Hip Hop Becomes Mainstream
or, How to Commodify Multicultural Listeners

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Abstract *Throughout the 1980s, hip-hop music dramatically increased in popularity in the United States, transitioning from a local trend understood to be primarily made by and for African American youth in New York City to a genre ubiquitously consumed by Americans of all races and ethnicities. In this chapter, I contend that the Crossover format, a commercial radio format that began broadcasting in Miami in the mid-1980s, was central to this transformation. This format, which spread throughout the United States during the second half of the 1980s, played rap songs to appeal to a coalition audience of Black, White, and Hispanic listeners.*

As I argue, these stations challenged the segregated structure of the radio industry, acknowledging the presence and tastes of Hispanic listeners and commodifying young multicultural audiences. The success of this format in turn influenced programming on more traditional Top 40 radio stations, bringing hip hop into the US popular music mainstream. But like many forms of liberal multiculturalism in this era, the racial politics of these stations were complex, as they decentered individual minority groups' interests in the name of colorblindness and inclusion. These stations played a central role in hip hop's growth into the mainstream, but in so doing laid bare the problematic politics of commodifying hybridity.

The final scene in the widely panned 1985 movie *Rappin'* begins with the male lead, Rappin' John Hood, and his crew walking down the street, celebrating their recent success at driving several nefarious characters out of the neighborhood. As the credits roll, each takes a turn clumsily rap-

ping about solving the neighborhood's problems with nothing more than a rhyme. Barely locating the beat, they join together for the song's hook, "We can't stop, won't stop, rockin' that rhythm till we hit the top" (Silberg 1985: 1:26:27). While their rapping may leave something to be desired, the crew certainly looks the part: they fit the demographic profile that hip hop's primary creators and consumers were commonly understood to be in 1985, young men of color.

As the song continues, it becomes clear that it is not just this demographic who can participate in the genre. Walking down the street, Rappin' Hood first sees his White nemesis, Duane. As the backing track transitions from synthesizer-driven R&B to the twangy sounds of a banjo, Duane raps a verse that ironically starts with him demurring that "I may not rap, I may not rhyme, but I got something to say this time" (Silberg 1985: 1:26:37). The beat morphs again and the crew continues down the street to find other members of their multiethnic community who each rap along to an individualized beat that crudely stereotypes their cultural backgrounds: a middle-aged, middle-class Black developer raps along to what sounds like a jazzy muted trumpet, an elderly Jewish woman raps atop a klezmer-inflected clarinet line, and the gyro salesman raps along to a modal harmony shoddily representing some sort of Eastern European folk music. Rapping, here, is some sort of musical common ground. While each member of the community has their own style of music—a clichéd musical representation of their cultural identity—rapping cuts across these differences.

The unifying potential of rap indeed drives the movie's rather flimsy plot. Upon his release from jail, Rappin' John Hood teaches his friends about rap's dual roles as entertainment and political expression. Together, they solve the neighborhood's problems while having fun, a mission culminating in a rapped performance convincing the city council to deny a developer's gentrification project. Here, rap's broad appeal is transformational. The music brings people together, amplifying the concerns of those on society's margins.

And this logic extended beyond the script of a pretty terrible movie. Throughout the twentieth century, scholars and journalists alike have credited Black music's multiracial appeal with reshaping racial attitudes

in the United States. From rock'n'roll through Motown and the crossover careers of Whitney Houston and Lionel Richie in the 1980s, Black music's appeal beyond a Black audience has often been interpreted as indicative of social integration more broadly (Goodman and George 1986; Nathan 1988; Weisbard 2014). Hip hop was no different in this regard: shows in the early 1980s brought White and Black audiences together during an era of increasing segregation, the popularity of Run-D.M.C.'s rock/rap hybrid "Walk This Way" has been heralded as a catalyst for substantive social change, and early advocates for the genre such as Bill Adler believed that hip hop could radically reshape the politics of race in the United States by providing a "successful voluntary desegregation plan" (Chang 2005: 245; Edgers 2019).

In this chapter, I look towards the commercial radio industry in the United States to understand how rap's multiracial appeal was commodified. On commercial radio, rap music first thrived on what were called Crossover stations, hit music stations intended for young multiracial and multiethnic audiences. Hip hop, at least on this medium, was targeted at a broad public. But did hip hop's appeal to this coalition audience translate into amplifying the concerns of young people of color or reshaping racial politics in local communities?

