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Musical Resistance

“But if God got us, then we gon’ be alright.” With some of the most simplistic yet influential lyrics, Kendrick Lamar was able to move society and create an anthem for the oppressed. In order to truly understand the correlation between music and resistance, there demands an investigation into the enriched history of this form of art. Music is arguably one of the greatest human creations of all time. Through singing, dancing, and other musical expressions, this creative sound can move audiences from all backgrounds. The diversity, inclusivity, and creativity are what make music special to all of us. Each genre has its own narrative, but one specifically sticks out to many. Hip-hop, introduced to humanity in the 1900s has spread throughout the world like wildfire and influenced countless artists to pursue their musical careers. During this time, New York City shadowed the black community and prevented them from having a voice. Boroughs such as Harlem and the Bronx were being transformed into war zones that Black Americans were forced to grow up in. This community discovered music and saw it as a way to break that silencing hand, rewarding themselves with a presence in American society. Hip-hop was created in the Bronx, New York City, and came in four pillars: emceeing, deejaying, breakdancing, and graffiti. Through this strong backbone of the genre, hip-hop artists were able to communicate their thoughts and feelings while building a stronger community around them. Upcoming artists such as Grandmaster Flash and Sugar Hill Gang helped dismay the genre to a wider audience and solidify hip-hop as a medium for musical resistance. Hip-hop began to be used as a way for the black community to protest oppression and stand up against the everyday injustices they faced. In schools, neighborhoods, and public facilities, hip-hop has significantly influenced the upcoming African-American generation. Fifty years is all it took for hip-hop to become one of the most appraised, followed, and practiced genres in the current music industry. Music has played an essential role in helping the black community resist oppression in the United States. This is evident by looking at the hip-hop artists who have protested these injustices publicly, the songs and anthems being used as a form of expression and creativity, and the strong community built through the genre. Music has provided African Americans with inclusion and diversification in today's society, awarding them with a podium to vocalize against discrimination.

As hip-hop evolved as a genre and flourished in communities from all regions of the country, a plethora of artists began to show interest in this form of music in order to speak their minds. These musicians decided to transform hip-hop into a political and social forefront towards protesting against oppression. Artists such as Tupac Shakur, Public Enemy, and N.W.A. used hip-hop to promote resistance and demand change. Rappers used music to not only express freedom but to create a powerful statement against certain societal issues. Jesus Ramos states in “HIP-HOP: The Greatest Form of Resistance” that “From Hip-Hop groups such as N.W.A. and Outkast or rappers like Tupac, Kanye West, and Kendrick Lamar, their opinions and experiences as African American males living in the U.S. are often expressed explicitly within their music”(Ramos 1). Hip-hop artists not only saw their music as a way to express their creativity

and thoughts on society but to also promote change and rise against the discrimination in their lives. These musicians would use the platform as a way to spread the resisting form of art, and it was exhibited through their lyrics. Additionally, what was seen to many as the genre of exemplifying ideas of murder, drugs, and sex, hip-hop provided millions with an opportunity to spread their voice and protest systemic oppression towards the black community. In the late 1900's, rap was a "dirty word" and radio stations, venues, and even the Grammys unacknowledged the genre. One specific hip-hop group, Public Enemy, decided to change that common misconception and take their work to the next level. The group understood they had a large following and a tremendous platform, so they took advantage of that in order to tell the world about what had been hidden from society for the last 100 years. In an interview with Public Enemy lead singer Chuck D published by Ben Thomas on The Guardian, Chuck states "If the government dictates who you are, then you're part of the power structure that keeps you down. We were going to fight that and say: 'Look at me as a human being.' The government wanted rap to be infantile, to have us talk about cookies and girls and high school shit. I was like: 'Nah, we're going to talk about you'"("How We Made Public Enemy's Fight The Power"). Through the controversial culture of hip-hop, Public Enemy saw an opportunity and light where others saw doubt and negativity. The group used their music as a way to resist the oppression they faced in their personal lives. Being heard as an African American during that time was fatiguing and often silenced by society. Chuck D understood that the only solution to protest the injustice in America was to communicate through music. Furthermore, a few decades ago hip-hop was still a growing niche genre that evolved constantly. However, the one thing that stuck with hip-hop through it all was the accessibility and opportunity to speak your mind. To many, hip-hop was the resort to speaking one's feelings and disavowing their outside life. Most areas that hip-hop flourished in had a dangerous community. The genre was a method of escaping that danger and staying off the streets. Hip-hop was used to communicate what people experienced on those streets and protest the government's inaction towards the issue. Cameron Newman claims on The Hoya that "I want to really reinforce the Black experience. The marginal or subordinate cultural groups that turn to hip-hop say, 'This is the way we can amplify ourselves and give ourselves a presence in our world and in a society that continually represses us.' Hip-hop has become that amplifier"("Hip-Hop's Origin Story Is One of Political Struggle, Creative Resistance"). This proves that many members of the African-American community viewed hip-hop as something greater than just music and as the key to resistance. This idea of creating something beautiful out of destruction, chaos, and silence inspired millions around the nation. The hip-hop resistance movement is the indubitable demonstration that no matter how much you are discriminated against, silenced, and ridiculed, change can be created through doing what you love. Not only have hip-hop artists created a sense of belonging and provided a voice for the black community, but the songs they create hold deep meaningful messages that boast musical assertion.

