"Where the Rhymes at?"

How Contemporary Artists are Transforming Notions of Liveness in Hip Hop

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Abstract *Artists in popular music who are media-constructed "stars," have historically been granted live performance opportunities where lip-syncing or the use of performance tracks is employed. Although hip-hop performance practices originally shunned this value system, the eventual mainstream acceptance of hip hop, plus the current state of gaining traction within the popular music industry, through the advent of social media and digital streaming platforms, has prompted a transformation. As a result, the widespread adoption of performance tracks or TV tracks, with audible lead and background vocals, has altered notions of liveness in hip hop for both younger and established artists. In this study, I explore the cultural shift that has taken place that led to the use of performance tracks during hip-hop performances. By explaining how artists construct themselves as consumable brands, which are mediated by fans through television, social media, and streaming audio interaction, I display how the practice of using performance tracks is a natural conclusion to hip hop transforming from a countercultural entity to a mainstream fixture. However, I also identify places of defiance to this phenomenon, through critical assertions of hip-hop authenticity. Concepts from popular music and media studies allow me to contextualize newer and older aspects of liveness for multiple generations.*

During a 2017 interview with New York's Power 106 Breakfast Club crew (18:47), New Jersey-bred MC Redman (Reginald Noble) described his pathway to a successful career. He cited his ability to deliver memorable live performances as being a primary reason for his longevity, with KRS-One's (Lawrence "Kris" Parker) mastery of breath control, lyrical clarity, and vocal stamina being his exemplar. He warned that a "hip-hop rule" dictates that you never perform after KRS-One, and that his real-time vocal delivery factors into him being "phenomenal" onstage (ibid.: 19:10).

Afterwards, a pivot point in the discussion occurred. Redman proceeded to juxtapose his historically rooted performance style with the current trend of hip-hop artists employing what's known in the music industry as performance, backing, or TV tracks.

> Where the f**k do all this lip-synching be coming from with these artists? That's the fad? You throw on a record [that] got the lyrics playin' and you [rhyme] on top of it? So when you rockin' they can see you pause while the lyric is still goin'? That's horrible. Y'all need to cut that s**t out… Stop lip-synching. Hip hop wasn't based [on that]… Go to the gym. Get your wind up. (ibid.: 19:37)

In theory, performance tracks/TV tracks are defined as a version of the song with the lead vocals removed, but background or ad-lib vocal material included. If lead vocals are incorporated, they are used to bolster, not replace, the voice of the artists and are brought down to a relatively low dynamic level in the mix. Presently, rappers perform over completed versions of songs without any dynamic adjustments to the vocal levels. The underlying perspective in Redman's assertion, even while using the term "lip-synching" erroneously in this context, addressed the alleged changing notions of liveness in hip hop.[1] His statement accomplished

1 "Lip-synching" is comparable to another term that will be introduced in the article: "pantomiming." This is when one moves their lips along with the vocal material of a track without any audible sound emanating from the individual's throat. Popular examples occur in drag performances or the 1980s television program *Puttin' On The Hits*.

multiple objectives: it created a fixed methodology in hip-hop vocal performance, based upon historical notions of liveness in the genre, and it contributed to the generational divide amongst hip-hop practitioners by suggesting that it is younger artists who are primarily guilty of engaging in this practice.

In this chapter, I detail the specific factors that have helped usher in new ways practitioners and aficionados think about performance practices in hip hop. The influence of commercial music and access to its trappings, which was once closed to hip hop, begs for a comparison between historical notions of liveness between hip hop and popular music. There is a marked difference in the acceptance of backing tracks, or lip-synching within pop music which was not always true of hip hop. Practitioners' eventual access to media outlets, like broadcast television programs or music video airplay, contributed to the overall mainstreaming of the genre and the acceptance of vocal practices employed in pop performance.

Presently, changes in all media consumption, creation, and contextualization that have transpired in the digital age are concurrent with an absorption of hip hop as part of the general entertainment business. Millennials and Gen Zers, who grew up with this depiction of the genre, have been influenced by reality or "self-help" television shows, and use audio streaming portals, social media, and other forms of participatory culture to rework all media content to either construct themselves as celebrities and influencers, or anoint others as so.[2] The live performance has become just one of many ways to interact with a "content creator," regardless of the use of real-time vocals or not.

Redman, and others that support his sentiment, present dichotomous arguments to an issue based on performance practices tied to historical constraints but fail to consider how societal influences both within and outside of hip hop have engendered a reality that is not simple to codify, but rather layered and complex. I contend that it is better to allow one's ears and eyes to assess the ways artists negotiate

2 Generational distinctions can be defined as Gen X, born between 1960 and 1979, millennials (1980–1994), and Gen Z (1995–2010).

newer and older aspects of liveness, and more interesting to find out how and why this practice became an acceptable and typical mode of live hip-hop presentation.