While elsewhere I have centered my analysis of the Crossover radio format on the Los Angeles radio market, here I turn to Miami, where the nation's first Crossover station began broadcasting in 1985, to better understand how programming for multicultural audiences impacted local minority-oriented stations and the listeners for whom these stations were intended (Coddington 2023). More than many other places in the country, Miami's radio stations catered to the area's diverse listeners. By the mid-1980s, more than forty stations in the competitive market carved out specific programming niches aimed at the area's White, Black, and Hispanic listeners—around one-quarter of the stations were aimed squarely at the latter two constituencies (Thornton 1986c). Through an analysis of radio station ratings and playlists, combined with the examination of reporting in nationally distributed radio trade journals *Radio & Records* and *Billboard* as well as in the *Miami Herald*, this essay complicates an optimistic reading of rap's multicultural appeal

by interrogating whose interests were centered when radio stations played hip hop to bring multicultural listeners together. As Anthony Kwame Harrison and Craig E. Arthur argue, music trade journals offer scholars a particularly rich text to help make sense of the "incorporation of new musical forms into the 20th- and 21st-century world of music commerce" (2009: 310). And, thanks to the digitization efforts of the archivists at www.worldradiohistory.com, these sources are readily available to scholars interested in learning more about how the music industries incorporate new genres and styles. As rap in particular moved from the margins to the mainstream, these sources reveal how the radio industry understood and acted on the genre's multiracial appeal. To ground the discussion, I begin with a short summary of this appeal and an explanation of the structure of the commercial radio industry. From there, I examine the Crossover radio format's emergence in Miami, and analyze the reasons why programmers played rap on this format in the late 1980s. In the final part of the essay, I critique this format for its reluctance to engage with issues important to its local communities of color and for diverting economic power from stations aimed at minority audiences.

Born in The Bronx

From its beginnings, hip hop was made and consumed by a multicultural public (Rose 1994). Its birth in the South Bronx during the 1970s almost guaranteed multiracial and multiethnic participation: over three-quarters of those living in the neighborhood, according to a survey taken a decade earlier, were Black and Puerto Rican residents (Ewoodzie 2017). These populations "lived next door; [they] shared the same cockroaches," and they experienced related types of racial discrimination, governmental negligence, and limited employment opportunities (Rivera 2003: 53). And they had more than just these immediate concerns in common; their lives were similarly shaped, as DJ Davey D notes, by the "legacy of exploitation, oppression and colonization" that has influenced hip hop's style and substance (1999). Jorge Duany clarifies that the Black/White

racial binary in the mainland United States has rarely made sense for Puerto Ricans who "have African as well as European backgrounds and range phenotypically across the entire color spectrum from black to brown to white," and many Puerto Ricans in the mainland US were racialized as Black by others, regardless of their specific racial or ethnic background (2016: 164). Both groups were integral participants in hip hop's development, although African American artists participated more often in DJing and MCing while Puerto Rican artists were more active in the breakdancing and tagging scenes (del Barco 1996: 87). Even as African American artists dominated the musical components of hip-hop culture, their funk-derived breakbeats and the rapping delivered over these loops were influenced by Caribbean musical styles (Ewoodzie 2017; Perry 2004; Rivera 2003).

Despite its multicultural roots, rap music has long been considered an African American cultural product (Harrison 2009).[1] While Raquel Z. Rivera notes that the genre's commercialization in the 1980s contributed to the style's "growing African Americanization" (2003: 89), this characterization was evident in its early years. When DJ Charlie Chase started performing in the late 1970s, he remembers being asked "What the fuck are you doing here, Puerto Rican?" (quoted in Rivera 2003: 63). But this sort of gatekeeping did not often apply to the audience, to those purchasing tickets and eventually records. According to Chase, "Hispanics always liked rap, young Puerto Ricans were into it since the beginning. I wasn't the only one who felt the same way about music like that. There were plenty of them, but they didn't have the talent, they just enjoyed it" (quoted in Flores 2004: 73). As the genre moved into New York City clubs in the early 1980s, the audience remained multiethnic and multiracial (Rivera 2003). And while hip hop has maintained its Black identity, its young multiethnic and multiracial appeal extends far past this original scene-based moment.

1 Joseph C. Ewoodzie notes that Puerto Rican involvement in hip hop didn't preclude its Blackness; rather, it demonstrated the extent to which "blackness in New York City during the 1970s overlapped with Puerto Ricanness" (2017: 162).

Radio Does Not Just Play Music, Radio Uses Music

When record labels began recording the genre, their primary partner in promoting records—the commercial radio industry—was not all that interested in young multiethnic and multiracial audiences. Commercial radio stations in the United States use music as a tool to divide local audiences into discrete audience segments (divided by race, ethnicity, gender, and age) that the advertising industry is interested in marketing products towards (Coddington 2023). A station's audience determines the rates that it can charge advertisers, who are willing to pay more for non-Hispanic White listeners aged 25 to 54. Despite copious research debunking racist ideas about Black and Hispanic consumers, the advertising industry has long considered Black and Hispanic listeners less preferable (Lopez 1988; Ofori et al. 1999). Due to this advertising industry bias, most commercial radio stations in the early 1980s worked to attract some proportion of White adult listeners (Turow 1997; Keith 1987). To accomplish this, stations played styles of music (such as pop, rock, and country) that they believed White adults liked.

