

IT'S TRICKY TO ROCK A RHYME: RAP-ROCK AND THE "PURIFICATION" OF GENRE,
1980-2000

By

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A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Musicology – Master of Arts

2023

ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses the development of the rap-rock genre from the mid-1980s through the end of the 1990s by analyzing the programming choices of MTV and how this music and its artists were perceived by audiences. The first major event that sets up this thesis is the Disco Demolition Night of 1979. The violence and anger that came from rock fans at this event shows us how rock at this point had, to them, become a “serious” art form, while they slandered disco because of its simplistic, unoriginal style. Rock fans at the end of the 1970s believed rock to be the “superior” genre that shouldn’t be changed or influenced by genres lesser-than.

My first chapter takes place during the mid-late 1980s with an analysis of MTV’s programming choices in relation to crossover genres. MTV’s programming was heavily oriented toward rock fans at its premiere, but as the channel’s audience expanded, MTV had to adapt in order to stay relevant. MTV’s adaption to newer audiences included more pop music from white and black artists, as well as crossover between rap and rock. The popularity of rap-rock crossover in the mid-1980s was segregated again by MTV with the creation of its specialty programming, which separated rap and rock between the programs *Yo! MTV Raps* and *Headbangers Ball*. Chapter 2 discusses the rising popularity of rap music in popular culture and how this popularity allows white rock fans to begin taking influence from these black rap artists. As the presence of black rap artists’ bodies became more and more common on MTV, white suburbanites began to emulate the clothing styles seen in the music videos. Chapter 3 illustrates the development of the use of the term nu-metal instead of rap-rock to illustrate how rap-rock was continuing to borrow from rap, but without the burden by removing the obvious connections to the genre. Chapter 3 ends with an analysis of Woodstock ’99 and the perception from fans of the violence seen at the event in relation to the music that was played.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Kenneth Prouty, Dr. Sarah Long, and Dr. Cara Stroud for being a part of my committee and helping me through the many hours of writing and researching that it took me to complete this thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

When I went to Slipknot's Knotfest Road Show in October of 2021 I got a chance to see some of the biggest nu-metal bands of recent years, as well as some up and coming groups. Nu-metal as a genre title came into common use by the end of the 1990s, but before then it was known by a different, "rap-rock." This idea of rap and rock coming together to create a new genre is called "crossover" in the music industry. One of these rap-rock groups was Fever 333, the only group at the festival who had members of color, and whose music focused on the social injustices within the United States. What they said to the audiences about half way through their set is what inspired me to do this research into the origins of nu-metal/rap-rock; "Thank you for letting us be people of color on this stage. To me this is American." This quote brought attention to the racial makeup of the nu-metal genre, which is almost completely white, and the question of why? Rock has become a heavily white genre, but nu-metal also borrowed from hip-hop and rap traditions, so had nu-metal always been a "white" genre? In order to answer this question, we have to understand the historical discourse surrounding racial tensions between white rock fans and black music and musicians.

Rock music is nearly universally understood to have been derived from the blues and R&B music of black musicians through the 1940s, but beginning in the 1950s, the genre has increasingly become identified with white artists and audiences. According to David Brackett, the pop charts in the mid-19th century had been divided into specific categories that "represented specific (or implied) group identifications."¹ As these groups were created and categorized by the music industry, the music categories and charts inherently began to act as a force of inclusion or exclusion based on how the artists and charts were categorized toward certain group

¹ David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 19.

identifications.² We can see this in R&B acts of the 1950s, where all black artists were included on the R&B charts while white artists covering the same black R&B songs were on the pop charts. As a musical term, “crossover” occurs when one artist crosses into two separate musical charts, for example, a jazz artist being on the jazz chart, but also crossing into the Top 40 pop chart. Rap-rock as a stylistic category developed out of this idea, as the genre was popular amongst both rock and rap charts.

Music charts historically have functioned as a symbolic form of exclusion between different genres and their social classes.³ Formatting on pop-oriented radio during the 1970s was largely divided between four different charts: “Rock Singles Best Sellers,” “Rock LPs Best Sellers,” “Album Radio Action Chart List,” and “Disco Action Top 40.”⁴ By the late 1970s, however, the Top 40 chart itself saw an increasing overlap with the disco chart, a situation which would be solidified with the release of the film *Saturday Night Fever* in 1977, which brought disco to the forefront of the entertainment industry.⁵ The film’s young, white protagonist, played by John Travolta, served to transform disco into a dominant force in American music and popular culture. Despite this, disco was still understood as a genre which was closely identified with black, Latino, and gay audiences; this point is underscored in the film’s conclusion, in which Travolta’s character Tony rejects the dance-off trophy he has just won, seemingly recognizing that he was still an outsider. Bill Yousman notes this challenge to cultural authority, writing that “there is a profoundly disturbing tension that is felt by those Whites who have been socialized to think of themselves as naturally dominant and yet find this ‘natural’ position of

² Brackett, 28.

³ David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 28.

⁴ David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 284.

Rosemary Lucy Hill, *Gender, Metal, and the Media: Women Fans and the Gendered Experience of Music* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 4.

⁵ Rob Tannenbaum, “Stayin’ Alive,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 19, 2020, <https://www-proquest-com.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/docview/2471130393?accountid=12598>.

power being challenged by the very same individuals to whom they believe themselves inherently superior.”⁶ As disco rose to its ascendant position, the backlash from some rock fans would become much more vocal and, in some cases, violent.

Disco Demolition Night was the culmination of a growing movement against disco by rock fans. The event was the brainchild of Chicago based radio DJ Steve Dahl, whose own hatred of disco intensified when the radio station he DJed for (WDAI) changed from its album oriented rock programming to disco. Dahl was fired from WDAI when the format changed to disco, but he then became the DJ at WLUP. He then used his new radio station to “make fun” of WDAI and their new host Wally Phillips because disco programming “was the worst thing ever.”⁷ It was on WLUP that Dahl began an anti-disco movement, whose motto (“disco sucks”) was yelled on air while Dahl broke disco records over his head.⁸ Dahl’s anti-disco movement gained traction because some audiences believed that disco was “devoid of intelligence, musicality or passion.”⁹ As Dahl’s “disco sucks” movement gained traction in the popular sphere, Chicago White Sox promotions manager Mike Veeck collaborated with Dahl to create a promotional event between the games of a White Sox/Tigers doubleheader at Comiskey Park on July 12, 1979. This promotion encouraged attendees to bring disco records (for which they received discounted

⁶ Bill Yousman, “Blackophilia and Blackophobia: White Youth, the Consumption of Rap Music, and White Supremacy,” *Communication Theory* 13, no. 4 (November 2004): 382.

⁷ Steve Dahl and Dave Hoekstra, *Disco Demolition Night: The Night Disco Died* (Curbside Splendor Publishing, 2016), 95.

⁸ Steve Dahl and Dave Hoekstra, *Disco Demolition Night: The Night Disco Died* (Curbside Splendor Publishing, 2016), 29.

⁹ Rob Tannenbaum, “Stayin’ Alive,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 19, 2020, <https://www-proquest-com.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/docview/2471130393?accountid=12598>.

admission), which would then be collected and ceremoniously blown up.¹⁰ Chicago-based DJ Darlene Jackson, also known by her stage-name DJ Lady D, notes that fans' ire seemingly went beyond disco itself: "the emotional arc of Disco Demolition is that you had this outward moment of hate, highly focused onto a specific thing: disco music. After closer examination, it revealed itself to have racist and homophobic aspects. That may have not been Steve Dahl's mind frame at the time, but it came from somewhere. And it reverberated..."¹¹ The violence seen at Disco Demolition Night illuminates the underlying racism that existed within the white rock community during the 1970s against black disco artists (or any black artist that wasn't rock).

In Figure 1 we see a Twisted Sister Fan Club poster that was awarded to Steve Dahl on August 11th, 1979, titled the "Disco Sucks Award."¹² According to Steven Blush in his book *When Rock Met Disco: The Story of How the Rolling Stones, Rod Stewart, KISS, Queen, Blondie and More Got Their Groove On in the Me Decade*,

[t]he Long Island "party band" [Twisted Sister] left their inedible mark, smashing disco records onstage, and much more. The Twisted Sister Fan Club once picketed outside Studio 54, and the band also took an ad in *Billboard* to give Steve Dahl the first "Disco Sucks Award" for his "victory in the battle against disco." Their song "Disco Sucks" – with its refrain "I hate disco because disco really sucks" – hung on banners from balconies, and some fans wore T-shirts that seconded that emotion.¹³

¹⁰ Rob Tannenbaum, "Stayin' Alive," *Chicago Tribune*, December 19, 2020, <https://www-proquest-com.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/docview/2471130393?accountid=12598>.

¹¹ Steve Dahl and Dave Hoekstra, *Disco Demolition Night: The Night Disco Died* (Curbside Splendor Publishing, 2016), 40.

¹² Mitch Lafon, "Disco Demolition Night took place at Chicago's Comiskey Park on July 12, 1979.," Twitter, August 11, 2022, <https://twitter.com/mitchlafon/status/1557730231774941184?s=46&t=TxRk0Dp17yGvOBicXeCICw>.

