has frequently been expressed in the Australian mass media, most notably in a prominent feature article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1994 by Richard Guillatt, entitled ‘U.S. eh? Why Young Australia is so Smitten with American Culture’. This article examined widely-expressed concerns that Australian youth were not only turning to American basketball and other sporting heroes and clothes and rejecting the previously strong local and national sporting traditions of cricket, swimming and rugby league, but also embracing MacDonaldis, US cultural icons like James Dean, and television programs like *The Simpsons* and *Melrose Place*. Guillatt suggested that Australian youth was being subjected to ‘an unstoppable geyser of American pop culture’ which threatened to flood a hard-won Australian cultural identity. Interviewing Western Sydney rapper Sean Taylor of the group *Voodoo Flavour*, he pointed to his use of ‘pilfered’ US hip-hop jargon such as ‘phat’, ‘chill’, ‘props’ and ‘kickin’ as an indicator of ‘African-American culture as the sine qua non of cool for Australian youth’, identifying hip-hop as ‘the dominant youth style’. Statistics provided by an advertising agency survey demonstrated that ninety percent of Australian young people’s favourite programs were from the USA, 85.1 per cent wore American sports clothes, the favourite sport of 92 per cent was basketball, and 87.31 percent rented only US videos. But Guillatt countered his extended dramatisation of this widespread US cultural invasion and loss of local identity with the suggestion that US influences had been just as predominant in Australia in the 1960s and 1970s. He concluded with an apparent open-ended ambiguity, opposing a characterisation of the global village as Los Angeles with a portrayal of Def Wish Cast’s ‘broad Strine accents’ and association with ‘a growing clique of hip-hop crews pursuing an Australian identity’ as evidence of ‘a wave of patriotism’ in a youth culture which found strong cultural and social affinities with US cultural forms. (Guillatt, 1994)

What emerges most strongly from this article is the globalisation of these US cultural icons and the universality of local panics about their contaminating influence, and a neglect of the strong local cultural

indicators which are expressed even in the adoption of these imported and borrowed forms. While young Australians might easily be mistaken for Americans if regarded solely in terms of their clothes and visual appearance (and photographs accompanying the article served to prove this point), the singularity of Australian speech patterns, social practices and cultural forms of expression, along with the wide variety of ethnic origins – from Chinese to Korean to Lebanese, South American, Greek and Italian – of many young Australians attracted to hip-hop culture, is still unmistakable. And since the social realities of life in the urban ghettos of the USA are vastly different from the relative comfort and affluence of Australia, the fetishised American artefacts of hip-hop culture tend to take on a strong imaginary quality.

The development of a national Australian hip-hop scene was given some degree of ‘official’ recognition by the release by local label Mushroom in 1995 of *Home Brews Volume 1*, a compilation of eleven Australian rap tracks by mostly unrecorded and almost exclusively male ‘bedroom’ hip-hop practitioners from Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne and Adelaide. Robert Brailsford’s liner notes expressed the prevailing sense of fragility:

apart from having a hip-hop history, it is a history being built on. The main problem being Australian hip-hop suffers the same fate as English or for that matter Zambian hip-hop. The prevailing attitude is that only American hip-hop is real. ... The main challenge for Australian hip-hop is to discover and consolidate what makes it unique. I don't really think anyone knows what that is, but Home Brews should provide some clues.

The album’s diversity of styles is immediately noticeable, with trip hop, ragga, acid jazz and funk influences predominating. As a grouping together of exponents of a virtually invisible underground movement, the album is a valuable indicator of some of the developments in the national hip-hop scene. Last month’s release of *Home Brews 2*, including a track by the female crew Womb-Mind-Speak Collective, continued this expansion of the local hip-hop scene to the point where Miguel D’Souza has noted that Sydney hip-hop scene no longer needs ‘supporting’, it’s managing to proliferate and expand on its own momentum.

Hip-hop’s appeal to Australian youth of non-English-speaking backgrounds as a vehicle for expressing their otherness within Australian culture has already been noted, and one recent examples of this is Brethren’s 1996 self-titled mini-album which includes a track in Spanish, based on the Chilean saying ‘pass me your spoon and I’ll return it full’, meaning I’ll tell you of my experiences. This track, which got some airplay on Triple J, contains the line ‘Che passa Gough Whitlam, Ciao Pinochet’, which sums up the experience of migrating from Chile to Australia.

[Extract from Brethren, ‘Passa la cuchara’ (Pass the Spoon).]

The development of Spanish language hip-hop is a long story, but it was probably generated by Los Angeles-based Chicano rapper Kid Frost, who began rapping in Calo, a form of Spanglish used by Latino prisoners in the USA. Frost later jammed with Italian rappers in Rome, encouraging them to start rapping in their own language and dialects, and he provided a model for Calo, a Brazilian rapper who raps in Portuguese, and who leaned his skills from listening to Kid Frost’s albums over and over again. MetaBass ‘N’ Breath, a Sydney crew who include two Anglo-Americans, released a notable album of world music-inflected hip-hop, *Seek*, in 1997, which include two tracks in Spanish – evidence that Sydney rappers are looking at global rap influences rather than exclusively US ones. And I’d like to note in passing that Spanish and Italian are much more suitable languages than English for the dense rhymes of rap – it’s far easier to rhyme in those languages than in English. And in musicological terms, rap can be traced back to the recitativo in 17th century Italian opera. It’s no coincidence that a recent album called *The Rhapsody Overture* combines predominantly Italian operatic arias with raps by L.L.Cool J, Onyx, Redman, and the results are not as disjunctive and discordant as one might suppose. One local attempt to combine rap and high culture was ‘Hip-hopera’, an Australia Council-funded community project run in 1996 by the theatre group Death Defying theatre with young people in the Western Suburbs of Sydney. This managed

to unearth a number of new teenage and pre-teen rap posses, including some of mixed Aboriginal and Lebanese origin, whose work was showcased on an album entitled *Danger*. The result was then toured around schools and community centres in the Western Suburbs. This was in many ways a synthetic project based on workshopping rap music with suburban kids, and had a community theatre orientation which conflicts with some local rappers’ concept of hip-hop. The Funnel Web Crew, for example, featured in *Basic Equipment*, operate as a kind of hip-hop family for delinquent and dispossessed youth, and hang out literally underground in a tunnel where they do graffiti. As they put it, ‘hip-hop’s the only thing we’ve got that’s ours, and we don’t want to see it going into schools and people charging for it.’ This suggests that the educational tropes of hip-hop don’t correspond with those of institutionalised education.

Another important local rap album is *Sleekism*, the 1997 debut album by Sleek the Elite, a flamboyant and witty freestyler of Lebanese extraction who raps about Australian racism, political life, capitalism, sexual encounters solidarity with Aborigines and Lebanese culture. (Although it’s unfortunate that Sleek makes references to ‘ho’s’ – one positive aspect of Australian hip-hop is that much of it is free of the misogyny and homophobia of US gangsta rap.) Here’s ‘Child of the Cedar’, which includes references to his own Lebanese background and Aboriginal land rights, and adds Middle Eastern musical inflections:

[Extract from *Sleek the Elite*, ‘Child of the Cedar’.]

There are numerous other distinctively local hip-hop crews who I haven’t had time to mention - some still going, some transmogrified into other formations: Noble Savages, Etnik Tribe, Beats-a-Frenik, Easybass, Capital Punishment, Industrial Dispute, Stored Information, the White Boys, 046, Fuglemen, Moonrock. The local scene is united by its dedication and commitment to hip-hop culture and is an acknowledgment that hip-hop and rap music has become an indigenised, ‘glocal’ phenomenon.

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