Across the country, stations broadcast similar playlists to appeal to the same types of audiences, and the radio industry groups these stations into what they call formats (Adams and Massey 1994). Some formats are labeled by the terms that listeners use to describe musical styles: Rock and Top 40 stations, for example, are programmed to appeal to a specific subset of non-Hispanic White listeners (White 1997). The names of other formats such as Spanish, Urban, and Adult Contemporary indicate their target audiences.[2] This formatting structure divides

2 Throughout, I use the terms *Hispanic*, *Black*, and *White* to accurately reflect the terminology that the radio and advertising industries used during the 1980s and early 1990s. For the sake of clarity, I capitalize all radio format names. For simplicity, I refer to stations programmed primarily for Black audiences as Urban. During the 1980s, many of these stations changed their name from Black to Urban, Urban Contemporary, or Progressive Contemporary to appease companies that were unwilling to advertise their products on stations that called themselves Black (Brackett 2016). Similarly, I refer to stations that played cur-

both local and national audiences into sellable segments. Record companies tend to organize their portfolios similarly to facilitate promoting artists on the radio; while the record industry existed prior to the development of commercial radio, these two industries grew side-by-side throughout the twentieth century, mapping musical artists and genres onto listener demographics and pressuring performers to conform to their mapping (Cepeda 2000; Coddington 2023). The radio industry's organization overtly demonstrates who certain types of music are targeted towards. Genres are not played unless radio programmers—those responsible for determining playlists—think that the style is acceptable to their target audience.

One way that stations can generate additional income is by modifying their playlist in the hope that this will shift their audience profile. In the 1980s, many stations that had up until this point focused on Black listeners sought increased advertising rates by appealing to wider and Whiter audiences, adding songs by White musicians, and changing their presentation to not "be too black musically" (Washington 1985: 10). To indicate the multiracial nature of their audience to advertisers, most of these stations referred to their formatting as Urban or Urban Contemporary (Klaess 2022; Brackett 2016).

"Tri-ethnic" Programming

Beginning in 1985, Miami's WHQT did something similar, programming danceable songs aimed at a young "tri-ethnic" audience made up of Black listeners, "party-going, club-loving Anglos in the community," and Hispanic listeners (Thornton 1985a: 4D). Miami already had contemporary music stations aimed at these three constituencies, including Urban station WEDR, Top 40 station Y-100, and eight Spanish-language stations (Thornton 1986c). But WHQT programmer Bill Tanner considered WHQT distinct from these stations and their associated formats:

rent hits as Top 40, although many in the industry also used the format name CHR (Contemporary Hits Radio) (Weisbard 2014).

WEDR's audience was similarly multiracial, but Tanner did not think that his station qualified as an Urban Contemporary station because these were primarily aimed at Black audiences, while WHQT was "heavily targeted at Latins" (Love 1985: 58); Spanish-language stations shared *this* target audience, but they broadcast mostly in Spanish whereas WHQT broadcast in English; and although WHQT played some of the latest pop hits, it played far more dance and R&B music than a typical Top 40 station. Tanner, instead, preferred the format name "dance rock," which to him more aptly described the station's sound, "a cross between a traditional Kansas City [Top 40] and a Chicago Urban station" (Love 1985: 58). In an industry organized by separating listeners of different races and ethnicities onto different stations in the interest of selling advertisements, WHQT stood out for squishing all these demographics back together. It played songs by Black musicians for a mostly non-Black audience, songs by Hispanic musicians for an audience composed of plenty of non-Hispanic listeners, and songs by non-Hispanic White artists they hoped would appeal to non-White audiences.

WHQT's programming was unique within the radio industry, but bringing together this "tri-ethnic" audience was not particularly novel in Miami. In the early 1980s, Miami was primarily made up of the same three groups that WHQT was hoping to attract: most Dade County residents were Hispanic, about 20 percent were Black, and less than 30 percent were non-Hispanic White (Nijman 2010). These groups had specific political interests. In 1980, many Hispanic Miamians of Cuban heritage were concerned with US/Cuba relations as well as the sudden influx of 125,000 Cuban refugees via the *Mariel* boatlift. That same year, Black residents came together over the course of three days to protest the acquittal of four White police officers accused of beating a Black motorcyclist to death in what would be the largest racial uprising prior to the one in Los Angeles in 1992; meanwhile, many non-Hispanic White Miamians focused on maintaining their social and political interests in the face of increased immigration by passing a referendum denying funding to bilingual communication projects. These three groups were physically divided by some of the most pervasive residential segregation in the country (Aranda, Hughes, and Sabogal 2014; Nijman 2010).