¹³ Steven Blush, *When Rock Met Disco: The Story of How the Rolling Stones, Rod Stewart, KISS, Queen, Blondie and More Got Their Groove On in the Me Decade* (London: Backbeat, 2023), 156.

Another important aspect is the small description at the bottom of the poster that says “[a]nother victory in the battle against Disco to celebrate the 25th anniversary of Rock & Roll.” 25 years before 1979 was 1954, the year Bill Haley and his Comets released “Rock Around the Clock,” which is considered by some to be the first ever rock song. The fact that this poster pinpoints 1954 as the exact moment when rock began erases all of the previous early black rock musical influences on the genre, further solidifying rock as a “white” genre. Besides the obvious praise of Steve Dahl’s work of creating Disco Demolition Night, the wording of the poster itself highlights the “war” that seemed to be happening between rock and disco. “Long live rock & roll” also highlights the idea of rock being an “important” or “superior” genre to other genres, especially.

As the dust – and record shards – were settling in Chicago, another paradigm-shifting development was happening in New York. The Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight” (1979) became the first hip-hop single on the Top 40 chart (hitting number 36 on the *Billboard* Hot 100, and number 4 on the R&B/Hip-Hop Songs chart) which opened the door for hip-hop and rap to be introduced to new audiences.¹⁴ “Rapper’s Delight” primarily sampled (although the recording was actually made with a live band) from “Good Times” by Chic, which was a disco song released only a few months earlier. The use of disco samples by hip-hop artists is rooted in the history of the genre being primarily focused on underground parties and dance clubs where the DJ’s needed to keep the beat going to keep dancers on the dance floor. Rap and hip-hop’s clear connection back to disco served to amplify the negativity which some rock fans would exhibit toward rap in later years.

But rock audiences and communities were not always hostile to such musical movements. A number of observers have, for example, spoken of the close links between the rap

¹⁴ *Billboard* Staff, “29 Black Music Milestones: Sugarhill Gang Pioneers Hip-Hop,” *Billboard*, February 10, 2011, <https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/29-black-music-milestones-sugarhill-gang-pioneers-hip-hop-473110/>.

and punk communities during these formative years, which stems in part from both genres' roots in countercultural movements in the U.S..¹⁵ A notable example can be seen in the early New Wave group Blondie and their song "Rapture" (1981). Blondie started their career as a punk band in New York City during the 1970s, performing frequently at clubs like CBGBs, but by the beginning of the 1980s had shifted from punk to the more pop-radio friendly New Wave sound. Debbie Harry, the lead singer for Blondie, had been exposed to rap music in her time in New York City and chose to use her platform as a pop artist to bring attention to the style. In her rapped verses she cites central figures in the DJ and rap scenes, including Grandmaster Flash and Fab 5 Freddy (who appears on the music video for the song). In an ironic twist, "Rapture" likely helped to popularize rap among the broader pop audience: Adam Horovitz and Mike Diamond of the Beastie Boys cite "Rapture" as the first rap song that was known by audiences outside of the rap community.¹⁶ But while affinities between punk rock and rap were embraced by some, in other cases, hostility would remain a significant factor. Echoing the hostility on display at Disco Demolition Night, Grandmaster Flash was promptly booed off the stage in 1981 when he opened for the punk band The Clash in New York.¹⁷

This hostility toward certain genres of music has deep roots in musicological discourse. German philosopher T. W. Adorno discussed the idea of "serious" vs "popular" music in his 1941 article titled "On Popular Music," where he defines serious music as "[e]very detail derives its musical sense from the concrete totality of the piece which, in turn, consists of the life

¹⁵ Bakari Kitwana, *Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005), 26-27.

¹⁶ Mike Diamond and Adam Horovitz, *The Beastie Boys Book* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2018), 82.

¹⁷ Diamond and Horovitz, 15.

relationship of the details and never of a mere enforcement of a musical scheme.”

Comparatively, Adorno then goes on to say that “[n]othing corresponding to this can happen in popular music. It would not affect the musical sense if any detail were taken out of the context; the listener can supply the ‘framework’ automatically, since it is a mere musical automatism itself.”¹⁸ While Adorno’s main point was a comparison between popular music and more established art forms, his ideas are similar to longstanding debates *within* the discourses of popular music in the late 20th century. Simon Frith explores this theme in his seminal 1987 essay “Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music.” He states that the

rock aesthetic depends, crucially, on an argument about authenticity. Good music is the authentic expression of something – a person, an idea, a feeling, a shared experience, a *Zeitgeist*. Bad music is inauthentic.- it expresses nothing. The most common term of abuse in rock criticism is ‘bland’ – bland music has nothing in it and is made only to be commercially pleasing.

“Authenticity” is, then, what guarantees that rock performances resist or subvert commercial logic, just as rock star quality (whether we are discussing Elvis Presley or David Bowie, the Rolling Stones or the Sex Pistols), describes the power that enables certain musicians to drive something individually obdurate through the system. At this point, rock criticism meets up with “serious” musicology.¹⁹

In this passage, Frith highlights both what the rock aesthetic is, as well as how this aesthetic aligns with Adorno’s notions of “serious music.” Rock had progressively moved from being a “popular” music to a “serious” music amongst fans of the genre, a point which would

¹⁸ T.W. Adorno, “On Popular Music,” *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9, no. 1 (1941): 19.

¹⁹ Simon Frith, “Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music,” in *Taking Popular Music Seriously* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007): 260.

heavily inform the reception of rap amongst some rock fans into the 1980s and 1990s. This would become a particularly pressing point with the rise in popularity of rap-rock crossover recordings in the early-mid 1980s. But the relationship between rock and rap would, over the course of two decades, reveal both the potential and limitations of crossover, particularly as filtered through the fraught topic of race in the music industry, a point which forms the core question of this thesis.

Chapter one will address the emergence of rap-rock crossover as a popular form in the mid-1980s, within the broader context of racial identity in the pop music industry. After a discussion of rock and race in MTV's early programming, I examine the careers of Run-DMC and the Beastie Boys, the two groups whose work arguably established rap-rock as a viable genre. While the two groups had different origins (Run-DMC in hip hop, the Beastie Boys in punk), they would eventually converge as the leading figures in rap-rock during a two-year period between 1984-1986. This is followed by a discussion of the evolution of specialty programming on MTV as a response to these developments, as well as parallel developments in the underground metal scene. The coalescence of metal fans around Metallica, especially following the release of their 1986 album *Master of Puppets*, forced MTV to accommodate a growing "rockist" sentiment among some fans, leading to the premiere of *Headbangers' Ball* in 1987. This in turn would be followed by *Yo! MTV Raps* a year later, enacting a form of stylistic segregation on the network which echoes earlier programming in the early 1980s.

The second chapter begins at the dawn of the 1990s with the continued rise of rap-rock in popular culture. The rising visibility of rap, which accelerated with *Yo! MTV Raps* at the end of the 1980s, brought hip-hop clothing and other visual cultural symbols into mainstream popular culture. A notable example can be seen in Run DMC's recording of "My Adidas," which

solidified the brand as a key symbol in hip-hop. Aside from fashion, the very presence of the artist's body also plays a role in how certain bands' music was understood by critics and audiences. A notable example was Ice-T's rock band Body Count, which, despite its sonic grounding in metal, was mainly categorized as rap due to the presence of a black rapper as the lead singer (who doesn't even rap in their music). As rap became a more significant presence on the pop music scene, a number of high-profile collaborations began to occur between rock and rap artists; two notable examples were those between Public Enemy and Anthrax, and between Biohazard and Onyx. But by the middle of the decade, rap-rock collaborations became less common; instead, rap's incorporation into rock would follow a course that attempted to separate the music from its historical origins and identities.

The final chapter traces the transformation of rap-rock into nu-metal, culminating with the participation of nu-metal bands in the ill-fated Woodstock '99 festival, coming three decades after the original Woodstock, and two decades after Disco Demolition Night. The adoption of the term nu-metal to refer to mostly white groups who fused rap and metal served to erase direct connections to rap/hip-hop. Emerging from Bakersfield, California, Korn became the face of nu-metal in the mid-1990s with the release of their self-titled debut album in 1994. Korn's connection to hip-hop is most easily seen in their song "A.D.I.D.A.S.," which reappropriates the adidas brand name into a sexual reference. Korn was also known for wearing adidas tracksuits, providing a more tangible connection to Run-DMC's usual uniform. This is followed by a discussion of the next major figure in rap-rock to emerge by the end of the 1990s, Detroit's Kid Rock. Instead of pushing the common inner-city born and raised narrative that many rappers associate with, this young white rapper claimed (falsely) that he was from the "trailer park," featuring a sound that combined rap, rock, and country music. Kid Rock's image was largely

disconnected from the usual storylines that were associated with rap, instead creating a new image that revolves around his “whiteness.” The final segment of this chapter will discuss the careers of bands such as Limp Bizkit, culminating in the events and aftermath of Woodstock ’99. The headliners of Woodstock ’99 had consisted of almost all of the most popular white rap-rock/nu-metal bands at the end of the 1990s. While the rioting and sexual violence seen at Woodstock ’99 received a good deal of press coverage (including potential links to lyrics), the reactions were decidedly different than those directed at black rap groups earlier in the decade, who often faced performance bans and similar sanctions. By contrast, the careers of bands such as Limp Bizkit, whose song “Break Stuff” was often cited as a catalyst for the violence at Woodstock ’99, suffered comparatively little negative impact from their performances at the festival.