Historical Notions of Liveness: A Comparison

What is or isn't deemed a live musical performance isn't a universally accepted idea. Early hip-hop acts had to deal with multiple audiences. Openly hostile crowds that correlated liveness with singers and bands who associated what they were witnessing with a maligned disco scene, differed from hip-hop insiders who demanded skillful displays of turntable and MC virtuosity (Toop 2000; Chang 2005). Although his definition for musical performance is derived from Western Art Music, Theodore Gracyk (1997: 139–140) provides one that is sufficient:

> A public situation in which an audience attends to the actions of one or more performers, during which specified sounds are intentionally generated for the express purpose of being attended to as music by the audience… It is also a necessary condition of a musical performance that the sounds to which the audience attends are sequenced and coordinated by human performers in real-time, in the presence of an audience, for that audience.

Liveness not only has different connotations between genres, but "[it] is [also] a fluid concept, contingent upon historical context, cultural tradition, implicated technologies, and various other factors for its exact articulation" (Sanden 2013: 3). By using this framework, we can compare aspects of liveness between hip hop and pop music to understand how it has been standardized in each genre.

Hip Hop as a Subculture

Regarding performance practice methodology and the centrality of real-time music making in the live space, the concept of liveness in hip hop is partially descended from Jamaican sound system culture. As Hess (2007: 20) says, "the precommercial culture of [hip hop] focused on musical skills in live performance rather than recordings." Similar to performance practices in Jamaican music making, non-vocal sounds from the DJ centered on making new musical statements by manipulating the once fixed recorded object in real-time. This occurred in conjunction with musical contributions from vocalists being made through reciting party-rocking rhymes and chants, or by making music using vocal percussion sounds, aka "beatboxing."[3] First generation hip-hop acts like Grandmaster Flash (Joseph Saddler) and the Furious Five and Doug E. Fresh relied on these musical devices to entertain patrons during notable performances (Toop 2000: 93–94).

Traditionally, rhyming in real-time was a necessary component of an MC's development. It implies a certain required vocal mastery before getting a chance to "bless the mic," and be heard over the sound system. One needed to be able to display lyrical prowess in the live space before the DJ would allow them to "rock" during their DJ set. MCs had to perfect their craft. This would sometimes occur in public settings by participating in cyphers (ciphers/ciphas), regardless of whether an audience is present or not.

These sessions take place on street corners, in school lunchrooms, in between acts at venues, or at any locale where MCs are in attendance. A cypher isn't an open mic, where you may have one person performing to an audience, but it is a collection of individuals, usually standing in a circle, trading pre-written or improvised rhymes over a beat. Observers usually listen standing outside of the circle. The MC Ras Kass (John Austin IV) emphasizes, "it ain't really fans in the [cypher]" (Alim 2006: 97). In his in-depth study of hip-hop linguistic and performance

3 The song "La Di Da Di" (1985) by Doug E. Fresh (Douglas E. Davis) & The Get Fresh Crew, feat. Slick Rick (Richard Walters) being a prime example.

traditions, scholar H. Samy Alim (ibid.) paraphrases testimony from well-respected MCs, like Kurupt (Ricardo Brown), about the pedagogical and communal, but sometimes competitive nature of these sessions. "Several skillz are developed in the cipha. Rap delivery, reacting under pressure, verbal battling… The cipha is like Hip Hop's classroom, where one studies to learn the tricks of the trade" (ibid.: 98).

Beyond cyphers, open mics, house parties, or talent shows were seen as places to rhyme. Performances in these situations were considered stepping stones on the path from novice to professional (Harkness 2014: 139–66). The rapper Snoop Dogg (Calvin Broadus Jr.) has emphasized that an MC's skill was measured by their ability to rhyme in these performance situations. He implores that proving oneself in cyphers and battles were *mandatory* steps for an MC to take before getting on the mic in public, and he details what could happen if you had not done so. Snoop informs that "I started rappin' [in 1984], '85… I had to battle about a hundred ni**as before I even got to a microphone… And when I got to a microphone… if you ain't sayin' the right s**t, they [take the mic away]… I've seen ni**as get shut down at a house party" (Thompson et al. 2021: 00:31:01). Busta Rhymes (Trevor Smith Jr.), as one-third of the group Leaders of the New School, was asked to spit bars while running laps at a high school track to build stamina and gain breath control when training with Public Enemy's Chuck D (Carlton Ridenhour) and The Bomb Squad (Talib Kweli et al. 2020: 00:05:23).[4] Embracing liveness was part of the mentoring process that distinguished amateur versus professional practitioners.

