

The Music Behind African American Movements of Social Equality

American popular music is a reflection of current narrative and culture, including people group demographics, geographic regions, and messages to be conveyed, in addition to the distinct differences in musicality and execution of performance. African American popular music highlights important social movements, such as slavery and the Emancipation, the continued racial segregation and Jim Crow laws, the Harlem Renaissance, and the mid-century Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Though each popular style represents a unique narrative of specific culture, two styles in particular reflect similar musicality and social action: funk and hip hop. Though audibly unique and separated by 15 years, funk and hip hop styles share many analytical characteristics. In addition, the artists used their music to further their cause as a people group, communicating specific messages of social action. This paper will examine the music behind African American equality movements, relating to two popular funk and hip hop songs, James Brown's "Say it Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud" and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message," first examining the musical analysis and construction, then secondly illustrating the social, cultural, and historical significance behind the music, focusing on the similarities of construction and social action.

James Brown (1933-2006) created a unique niche within both the realms of musical genius and social construct. Brown, borrowing musical elements from the black church and popular music as well as dedicating himself to excellent showmanship, was considered to be the "hardest-working man in show business," devoting himself to unparalleled musicality as well as furthering his cause as an African American seeking social equality.¹ Brown, considered to be the founding father of funk music and the "Godfather of Soul," released "Say it Loud – I'm

1. Richard Crawford, *America's Music Life: A History*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 797.

Black and I'm Proud" in 1968, the very beginning of the Black Power Movement.² Funk was characterized by straight eighth and sixteenth subdivided rhythms, soul-filled vocal lines, complex harmonies extended through the use of vamping, strong emphasis on grooving bass lines, and lyrics communicating spiritual or social messages; "Say it Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud" exemplified this style.³

Funk, like hip hop, favored extensive jams, exemplified through harmonic groove, vocal ad lib, and solo material, making it one of the first genres to extend beyond "the 45-rpm single (three minutes and thirty seconds) format."⁴ That being said, "Say it Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud" is uncharacteristically only 2:51, yet definitely not lacking in musical originality. Funk rhythms are iconic with the shift back to straight rhythms, since swing had been the popular style for the past 60 years.⁵ The drums set a groove with quarter notes, except a distinct sixteenth note leading into beat three, creating the sixteenth subdivision feel. The bass offset the drum kit with an upbeat on the and-of two, quickly followed by the drum sixteenth leading into beat three, using the funk effects of "nonstop grooving, slapping, and thumping."⁶ Extended vamps over a single dominant 9th harmony created the basic structure, consisting of the drum and bass rhythms, with an electric guitar and brass section filling in between the rhythm section. During the bridge, the brass section and the bass created the harmonic groove, accenting the same beats. This tight combination of drum rhythm, bass line, and brass vamps established the groove of the

2. "James Brown," The James Brown Trust, accessed August 12, 2016, <http://www.jamesbrown.com/bio/default.aspx>.

3. David Brackett, "Funk," *Oxford Music Online*, accessed August 12, 2016, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.bu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/46626?q=funk&hbutton_search.x=0&hbutton_search.y=0&hbutton_search=search&source=omo_epm&source=omo_t237&source=omo_gmo&source=omo_t114&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit.

4. Reiland Rabaka, *The Hip Hop Movement: From R&B to the Civil Rights Movement to Rap and the Hip Hop Generation*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 214.

5. *Ibid.*, 293.

6. Reiland Rabaka, *The Hip Hop Movement*, 218.

song. The only sung section is a bridge breakdown, with vocals characteristic of the soul and gospel genre.⁷ Brown used spoken words, a precursor to hip hop's rap, during the verses and chorus sections, as well as sung syllables, such as "uh," "ooowee," and "ah," throughout, a technique borrowed from jazz and vocal scat. As traditional in the funk style, colloquial negative words were often inverted to give them a more radical meaning, such as the term "bad self," one of Brown's popular self-appointed nicknames, positively reappropriated to refer to his strong independent self.⁸

Hip hop was born out of funk using the same elements of straight rhythms, extended harmonic vamps, grooving bass lines, and soulful vocals. Hip hop expounded upon funk's use of spoken lyrics and syllables, which evolved into rap. The use of harmonic vamps was taken to a new extreme however, as an entire hip hop song could be built over one harmonic progression and groove, varied by additionally layered electronic sounds, vocal registers, and dynamics. The music of hip hop was constructed via a post-modern technique of splicing, remixing, and manipulating songs utilizing record turntables, often including rap and other spoken lyrics.⁹ Hip hop lyrics are reminiscent to funk, since "rap lyrics are frequently nothing more than contemporary updates of classic funk's lyrical themes," such as "slang, sex, and the sordid side of black life," and born from the same group of under classed and marginalized African Americans.¹⁰

7. Ibid., 161.

8. David Brackett, "Funk."

9. Encyclopedia of Popular Music, "Hip Hop," *Oxford Music Online*, accessed August 16, 2016, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.bu.edu/subscriber/article/epm/63796?q=hip-hop&search=quick&pos=2&_start=1#firsthit.