Miami's politicians needed to cut across these and other differences to build successful campaigns; they needed to balance the unique priorities of each group while crafting a platform that appealed to everyone. In what was referred to as "the milk-stool strategy," candidates throughout the 1980s won elections by building support among the three "legs" of Miami's stool: Black, Hispanic, and White voters (Fiedler 1987: 1B). Due to the demographic makeup of the area, support from each of these legs was not similarly sized. While many candidates won elections by appealing equally to all three legs, others catered more to the rapidly growing Hispanic population in Miami.[3] And, Tanner did something similar at WHQT; his station's primary target was, as he described them, "upwardly mobile Latin Americans who…[are] on the upper end of the economic scale and love to dance, dress, drive fancy cars, and travel" (Love 1985: 58).

In music industry parlance, WHQT played "crossover music," meaning songs that exceeded the music industry's narrow framework that mapped a performer's race and ethnicity to their musical style and associated audience. Beat and "danceability" were key considerations for admittance onto the station's playlist, but more important was a song's appeal to the demographics the station was interested in (*Radio & Records* 1985a: 6). Like politicians nuancing their platforms to appease the three legs of the milk stool, WHQT's playlist combined styles that Tanner believed might appeal to the station's three target audience groups (Ross 1989b). In the fall of 1985, playlists were composed of R&B songs by Black performers such as Whitney Houston and Stevie Wonder, dance-pop songs by White artists such as Madonna, danceable rock songs by groups like A-ha, freestyle songs by Lisa Lisa and Cult Jam, Latin dance music by Miami Sound Machine, and rap songs by the Real Roxanne, Grandmaster Melle Mel, and Doug E. Fresh (Freeman 1985; *Radio & Records* 1985b). While the station's closest English-language competitors played some of these same artists, they leaned further towards either

3 By the late 1980s, some politicians succeeded by appealing to only Hispanic voters plus one other leg, not relying on both Black and White voters (Grenier and Stepick III 1992).

rock or R&B. Top 40 station Y-100 also included songs by Dire Straits and Phil Collins on its playlist, and Urban station WEDR added songs by the Pointer Sisters, Starpoint, and Family to its playlist.[4]

Tanner was not particularly attached to the music he played on WHQT: a 1985 feature reported that the parrot-raising, burgundy Jaguar-driving programmer mainly listened to classical music and Motown hits in his spare time (Thornton 1985b). Perhaps that was one reason why he programmed such a unique mix. By paying attention to what was popular in the clubs, Tanner's playlists exceeded the narrow-minded industry norms expecting musical taste to align with racial and ethnic identity. But these playlists proved popular and influential. While programmers at Top 40 station Y-100 initially scoffed at Tanner playing Jelly Bean Benitez's dance track "Sidewalk Talk," for example, they added it after the song became a hit on WHQT (Love 1985). And these playlists drew in listeners from Y-100 and WEDR; within a few months, it was the sixth-most popular station in the South Florida area (Thornton 1985c).

But Y-100 and WEDR fought back (Thornton 1986a; Ross 1985). Regularly the area's most popular station, Y-100 considered WHQT's success a mere blip in their usual strong ratings. But WEDR, according to Tanner, had been "asleep at the switch and got knocked on its ass" (Washington 1985, 10; Thornton 1985d). WEDR, however, woke back up. Black listeners—despite switching over occasionally to see what the new station was playing—were loyal to the only Urban FM station in the area, which tended to play new releases by Black artists sooner than WHQT or Y-100 did (Thornton 1985d). And, like many other stations in this format, WEDR demonstrated a strong commitment to its Black community: the station assisted listeners in need by pointing them towards government resources, it helped small Black-owned businesses by offering them lower advertising rates, it highlighted local Black artists on its playlists, and it produced Black-oriented news and community affairs programs (Washington 1985).

4 These stations reported at least part of their playlists to *Radio & Records*. See, for example "Black/Urban Adds," *Radio & Records*, October 4, 1985, 68; "CHR Parallel One Playlists," *Radio & Records*, October 4, 1985, 84.

WHQT's too-brief moment of glory meant that Tanner was shown the door. In the summer of 1986, the station fired him due to poor ratings (Freeman 1986a). But he quickly found a new position across town at the brand-new station Power 96, which he described as a "rock and rhythm" station (Thornton 1986b: 3E). Like at WHQT, Tanner designed Power 96 to fit between, rather than into, the radio industry's preexisting format categories. The station played pop, dance, and freestyle songs, and the playlists were informed by about forty pages of research compiled each week from telephone surveys, sales figures, and a panel of club-going teens (Freeman 1986c). The station had a close relationship with local venues; its playlist influenced DJs' sets, and the station often began playing songs after hearing them in the clubs (Ellis 1986; Terry 1988).

