ENG 350: THE HISTORY OF HIP-HOP

With your host, Dr. Russell A. Potter, a.k.a. Professa RAp

Monday - Thursday, 6:30-8:30, Craig-Lee 252

http://350hiphop.blogspot.com/

In its rise to the top of the American popular music scene, Hip-hop has taken on all comers, and issued beatdown after beatdown. Yet how many of its fans today know the origins of the music? Sure, people might have heard something of Afrika Bambaataa or Grandmaster Flash, but how about the Last Poets or Grandmaster CAZ? For this class, we’ve booked a ride on the wayback machine which will take us all the way back to Hip-hop’s precursors, including the Blues, Calypso, Ska, and West African griots. From there, we’ll trace its roots and routes through the ‘parties in the park’ in the late 1970’s, the emergence of political Hip-hop with Public Enemy and KRS-One, the turn towards “gangsta” style in the 1990’s, and on into the current pantheon of rappers. Along the way, we’ll take a closer look at the essential elements of Hip-hop culture, including Breaking (breakdancing), Writing (graffiti), and Rapping, with a special look at the past and future of turntablism and digital sampling. Our two required textbook are Bradley and DuBois’s Anthology of Rap (Yale University Press) and Neal and Forman’s That’s the Joint: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader are both available at the RIC campus store. Films shown in part or in whole will include Bamboozled, Style Wars, The Freshest Kids: A History of the B-Boy, Wild Style, and Zebrahead; there will also be a course blog with a discussion board and a wide array of links to audio and text resources at http://350hiphop.blogspot.com/

WRITTEN WORK: An informal response to our readings and listenings is due each week on the blog. There will also be one formal written paper of 4-6 pages in length, as well as an in-class individual or group presentation in the final week.
LIST I: ESSENTIAL READING: You should get yourself at least one of these, and two if you can manage it. Those marked Out of Print (OOP) can usually be had for a reasonable price at zShops, abebooks, or alibris.

1. David Toop, Rap Attack IV (III or II are fine as well -- each adds just a small amount of additional material at the end) (OOP) Toop’s is far and away the best and most engaging history of the dawn of the Hip-hop era, written at a time when, by Toop’s own account, the best way to get a hold of a well-known rapper or DJ was to call their mom.
2. Jim Fricke, Yes, Yes, Y'all: The Experience Music Project’s Oral History of Hip-hop's First Decade (OOP) Fricke’s book is jam packed with the documentary traces of the dawn of Hip-hop – fliers for concerts, battles, and jams – and includes first-person testimony from many of the genre’s originators.
3. Tricia Rose, Black Noise One of the first, and the most accessible, academic histories of Hip-hop.
4. The VIBE History of Hip-Hop (OOP) Slick, well-illustrated, and better than you might expect; Vibe's writers were the best during the “Golden Age” of Hip-hop from 1993 onwards.
5. S. H. Fernando Jr., The New Beats: Exploring the Music, Culture, and Attitudes of Hip-Hop (OOP) Fernando was, and is, one of the best new young journalists of the Hip-hop generation.

LIST II: USEFUL SUPPLEMENTAL READING: These books are all solid, but some address just one aspect of Hip-hop, or one related issue to the larger histories of African-American culture and Black music generally. NOTE: Books marked with an asterisk (*) are available FREE via the RI College Library’s “eBrary” page. Try to track down 1 or 2 that connect with your interests.

1. Nelson George, The Death of Rhythm and Blues; Hip-hop America
2. Adam Bradley, Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip-hop *
3. Tricia Rose, Hip-Hop Wars *
4. That's the Joint: The Hip-hop Studies Reader
5. Brian Cross, It’s Not About a Salary: Rap, Race & Resistance in Los Angeles (OOP)
7. Raquel Rivera, New York Ricans from the Hip-Hop Zone. *
9. Brian Coleman, Check the Technique: Liner Notes for Hip-Hop Junkies
10. Roni Sarig, Third Coast: How Hip-hop Became a Southern Thing
11. Eric Lott, Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class
12. Dick Hebdige, Cut 'n; Mix: Culture, Identity, and Caribbean Music
13. Iceberg Slim, Pimp
14. Gil Scott-Heron, Now and Then: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron
15. Abiodun Oyewole, On a Mission: Selected Poems and a History of the Last Poets (OOP)
17. Roger Gastman and Caleb Neelon, The History of American Graffiti
18. Geneva Smitherman, Talkin’ that Talk: African-American Language and Culture. *
CLASS SCHEDULE

WEEK I: Monday-Tuesday  INTRODUCTION TO CLASS.  THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN REPRESENTATION AND MUSIC.
  • Blackface Minstrelsy
  • Commodification of “Black” Culture
  • The “Comic Negro” and the “Tragic Negro”

NO CLASS WEDNESDAY (July 4)

WEEK I: Thursday.  Black Voices on the Air.
  • “Crazy Blues” and the birth of “Race” Records
  • Black Vaudeville (“The Chitlin’ Circuit”)
  • The Role of Black Radio


Fathers Speak the Truth” (TTJ); Potter, Spectacular Vernaculars, Chapter 1 “Gettin' Present as an Art” (blog link). (Items in boldface have lyrics in AOR).


WEEK VI: Monday: The Present and Future of Hip-Hop: Student Presentations. This will be our last class meeting; the final paper will be due by 12 p.m.(midnight) Thursday.