10. Reiland Rabaka, *The Hip Hop Movement*, 253.

Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five was a hip hop group active from 1976-1988, based out of the South Bronx in New York City, the centralized birthplace for the urban street culture genre of hip hop.¹¹ As a DJ, Grandmaster Flash used two turntables to create his music, perfecting the art of electronic “sampling.” Flash’s level of perfection included refining the inertia of the record, which Grandmaster Flash called “the torque-factor,” and establishing the minute difference between elliptical and conical needles, eventually developing into the “sampler.”¹² The foundation of the song was created using an electronic collection of earlier recordings, refined to specific samplers, imported into computers, and then were used to “duplicate any existing sound digitally, play it back at any speed or pitch, and loop it endlessly.”¹³ Grandmaster Flash, approaching “The Message” as a DJ and not as a traditional musician, used samplers and synthesizers to create the straight grooving beat, supporting the delivery of the lyrics, an exceptionally important aspect of hip hop music. Vocalist Melle Mel used different parts of his vocal range to accomplish different tones, such as the lower register for the introduction of the vocal theme (0:43-0:52), then a higher register, almost like declarative yelling, at the start of the verse at 1:03. After an introduction of the groove theme, five consecutive verses occur, each finalized with a refrain: “It’s like a jungle sometimes / It makes me wonder how I keep from going under.” Mel continued to use different tones and registers of his voice to express the disappointment, disillusionment, bewilderment, or anger at his current situation. Just as the funk artists inverted the colloquial meaning of specific words, such as “bad,” hip hop and rap was considered to be “hard” music, illustrating “that the music offered an

11. Encyclopedia of Popular Music, “Hip Hop.”
http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.bu.edu/subscriber/article/epm/63796?q=hip-hop&search=quick&pos=2&_start=1#firsthit.

12. Rashan Hall, “Grandmaster Flash: Rap Pioneer.”

13. Richard Crawford, *America’s Music Life: A History*, 849.

outlet for hard feelings, thoughts, and political points of view that might have been otherwise suppressed.”¹⁴

Funk and hip hop represent two distinct popular music styles that were used as a catalyst for social and racial change within the black American culture. Throughout history, social movements have been accompanied by sounds and music to unify the people to the cause. Twentieth-century black social movements include the Harlem Renaissance (1910-1935), the Civil Rights Movement (1947-1968), the Black Power Movement (1968-1980), and even continuing into today with the Black Lives Matter Movement (est. 2013). The Harlem Renaissance used big band swing as their sound, including artists such as Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, and Ella Fitzgerald, which birthed a new resurgence of African American music, art, culture, and fight for social equality. The Civil Rights Movement focused on ending racial segregation and discrimination using “nonviolent protest and civil disobedience” and featured the grooving sounds of funk as their soundtrack.¹⁵ The Black Power Movement compromised the nonviolent approach of Martin Luther King, Jr. due to the lack of affect of the Civil Rights Movement, employing the harsher sounds of hip hop and rap to unify and promote their cause. In addition to their individual place in both the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement, these popular black music styles are representative of the harsh, urban city life as they portray an attitude of confidence and pride in one’s identity and race, as well as being considered to be concert venues, representative of the black popular musical tradition.¹⁶ The hip hop and soul tradition has continued to be the

14. Reiland Rabaka, *The Hip Hop Movement*, 220.

15. “Civil Rights Movement,” History.com, last modified 2009, accessed August 17, 2016, <http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement>.

16. Richard Crawford, *America’s Music Life: A History*, 661.

soundtrack of the continual pursuit of social racial justice in America with the current Black Lives Matter Movement.¹⁷

These civil movements add much cultural narrative to the intention of the previously discussed songs, “Say It Loud – I’m Black and I’m Proud” and “The Message.” Brown’s “Say It Loud – I’m Black and I’m Proud” was declarative and commanding, so much so that the song was heralded by the black community as the theme song for the Black Power Movement, which began the same year as the song’s release.¹⁸ The song was released immediately following Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination, a declaration of Brown’s commitment to “*black empowerment* and deeply outraged by what seemed to be an all-out government-sanctioned assault on black America.”¹⁹ “Say It Loud – I’m Black and I’m Proud,” full of soulful lyrics and attractive groove, reflected the cultural needs of a group of people that desired to be treated with equality and respect and that invoked a call-and-response with the leaders and followers that demanded action, not just a listening ear.²⁰

“The Message” also conveyed a strong message of strength that demanded social action, though it was released 14 years later. Hip hop was born out of the fight against “deindustrialization and urban renewal” in the South Bronx region of New York City.²¹ As the gap between the rich and the poor widened, traditional private music lessons were not common; music was learned and experienced through boom boxes, radios, and record players, creating a new often completely electronic form of popular music.²² While hip hop lyrics may be

17. “Sounds of Black Lives Matter,” CampaignZero.com, last modified July 7, 2016, accessed August 21, 2016, <http://soundsofblm.com/>.

18. David Brackett, “Funk.”

19. Reiland Rabaka, *The Hip Hop Movement*, 226-227.

20. *Ibid.*, 227.

21. Richard Crawford, *America’s Music Life: A History*, 849.

22. *Ibid.*, 848-850.

considered obscene, they are similar to funk, as a “culmination of black popular music from the pathos of the blues through to the festive vibes of funk,” connecting these two styles not just by musical groove but by intent of lyrics.²³ This was particularly true for the lyrics of “The Message,” a song describing the inequality of people groups, education, employment opportunities, and government services, such as reliable public transportation, as well as the daily frustrations voiced from a member of the African American community wondering how long he can stay afloat of life.

While every popular American music style reflects individual characteristics of culture, the sounds behind twentieth-century African American civil rights movements illustrate a specific objective: fight for their social and political cause with musical excellence and ingenuity. Funk reinvented African American musical styles with its return to straight rhythms and vamping grooves, most of which are attributed to James Brown. Hip hop evolved from the funk style and has continued to make a lasting impression upon black popular music and social movements today. In conclusion, two popular African American songs, Brown’s “Say It Loud – I’m Black and I’m Proud” and Grandmaster Flash’s “The Message,” illustrated musical ingenuity, ascertained a unique political agenda, and furthered the cause to specific African American social movements. These songs established a new form of popular groove, testifying to an ever-growing desire for new American popular music.

23. Reiland Rabaka, *The Hip Hop Movement*, 253-254.

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