



Fordham University
DigitalResearch@Fordham

Occasional Essays

Bronx African American History Project

9-18-2019

Critical Review of Break Beats in the Bronx: Rediscovering Hip-Hop's Early Years

Corey Lionel Spencer

Follow this and additional works at: https://fordham.bepress.com/baahp_essays

 Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), and the [Ethnomusicology Commons](#)

Corey Lionel Spencer

Critical Review of *Break Beats in the Bronx: Rediscovering Hip-Hop's Early Years*

2019 September 18

Break Beats in the Bronx: Rediscovering Hip Hop's Early Years by Joseph C. Ewoodzie Jr really is a rediscovery. From his theoretical framing to his narratives, it highlights the origins of the genre in ways other texts have not. He frames the text with Andrew Abbotts theory of boundaries which Abbott used to comprehend the emergence of the Social Work profession. Even though it started with Social Work, his inquiry broadened to consider entities such as an ethnic groups, professions, or academic disciplines. His main question concerning “things” which Ewoodzie repurposes is “how do they come into existence in the first place?(8)” In turn Ewoodzie asks a similar question of hip hop: “how did hip hop come to exist and come to have four elements in the first place?(9)” He answers this question and several others by breaking down each component of Hip-Hop, its origins outside and inside the Bronx. He does this by separating the book into three amazing sections each containing two chapters. Each section correlates with Abbotts understanding of how an entity comes in itself and establishes itself as independent and separate which functions as roads maps to the development of hip-hop as a thing. Ewoodzie retells the early years of Hip-Hop powerfully and his theoretical map keeps the reader on track all the way.

The first section on The Beginning of a Boundary exceptionally looks at the “influence of macro-level structural forces and meso-level institutional and cultural forces that converged in the creation of hip hop and the micro-level influences that played a role in its formation”(51). Chapter addresses Kool Herc's significance to the creation of hip hop as a genre. It tends to the questions “why [] does the [1520 Sedgwick Party] mark the beginning of Hip-Hop, especially since some

aspects of Hip-Hop existed before that event?” And, “why does it begin with Herc, and not any other DJ?”(18) He goes on to discuss both graffiti and DJing, two early elements of hip hop which still exist in some capacity. Herc’s involvement in graffiti-writing and switch to DJing merged two otherwise opposite activities in the South Bronx. Because of this, when he began to throw his parties, dancers, graffiti-writers, MC’s and the like were present. My understanding is that Herc brought together all the early aspects of Hip-Hop because he participated in them before becoming a DJ. The author underscores global and national musical and artistic practices that predate Herc and hip hop. However, all of the traditions that became associated with Hip-Hop forged in the South Bronx. To use a cooking analogy, all of the ingredients may have come from all over the world, but the gumbo was made in the Bronx. Ewoodzie argues that the context of the time matters which I agree with; therefore, he highlights how urban decay in the Bronx also contributed to the engagement with the parties and DJing. Chapter Two addresses the difference in DJing styles of Herc, Bambaataa and Flash in comparison to other DJ’s outside the Bronx, discussing their approaches and influences. Herc developed the merry go-round which centered the break part of the song which allowed break-dancers to dance. Bambaataa expanded the genre range integrated into the party scene while centering community organizing as part of the music scene. Flash contributed his Quick-Mix Theory which built on Herc’s merry go-round concept. These approaches coupled with the sites of difference from Brooklyn, Queens and Harlem, made the Bronx and its DJing style the Fore Founders of what would become Hip Hop. Ewoodzie lists five sites of difference: “break-centered DJing versus song-centered DJing; dancing with a partner versus competitive breakdancing; larger more established, and more lucrative venues versus smaller, less established and less lucrative ones; twenty-one and older audiences versus twenty-one an under audiences; and formal attire, including suits and dresses, versus casual clothes,

including jeans and sneakers”(75). These differences craft what theorist call proto-boundary, or a symbolic boundary. A proto-boundary becomes symbolic after it has endured and creates an imaginary boundary making an “us” and “them”. By the end of this section, the boundaries between other DJing scenes and the South Bronx are clearly distinct, and his initial questions concerning Herc are answered.

The second section on The Development of An Internal Logic thoroughly highlights “how loosely formed boundary becomes a self-perpetuating entity,[] describes the way [the new cultural phenomenon] coalesced, and shows that boundaries endure when an internal logic develops within them and when the logic comes cultural and social”(82). Chapter three uses Grandmaster Flash’s rise to top DJ to chronicle how various conventions in hip hop gained and lost prominence—whether through internal or external forces, intentionally or unintentionally. By focusing on Flash, we are able to understand how breaking and graffiti-writing lost their standing within the culture, but how MCing, selling tapes, having a security and promoting gained notoriety. With the creation of his quick mix theory, dancing halted. Flash remedied this by giving the MC a more central role in party experience. No longer would people spread the floor to see the breakers break. They would listen intently to hear the rappers rhyme. However, blended well within Flash’s story are anecdotes that reflect how hip hop helped to shaped people’s lives outside of music, i.e. DJ AJ and Coke La Rock. These narratives accurately illustrate how the genres internal logic began to effect participants. Chapter Four focuses on how crews developed in the DJing scene and how outside influences helped to shape the fabric of what would become known as hip hop. The crews he pays close attention to are the Funky 4, The L Brothers and Caz and Wiz who all contributed differently to rapping styles and/or DJing approaches. He touches on how outside forces like famous R&B groups influenced the dress, and dance routines. Also, he speaks to how the blackout of 1977