Like WHQT, Power 96 was aimed primarily at young Hispanic, Black, and White listeners and catered more to its Hispanic listeners than these other constituencies. In comparison to WHQT, Power 96 played more freestyle and club-oriented 12-inch singles aimed at Hispanic listeners by artists like the Cover Girls and Exposé (Terry 1988). In Tanner's own analogy, if WHQT was at 9:00 on a clock, thanks to its dance- and R&B-friendly playlist, and Top 40 station Y-100 was at high noon, Power 96 would fit somewhere in the brunch hour between the two (Freeman 1986a). Tanner thought that this brunch spot represented Top 40 for Miami, due to its large Hispanic population, and that his station's orientation towards this audience made it "not an urban… really, we're more dance than urban" (Freeman 1986b: 15). This distinction was important. As Tanner knew from his stint at WHQT, advertising agencies discriminated against Urban stations (a fact he described as "the shame of the industry"), and reporting as one would decrease advertising rates (Ross 1988a: 10). And within a few months, WHQT shifted their programming to generate higher rates, occupying a slightly later—and less Urban—brunch spot between Power 96 and Y-100 (Denver 1987a).

Becoming a Format

Within the next few years, Power 96 and WHQT would be joined at the brunch table by dozens of other stations throughout the country that programmed music for multiracial and multiethnic audiences. Mostly located in urban areas with sizeable enough Hispanic and Black populations to support this sort of "milk stool" approach, these stations played up-tempo dance, freestyle, R&B, rap, and pop songs—along with enough ballads to provide some balance—for a young, club-friendly audience (Freeman 1987b). Local demographics as well as the nuances of their radio market determined each station's particular balancing of the stool's legs. While Hispanic listeners were most often the "linchpin of each station's success," some stations did well in markets with a smaller Hispanic population, such as New Orleans and Washington, DC (Chin 1987: D3; Freeman 1988). And the distinct cultural backgrounds of their Hispanic listeners also made for "significant programming differences" between these stations (Chin 1987: D3).

This all meant that fitting them into the industry's format structure would be complicated. Their "relating to several ethnic groups instead of one in particular" broke longstanding formatting norms in an industry organized along racial lines (Love and Ross 1987: 44). Indeed, the *Los Angeles Times* proposed that their programming was so "violently different" to necessitate "a whole new category" (McDougal 1987). Most often referred to as either "Churban" stations (combining the industry term for Top 40, CHR, with Urban) or Crossover stations (for their playlists filled with music intended to do just that), these stations were "writing their own rules" in an industry that typically segregated listeners by race and ethnicity onto different formats (Denver 1987a: 47). Few agreed whether they should report to the trade journals as Urban or Top 40 stations. Programmers, acutely aware of advertising industry bias against Urban stations, often insisted they were the latter even though they targeted non-White listeners (Chin 1987). Indeed, Tanner noted that one reason why he was the first in Miami to program this type of station was because others "were scared the station would be labeled as Black" (Love 1985: 58).

By mid-1987, these stations were proving popular enough across the country that the trade journals were forced to act. *Billboard* debuted a new chart, the "Hot Crossover 30," which was intended to not only resolve the format classification question, but also demonstrate the popularity of songs—such as freestyle hits by Nice & Wild and the Cover Girls—that had not previously charted well because their airplay was split between Urban and Top 40 stations (Freeman 1987a).[5] The chart editor described Crossover as a new format, one which was "happening in the country's urban centers" (Freeman 1987a: 83), but designed the chart to acknowledge its relation to pre-existing formats: stations could report only to the "Hot Crossover 30" chart, or those programming closer to traditional formats could also report to the "Hot 100" or the "Hot Black Singles" chart.[6]

These stations often had a young listener base, which was a financial risk. It was clear from the success of the format that there were plenty of young listeners whose needs were not being met by other stations. But English-dominant Hispanic teenagers who were not being served by the Spanish-language stations catering to their parents and young audiences interested in budding club trends were tricky listeners to monetize (Ross 1990a). Making money at a Crossover station was difficult, one programmer claimed, because "the median age of the [Crossover station audience] was 19, and you can't live on that" (Stark 1994: 111). But Bill Tanner insisted Crossover stations' young listeners set musical trends and that older listeners would "com[e] along for the ride" (Denver 1987b: 46). Other stations found financial success by prioritizing the sale of advertisements intended for younger listeners rather than succumbing to the general industry trend of trying for older White audiences (Denver 1988a; 1989a; 1989b).

One of the clearest indications of the format's success, however, was not financial—it was musical. Crossover stations had been breaking

5 *Radio & Records* also established a category for these stations, calling them P1A reporters (Denver 1987a).