This shift from rap-rock’s association with black musicians like Run-DMC, to becoming a genre that was associated with white rap-rock/nu-metal musicians, illustrates the ways in which race continued to play an important role within the discourse of popular music, especially amongst white rock fans. Framed by two major incidents of rock-related violence, rap-rock’s trajectory from a seemingly mutual embrace to a form of stylistic re-segregation demonstrates the many of the mechanisms of racial appropriation and exclusion which characterized rock’s early years, and which would continue long into its future.

CHAPTER 1

“Ladies and Gentlemen, Rock ‘n’ Roll”: Rap-Rock and the Exclusivity of Genre

Baby, I’m a (Rock) Star: Rock and Race in the Early MTV Era

Just over two years after the dust of Disco Demolition Night had settled, a new player on the pop music scene appeared, one which would fundamentally reshape the course of pop music. Premiering on August 1, 1981, MTV’s initial target audience was made up mainly of white suburbanites that could afford cable TV in order to access the channel, who comprised the loudest voice (generally rock listeners) that influenced its programming. MTV executives supported this focus on rock music since many of them were familiar and fans of album oriented rock (AOR) styles of programming; but trends in popular culture continued to push traditional AOR programming out of favor. The idea of “music television,” an entire network devoted to music and music videos, was a relatively novel idea. Through the 1950s to the 1970s there had been plenty of ways music could be seen on television; notable examples included the Ed Sullivan Show, Burt Sugarman’s Midnight Special, Soul Train, American Bandstand, and others. But these shows generally featured “live” (although often mimed and/or lip-synched) performances by the artists. Music videos on television were rare in the US, and as a result, MTV’s early programming relied heavily on British rock artists, who also were overwhelmingly white. The idea of keeping rock “pure” from other musical influences took root amongst white rock audiences into the 1980s, as well as in MTV’s programming. This would pose a particular challenge for Black artists who sought access to the channel, and for MTV executives facing an increasingly popular demand for rap videos by the middle of the decade.

An examination of the early career of Prince, perhaps the most visible Black rock-aligned artist of the time, can provide a good deal of insight into these matters. In his article “‘Baby I’m a Star’: Prince, *Purple Rain*, and the Audiovisual Remaking of the Black Rock Star,” Jack Hamilton discusses the challenges Prince faced, culminating in his hugely successful film and soundtrack *Purple Rain* in 1984. Disco Demolition Night’s unspoken rejection of black artists as a whole would cast a shadow over his work. From the start of his career, Prince had struggled against being viewed solely as a black artist, and instead preferred to be more closely identified with rock. Upon signing with the Warner music label, he insisted that the company “treat him as a normal ‘pop act’ rather than assigning him to its Black music division.”²⁰ Despite a much higher profile which came with being a pop music act at Warner, Prince still struggled to be accepted by many in the rock audience. This is highlighted in press coverage early in his career; in which a *Rolling Stone* feature called him “America’s Sexiest One-Man Band,” a reference to his frequent use of overdubbing techniques in which he played all of the instruments on his albums.²¹ In rock music, excessive studio manipulation had a negative connotation, presumably signaling a lesser degree of authentic musical ability. Intentionally or not, *Rolling Stone*’s choice to call Prince a “one-man band” may have detracted from his image amongst rock fans. In addition to such coverage in the rock press, another factor Prince had to contest was that many rock-oriented radio stations actively avoided playing rock style records by black artists, believing that rock fans would associate black artists too closely with disco.²² This is largely at odds with what many white rock musicians themselves were saying, however; even before *Purple Rain*’s

²⁰ Jack Hamilton, “‘Baby I’m a Star’: Prince, *Purple Rain*, and the Audiovisual Remaking of the Black Rock Star,” *Black Camera: An International Film Journal* 14, no. 1 (Fall 2022): 83, 78.

²¹ Jack Hamilton, “‘Baby I’m a Star’: Prince, *Purple Rain*, and the Audiovisual Remaking of the Black Rock Star,” *Black Camera: An International Film Journal* 14, no. 1 (Fall 2022): 78.

²² Hamilton, 79.

release, many white rock artists, such as John Cougar Mellencamp, proclaimed their love of Prince's music. Mellencamp stated in an interview with *Rolling Stone* that he was "so impressed on hearing Prince's 'Little Red Corvette' that he started touting Prince to his own concert audiences..." Hamilton states that *Rolling Stone*'s focus on John Mellencamp's love of Prince in the article acts as a sort of "stamp of approval" from successful white rockers for white audiences to be "allowed" to listen to a black rock artist like Prince.²³ This work from white rock artists to bring Prince's name to the attention of white listeners openly acknowledges the biases white listeners had against black artists simply because they were black, and not because of their musicianship.

In *Purple Rain*, Prince clearly inhabits the role of a rock star. His character, loosely based on his own life, plays in a rock band (called "The Revolution" as was the case offstage), rides a motorcycle with a guitar strapped to his back, and generally exudes the sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll lifestyle. *Purple Rain* was released in 1984 to critical acclaim, topping the box office the first week of its release, and making Prince the only American artist to hold the number one single, movie, and album in the country simultaneously. Prince became a global superstar almost overnight with this film, which helped him overcome the racial barrier amongst rock audiences.²⁴ Hamilton adds that

Purple Rain is a film haunted by and obsessed with genre, both in terms of the cinematic-generic status of the film and the musical-generic association of its star. By combining two previously established filmic genres- the narrative rock and roll film, and the concert film- *Purple Rain* helped shift the imaginative association of Prince's musical genre, turning him from an R&B prodigy to a rock icon, by deftly exploiting three

²³ Hamilton, 91-92.

²⁴ Hamilton, 79.

concepts central to rock music's self-understanding: locality, likeness, and authenticity.

Purple Rain's skilled deployment of locality and likeness worked in tandem to create Prince's own rock authenticity: the film established Prince as a "real" rock star, a designation which certain aspects of his music and image- most pointedly his skin color- had previously rendered unavailable to him, and arguably to any Black musician since the death of Jimi Hendrix fourteen years earlier.²⁵

The music videos that were derived from the *Purple Rain* received heavy airplay on MTV, and Prince would eventually earn the title of rock star on the network in the wake of the film's success. But he wasn't the only black artist who had struggled to get programmed on MTV. Rick James was very public about his fights with MTV with respect to their racist programming. Bob Pittman (the founder of MTV) said that "Rick James is great. So is Parliament Funkadelic, but we turned down Rick James because the consumer didn't define him as rock.... But we do play black artists, Joan Armatrading, Gary US Bonds, and Jimi Hendrix, because they fit in with rock 'n' roll. So, it has nothing to do with race, but with sound."²⁶ James continued to speak publicly about MTV's seemingly blatant racism against black artists outside of the rock genre, and condemned Michael Jackson and Prince for not supporting his efforts. Eventually, James gained the support of white British rocker David Bowie, who spoke publicly about how surprising it was that there were so few black artists featured on the channel. Even though Rick James had been pushed aside by MTV, his struggles would later open the door for

²⁵ Hamilton, 80.

²⁶ Ramon Hervey II, "When Rick James Fought to Get Black Artists on MTV," *Literary Hub*, August 19, 2022, <https://lithub.com/when-rick-james-fought-to-get-black-artists-on-mtv/>.

Michael Jackson's videos to be programmed in early 1983, a development which was critical for the acceptance of black artists on the channel.²⁷

To better understand the ways in which Black artists were integrated into the network, it might be worth revisiting the network's early history. John McCombe, in his article "Authenticity, Artifice, Ideology: Heavy Metal Video and MTV's 'Second Launch', 1983-1985" argues that MTV's programming during the 1980s can be understood as being divided into three separate "launches." The first launch (1981-1983) consisted primarily of British New Wave (Duran Duran, The Buggles, Spandau Ballet); the second launch (1983-1985) consisted of a broader variety of rock and pop music; the third launch (1986-1989) featured more specialized programming, especially programs geared towards metal music and rap.²⁸ McCombe's classification of MTV launches are a simplified but useful generalization, especially considering how rock music is a constant presence throughout all three of these periods. Of particular interest in this chapter are the second and third "launches," when MTV began to engage more substantially with black artists. The conventional wisdom of MTV's history is that the first period did not feature music by black artists, with Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean" positioned as the video which broke the network's color barrier. And certainly MTV's "first launch" had, as noted previously, consisted largely of British New Wave music, which was a white-dominated genre. When claims of racism arose in the public discourse around MTV, Buzz Brindle, an MTV programmer, had stated that MTV would start playing more black artists if they played rock music. Yet, MTV did air some black artists during its first launch who were not necessarily thought of as "rock" musicians, including Joan Armatrading, Eddy Grant, and the Bus Boys,

²⁷ Ramon Hervey II, "When Rick James Fought to Get Black Artists on MTV," *Literary Hub*, August 19, 2022, <https://lithub.com/when-rick-james-fought-to-get-black-artists-on-mtv/>.