Throughout the history of hip-hop, songs have been published that spread the notion of expression and perseverance inside our communities. For example, rapper Kendrick Lamar noticed the battles his fellow African Americans were facing in certain low-income communities. To soothe those affected, he released his hit song "Alright" to respond to these battles. Alec Banks states on Rock The Bells that "The chorus for Kendrick Lamar's 'Alright' has become the rallying cry at many Black Lives Matter protests throughout the country... 'And we hate po-po, Wanna kill us dead in the streets for sure, I'm at the preacher's door, My knees getting weak, and my gun might blow, But we gon' be alright'"("Hip-Hop's 10 Best Protest

Songs”). These lyrics demonstrate the resilience and demand for change that fueled the lives of several Black Americans. Lamar was able to communicate what most could not in order to deliver a powerful message to our nation. Movements were built behind this song that influenced groups to express themselves despite the hate. Not only has “Alright” guided millions of people to communicate collaboration and love, but 2Pac’s single “Changes” bestowed a different lens on the issue. Tupac understood that both sides had their problems and that combined advancements were essential, so he tried to remain neutral on most of his beliefs. As a result, he dropped his song “Changes” to promote change and peace within society. As stated in “Hip-Hops 10 Best Protest Songs”, “But unlike the others, Pac offered up a solution; if everything that young, black men and women were doing was ‘wrong’ in the eyes of the powers that be, then it stood to reason that major change had to stem from within”(Banks). This proves that “Changes” helped pave the road to finding a solution to the issue the black community was facing. The song explored all of the roadblocks but also promoted adjusting the way certain communities lived and treated each other. Also, this song was influenced by another previous single released by an artist that focused on the same subject. In 1971, Marvin Gaye released his album “What’s Going On”. His introductory song on the album, also titled “What’s Going On”, asked the question that many oppressed humans were also wondering. What exactly was going on in our country? Lyrics such as “Brother, there’s far too many of you dying. You know we’ve got to find a way, to bring some lovin’ here today”(Gaye 0:26) helped try to solve this perplexing idea that countless members of the black community also pondered. This demonstrates that Gaye spotted a massive tear in the country he grew up in and decided to hold up a mirror to society in turmoil. These lyrics that focused on the overflowing pain and suffering still resonate with African Americans to this day. Because of the heartfelt passion induced by “What’s Going On”, the song has been used as a staple piece for the numerous movements. All three of these resilient anthems have provided a healthy influence on African Americans, but there has also been a loyal and strong community built through music.

Since the birth of hip-hop, all sorts of localisms have been created throughout the United States. Different communities and regions had their own method of speaking through music, but all shared the common goal of achieving justice. For example, activist Rebel Diaz uses his platform to involve Harlem youth in the art of music. He focuses on transforming the lives of those affected by the dangers of society and using hip-hop as a *modus operandi* to authorize that. In an interview with Sufiya Saylove, Diaz claims “We feel that the most revolutionary thing we could do in the current throws of the political climate is to create a safe place for young people to gather around, and provide them with the infrastructure needed to create an alternative culture. That means recording spaces, performance spaces, you know spaces to be able to edit and produce music and hone their craft”(“Hip-Hop As Global Resistance”). This quote provides the reasonable assumption that music is being used in low-income communities to direct attention from violence to art. Through hip-hop, Rebel has been able to not only save several lives but also reshape their futures to ones that point toward successful outcomes. Furthermore, the hip-hop community has a mixture of resistance and creativity, strengthened through bonds that are developed through the genre. Politically and socially, members of the black community have created relationships and conversed over music. As stated on The Hoya, “With the combination of political resistance and creative elements that led to hip-hop as we know it today, hip-hop is clearly an entire culture of its own, according to Forman”(Newman). This shows that the creativity and uniqueness that come with music have helped build friendships and ties within communities. People have been able to connect over music because of the relationships they can

develop with certain hip-hop songs. Additionally, black Americans can relate personal experiences and find a common ground for their memories through hip-hop. Many are able to speak their feelings and opinions on the world, all while bonding closer as a community. Tyina Steptoe states on yes! Magazine that “Hip-hop artists have protested police violence in their music for decades. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, rappers from different corners of the United States described the brutal and discriminatory police tactics they witnessed in their communities”(Steptoe 2). This demonstrates how hip-hop artists have been constructing an exponentially growing community for decades. Artists can collaborate and piece together certain experiences they might share, resulting in more relative songs. Projects created become motivating chants for protests and movements. The communities that the hip-hop industry has built in the past decades have helped resist oppression as well as spawn new artists who create popular anthems.

The protesting songs that hip-hop artists have created in our history have molded communities and solidified hip-hop as the supporting piece for aiding the black community in resisting oppression. Music has provided this community with the opportunity to express themselves and vocalize thoughts. In the recent past, several rappers have made a name for themselves by releasing music concerning the movements that protest injustice. Songs have been published that demand change and include personal experiences and feelings, helping provide a sufficient basis for protests and anthems. The hip-hop community has benefited countless souls by helping express the thoughts of those who are normally silenced. Pieces of music are used to strengthen bonds and birth new relationships. Hip-hop blooms variations of cultures and heritages throughout the nation. For centuries, the black community has been suppressed and discriminated against, seen as a lesser race to the oppressors. Hip-hop has helped shine a light on the issue and spark resistance, providing illumination for those a part of this community. If we continue to use music to protest injustice and demand change, eventually the words will take their toll and change will be made.

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