Second generation pioneer Kurtis Blow (Kurtis Walker) speaks to the importance of this ethos at a time when hip hop was unproven as a mainstay and was considered a fad by the music industry, "We had to actually be good on stage. That was… important to the success of the culture… It was… important for us to rock the house. That was key to my experience in New York City… playing the clubs… the block parties and the park jams. … I just thank God I had that experience… before I made my first record" (Thompson et al. 2019: 00:35:05). Kurtis makes it clear that one's

4 The Bomb Squad was the production group of Public Enemy.

ability to perform live prepares an MC to make a recording and is clearly tied to professionalism in hip hop.

Pop Music/Popular Mainstream Culture

Mainstream musical practices in American traditional pop music come from minstrel shows, vaudeville, Broadway, MGM (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer) musicals, and vocalists connected to swing bands. I agree with Andrew Goodwin's assertion, when he emphasizes that pop music has "always been a multi-discursive cultural form in which no one media site is privileged" (1992: 26). The musical activity of artists like Judy Garland and Frank Sinatra moved in between film roles, television appearances, club dates, and live radio broadcasts. While this type of performer/celebrity became more prominent in the American consciousness during the 1940s and 1950s, one's celebrity status did not excuse performers from having to prove their vocal mastery in live settings. In the 1950s, the maturation of pop and commercial music, and the emergence of rhythm and blues being rebranded as rock 'n' roll, coincided with a fermenting, symbiotic relationship between music and television at a time when the first generation of children who were weaned on television were becoming teenagers (Austen 2005: 5). Programs targeted at teens and young adults were used as visual vehicles for artists to promote their music. Singing in real-time with an instrumental TV track or lip-synching were both techniques exploited by artists at varying points of time.

Murray Forman in his text, *One Night on TV Is Worth Weeks at the Paramount*, offers fresh analysis when "addressing the conjoined histories of popular music and television during the earliest phase of TV broadcasting," (2012: 3) and sharing the processes of each industry in the "breaking" of new artists. He highlights the adjustment process of executives, musical artists, media critics, and the viewing public to the new medium in the 1950s and explains that it steered executives towards presentations that were tame, safe, and predictable (ibid.: 170). This led to "implementing pre-recorded vocal tracks as a means of ensuring

vocal quality during live broadcasts" (ibid.: 214). Although established vocalists like Dinah Shore refused to comply, in general, television crews and network executives were not yielding to the wishes of the performer.

This type of power was wielded by executives of the teen and young adult dance programs *American Bandstand* and *Soul Train* (Bruenger 2016: 172). *American Bandstand*, which first started in 1953, with Bob Horn as host, was taken over by entertainment industry mainstay Dick Clark in 1957 (Austen 2005: 28–29). Lip-synching was standard fare for reasons of production, time, and costs. At first, the practice was unfamiliar to the young dancers, but Clark sold it to his audience by saying it was a technique often used in motion pictures. He insisted that "we used the [lip-synch] primarily because it was cheaper, but also because it was impossible to duplicate the sound of the record—and it was the record that kids wanted to hear. That was what they bought" (Clark and Robinson 1976: 72). Notable artists who refused to lip-synch on the program were blues musician B.B. King, who played in real time, and Syd Barrett of Pink Floyd, who declined to move his lips while the rest of the band pantomimed playing to the track (Shore and Clark 1985: 16, 110).

Soul Train, which started as a local Chicago broadcast in 1970, was soon syndicated to six other cities in 1971 (Questlove 2013: 15, 29). This program was conceived for African Americans, by its creator Don Cornelius, and was meant to portray a positive African American media presence. It was a prominent showcase for Black musical styles throughout its run, with artists, and sometimes political figures, working towards the goal of "racism, poverty, and social justice issues being addressed through both words and song" (Lehman 2008: 31, 33). Both textual analysis of *Soul Train* videos and archival research reveal that lip-synching was the preferred method of presentation for the program. Cornelius insisted on lip-synching, or at least a song rendering that mirrored the recording, because of an incident in January of 1972. Guitarist Dennis Coffey performed his hit instrumental "Scorpio" (1971) for the enthusiastic dancers, but his lengthy improvisation altered the production schedule (Danois 2013: 58). Perhaps due to feelings of resistance from artists, a flexible and fluid approach to liveness, with artists singing live to instrumental backing tracks or instrumental accompaniment,

or by choosing to lip-synch, became standard. However, as the show transitioned from the 1970s to the 1980s, live presentation was blatantly phased out. Video evidence shows Bill Withers performing in real time with a full band in the 70s but visibly disengaged while lip-synching to a track in 1980.