²⁸ John McCombe, "Authenticity, Artifice, Ideology: Heavy Metal Video and MTV's 'Second Launch', 1983-1985," *Metal Music Studies* 2, no. 3: 406.

which lead to a somewhat confusing picture of the place of black music on the channel.²⁹ But the situation would become much clearer in early 1983 with the appearance of Jackson on MTV in 1983, a black pop artist who would become the biggest star on the network. Jackson's popularity arguably signaled the start of MTV's "second launch" as more black artists were put in regular rotation in MTV's programming, though the channel was still heavily slanted towards white artists, especially those in mainstream pop and rock throughout the middle of the decade. It would not be until MTV's "third launch" that the concept of crossovers between different musical genres, specifically hip-hop/rap and rock music, would gain regular exposure on the network. But as MTV expanded beyond Top 40 pop, it faced a crossroads with respect to how to balance its desire to cater to what the pop audience wanted to hear with the demands of rock purists. As we will see, the emergence of popular rap-rock groups at mid-decade would force MTV's hand.

Kings of (Rap) Rock: Run DMC and the Emergence of Rap and Rock Crossover

"Homeboy, I rock it like that" Run-DMC

Of all the black artists MTV had been playing throughout the first launch, only a few had been able to achieve significant success in the pop mainstream (i.e., Michael Jackson, Prince, Whitney Houston, etc.), and even less so among the core rock audience. But Run-DMC, benefiting from significant airplay on MTV during the second and third "launches," would manage to cross the threshold into rock. Run-DMC was the first black rap group to receive sustained continuous support, and more importantly programming in regular rotation, from MTV. A significant factor was almost certainly the group's partnership with Def Jam Records

²⁹ Craig Marks and Rob Tannenbaum, *I Want My MTV: The Uncensored Story of the Music Video Revolution* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 66, 166-167.

(whose co-founder Russell Simmons was the brother of Joseph Simmons, the “Run” of Run DMC), whose artists made “striking and original videos that couldn’t be ignored.”³⁰ In defending their earlier decisions to not play music videos from many black artists, MTV stated it was because their videos were very low-quality, or the music didn’t have a video at all; when Run-DMC sent in videos that were clearly well-produced and high-quality, it became difficult for MTV to ignore them.³¹

Run-DMC was formed in 1982 in the Hollis neighborhood of Queens, New York and consisted of three members; Run (real name being Joseph Simmons), DMC (real name Darryl McDaniels), and Jam Master Jay (real name Jason Mizell). Their first album, the self-titled *Run-DMC*, was released in 1984 and became certified gold in December of 1984.³² The album also contained Run-DMC’s first hit single, “Rock Box,” a somewhat literal commentary on the crossovers between rap and rock. The music video for “Rock Box” (1984) highlights the history of racial tension between white rock fans and black artists which had characterized Disco Demolition Night in 1979, and how that tension was still being felt five years later. “Rock Box” opens with (presumably) a white musicologist’s explanation of what rap music “is,” reflecting a long history of white critics, scholars, and other observers determining the meanings of black music. This is clearly illustrated in the “lecture” that the white musicologist gives:

Now, what is rap music? Well, in a sense we cannot use that particular item because what has nothing to do with music, what is a unit of measure, used to determine the necessary current to excite an incandescent lamp to its proper candle power. Many people thought that rap began in Hollywood one day when a child was born, and they called it the

³⁰ Marks and Tannenbaum, 273.

³¹ Marks and Tannenbaum, 166-167, 168-169.

³² “Run-D.M.C.,” Gold and Platinum, Recording Industry Association of America, accessed January 17, 2023, https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&se=Run-D.M.C.#search_section.

Andrew Sisters. It was a child of a Bayou woman, not by you, a Bayou woman. Who, with her beautiful diamond rings and her store-bought hair. This is a development where we find that in the bassoon section, we find categorically to accept a non-deplume or an entity where we find that it is written in fugical form. Now what is a fugue? A fugue is like rap, only a future starts where it's conatpuntical form where we find that the melody keeps coming in and the audience keeps going out.³³

This speech presents a contradiction in how it seems to speak with a sense of authority, but is in reality a series of musical terms that are simply thrown together. This use of random musical terms that are not explained and don't necessarily make sense together might leave listeners with a sense of confusion. But, specific meanings are not the point: by invoking the authority of a white expert to introduce this video and Run-DMC it also shows a stamp of "approval" from a white figure of authority that viewers would theoretically trust. The musicologist also acts as of sort of "translator" for white audiences into the world of rap music. That said, the inclusion of this introduction is clearly intended to be satirical, underscoring the idea that Run-DMC see themselves as the "real" authority on their music.

After this introduction, there is an extended solo by guitarist Eddie Martinez, who even in the black and white video can be seen that he is a Latino guitarist, which was somewhat uncommon in rock at this time. Next, Run-DMC comes out of a car into a crowd of people on the sidewalk, where they begin rapping as they make their way through the crowd and past the musicologist who introduced the video. During the musical interludes, the same TV from the beginning of the video is pasted in color on the center of the black and white video, where we see silhouettes of Run and DMC dancing. This shows exactly what the "rock box" is according to

³³ Run-DMC, "Rock Box," directed by Steve Kahn, 1984, music video, 0:05-1:13, <https://youtu.be/GND7sPNwWko>.

Run-DMC, the television box that plays rock music on MTV. In the next scene, Run-DMC is performing with a rock band on a stage in front of their audience, while another image of them sitting on a turntable arm while it plays a record reminds us of their sampling roots.

Run-DMC's 1985 single "King of Rock," from the group's second album of the same name, engaged with similar ideas and messages as "Rock Box" through both the lyrics and the music video. The song and video focus on the breaking down of the rock "canon" that increasingly formed the core of rock audiences' understanding of the genre, especially as reflected on MTV. The "King of Rock" music video takes place in a rock 'n' roll museum, likely a nod to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, established only two years earlier. We see Run and DMC enter the museum, where they are greeted by a white security guard (portrayed by Calvert DeForest, then known to popular audiences as Larry "Bud" Melman on *Late Night with David Letterman*) who exclaims, "Hey! This is a rock 'n' roll museum. You guys don't belong in here." This opening line from the security guard can be understood as a representation of how white rock historians viewed Run-DMC, and rap in general, in the rock history "canon." According to Simon Reynolds, MTV itself serves as a museum of rock history, and thus Run-DMC underscores for MTV's viewers the barriers that they and other black artists had to overcome to be a part of this very network's "rock museum."³⁴ One crucial segment occurs between 1:58 and 3:30, focusing on one of the small televisions Run and DMC look at as they make their way through the museum. Each television shows a clip of a significant musician in the history of the rock canon. The first television shows Buddy Holly, whose guitar playing style DMC seemingly mocks; the next television shows Little Richard, who Run and DMC watch with a look of approval and appreciation. Finally, the last television shows a performance of Jerry Lee Lewis,

³⁴ Simon Reynolds, *Bring the Noise: 20 Years of Writing About Hip Rock and Hip Hop* (Berkeley: Soft Skull Press, 2011), 160.

which DMC promptly unplugs from the wall in disapproval.³⁵ The comparison between all three of these artists reminds viewers of the long-standing history of white rock musicians copying and performing the music of black artists, while often failing to credit those artists whose work they adopted. As the video continues, Run and DMC argue for their own place in the rock museum, and by extension, the rock canon. By the end of the video, a clip from Run-DMC's "Rock Box" music video is included on one of the television screens (which, in a final bit of irony, anticipated their eventual induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2009, their first year of eligibility). By the end of the video, the white security guard who previously seemed to be safeguarding the rock canon expresses his approval of Run-DMC, supporting their inclusion in the rock museum.³⁶ There are few music videos which have dealt so openly and directly with the treatment of black popular music and musicians as "King of Rock." It is a striking work, coming at a particularly important moment in pop music and media history.

But Run-DMC's identity as bona fide stars amongst a cross-genre pop audience on MTV would come with their 1986 collaboration with the rock band Aerosmith on a cover of the latter's single "Walk This Way," which peaked at number 4 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart in August of 1986, remaining on the Hot 100 for a total of 16 weeks.³⁷ "Walk This Way" is a critical case study in the relationship between rock and rap musicians during the mid-1980s. From a musical standpoint, the song was a perfect vehicle for such a collaboration. "Walk This Way" was originally released in 1975 on Aerosmith's album *Toys in the Attic*, peaking at no. 10 on the *Billboard* Hot 100.³⁸ According to DMC, speaking in an interview with *Loudwire* in 2016,

³⁵ Rob Tannenbaum, "Stayin' Alive," *Chicago Tribune*, December 19, 2020, <https://www-proquest-com.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/docview/2471130393?accountid=12598>.

³⁶ Run-DMC, "King of Rock," director Joe Butt, 1985, music video, <https://youtu.be/qXzWIPL TKw>.

³⁷ "Run-DMC Chart History," *Billboard*, accessed December 12, 2021, <https://www.billboard.com/artist/run-d-m-c/chart-history/tlp/>.

³⁸ "Aerosmith Hot 100 Chart History," *Billboard*, accessed March 8, 2023, <https://www.billboard.com/artist/aerosmith/chart-history/hsi/>.

rappers had been rapping to the beat of “Walk This Way” since before the release of “Rapper’s Delight” (1979). But, DMC notes, he had never known what the song actually was, knowing it simply as the fourth track on the *Toys in the Attic* album. It had been their producer Rick Rubin’s idea for Run-DMC to “do the record over” instead of just sampling the opening riff and creating new lyrics.³⁹ Thus, the Aerosmith/Run-DMC crossover was born.