impacted the spread of DJing and how the term hip hop became associated with the South Bronx DJing scene. Next, he highlights how specific conventions of b-boying and graffiti writing became less connected to the DJing scene, but found life in other spaces and races. The graffiti artists used their artistic skill for flier making and clothing while b-boying transitioned from mainly African Americans to Puerto Ricans. He asserts that “the creation of conventions allows an emerging entity to endure over time; it also illustrates that well-bounded entities create affinity among their participants and exert influence on the individuals involved in making the entities” (109). There specific features that a South Bronx DJ had to have to be considered a DJ, and those who entered the DJ scene abided by those spoken and unspoken rules. This allows for the internal logic to growth and create what is discuss in the next section.

The final section of the book on Symbolic Capital in the New Entity unevenly “explains the durability of the boundaries around Hip-Hop by exploring how actors gained and used symbolic capital and how participants used the rules of the game to gain fame in the hip-hop world”(137). Chapter Five centers around gender and race and how women, though participants from the beginning of hip hop's emergence, were not afforded the same opportunities and possibilities because they were women. The narrative about the Mercedes Ladies illustrates the resistance women dealt with attempting to enter the male dominant genre/space. He asserts that hip-hop became masculinized because it provided young male performers the ability to “perform their masculinity, especially their heterosexual desires”(142). I was left questioning why did the young men need to perform their masculinity. Is this need to perform masculinity linked to their biology? Do women not share this desire to perform their heterosexual desires or femininity? Interestingly, in the following section on race, he begins the section with sociologist of music William G Coy who provides theoretical framing for the rest of the section. I wondered why this

wasn't done for the previous one. Continuing, because most of the DJ's and MC's were black, hip hop was considered a black genre. The author highlights this through Charlie Chase's account of becoming one of New York's most sought-after DJ's before joining forces with Grandmaster Caz. Because of his DJing talent and alliances, Charlie Chase was eventually accepted into the inner circles of hip hop heads. The author frames the race conversation by illuminating how black and Puerto Rican cultures overlapped in many regards. However, as it pertains to hip hop, overlap seemed little. Chapter Six underscores the rise of the MC's and crew making that ensued after the rise of Flash and the Furious Five. Crews like the Cold Crush Brothers, The L Brothers, Funky 4+1 went from two or three MC's to four or five imitating Flash's crew. And as the number of MC's grow, the influence and popularity of the DJ decreased. Party's became centered around the MC's and not the DJ's. MCing became the quickest and primary way to gain notoriety. Clubs like Galaxy 2000 and Disco Fever contributed to the rise of the MC because they hosted hip hop groups from both the Bronx and Harlem. Even with all of the cultural work that had been done by hip hop pioneers, because conventions changed so often in the DJing scene, or Hip-Hop scene, it allowed for non-Bronx rappers like the Sugar Hill Gang to side step traditions and rise to the top of notoriety through recording and promotion of the first hip hop record "Rappers Delight" to many real Bronx hip hop participants dismay.

The new narratives in *Break* provide a fresh understanding of all the "actors" in the early hip hop scene and how they contributed to what the genre looks like today. The story structure of the book coupled with the digressions to theory make the text an easy yet profound read. When considering all of the new anecdotes by unknown or little known "actors" that do not exist in other texts, it underscores what Ewoodzie argues is a two-fold issue with previous scholarship. The practical issue rests on the truth that "historians and journalists have simply not had access to those

involved in the creation of hip-hop between 1975-1979 because most of them did not become famous”(5). Perhaps Ewoodzie seeks not to insult his colleagues, but many could have taken the difficult task to research like he did to give a fuller historical account. The theoretical issue is that “the historical narratives in current literature move from present to past. Most authors begin with what is currently known and then trace it back to its origins, or they look at what has become the most component of hip-hop and trace its beginnings”(5). Only after reading the text did I comprehend the problem with the present to past approach. There were so many appropriates of Hip-Hop that exist in different ways, understanding their individual journey and interconnect journeys are essential. Therefore, *Break* takes a different approach by starting at the beginning and navigating how the element became what it is presently. The author also believes the culturalist and materialist approaches which are often used in discussing Hip-Hop’s history, individually are limited; thus he merges them to showcase how “at different junctures, early hip-hop participants drew equally on both material and symbolic resources”(7). Ewoodzie does this well with the beginning to end journey and the unifying of the cultural and historical critical approaches.

Break Beats in the Bronx provides me with a framework to continue with if I should choose and a history, I can continue tracing to contemporary Bronx artists like Cardi B, Remy Ma, Fat Joe, Africankillerbees, Tish Hyman, Donelle Valentine, A Boogie and so on. Some of these artists earn millions while others barely earn but looking at those who are popular and underground helps to round out the story of the what Hip Hop in the Bronx looks like today and why.