The emergence of Music Television (MTV) in the 1980s provided record companies further opportunity to promote artists without them having to perform in real-time. With the expectation of videos being part of the music consumption process, a marked shift to the visual and away from the aural had occurred. The new state of things was solidified on March 25, 1983, with Michael Jackson's performance of "Billie Jean" during the *Motown 25* anniversary television broadcast. Despite Jackson choosing to reenact his music video through movement and dance while lip-syncing, it was still described glowingly by critics from *Rolling Stone* and *Black Beat* magazines (Kooijman 2006: 119, 122). It was this performance, and the airing of his "Thriller" music video on MTV that ushered in his "King of Pop" status. Jackson embraced an aesthetic that was focused more on the visual image, rather than the music itself.

A Period of Adjustments for Commercial Music

As hip hop began to infiltrate mainstream media spaces in the 1980s, practitioners were reluctant to incorporate popular music performance practices. Hip-hop artists on *Soul Train* were encouraged to lip-synch. Kurtis Blow was the first hip-hop act booked on the show and was shocked when he found out artists had lip-synched during broadcasts. Correctly, he knew hip hop did not hold a position of esteem to consumers and felt lip-synching would feed into assumptions of practitioners lacking talent. "I am not gonna lip-synch. That is not what I do. This is hip hop. This is live… I didn't want to have that reputation [of lip-synching]" (Thompson et al. 2019: 00:40:47). Eventually, hip-hop performers on *Soul Train* had to compromise. Big Daddy Kane (Antonio Hardy) re-recorded his verses and crowd participatory ad-libs without

reverb, and at a higher volume, to make his TV track for his lip-synched performance (Danois 2013: 142).

Touring musicians and sound technicians estimated that, by the 1990s, 25 percent or more of what the audience hears in a pop, rock, or R&B arena show is prerecorded, with audience members being aware of the process (Handelman 1990: 15). However, expectations of vocal liveness for hip hop were still aligned with its own cultural mandates, as Eminem (Marshall Mathers III) found out. After being informed of the visceral reaction to the disclosure of him rapping over his lead vocal tracks during a 2013 appearance on *Saturday Night Live*, it remained clear that even the most accomplished rapper still had to contend with rhyming in real time being the only acceptable vocal practice in hip hop, until it wasn't (Gracyk 2020: 151). Other factors coalesced that shifted the landscape in general, which affected all commercial music making.

Music, Media, and Attention Capital

In 2001, educational consultant Marc Prensky (2001) coined the terms "digital immigrants" and "digital natives" to describe the differences in learning styles between individuals who were born in a pre-, versus post-digital age. These distinctions fall across generational lines, with natives born at a time where the creation and access to content via the internet and mobile devices, and engagement with social media is ubiquitous in their daily interactions. Children as young as two demonstrate the means to take a mobile device and access desired content. It doesn't take them much longer to figure out how to create media, even if it's as simple as a selfie, regardless of whether they choose to distribute it or not.

My use of the media term "content" is deliberate here. Keith Negus (2019) elaborated on the act of musicians making, posting, and consuming content. Distinctions between amateur and professional level material is unclear, as is the criteria that people use to define these boundaries, mainly because the perceived value of recorded music is nebulous. The concepts of prosumerism, participatory culture, or producerism are

ideas formed by media scholars that all encompass the notion that fan engagement with content is interactive, and the need for quality control is antiquated. As William Deresiewicz illuminates in *The Atlantic*, "[w]hat we're now persuaded to consume, most conspicuously, are the means to create… and the democratization of taste ensures that no one has the right (or inclination) to tell us when our work is bad" (2015). Content makers can move from social media platforms like SoundCloud, which can be classified as an amateur site of participatory culture, to revenue generating, streaming services like Spotify in an instant, regardless of the supposed quality of the music.

Generation-X aficionados didn't anticipate changes in the media scape, and mistakenly felt hip hop would be immune to these developments when they started to occur. Roy Shuker in *Understanding Popular Music Culture* (2008: 129), lists three key pieces of evidence addressing hip hop's transformation from underground status to the American mainstream: the 1999 *Time* Magazine cover story with Lauryn Hill; hip hop becoming the highest selling genre in America, with its growth in sales starting in the 1990s; and the marriage of hip hop to corporate culture by rappers and entrepreneurs, like Sean "Diddy" Combs and 50 Cent (Curtis Jackson III), which eventually led to *Forbes* magazine publishing a yearly top-ten earners in hip hop.[5] Now, the Millennial and Generation-Z hip-hop participant prefers to be called an artist, or even a rock star, and is seemingly more concerned with their brand than their ability to write and spit rhymes effectively. The use of vocal-laden performance tracks should not be perceived as a shock, but more as a foregone conclusion as part of a modern-day hip-hop persona. This negotiation between aesthetics is ongoing because the larger idea of celebrity and attention capital has altered the importance of liveness for artists and patrons who consume and make content through the digital space.