Of critical importance is an examination of the portrayals of the musicians within the music video. The video begins with Aerosmith rehearsing loudly on a stage, prompting Run-DMC (who are backstage) to pound on the walls and demand that Aerosmith to “turn that noise down!” When Aerosmith does not stop, DMC states “I know what to do.” As Aerosmith begins playing “Walk This Way” Run-DMC turn their speakers against the wall; Jam Master Jay scratches over Joe Perry’s iconic guitar riff, and Run and DMC begin rapping the vocal part before Stephen Tyler of Aerosmith can enter. As the two groups continue to battle over who actually gets to perform, Tyler eventually gets frustrated and slams a microphone stand into the wall between the groups, leading to a simultaneously metaphorical and physical breaking down of the wall between rap and rock. According to Theodore Gracyk, “[i]f the presence of Steven Tyler and Joe Perry made rap palpable to white consumers who were suspicious of the form, then their pairing with two originators of hard-core rap gave Tyler and Perry a credibility that they’d long since squandered.”⁴⁰ Gracyk’s statement highlights the line that “Walk This Way” straddles between the rock and rap genres. Steven Tyler and Joe Perry provided a gateway for rap to reach white rock audiences, while Run-DMC gave Tyler and Perry a sense of credibility within contemporary rap audiences of the time.

³⁹ Loudwire, “DMC: The Real Story of Aerosmith + Run-D.M.C.’s ‘Walk This Way’,” Youtube, posted November 15, 2016, <https://youtu.be/5ikJrtxRovI>.

⁴⁰ Theodore Gracyk, *I Wanna Be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 35.

The concept of crossover was certainly not new to the popular music field in 1986. In his book *Categorizing Sound*, David Brackett discusses the history of the term, but claims that the concept reached cultural legitimacy in the 1980s.⁴¹ Brackett writes that

the term “crossover” implies that there must be discrete boundaries between musical styles, for a recording can only “cross over” when one style is clearly demarcated from another. However, the act of dividing and hierarchizing musical styles and audiences is never innocent or natural (and the fact that it is unstable attests to this): some stand to benefit from the way the hierarchy is constructed while others will lose out.⁴²

Economically, crossover genres challenged the hierarchical system that Brackett discusses above. Marketing in the music industry, he argues, revolves around the idea of a “feedback loop,” that there are inherent assumptions about different genres, which are circulated by music producers, musicians, consumers, and critics.⁴³ MTV’s programming revolves around this feedback loop by either creating the subject that will travel through musicians, consumers, and critics, or by following what it perceives that consumers want. MTV had “created the subject” by labeling itself as a rock channel from its premiere, as epitomized by its opening phrase, “ladies and gentleman, rock ‘n’ roll.”⁴⁴ But the idea of what characterized rock music changed throughout the course of MTV’s programming in the 1980s, from British New Wave, to American rock, and finally to metal and beyond. While rock had always been an underlying focus of the channel, changes in consumer trends required responses to consumer demands.

⁴¹ David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 280-282.

⁴² David Brackett, “The Politics and Practice of ‘Crossover’ in American Popular Music, 1963 to 1965,” *The Musical Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 777-778.

⁴³ Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*, 16.

⁴⁴ Marks and Tannenbaum, 65.

No Sleep 'Til Brooklyn: Rap-Rock Reaches New Audiences

Only two months after Run-DMC and Aerosmith's "Walk This Way" peaked on the *Billboard* Hot 100, a group of three young Jewish men from New York would release their first album, *Licensed to Ill*. The Beastie Boys were arguably the first white rap group to gain a significant following among rap audiences. They had started out as a punk rock band called the Young Aborigines in the late 1970s, but by the end of the decade, the punk scene in New York began to decline, morphing into other genres and styles (New Wave, Post punk, and No Wave are the most prominent examples at the time). The Beastie Boys' career began at this precise moment when the New York punk scene was fading, forcing them to find other venues for performance, and by extension, other musical communities.⁴⁵ As it would happen, this would prove to be a critical turning point for the band. According to *The Beastie Boys Book* "Upper Broadway at that time was like a multicultural mixtape. Salsa blaring on one block, a JVC boombox playing rap outside housing project on the next, sound of a.m. broadcast from Panasonic clock radios coming out of open windows on the next."⁴⁶ This eclectic musical landscape was a significant factor in the Beastie Boys' fusing of rap and rock influences. Like Run DMC, the Beastie Boys had worked closely with co-founder of Def Jam Records Rick Rubin, who had embarked on his own journey from hardcore rock fan to hip-hop.⁴⁷ With the support of Rubin, the Beastie Boys would begin to cross the threshold from rock to rap-rock.

Initially, the group faced backlash from influential rock executives. Michael Diamond of the Beastie Boys described an interaction with Danny Fields, a music executive who managed Iggy Pop and the Stooges and the Ramones. Early in the group's career Fields stated, "[k]id, this

⁴⁵ Mike Diamond and Adam Horovitz, *The Beastie Boys Book* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2018), 16.

⁴⁶ Diamond and Horovitz, 52.

⁴⁷ Diamond and Horovitz, 121-122.

will never work. You're white kids trying to rap? No one will like you. White people will be scared and black people will never accept you.”⁴⁸ Fields' statement brings attention to how separate the white music audiences and black music audiences were: white music listeners would be “scared” to hear rap music from white musicians, while black listeners would never take them seriously as white rap artists. But because they were a white group, the Beastie Boys had a much different experience when fusing rap and rock music with respect to responses from within many in the rock community. This is evident in their music video for “No Sleep Til Brooklyn.” Compared to Run DMC, the Beastie Boys did not have to prove their place in the rock world; since they had started out as punk musicians (and were white) they likely had a greater sense of legitimacy within the rock community. According to the Beastie Boys, it was their “job” as former punks to hate and/or make fun of classic rock, and this is evident in “No Sleep Til Brooklyn.”⁴⁹ As punks turned into rap-rockers, they hated classic rock just as much as rock fans hated rap music, so their ability to poke fun at “metalheads” further demonstrates the seeming affinity between punk and rap in the late 1970s.

The music video for “No Sleep Till Brooklyn” opens with the three young men arriving at the performance venue for their concert that night, where they are denied entry by the venue owner because they don't have any instruments and do not play rock music. When the Beastie Boys show that their instruments are vinyl records and not guitars, the venue owner grabs the record and breaks it over Adam Horovitz's head, recalling Steve Dahl's destruction of a crate full of records during Disco Demolition Night. Following their rejection, they quickly return dressed as stereotypical rock artists, in a manner similar to popular groups at the time such as Mötley Crüe or other “hair metal” bands, and holding guitars in order to appear as genuine rock

⁴⁸ Diamond and Horovitz, 123.

⁴⁹ Diamond and Horovitz, 29.

musicians. In this brief introduction, the Beastie Boys have been able to cross the line between rock and rap music simply by changing their clothes, but not their music. Unlike their counterparts Run-DMC, the Beastie Boys did not need an invitation from an established rock act; as artists with experience as rock musicians – and who were also white - the Beastie Boys had an easier time of crossing between audiences, without the need for a white collaborator with an established history amongst white rock fans.

Such an emphasis on image plays out in the rest of the video as well. As the video continues, they shed their rock outfits and wigs (which are overly exaggerated). The Boys subsequently begin to destroy the rock instruments and amps that were on the stage, leading to an altercation with a group of large burly men (who are presumably providing security), who could represent a physical manifestation of the idea of “gatekeeping” what type of music could be performed on that rock stage. The destroying of the guitars by the Beastie Boys has a sense of irony in this moment, since historically many major rock stars (Jimi Hendrix, Pete Townsend, etc.) had destroyed their instruments on stage in legendary performances, but here, the Beastie Boys are destroying them as a form of revolt against rock, since they are only faking their playing of the instruments during the video. The Boys win this altercation with the security force, symbolically overcoming the barrier between rock and rap. The presence of Kerry King, one of the guitarists from the thrash metal band Slayer, acts as another form of expression of support toward the Beastie Boys being accepted by rock musicians and fans. King makes an appearance at the 3:30 mark as a guitar soloist on the track; for rock audiences, this could be seen as a further form of endorsement from the metal community of the Beastie Boys’ music.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ The Beastie Boys, “No Sleep Til Brooklyn,” directed by Rick Menello and Adam Dubin, 1986, music video, <https://youtu.be/07Y0cy-nvAg>. Kerry King’s band Slayer was also signed to the Def Jam label with the Beastie Boys.

“Kill ‘em All”: Authenticity and Advocacy in 1980s Metal

“Rock hard with a purpose”

—from “Rock Hard Ride Free” by Judas Priest

At nearly the same time that both Run-DMC and the Beastie Boys were arriving on the music scene on MTV, a new sub-genre of rock began to emerge from the West Coast, which would eventually become known as thrash metal. The vanguard of this movement was arguably the California-based band Metallica, who released their first album, *Kill ‘Em All* in 1983.

