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Where Would Hip Hop Be Without Colleges and Universities?

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In an interview with Fuse last year, Kendrick Lamar—who just took the top spot in MTV's annual "Hottest MCs in the Game" list—revealed that his greatest regret in life was that he never attended college when he was younger. "Now all these years have passed, and I done got deep into a career, a music career," he said. "It's gonna be hard to find time unless I really put my focus into it."

It might seem strange that a rapper at the top of his game would place such importance on going to college, especially coming from a genre that prizes street knowledge over formal education. And yet a glance just a bit further down the "Hottest MCs" list reveals that the ivory tower has been a stop along the path to stardom for some of today's biggest names, including Rick Ross, 2 Chainz, and Kanye West.

In fact, this has been true throughout most of hip hop's 40 year history. While traditional narratives tend to present early hip hop solely as the product of marginalized urban youth, cut off from elite social institutions, it's hard to deny that colleges and universities have played a critical role in the early formation, and continued evolution, of hip hop as well.

Perhaps the most obvious illustration can be found in the formation of Def Jam Recordings. In 1983, Rick Rubin, an NYU student at the time, aspired to break into the burgeoning hip hop industry, so he borrowed \$5000 from his parents and recorded "It's Yours" by T La Rock and Jazzy Jay. When the song became a dance hit, he came up with the Def Jam label and began running it out of his dorm room. Shortly thereafter, he teamed up with Russell Simmons—himself a former college student—who had already begun signing the big names in hip hop that would eventually put Def Jam on the map. Among them were Kurtis Blow, rap's first major-label artist, and Run DMC, easily one of the most influential groups in rap history. Like Def Jam's founders, these artists also attended college, something D.M.C. (Darryl McDaniels) explicitly brags about on the 1984 song "Sucker MCs": "I'm D.M.C. in the place to be. / I go to St. John's University. / And since kindergarten I acquired the knowledge, / and after 12th grade I went straight to college."

On its way to becoming the premier hip hop label in the business, Def Jam went on to sign more successful college-student-turned-rappers, including the Beastie Boys (two of whom attended college) and Public Enemy. In the case of Public Enemy, college turned out to be more than just a stop on the way to a hip hop career—Adelphi University in Long Island provided the creative environment that brought together Chuck D and Flavor Flav, as well as producers Hank Shocklee and Bill Stephney. And since then, the genesis of groups like dead prez, Blue Scholars, Kidz in the Hall, and Das Racist can also be traced to college campuses, where group members met one another as students.

These examples are hardly isolated. Indeed, over the decades a long list of hip hop's biggest and most respected names can also claim ties to the academy, including Ice Cube, Salt N Pepa, Queen Latifah, Diddy, Guru, DJ Premier, Common, and Talib Kweli. Add to that list Lil Wayne, David Banner, Ludacris, J. Cole, Plies, Paul Wall, Immortal Technique, Wale, Killer Mike, Macklemore, and many others, and it becomes difficult to imagine a narrative of hip hop that does not account for colleges and universities. As a matter of fact, even *The Source*—the self-proclaimed "bible of hip hop culture, music, and politics" that has literally tried to shape rap's narrative for decades—was born on the campus of Harvard University in 1988, when two students, Jon Schechter and Dave Mays, started a newsletter covering the hip hop music industry.

To highlight the role of academia in the formation of hip hop is not an attempt to de-localize or de-racialize the culture, nor is it to gloss over the many performers who overcame profound adversity as they struggled to break into the industry. The number of influential rappers who came out of New York's Queensbridge housing projects alone is a testament to that. But at the same time, hip hop has always been highly diverse, with roots that extend beyond the streets and into the lecture halls, radio stations, and dormitories of college campuses. To lose sight of these roots is to risk drawing boundaries around a cultural movement that is in many ways defined by its aversion to such limitations.

In fact, institutions of higher education have played a critical role in ensuring that hip hop music remains fluid and vibrant. When rap music started to gain popularity, it still faced major challenges in getting airplay on commercial radio stations, and so for years, especially before the rise of the Internet and social media, college radio was one of the only ways that artists could disseminate their work. Today, things are very different. While every major market now has a "hot urban" station that plays hip hop music, these stations have become instruments of the record companies, repeating *ad nauseam* the same tracks that are largely devoid of lyrical innovation, social consciousness, or local flavor. Breaking into these limited rotations is nearly impossible (and sometimes not the goal) for "underground" artists, so many have turned to college radio stations to provide outlets to reach the public. These same artists have for decades looked to college campuses to provide an important touring circuit as well.

Given their long-held ties to hip hop, it's no surprise that institutions of higher education have shown a growing interest in bringing hip hop to the classroom. Not only have they offered hundreds of classes on hip hop over the last two decades (with a few, such as the University of Arizona, offering a formal qualification in hip hop studies), but in the last several years, artists such as Afrika Bambaataa, Wyclef Jean, Questlove of the Roots, GZA of the Wu Tang Clan, M1 of dead prez, and Bun B of UGK have been offered appointments at various schools. At the same time many other artists have begun collaborating with college faculty to explore the intersections of hip hop and higher education. What's more, universities like Cornell and Harvard have created extensive research archives devoted solely to documenting and celebrating hip hop culture.

Journalists, scholars, and even some artists too frequently cling to simplified mythologies of hip hop's beginning and development, perhaps afraid that by acknowledging the role of institutions like colleges and universities, they will somehow silence the people and communities that incubated hip hop in its earliest moments. This is understandable. However, as we look to a future in which the music industry continues to be a force for homogeneity and conformity in the name of profit, there is hope that colleges and universities can be vital partners to hip hop artists, offering new avenues for expression, even as others are closed off.

Perhaps seeing this potential, J. Cole, who was *magna cum laude* at St. John's University, recently told a group of Harvard students that more school was in his future. "That was some of my best times, in college," he said. "I really miss it. I'm going back to school."