5 It doesn't get more mainstream than a toy doll, and a children's animated program with (MC) Hammer (Stanley Burrell); The *Forbes* list displays hip-hop associated individuals earning in the millions and billions.

SoundCloud and Spotify

Simon Frith, as early as 2000, forewarned about the transformational state of affairs brought about by the nexus of technology and media use when stating, "[t]hrough 'upload ability' music, people who have never performed in a live setting have means to global distribution… Posting things online is akin to a kind of electronic cottage industry. [Hip hop] no longer relies on the live event as it did in its pre-recorded or post-recorded era" (391–392).

The combination of digitally downloaded or streamed audio has become the primary source for US consumer audio consumption according to year-end-2020 revenue statistics published by the Recording Industry Association of America (Friedlander 2020). Although downloading is different from streaming, and statistics are accumulated differently, many platforms, such as Amazon Music, YouTube Music, and Apple Music, combine the two services. Two platforms in particular, SoundCloud and Spotify, have been used in a manner that has resulted in a decrease in the demand for real-time rhyming in hip hop. An exposé written by Craig Marks encapsulates how Lil Uzi Vert (Symere Woods) gained prominence in the music industry through SoundCloud and Spotify.

> In the three years since he uploaded his first song on to the DIY streaming platform SoundCloud, he collaborated with everyone from Gucci Mane [Radric Davis] to Pharrell [Williams], built a 4 million + Instagram following, and racked up a *Billboard* Hot 100 number one record with his featured verse on Migos's viral smash 'Bad and Boujee'… [His song] 'XO Tour Llif3' became a sensation on SoundCloud first, and then a success on [streaming services] Apple Music and Spotify.[6] (2017)

6 The Migos were a rap trio from Lawrenceville, Georgia consisting of Quavo (Quavious Marshall), Offset (Kiari Cephus), and Takeoff (Kirshnik Ball). At the time of writing, Ball is deceased, and the remaining two members are not working together.

SoundCloud, a site created in 2008, became a huge part of the DIY rapper ecosystem because it enables anyone to upload and share audio with friends. The price model allowed users to load up to two hours of content for free and features embeddable players that integrate with social media sites like Facebook and Twitter (X) (Giannetti 2014: 499). The portal became so omnipresent as a medium for Gen-Z rappers to share music with each other, that a somewhat pejorative term, "SoundCloud Rap," became part of the cultural lexicon, but in essence, many rappers with various styles and aesthetics were using the site.[7] An MC named Russ (Russell Vitale) was releasing physical copies of music independently and doing shows in Europe before using SoundCloud, but he decided to use the site to amplify his presence by switching from an album-based distribution approach, to focusing on singles (Miller et al. 2016: 00:02:38). Russ's attorney Josua Binder detailed the results of this strategy: "The kid was dropping a song on SoundCloud every week and was able to get over 100,000 plays within a 24-hour period… At first, he was touring 500-person rooms, then 1,000, then 2,000. By that time there was a five-label bidding war over Russ. We ended up signing a *ridiculous* [original emphasis] deal with Columbia Records" (2017).

$not (Edy Edouard) is a rapper who is the aesthetic opposite of Russ. He has described himself as "just having fun" when starting to rhyme, without having any allusions to a career (Kennedy 2019; Inman 2020). He found himself in demand for live shows in 2019, after only two years of actively loading music onto SoundCloud. His breakout record "Gosha" (2020) had accumulated over 45 million streams between SoundCloud and Spotify, and his music gained placements on the cable television program *Euphoria* (ibid.). As an indicator of Friths' point, none of his success was tied to live performance. An analysis of a show during the 2019 Rolling Loud Music Festival, reveals that $not was using finished versions of his songs as performance tracks. It is noticeable that the voice for one of his hype men was clearly audible, but his own voice was not

7 "SoundCloud Rap" or "mumble rap" became shorthand for a sound and style where lyricism has been diminished and auto-tuned vocals are prominent. Sounds and content take cues from emo rock and recreational drug use.

cutting through the mix. In an interview, $not described his relationship with performance by "admitting that he had only performed once prior to Rolling Loud, that he was essentially a novice and was routinely forgetting the lyrics to his songs" (Gengo 2019: 42, 40).