6 In Miami, WHQT reported exclusively—for a brief time—to the "Hot Crossover 30" chart while Power 96 reported to the "Hot 100" as well, indicating the station's smaller Black listener base (Freeman 1987a).

new music locally and influencing nearby Top 40 and Urban stations for a few years, but the publication of the "Hot Crossover 30" chart increased the geographical reach of their influence. These stations almost immediately began affecting the playlists at Top 40 stations, bringing the sounds of the city to suburban and rural parts of the country (Denver 1988b; Grein 1988). And their influence grew stronger when *Billboard* began printing the Crossover chart close to the Top 40 chart. Programmers looking at the latest hits could not help but witness the growing popularity of artists like Salt-N-Pepa and Club Nouveau, who first experienced success on Crossover playlists (Ellis 1988). Industry observers began wondering whether the influence of these stations was too great, and indeed, in 1990, *Billboard* deemed the "Hot Crossover 30" chart no longer necessary because it had "influenced the Hot 100 Singles chart to such a great extent that a separate chart to break out dance titles is no longer necessary" (*Billboard* 1990b: 84; Denver 1988b).

Rap on Crossover Stations

Looking at the last week of *Billboard*'s "Hot Crossover 30" chart demonstrates one important component of that influence: one-third of the songs on the chart had rapped vocals in them. Some of these songs, like Deee-Lite's "Groove is in the Heart" and C+C Music Factory's "Gonna Make You Sweat," were slamming club-oriented tracks that featured rappers. Others were by new jack swingers and ex-New Edition members like Bell Biv DeVoe and Ralph Tresvant, while MC Hammer's "Pray" and Candyman's "Knockin' Boots" were by more straight-ahead rappers and could be found on *Billboard*'s rap singles chart (*Billboard* 1990a). Regardless of style, all these songs with rapped vocals made their way onto Top 40 stations after showing promise on the Crossover chart.[7]

While Crossover programmers had not initially intended to play rap, they began playing an increasing amount of the genre throughout the

7 In most cases, they appeared on the "Hot 100 Airplay" chart a few weeks after debuting on the "Hot Crossover 30" chart.

late 1980s. In Miami, WHQT and Power 96 played rap songs occasionally throughout the mid-1980s, throwing songs by LL Cool J and Tricky T into the mix, but rap was not their focus—dance music was. But stations around the country experienced success when adding rap songs to their playlists. By the time *Billboard* debuted the "Hot Crossover 30" chart in 1987, about seven percent of its songs had rapped vocals. The following year, this percentage doubled, and it continued to grow until 1990 when songs with rapped vocals made up a full third of the chart (Coddington 2023). As the 1990s began, Crossover stations were the most reliable place to find rap songs on the commercial radio dial.

Crossover stations were well suited to play hip hop. Many Urban and Top 40 programmers did not play the style because they claimed their older listeners, who raised advertising rates, did not like it (Ross 1990b; 1990d; Simmons 1985). But Crossover stations' business models were not dependent on appealing to older listeners, which meant that they could play rap without worrying about this demographic tuning out. Instead, they played rap to develop a young multicultural audience.

Many of the rap songs that they played took the musical styles already popular among specific segments of their audience—freestyle, up-tempo R&B, and dance-oriented rock—and added rapped vocals. Freestyle group Sweet Sensation, for example, teamed up with Romeo J.D. in their 1989 song "Sincerely Yours," which featured the female vocalists and rapper discussing faithfulness above a Latin-influenced dance beat and multi-part horn riffs. R&B singer Jody Watley similarly added Eric B. and Rakim to her song "Friends" the same year, and MC Hammer's "Pray" sampled Prince's 1984 song "When Doves Cry," a danceable pop-rock hit that would have easily fit on Crossover playlists had the format existed when it was released.

But rap's appeal extended beyond the target demographics of its backing tracks. Programmers noted that all three of the demographic segments they considered their audience to consist of liked the genre. This was not a guarantee for much of the music these stations played; programmers worried about pleasing all three parts of their audience, whose tastes they believed did not always align. During programming meetings at WHQT, for example, the staff worked to understand every

song's demographic reach, "openly discuss[ing] who [they thought] a song would appeal to, and who would be turned off by it" (Love and Ross 1987: 44). A song only made the playlist if the staff thought it could appeal to at least two parts of their "tri-ethnic" audience. Across the country, programmers considered freestyle to be a particularly difficult genre to program. While it developed out of the same African American and Puerto Rican communities from which hip hop emerged, programmers thought that it mainly appealed to Hispanic listeners. Rap, on the other hand, came to be seen as a "common denominator" between the Black and Hispanic segments of Crossover stations' audiences, and programmers began adding dance-oriented rap songs to their playlists (Ross 1990c: 13). As the format's influence grew, these same songs made their way onto Top 40 stations across the country, ushering hip hop into the mainstream.

