

1-12-2018

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Recommended Citation

Oware, Matthew. Review of the book *Break Beats in the Bronx: Rediscovering Hip-Hop's Early Years*, by Joseph C. Ewoodzie. *Social Forces*, Volume 96, Issue 3 (March 2018): e4, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/sox098>.

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Book Review

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

By Joseph C. Ewoodzie Jr.

University of North Carolina Press, 2017. 256 pages. \$77.16 hardcover, \$26.55 paperback. <https://www.uncpress.org/book/9781469632759/break-beats-in-the-bronx/>.

Reviewer: Matthew Oware, *DePauw University*

Joseph Ewoodzie's monograph, *Break Beats in the Bronx: Rediscovering Hip-Hop's Early Years*, is a hip-hop head's ode to the culture with a sufficient dose of sociological theory for the academic crowd. He re-examines taken-for-granted assumptions regarding the origins of hip-hop. Specifically, the author unpacks how the culture came into existence; why it started in the Bronx; how its four elements—deejaying (DJing), rapping (MCing), breakdancing, and graffiti writing—gained prominence; and why hip-hop essentially became rap. With a “fresh” set of eyes, using archival information from the Museum of Pop Culture in Seattle, Washington, and firsthand accounts conducted by hip-hop historian Troy Smith, Ewoodzie (re)analyzes the histories of the founders of hip-hop, Kool DJ Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, and Grandmaster Flash. He also explores the backgrounds of lesser-known key figures such as Grandwizard Theodore, Grandmaster Caz, and Charlie Chase, among a plethora of other rarely discussed progenitors. All the while, he draws on sociological theorists' work such as Pierre Bourdieu, Erving Goffman, and George Simmel, as well as hip-hop scholars Tricia Rose and Cheryl Keyes, to anchor his analysis. His work has something for everyone, from cultural critics to cultural fanatics.

Ewoodzie contends, and rightly so, that most analysis of hip-hop and rap occurs post-1979, after the commercial success of “Rapper's Delight” by the Sugar Hill Gang. For him, previous works on hip-hop fail to address the genre's birth thoroughly. Critical moments within the Bronx from 1975 to 1979 created the foundation for one of the most well-known genres across the world—thus, this period deserves a detailed examination. In order to answer questions regarding hip-hop's origins and the primacy of the four elements, Ewoodzie posits that we must examine what he calls the internal and external logics of this new cultural form. Scholarship addressing hip-hop often frames its emergence based on the conditions of the Bronx during the 1970s. High rates of unemployment, urban renewal programs, and decreased social outlets hollowed out this location and other parts of New York. Surely, these external factors played a role in the development of the culture. However, internal forces such as hyper-competitiveness among DJs, graffiti

writers, and breakdancers—all forms in their embryonic stages at the time—also fostered the growth of hip-hop. Individuals hoping to obtain notoriety and fame in these areas pushed what Ewoodzie calls the conventions of this social entity. Borrowing from Howard Becker’s work on art, conventions encompass an informal set of rules that govern the behaviors of participants, in the case of hip-hop, performers and partygoers.

An example of a change in convention is the addition of the MC to DJs’ performances at local venues. Initially, DJs such as Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa were focal points at jams in parks and clubs. Youth danced while the DJ spun the records, drawing out the breakbeats of popular songs. However, Grandmaster Flash introduced the technique of mixing, which stunned audiences, causing them to stop dancing and focus their attention on his unique style of spinning. Made uneasy by the unwanted gaze, Flash added MCs to his sets—Cowboy, Kid Creole, and Melle Mel—who introduced routines or elementary rhymes and dancing that took eyes off Flash. However, this change pushed other DJs to add MCs to their performances. Thus, due to Flash’s insecurity, he unknowingly introduced an enduring aspect of hip-hop—the rap artist. Unfortunately for Flash, he also ushered in the eventual demise of the DJ.

In all, Ewoodzie’s book is insightful, well written, and thoroughly researched. His use of archival records and insights from key stakeholders in the culture adds much-needed detail and depth for a period often overlooked by far too many hip-hop studies scholars. Additionally, the author uses this case study as part of a broader discussion of social boundary creation and maintenance, drawing on the work of Andrew Abbott. Here, we see Ewoodzie’s examination of hip-hop as a contribution to the scholarly literature in cultural sociology. As a result, sociology courses focusing on culture and popular culture can benefit from assigning *Break Beats in the Bronx*. Courses in Africana Studies that examine black expressive culture and cultural production would be enhanced as well. Finally, Ewoodzie’s work is an important scholarly contribution to the growing area of hip-hop studies.

As someone who researches rap music and its representations of masculinity and sexuality, I find this book a critical intervention for understanding how hyper-masculinity, homophobia, and gendered norms surrounding the treatment of women took hold in the culture. These themes saturated the genre at its peak in the 1990s, and remain prominent in contemporary rap music. By understanding that early rappers embraced hegemonic masculinity—denigrating male opponents, presenting one’s self as a ladies’ man, and fabricating one’s wealth—as part of a competitive spirit, we learn that current artists’ lyrics articulating misogyny, sexism, and materialism do not come from “destitute” or “street” individuals. Rather, these tropes of rap have been a part of the scene since its birth in the mid-1970s. Moreover, they became conventions—expectations from fans and rap artists—for future MCs. This new insight allows for a more nuanced and complicated discussion surrounding rap music. Responding to the iconic rapper Rakim’s lyric—“It ain’t where you from, it’s where you at”—Ewoodzie’s book forces the reader to understand rap’s origins—where it came from—to understand its current incarnation—where it’s at.