Edouard was the recipient of his song graduating from SoundCloud to Spotify, which is characterized in the industry as a step forward for artists. Spotify, which launched in the US in 2011, is not a DIY portal and represents a type of curated professional distinction that rappers want their music associated with, along with potential earnings from streams. Status and revenue that artists seek are generated through company-compiled playlists (Eriksson et al. 2019: 120).

Reports indicate that "values and identities are contextualized through the crafting of playlists, which constitutes a politics of content where the delivery of music implicates prescriptive notions of the streaming user" (ibid.: 115). In other words, there is an exchange of cultural cache, or a certain type of "coolness" reinforced between the artist, who is included on the playlists, and the user, who is an official follower of said list. As Money Bagg Yo (DeMario White Jr.) insisted, "Spotify is the new street" (Marks 2017).[8] No playlist offers this more so than the portals' 50-song, hip-hop juggernaut, RapCaviar.

Created in 2017, and with over 10 million followers, RapCaviar siphons songs from feeder lists and assembles them under one umbrella. The formula was so successful, it was decided by the company to transform and extend RapCaviar from a playlist to a cultural sub-brand. The concept was created and curated by executive Tuma Basa, with the visual branding designed by Tal Midyan.[9] Rappers whose songs have performed well metrically on the RapCaviar playlist become featured in print ads, other forms of media, and in branded live performances.

8 The "street" represents authenticity in hip hop. If one is popular, or "hot in the streets," that means your music is acceptable and notable with hip hop's supposed African American and Latino core audience.

9 Basa is no longer employed by Spotify. His current position is director of Black music and culture for YouTube.

Vibe magazine reporter Stacy-Ann Ellis wrote a concert review of a 2017 RapCaviar Live event in Toronto. This provided an opportunity to examine modern day liveness. She described the event as "lit" and that rappers like Playboi Carti (Jordan Carter) and Baka Not Nice (Travis Savoury) "delivered the goods" to adoring fans. After viewing an Instagram video linked to the story, it is clear that the DJs injected vocal exclamations to excite the crowd, but the rappers themselves didn't need to rhyme in real-time to elicit such reactions. The crowd was fully engaged and rhyming along with Playboi Carti's lyrics-laden version of "Magnolia" (2017), while he jumped, danced, and peppered them with occasional sounds of his voice. Huge streaming metrics have given concert promoters reason to book millennial or Gen-Z rappers to large stages based on user engagement with the recorded object. Company-curated playlists notwithstanding, platforms such as SoundCloud and Spotify are considered part of the shareable and embeddable social media matrix that has emerged as part of identity, or perhaps celebrity construction for artists.

The Lox on Verzuz and Megan's Multi-Styled Performances

Comparative examples of performance style, and the aforementioned generational shift, can be found through media analysis of two cases: The Lox and Dipset in-person/virtual *Verzuz* battle, and post-event reflections, and iterations of Megan Thee Stallion (Megan Peete) embracing various methods of performance.[10] In fact, material from Megan supports a strong case for employing newer and older methods of liveness.

Succinctly, the *Verzuz* platform is a live streamed, music showcase first consumed by millions of music aficionados on Instagram Live (IG)

10 The Lox are Jada Kiss (Jason Phillips), Styles P (David Styles), and Sheek Louch (Sean Jacobs). Dipset, or The Diplomats, consists of Cam'ron (Cameron Giles), Jim Jones (Joseph Jones II), Freekey Zekey (Ezekeil Giles), and Juelz Santana (LaRon James).

and Apple TV, starting in March 2020 (Cochrane 2021; Kennedy 2021). Producers Timbaland (Timothy Mosley) and Swizz Beatz (Kasseem Dean) began *Verzuz* not as an event, but as an impromptu, song-for-song playback challenge while they were each isolating at their residences during the unprecedented shutdown of live music events due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Eventually, vocalists were included in the forum, with some electing to just play their songs. Others chose to sing or rhyme over their pre-recorded vocals on the track. As pandemic-related restrictions began to be eased, and the platform was sold to Thriller Network, individuals were able to experience *Verzuz* as both a virtual and in-person concert (Yoo 2021).