In Miami, programmers also recognized the genre's unifying nature. Crossover stations in the Magic City did not play much hip hop, but one style seemed to cut across racial and ethnic lines. Programmers found it difficult to simultaneously please two parts of their "tri-ethnic" audience. While Black and Hispanic listeners liked dance music, programmers thought that they did not like the same *kind* of dance music. But according to WEDR programmer Leeo Jackson, one point of agreement was bass, Miami's homegrown style of hip hop, by artists like 2 Live Crew and Gucci Crew (Ross 1988b). And so WEDR, Power 96, and WHQT all played the hottest bass tracks. For Power 96, which leaned further towards a Hispanic audience than these other stations, songs by these artists—which Bill Tanner praised as "a little madness from the street"—were at times the only rap songs on its playlist (*Radio & Records* 1988: 56).

And in a residentially segregated city whose politics were drawn according to the same racial lines that defined its geography, hip hop's ability to physically bring together young multicultural audiences was notable. When MC Hammer came to the Miami Arena in 1990, one columnist at the *Miami Herald* praised the audience as "the Miami many of us adults have given up on: multicultural, multiethnic. Rather, it was who-cares-what-ethnic." After the concert, he noted, many would return to

their segregated areas of Miami and "go back to hanging out with their isolated ethnic crowds again." But he hoped that one day "they'll remember only that they all liked the same music and danced the same steps" (Steinback 1990: 1B). The writer's hope was, of course, the promise of hip hop presented in *Rappin'*: a music that could unite factions with diverging interests, offering a fun way of coming together and making the world less divided. And on the radio, Crossover stations used hip hop for precisely this purpose, to bring together diverse audiences. But what was the impact of these stations off the air, within the communities they played rap for?

Commodifying Multicultural Listeners

Crossover stations made space within the radio industry for multicultural audiences, but their positioning did little to challenge the racism inherent to the industry's business model. Indeed, their place within the industry only reinforced its economic status quo, which discriminated against stations formatted for non-White audiences. At the local level, Crossover stations directly competed against Urban and Spanish-language stations, meaning that their growing popularity decreased the audience size and economic power of these other stations. In particular, Crossover stations repackaged the multiracial promise of Urban radio with a Whiter facade, dividing the local multiracial coalition audiences that Urban stations had been working to cultivate since the early 1980s and forcing Urban stations to compete against their more advertiser-friendly format (Ross 1990a, Hammou 2023). The coexistence of Crossover and Urban stations, *Radio & Record* columnists Walt Love and Sean Ross wrote, brought to mind "two separate but not very equal drinking fountains dispensing similar music" (1987: 44).

The competition between Crossover and Urban stations was tight in Miami. Returning to 1987, local gossip indicated that pressure from Crossover competitors would force Urban station WEDR to switch to a Country format (Love 1987). But the station held fast. Its continued success may have had to do with its programming team's recognition of

the complex relationship between race, ethnicity, and musical preference. Black programmer Jerry Rushin found that the station's Hispanic listeners "also like the same rhythms we do for the most part," and he understood that it was inaccurate for programmers to simplistically divide non-White audiences into Black and Hispanic segments. "People in other parts of the country," he thought, "don't realize that there are also blacks who were born in a number of Latin American countries." But Rushin was not convinced that the station's success would do much financially for it. Referring to advertisers, he bleakly stated that "[p]eople just want to look the other way when a Black station does well" (Love 1987: 47).

The station had only about a year to see whether its success could generate additional income. In the late Summer of 1988, WHQT recalibrated its programming once again (Ross and Olson 1988). Attempting to fit somewhere between Power 96 and WEDR, the station played "common denominator" rap, R&B, freestyle, and dance music alongside older hits by Black musicians such as New Edition's "Candy Girl" and the Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight." Programmer Keith Isley wanted WHQT to be "some sort of top-40-type station," but one that played more music by Black performers because he believed that "Black-based music is a lot more mass appeal than just black listeners." New jack swing, rap, and R&B "seem[ed] to cross better to both Anglos and Hispanics than dance music" (Ross 1989a: 19). But the appeal of Black culture only spread so far at the station. Like at many Crossover stations, the station's jocks were all White or Hispanic.

WEDR's ratings tanked, as young Black listeners in particular turned their radio dials away from the Black-operated station to the Crossover station. By 1989, half of WHQT's audience was Black, while almost all the station's staff were White, a disparity that some flyers critical of WHQT posted in nightclubs and flea markets pointed out (Love 1989). WEDR denied any direct involvement with this flyer campaign, but the station began running public service announcements highlighting its commitment to the local Black community, noting that "While others are exploiting our community, we truly do care" (Viglucci 1989: 1B). Commenting on his rival's lack of involvement with the Black community, WEDR pro-

grammer Jerry Rushin suggested that "They could hire some black people, other than the janitor" because "Somewhere we have to give something back other than bumpin' and grindin' music." WHQT's response emphasized the colorblind philosophy at the station; general manager Chuck Goldmark claimed that when a job opened, they would not prioritize Black talent and instead would hire any qualified DJ: "We don't care what color they are" (Viglucci 1989: 1B).