Metallica had become something of an underground sensation with metal devotees, often expressing disdain for pop music, and particularly for pop-influenced metal. In one notable example from a 1983 appearance in Chicago, James Hetfield was explicit on this point. After admonishing the crowd for “not makin’ enough fuckin’ noise,” Hetfield directly addresses those who he sees as degrading the genre in introducing the song “No Remorse,” stating “This one is gonna kill all the fake people out there, all the posers... We fuckin’ hate them.”⁵¹ Such attitudes would resonate with the same core audience which coalesced around Steve Dahl in 1979, establishing the group as crusaders for “real” rock music.

Metallica began to achieve mainstream success in 1986 with the release of their album *Master of Puppets*, which became certified gold in November of 1986, only nine months after its release.⁵² The album would become a rallying point for metal fans, paving the way for other thrash bands out of California, including Slayer and Megadeth. Thrash (and its related style of speed metal) continued the timbral trends of earlier heavy metal artists like Black Sabbath, Iron

⁵¹ Metallica, “Metallica: Live in Chicago, Illinois – August 12, 1983 (Full Concert... Mostly),” posted May 18, 2020, Youtube video, 12:29-13:10, <https://www.youtube.com/live/abDLUhw-53w?feature=share>.

⁵² “Metallica” Gold and Platinum, Recording Industry Association of America, accessed March 8, 2023, https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&se=+Metallica&col=format&ord=asc#search_section.

Maiden, Motörhead, and Judas Priest, but added faster tempos and more complicated techniques which were largely absent from more radio friendly glam metal acts. This can be heard when comparing a recording such as Metallica's speed metal song "Master of Puppets" and Poison's "Talk Dirty to Me," a major glam metal hit. "Master of Puppets" features a much darker and grittier sound with complicated rhythmic patterns played at an extremely fast tempo. Poison's "Talk Dirty to Me," with its brighter timbre and a more pop-oriented subject matter, is arguably "easier listening" than Metallica. There are no complicated rhythms and the song stays at a similar volume and timbre throughout. There is also the matter of the lyrical content. Metallica's lyrics often dealt with serious topics, such as insanity, death, and biblical texts (for example, "Welcome Home (Sanitarium)," "For Whom the Bell Tolls," and "Creeping Death"). Poison's lyrics emphasized romance, partying, and especially women ("Every Rose Has It's Thorn," "Nothin' But a Good Time," and "Talk Dirty to Me"). Glam metal groups like Poison were placed in regular rotation on MTV, with their "friendlier" approach regarded as more appealing to general audiences. Harder metal groups, meanwhile, were deemed not to be as audience friendly. MTV's embrace of glam metal and dismissal of thrash/speed exacerbated a rift between the two fan bases, and also between the general pop audience and what was increasingly a small, specialized community.

But with the success of *Master of Puppets*, Metallica emerged as the face of an alternative metal movement. Returning to Hetfield's comment in Chicago from 1983, the term "poser" was often used by "true" metal fans to describe fans of the glam metal genres (bands like Cinderella, Mötley Crüe, Def Leopard, and Poison) which had become popular on MTV. In *Creem* magazine's fan mail section titled "Chainmail," one anonymous fan stated that "[Metallica's] concert in Seattle was the most radical and best I have been to. To all you posers

of metal: Metallica is the best.”⁵³ In another article featuring interviews with college bands competing in a battle of the bands competition, Nate Blevins from the band Nihilism states that “[w]e play original heavy metal, but we’re not posers with the teased hair, studs, and chains. We draw a different kind of crowd. I don’t know how well we’ll go over with a college crowd.” The author then goes on to state that the band played originals and covered “tunes by Metallica, Black Flag and Aerosmith.”⁵⁴

I Want MY MTV: Defining Genre through Specialty Programming

In *Creem* magazine in 1985, a fan by the name of Anita Carswell wrote a letter to the magazine with the title “MTV is bad.” Carswell writes:

I’d like to thank Richard Riegel for pointing out that heavy metal has become extinct on MTV. While MTV used to have a pretty well-rounded approach to rock video, that was in the past. I’d like to urge readers to write to MTV demanding either more heavy metal programming or an entirely separate channel dedicated to heavy metal. I’m convinced there really is a large heavy metal audience out there and if everyone who enjoys heavy metal would send a letter to MTV I’m sure they would have something to contend with.⁵⁵

She would get her wish in 1987, when a two hour long special called *Headbangers Ball* premiered on the network. The program can be understood as MTV’s response to the anger that metal fans were expressing, that there was no longer any “real” metal music being played on the channel. *Headbangers Ball* was the network’s first “specialty” program, once again demonstrating the power of core rock fans to sway the course of the music industry, just as they

⁵³ “Chainmail,” *Creem Special Edition*, September 2, 1985, 5.

⁵⁴ Tom Linafelt, “College Rock Bands to Battle for Fans and Prizes,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 1, 1990, 32-CC.

⁵⁵ “Chainmail,” *Creem Special Edition*, September 2, 1985, 5.

had done in response to disco in 1979. According to Adam Curry in *I Want My MTV*, “[i]f I’m recognized in public now, it’s always about *Headbangers Ball*. Sure, we had to play Bon Jovi videos. By Saturday at midnight, for three hours, we play Metallica, Anthrax, Iron Maiden. Period. It was a little niche when you could show crazy stuff, and I knew everyone was drinking beers and stoned. I would be on news groups, talking with fans. I always got asked, ‘Hey man, why are you playing Bon Jovi? This is our three hours.’”⁵⁶ The comment about Bon Jovi highlights how specific this fanbase was that watched *Headbangers Ball* since Bon Jovi was regarded as a mainstream glam metal artist and thus not representative of “real metal.”

But metal was, of course, only one new development in mid 1980s popular music. What would the network do about the rising popularity of rap? At first, MTV’s approach would seem to mirror its earlier dismissal of black artists. According to Craig Marks and Rob Tannenbaum, writing in their book, *I Want My MTV: The Uncensored History of the Music Video Revolution*, MTV executives believed that rap, despite its growing commercial acceptance, wasn’t a good fit for their network, even after the success of Run-DMC and the Beastie Boys. Rap’s inclusion into MTV’s programming only came about after MTV employee Tom Hunter continuously brought it up in meetings. He explains how this happened in *I Want My MTV*:

I’d bring it up every week at my meeting with Lee Masters, and his argument against it was consistent: “We’re white, suburban, male, affluent. That’s who we are.” When Pittman left the channel, he told Lee to pay attention to that audience profile. Finally, I got desperate, and I said, “Lee, give me from 2 to 3 A.M. on Tuesdays and let me put rap there.” He still said no. I said, “Okay, how about we do a one-off, two-hour rap special,

⁵⁶ Marks and Tannenbaum, 445.

and you let me air it between noon and 6 p.m. on either a Saturday or a Sunday?” He finally said okay.... We got the highest ratings in the channel’s history.⁵⁷

The success of this hour-long slot would become the genesis of the specialty program *Yo! MTV Raps* in 1988, which was in some ways the rap equivalent of *Headbangers Ball*. *Yo!* brought hip-hop culture and urban life to a growing dedicated rap audience, but also into the living rooms of white suburban families who comprised the core of the network’s viewers. Before *Yo!*, Run-DMC had been the most visible rap group seen on MTV, but *Yo!* opened the door for a number of other hip-hop artists, including Public Enemy, LL Cool J, the Geto Boys, and De La Soul.⁵⁸ As *Yo! MTV Raps* became the most highly rated program on MTV, concerns arose from within the ranks of MTV executives about the extent to which urban culture could be shown in the music videos. Fab 5 Freddy discusses the change in the channel’s approach after the first few years due to these concerns:

For the first three years or so, we were kind of untethered and could do whatever we wanted. Then the network became overly sensitive, because it was black content. There was a constant pressure to edit videos: the gun has to come out; that FUBU T-shirt was ok before, but now we can’t show it because we’re getting pressure from advertisers....⁵⁹

Through a comparison of original footage from MTV broadcasts of both *Headbangers Ball* and *Yo! MTV Raps*, we can see that both programs were structurally very similar, but it is clear which audience each program is targeted towards. The premiere broadcast of *Headbangers Ball* on April 18th, 1987 had been hosted by bassist and lead singer Lemmy (Ian Kilmister) and drummer Phil Taylor from the band Motörhead. Music videos were played in succession with small

⁵⁷ Marks and Tannenbaum, 418, 420.

⁵⁸ Marks and Tannenbaum, 423.