This new format set the stage for a battle between The Lox and Dipset, where the former rhymed in real time, and the latter group used performance tracks. Arguably, the highlight of the night transpired during a Jadakiss (Jason Terrance Phillips) freestyle he performed over a Trackmasters produced, Notorious B.I.G. (Christopher Wallace) affiliated, "Who Shot Ya" (1994) beat.[11] He used several tropes to assert hip-hop authenticity: his status as a native New Yorker still accessible to residents in his neighborhood; acknowledging the importance of mixtape culture; a full integration of the DJ into the performance; and, most importantly, embracing historical notions of liveness by rhyming in real time. Before he began, Jadakiss discredited Dipset by implying that using performance tracks in New York was inappropriate. "Why these n***as keep rhymin' over the words? Y'all could've stayed in the car and listened to Apple Music. These n***as is cheatin'… This is hip-hop. We in the Mecca of New York" (YungWillieWill 2021: 00:29:59).[12]

A few bars into the freestyle, and after receiving an explosion of adulation that erupted from the audience and Instagram commenters, Jada stops at a significant punchline. Again he displays a high working knowledge of hip hop, when cuing Technician, the DJ, to stop and rewind at

11 The Trackmasters are the production duo of Poke (Jean-Claude Oliver) and Tone (Samuel Barnes), who made beats for Bad Boy Records, among others.

12 There are several ways to access this media. I chose this posting because of the visible Instagram comments.

an impactful place in the song—a classic performance practice imported from Jamaican sound system culture. He then reasserts his authority by specifically targeting social media and Dipset's reliance on that medium. "We ain't playin'! This is New York. This what these n***as want, right? I don't do Instagram! I don't do Twitter! I don't do none of that s**t" (ibid.: 00:31:20). Throughout the night, The Lox continued with barbs, with Jada saying, "Them n***as is lip-syncing," Sheek insisting that, "They don't got no freestyles," and Styles P insisting that Dipset is unable to meet his challenge after he rhymed acapella. The rapper Russ expressed the general opinion of practitioners in the Instagram comments when stating, "Lox not rappin' over the vocals so the performance cuttin' thru way cleaner" (ibid.: 00:19:27).

Reactions at the event's conclusion were extensive and drove a large amount of discussion. Again, individuals are not making clear distinctions between lip-syncing and rhyming over vocals, but both are openly disparaged. The overwhelmingly positive reaction to the Lox is seen as reaffirming an unadulterated, unfiltered brand of hip hop, especially for an older audience, who feel the younger audience hasn't widely experienced this style of performance.

During their podcast, rappers and hosts Lord Jamar (Lorenzo Dechalus) and Rah Digga (Rashia Fisher) discussed how they should digest and merit what they witnessed.

> Rah Digga: "Did they do such a phenomenal job for a stage show, or have we just seen the quality of performance deteriorate? I feel like… you not rhyming over the vocals, knowing your words, breath control… Aren't these things normal? At least all the shows that I go to. I'm like, 'Have you been to a Black Thought show?' This is normal s**t."
> Lord Jamar: "This is not normal anymore. These kids are rhyming off the words. People like Lil' Wayne have made them feel like you can be a superstar. It's ok to rhyme off the words. I've seen some of the biggest rappers out here get on stage, get paid $100,000, and then go out there and… rhyme over the words. And then let the crowd say most of the s**t for them… That's the kind of s**t that it's deteriorated into with this new generation. So yes, I think it's a little bit of both of what you're talkin' about." (2021: 00:23:00)

In a post-event interview on The Breakfast Club (2021) the Lox explained their performance mind-set to host DJ Envy:

> Jadakiss: "We planned on goin' live. Goin' off the instrumentals. Given em' live things, and doin' the freestyles. You gotta rock for the camera and you gotta rock the crowd… We can go live, [but Dipset] wasn't gonna do that."
> DJ Envy: "How did y'all know that [they would rap over performance tracks/TV tracks]?"
> Jadakiss: "People is doin' that at iHeart shows, the biggest platform of shows. Unless it's a certain caliber of artist, TV tracks is what they giving you. It just became a thing. But we came from, that's no [good]."
> Styles P.: "And actually, they switched that around, [because] the TV track used to just kinda have the [background or adlib vocals] here and there. Now they say 'TV track' and it's the whole verse." (09:05)

The difference between performance concepts is explained in detail here, with The Lox indicating the type of show they prefer to give. In actuality however, when looking closely into the history and performance practices of Megan Thee Stallion, it would be hard for The Lox to compare her level of performance with Dipset, even though she does use performance tracks at times, and engages with social media for performative purposes.

She has built her brand by combining newer and older ideals of manifesting hip-hop performance in the popular space. This duality is in reference to an ethos she formed as a teenager, citing her own (now deceased) mother, Holly "Holly-Wood" Thomas, as her primary writing and rhyming influence, which operates in tandem with social media engagement that was originally independent of her music-making activities. While in college, she became known for posting twerk videos featuring herself and friends, but also received attention after a video of her verse over a Drake (Aubrey Graham) instrumental went viral (Gracie 2019; Holmes 2020). Perhaps it is easy for Jadakiss, a Gen-X digital immigrant to insist he doesn't use social media, but for Megan it

is a manifestation of how she expresses herself in the wider world, both within and outside hip hop.