But the criticism did seem to affect the station's positioning. Shortly after the flyer campaign, WHQT began reaching out to the local Black community and started reporting to the trade journals as an Urban station (*Billboard* 1989). Perhaps the station's rapid rise to the top of the local market gave it leverage with advertisers, maybe advertisers had already seen through the Crossover label and noticed the station's sizeable Black audience, or maybe the station was simply trying to be more honest about its place within the market. Either way, its rebranding did not change the fact that its staff—on-air and behind the scenes—was mostly White. The station used Black music to appeal to a broad multicultural audience but did not hire staff who reflected the diversity of its playlists. Across the country, Crossover stations did much the same, playing music by artists of color while not increasing economic opportunities for professionals of color within the radio industry.

What's more, Crossover stations were often criticized for their unwillingness to engage with issues important to their local listeners of color (Andrews 1990). Miami's Crossover stations were often wary of discussing contentious local issues that their "tri-ethnic" audience might disagree on, such as the 1990 visit of Nelson Mandela (who had recently made pro-Fidel Castro comments) or the trial that same year of William Lozano, a Hispanic police officer accused of killing two unarmed Black men. Lozano's guilty verdict divided Miami's population along racial and ethnic lines: Black residents celebrated while the Hispanic Officers Association of Miami described the verdict as "a sad, sad day for the people of this city" (Schmalz 1989: A1; Nijman 2010). In some ways, Crossover stations' lack of engagement was a product of trying to appeal to such a multiethnic audience. Goldmark claimed that WHQT "tr[ied] not to exclude anybody" but noted that this attitude limited the sorts of topics his

on-air staff could discuss because "a lot of the issues are narrowly targeted" (Andrews 1990: 3). WEDR program director B.J. Barry agreed and considered this limitation a strategic advantage for his station. If WHQT were to make "the commitment to the black community that's necessary to keep blacks listening," he claimed, "it just might offend their white and Hispanic audience" (Love 1989: 47).

And even if Crossover stations had engaged in more contentious issues, programmers were not trained to deal with the intricacies of balancing and mediating these conversations. Even a decade later, and after wholly adopting a hip-hop format after gaining popularity as a Crossover station, New York's Hot 97, for example, was criticized for interviewing a police officer during their public-affairs show about the acquittal of the police officers who killed Amadou Diallo (Johnson 2009). When it came to the music, programmers were often ill-equipped to present hip hop along with its cultural context; many programmers were hired for their audience-building acumen, not their knowledge about the music they played. Like other industries, commercial radio incentivized a programmer's attention to the bottom line rather than educating their listeners or improving their ethical relationships with the world around them.[8]

But ultimately, it was not the programmers but rather the system that denied hip hop the potential to reshape the politics of race in the communities it brought together on the radio. Throughout its decade-long history, the commercial radio industry in the United States has been celebrated for its ability to bring listeners together. Eric Weisbard writes that on Top 40 stations, "music did not just sell out communal impulses; it subsidized new publics, or at least glimpses of social relationships still being cemented" (Weisbard 2014: 264). But it did so within the constraints of its business model, bringing together only the audiences which made stations money. This meant that there was a substantive difference between what Rappin' John Hood's rhymes

8 Programmers weren't ethical role models. In 1992, Tanner and some of his colleagues from Power 96 were charged with, and sometimes found guilty of, crimes ranging from driving under the influence to drug possession and child molestation (Due 1992).

could do within his neighborhood and what happened when Crossover stations played rap.

Crossover stations created the conditions for hip hop to be heard regularly on commercial radio stations, making spaces for multicultural audiences to come together to listen to artists of color rhyming over a beat. But the financial imperatives of the industry dictated the terms of hip hop's inclusion. The radio industry incentivized catering to White listeners, meaning that many Crossover stations maintained a distanced relationship to rap's Black identity, obscuring the genre's potential to be a platform for Black artists. Perhaps these stations' popularity among White listeners even demonstrated these listeners' distance from Black culture; as one Black programmer noted, "the shift by white listeners to white radio stations [from Urban stations] for Black music only shows that white people find the connection to Black people to be undesirable" (Martin 1988: 1–2). Crossover stations played a central role in hip hop's growth into the mainstream, bringing the sounds of young Black artists to airwaves across the country. But these stations failed to challenge the discriminatory practices so central to the radio industry's business model, demonstrating just how difficult it would be for the genre to exact lasting social change.

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