⁵⁹ Marks and Tannenbaum, 432.

interruptions, but Lemmy and Phil would occasionally announce either what bands were playing next (and perhaps add some of their own opinions) or to promote their upcoming tour of the United States. Each of the bands that performed during this segment was squarely within the hard rock and heavy metal genres, whose audience the segment was targeted towards.⁶⁰ In comparison, *Yo! MTV Raps* programming clearly went for a different audience. This can be seen in the first episode of *Yo! MTV Raps* which premiered on September 22nd, of 1988 where Run-DMC hosts. Even though Run-DMC had been by any measure a crossover group, they did not resonate with the heavy metal fanbase, so MTV choose to align them with the rap fanbase instead. The seemingly racialized programming can be seen in a segment following a music video for Double T and the Downtown Posse's "Owner of a Broken Heart," which heavily samples Yes's 1983 hit "Owner of a Lonely Heart." The video shifts to a segment with two white men playing with turntables, one says "man, how's, how's they doing that?" The other responds, "Don't make me lie," and the first turns and looks at the camera and states that "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em."⁶¹

Despite MTV's efforts to keep rap and rock separate in its programming, rap-rock crossovers continued to appeal to MTV's broader audiences. MTV's programming by the end of the 1980s left groups like Run-DMC and the Beastie Boys in a sort of limbo between the two programs, and similarly between rock and rap audiences. As discussed above, Run-DMC seemed to have been adopted by *Yo! MTV Raps* audiences most likely due to their presence as black men, as well as their featuring of urban life in their music and videos. On the other hand, the

⁶⁰ *Headbanger's Ball*, hosted by Lemmy Kilmister and Phil Taylor, originally premiered on MTV, located on the Internet Archive, April 4, 1987, <https://archive.org/details/1987.04.18-mtv-headbangers-ball-hosted-by-lemmy-kilmister-phil-philthy-animal-ta>.

⁶¹ *Yo! MTV Raps*, originally premiered on MTV, located on the Internet Archive, 1989, <https://archive.org/details/television-mtv-1989>, 5:10.

Beastie Boys weren't accepted onto *Yo!* until November of 1989 when they hosted the show for the first time. The Beastie Boys were also grouped in with rock acts, but only with their more rock influenced songs like "Fight For Your Right." Since they were not "true" metal as some Metallica fans would say, they were largely overlooked when it came to *Headbangers Ball* programming. The Boys would stay popular amongst the general programming on MTV instead of on *Headbangers Ball*, seemingly regarded as "posers" by rock fans, especially when "Fight For Your Right" reached number 7 on the pop charts in 1987.⁶² Even if either of these bands had been tentatively accepted by either of these programs, these distinctly and intentionally separate spaces work against the broad appeal of crossover genres, especially when it comes to reaching different audiences, by pushing a group into either one or the other category. In this case, it seems that the reason the Beastie Boys were more readily associated with rock while Run-DMC was almost immediately associated with rap was largely because of race.

The impact of *Yo! MTV Raps* on rap's image in mainstream pop can be seen by 1989, when DJ Jazzy Jeff and The Fresh Prince became a major presence on the rap scene, in no small measure because of their exposure on the program. The duo started their career in Philadelphia with their first album *Rock the House* in 1987, but their second album *He's the DJ, I'm the Rapper*, released in 1988, brought them into mainstream attention. The most popular single from *He's the DJ, I'm the Rapper* was "Parents Just Don't Understand," which peaked at number 12 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 and spent 19 weeks on the chart.⁶³ The success of "Parents Just Don't

⁶² Marks and Tannenbaum, 445.

John Rudolph Covach and Andrew Flory, *What's That Sound?: An Introduction to Rock and Its History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 451-452.

⁶³ "D.J. Jazzy Jeff & The Fresh Prince," *Billboard* Hot 100, accessed January 19, 2023, <https://www.billboard.com/artist/d-j-jazzy-jeff-the-fresh-prince/>.

Understand” can be accredited back to the music video that was seen on MTV. Bill Adler in *I Want My MTV* states:

“Parents Just Don’t Understand” was an important video. They were young, suburban-seeming kids from Philadelphia. Will Smith was not a scary black man. He was handsome, charismatic, good-humored, sexy. Not scary. And yet, he’s rapping. Okay, MTV programs it, and boom, their phones light up. If there was a tipping point for rap at MTV, it was the success of that video.⁶⁴

The success of “Parents Just Don’t Understand” illustrates how popular the “pop-rap” genre was with general audiences outside of rap, while more hardcore rap stayed under the radar with much more modest audiences. In comparison, the politically-oriented rap group Public Enemy didn’t have any contemporary songs reach the *Billboard* Hot 100 until the 1990s, with only two songs eventually making the chart, “Can’t Truss It” in 1991 and “Give It Up” in 1994.⁶⁵ Pop-rap had become the preferred rap genre on MTV by the end of the 1990s, with the Fresh Prince leading the way and other artists like Young MC and Kool Moe Dee following. While the Fresh Prince helped to continue to open the door for more rap acts into the 1990s, MTV was still very selective on the type of rap that could be shown on the channel.

“They Say Rap and Metal Can Never Mix”: Anthrax and the Future of Rap-Rock

One final example is worth considering, Anthrax’s rap-rock anthem “I’m the Man”, which was released in 1987. “I’m the Man” can be read in two different ways, either a parody or a “diss” track. As a parody, the timbre and structure of the song is highly reminiscent of the early

⁶⁴ Marks and Tannenbaum, 419.

⁶⁵ “Public Enemy Hot 100 Chart History,” *Billboard*, accessed March 8, 2023, <https://www.billboard.com/artist/public-enemy/>.

Beastie Boys style on their first album. In the lyrics Anthrax mentions some positive things about rap-rock, such as “the sound you hear is what we like” and “they say rap and metal can never mix, well all of them can suck our, sexual organ in the lower abdominal area!” Also, the use of the melody from “Hava Nagila” (a Jewish folk song) in the guitar line at the start of the song acts as a parody of how openly Jewish the Beastie Boys are. (As Anthrax lead singer Scott Ian is also Jewish, the use of this song further highlights this idea). On the other hand, “I’m the Man” can also be seen as a diss track about rap-rock or the Beastie Boys as a whole. Within the lyrics Anthrax focuses a lot on the idea of what being “hard” is. We see this in a couple of different lines; “the only things harder’s the smell of my feet, so listen up ‘cause you might get dissed” and “we’re like a diamond that is forever, and will remain the hardest ever.” This emphasis on the importance of being a “hard” band is heavily associated with metal music, so Anthrax’s focus on them being a harder band while clearly emulating the Beastie Boys could be read as a critique, emphasizing that Anthrax is a “harder” and thus a more legitimate metal band, while the Beastie Boys are not.

Such a recording would seem extremely surprising from a band so closely identified with metal, especially since Anthrax has been considered one of the “true” metal bands heard on *Headbangers Ball*. The track itself at its core is a metal song with added samples from other rock artists and some scratching on the turntables to remind us of its influence from rap and hip-hop. In the music video Scott Ian, the lead singer of Anthrax, is wearing a Public Enemy t-shirt, further showing the crossover rap and rock had become entrenched by the end of the 1980s. As we will see, it would be far from the last time that rap and rock – or even Anthrax and Public Enemy - would cross paths.

CHAPTER 2

Three Stripes and You're Out: Fashion, Image, and Race as Pop Culture

As discussed in the previous chapter, visual broadcast media helped to create a pop culture feedback loop, in which networks like MTV can see what musical or fashion trends are being picked up by audiences. As these trends were picked up by audiences, MTV then would use their channel to promote them further, thereby creating a “loop.” Hip-hop fashion is one trend that went through such a feedback loop. The Beastie Boys are one example of MTV’s influence on the feedback loop. In every Beastie Boys music video during their *Licensed to Ill* days, Mike D can be seen wearing a hood ornament from a Volkswagen car on a chain, which resulted in some fans stealing similar hood ornaments in order to make their own Volkswagen necklaces at home.⁶⁶ *Yo! MTV Raps* encouraged this phenomenon through its spotlighting of hip-hop clothing trends. As viewers saw these new clothing trends being promoted by hip-hop and rap artists, many began to replicate these styles. Such associations with particular aspects of fashion pointed to the increasing importance of visual identity for rap artists, due in large part to MTV’s influence. In the following discussions, we will examine two particular examples of this idea.

“My adidas and Me, Close As Can Be”

Run-DMC’s image is inseparable from the adidas track suit and shoes that they wore in their music videos and album covers, but the release of their song “My Adidas” (1986) codified adidas’s relationship with rap music. Run-DMC had been sporting the adidas Superstar sneakers and tracksuits since the beginning of their career, as seen in numerous music videos, albums, and

⁶⁶ *Icons of Hip-Hop: An Encyclopedia of the Movement, Music, and Literature*, ed. Mickey Hess (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2007), 100.

photos.⁶⁷ This is illustrated further in the cover for the single “Walk This Way” (Figure 2) from 1986, and the album *Tougher Than Leather* from 1988 (Figure 3).⁶⁸ Run-DMC’s image became so closely tied to adidas that the company ended up offering a partnership to Run-DMC to promote their clothing; this directly led to the creation of the song “My Adidas.”⁶⁹ Despite the song’s origins in a commercial partnership, the song solidified deeper aesthetic relationships for Run-DMC between the brand and their identities as artists. The relationship was mutually beneficial, as is seen in the company’s television commercial featuring the band, structured in a way which was reminiscent of their previous music videos.⁷⁰ For Run-DMC, the relationship provided another opportunity to establish themselves in the mainstream commercial market. As discussed in the first chapter, Run-DMC had no qualms about highlighting racial issues in rock, as well as within the music industry as a whole. “My Adidas” continues this work by highlighting how hip-hop music and clothing can provide a sense of power for the wearer. For example, in the first verse, Run-DMC references their performance at Live Aid in 1985, and how their adidas shoes were critical to the performance:

I stepped on stage, at Live Aid
All the people gave and the poor got paid
And out of speakers I did speak
I wore my sneakers but I’m not a sneak

⁶⁷ This spelling of “adidas” is a stylized spelling based on the brand’s logo. Examples of them wearing adidas can be seen in the music videos “My Adidas,” “King of Rock,” “It’s Tricky,” and more.