There are several examples of her employing various modes of performance onstage. When conducting a close reading of a show during a 2019 North Carolina Central University homecoming celebration, she uses finished versions of her songs as performance tracks (Megan Thee Stallion 2019a: 00:00:42). Megan rapped and rocked the crowd in the arena-sized venue, in the style of The Lox.[13] However, her live vocals were not easily distinguishable from the lead vocals on the track. She chose to voice the words in some, but not all instances, because she chose to initiate performative gestures that gave new layers to liveness. Twerking in lieu of rapping, inviting patrons onstage to twerk, or grabbing a concert-goer's phone to take a selfie or video of herself rapping into the device all added value to the concert experience for the students. She understood her college-aged audience and provided a memorable show tailored to them.

Understanding the ways her fans engage in media has been as important to building her brand. Scholar Keshia Jennings argues this realization has spawned a "re-imaging of black women in hip hop in digital spaces," where similar to Taylor Swift or Beyoncé, "rappers like [Megan], Cardi B [Belcalis Almánzar], and The City Girls have deemed it appropriate to *adopt* [original emphasis] their fans" (2020: 51–52).[14] This symbiotic relationship, forged via social media, between Megan's "Hottie's" and the artist helped contribute to the success of her single "Savage" (2020).

In early 2020, Megan's management team contacted executives at TikTok, which is now universally recognized in the entertainment industry as a primary means for promoting music. The short-video, mobile device, social media platform, has been embraced by marketing executives and fans since the "Old Town Road" (2019) success of Lil Nas X

13 The "Golden Era" is a time marked in hip hop from roughly 1988 to 2000, when the balance between a high standard of music making, and access to wealth via a career in hip-hop music was at its pinnacle.

14 The City Girls are a duo composed of Yung Miami (Caresha Brownlee) and JT (Jatavia Johnson).

(Montero Hill) and is used alongside SoundCloud and Spotify (Millman 2020: 24–25; Beau 2022). Although the campaign for her song "Captain Hook" (2020) was effective, the song "Savage" (2020), became a social media phenomenon, due to the creativity of a fan named Keara Wilson. Wilson used TikTok when ushering the #SavageChallenge after creating choreography to the song and "challenging" others to learn it. Participants included Justin Bieber and Janet Jackson, and despite using Instagram, Megan herself, helped furnish a viral moment (Hill 2020). It was reported in *Rolling Stone* that "the song has now appeared in more than 31 million clips on the app [and] it garnered in excess of 4 billion views" (Millman 2020). Megan repaid Wilson by using her image, likeness, and choreography in an animated lyric video posted on YouTube in April 2020, which to date, has over 113 million views.

While YouTube and TikTok engagement metrics don't assess the quality of the content, or gauge an MC's performance prowess, a National Public Radio (NPR) *Tiny Desk Concert Series* performance by Megan does complicate criticism one may have of her approach. Historical notions of liveness were pre-built into the manner of presentation: it is meant to be an intimate affair, with performances from the office space livestreamed on Facebook and YouTube. And the iconic stereo-shotgun condenser mic is not handheld, which dictates that vocal talents of artists are laid bare. Megan's use of breath control, and clear recitation of verses and ad-libs displays an understanding of classic methods of real-time vocal hip-hop delivery (Megan Thee Stallion 2019b: 00:00:25). In addition, her ability to gel with first-time live band collaborators, Phony Ppl, is a testament to her adaptability to perform in a manner appropriate for the situation. Evidence proves that newer and older aspects of liveness can coexist in a highly skilled individual.

Conclusion

Practitioners deemed worthy of praise in countercultural movements such as hip hop have always been defined by the participants, but the rule of who is and who isn't "relevant," is now subject to what is valued

according to popular and social media metrics. SoundCloud, Spotify, Instagram, and TikTok are free and user friendly on home and mobile devices, and younger listeners tend to invest their attention capital based on an artist's presence on these platforms. It is naive to believe that hip-hop musical techniques would be unaffected by this era's marriage of music, media, and technology. The ability to perform real-time rap vocals at a high level has retained a shred of value for younger fans, but it is no longer a major determining factor for a rapper's said "relevance," when being a prominent presence in the mainstream media space is deemed equally or more important than live show performance prowess. Generation-X aficionados need to heed the wise words of Snoop Dogg when he reflects on the present state of the culture: "This ain't what it used to be… You can't expect them to be on the level of the game that ain't the same" (Thompson et al. 2021: 00:30:33).

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