Jessica Xalxo, “Into the Footprints of the Shoe that Changed Hip-Hop Culture,” *Rolling Stone*, March 5, 2020, <https://rollingstoneindia.com/into-the-footprints-of-the-shoe-that-changed-hip-hop-culture/#:~:text=The%20adidas%20Originals%20Superstar%20first,the%20tongue%20out%20in%20rebellion.>

⁶⁸ Run-DMC, *Walk This Way*, released 1986, album cover, Arista/Legacy.

Run-DMC, *Tougher Than Leather*, released 1988, album cover, Arista/Legacy.

⁶⁹ Sam Law, “‘It Was About Smashing Down Walls’: How Adidas Invaded Nu-Metal,” *Kerrang!*, May 26, 2021, <https://www.kerrang.com/it-was-about-smashing-down-walls-how-adidas-invaded-nu-metal>.

⁷⁰ “Run-DMC- My Adidas Commercial,” Youtube, posted May 9, 2020, https://youtu.be/c_haNmB_Lns.

My adidas touch the sand of a foreign land

With mic in hand, I cold took command

My adidas and me close as can be

We make a mean team, my adidas and me⁷¹

Their choice to connect the importance of their adidas sneakers to their performance at Live Aid is significant, since they were the only hip-hop act booked on the program. Run-DMC discussed the importance of their performance in a feature in *Billboard*:

[t]he trio continued with a rendition of their classic track, “King of Rock” — “We got a whole lot of rock groups backstage tonight, but D wants y’all to know one thing,” Run said before jumping into the song. “We have no band, just Jam Master Jay,” D added later, highlighting what made their performance so revolutionary. “We knew this was something big, but we didn’t know the impact until afterwards,” D.M.C. said in the same interview. “That’s why on the record ‘My Adidas,’ we said ‘stepped on stage, at Live AID, all the people gave, and the poor got paid!’”⁷²

“My Adidas” created a new meaning around the adidas sneakers that Run-DMC wore, that their could not have been the revolutionaries they were at Live Aid without their adidas sneakers. As Theodore Gracyk, writes in his book *I Wanna Be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity*:

[t]he oldest ideas about art locate its power in its capacity to imitate the world, holding out the promise that each new work can by itself show us the world anew. Looking at a picture book, a pre verbal child can distinguish the doggie from the ducky simply by seeing the difference. But as a specifically musical genre, a guitar riff or a melody or a

⁷¹ Run-DMC, “My Adidas,” released 1986, track 3 on *Raising Hell*, Arista.

⁷² Natalie Weiner, “Run-D.M.C. Brought Hip-Hop to the New World at Live Aid 30 Years Ago Today: Watch Now,” *Billboard*, July 13, 2015, <https://www.billboard.com/music/rb-hip-hop/run-dmc-live-aid-king-of-rock-anniversary-1985-hip-hop-history-6627371/>.

distant voice is strangely mute. It represents nothing at all. It's capacity to mean anything, to convey one meaning rather than another or to support one ideology rather than another, rests on its relationship to previous music.⁷³

In a similar way, Run-DMC imbues a piece of art (in this case, shoes) with a new meaning within the context of the hip – hop community. Through the commercial, the music video, and the song itself, Run-DMC made adidas sneakers a part of the newly emerging hip-hop “fashion.” But for other artists, such an emphasis on visual style would play out in vastly different ways.

“I’m a Nightmare Walkin’, Psychopath Talkin’”: The Black Body and Gangs as Pop Culture

Shoes had been central to “My Adidas,” but Run-DMC’s bodies had also become central to the video since the commercial was also focused on the adidas-branded clothing they were wearing. Music video had made the presence of the artist’s body equally as important as the actual music itself since an image of the musicians was often explicitly tied to the video. For rap artists, this increasingly resulted in associations with urban aesthetics and landscapes. This is also evident in a number of films of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The rise of black-themed, urban-located films like *Colors*, *Do the Right Thing*, and *Boyz in the Hood*, brought the narratives of inner-city life to broader audiences, but these films also aided in the perpetuation of stereotyped portrayals of what inner-city living was like.⁷⁴ *Colors* was released in 1988, and is portrayed from the perspective of two white LA based police officers. The younger officer, Danny McGavin (Sean Penn), is a rookie who is being trained by an older partner who had a great deal of experience working on the streets, Bob Hodges (Robert Duvall). The film’s plot

⁷³ Theodore Gracyk, *I Wanna Be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 9.

⁷⁴ Eric Salzman and Thomas Desi, *The New Music Theatre: Seeing the Voice, Hearing the Body* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 63.

follows their story as a part of the C.R.A.S.H. (Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums) unit of the Los Angeles Police Department. As both officers continue to struggle to control the seemingly rampant gang population, the film comes to a tragic conclusion with the death of Bob Hodges at the hand of one of the gang members he had befriended over the years. The film ends with the rookie now taking the role of trainer of a new rookie officer, signifying how the cycle repeats over and over again.⁷⁵

The film's theme song "Colors" was written and recorded by rapper Ice-T; it is first heard at about the 11-minute mark, during a scene where two different gangs were arrested and put into jail together. Ice-T's lyrics about the importance of the gangs' colors highlights the tension in this scene and illustrates the ride or die nature within a gang that the film was trying to show. But, in the full version of the song a very different narrative emerges. The verses used in the film are verse 1 and part of verse 2, and are included below:

I am a nightmare walking, psychopath talking
King of my jungle just a gangster stalking
Living life like a firecracker quick is my fuse
Vendettas of death back; the colors I choose
Red or Blue, Cuz or Blood, it just don't matter
Sucker dive for your life when my shotgun scatters
The gangs of L.A. will never die – just multiply

You don't know me, fool

⁷⁵ *Colors*, directed by Dennis Hopper, featuring Sean Penn and Robert Duvall (Orion, 1988), https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/amzn1.dv.gti.7c2c482c-2691-4f96-9772-62abbe71b655/ref=atv_pr_sw_sc?tag=imdbtag_tt_wbr_hbomax-20.

You disown me, cool

I don't need your assistance, social persistence

Any problem I got I just put my fist in

My life is violent but violent is life

Peace is a dream, reality is a knife

My colors, my honor, my colors, my all

With my colors upon me one soldier stands tall

Tell me what have you left me, what have I got

Last night in cold blood my young brother got shot

These two verses above are focused on the violence of being in a gang, as well as the commitment it takes to be a part of one. But the story changes when we look at the rest of the lyrics, especially in the last verse:

See the wars of the street gangs will always get to me man

But I don't wanna be down with this situation man

But I'm in here, if I had something better to do I think I'd do it but

Right

Now I'm just down here boy

I'm trying to get money 'cause I'm smart

I'm gonna get paid while I'm out here

I'm gonna get that paper, ya know what I'm saying

If I had a chance like you

Maybe I would be in school

But I'm not, I'm out here living day to day surviving

And I'm willing to die for my colors

Ya'll please stop, 'cause I want ya all to live

I draw attention to this last verse because of the way it highlights how Ice-T had to make a choice in order to survive, which based on the circumstances that led to him becoming a part of the gangs in order to make money and live in the ghetto, especially since his mother can't work because she's "on crack," and his sister can't work "cause her arms show tracks."

The film's edited version of the song emphasized the more pathological aspects of gang culture that had resonated with the film's storyline, while the original depicted the actual story of the struggles of why many of these youths join gangs in order to survive in the inner-city. The music video for the song "Colors" splices together footage of Ice-T rapping with scenes from the film. Ice-T's performance in the video takes place on a soundstage that is meant to look like an urban environment. There is a building behind him that has video from the film projected on it and small props on the floor that imparts something of a 3D quality, actively placing Ice-T in the inner-city settings in which many of the clips from the film are set. Once the song ends, Ice-T's sunglasses come off, the set lights are turned on, and he says "yo, please stop 'cause I want y'all to live. This is Ice-T, peace." This sudden change in tone from the rest of the video serves to disconnect Ice-T from the persona he had adopted in the first half, instead speaking directly to the audience in a genuine manner of concern, reminding listeners that this is real life, not just a movie.

Two years after the film's release, Ice-T formed a metal band in Los Angeles named Body Count, with himself as the lead singer and lyricist. He explains that the name came from watching the Sunday morning news, which would often list the number of casualties from gang

violence that previous week: “‘Is that all I am,’ I thought, a body count?’”⁷⁶ Aurally, the group is essentially a metal band with its instrumentation, distortion, and singing all matching the styles of many of the thrash bands of the late 1980s/early 1990s. In 1991, Body Count released their single “Cop Killer,” which generated an immediate and fierce response. Police unions and advocacy groups were particularly vocal in their criticism of “Cop Killer.” One example comes from Dennis Martin, the former President of the National Association of Chiefs of Police:

The Cop Killer song has been implicated in at least two shooting incidents and has inflamed racial tensions in cities across the country. Those who work closely with the families and friends of slain officers, as I do, volunteering for the American Police Hall of Fame and Museum, are outraged by the message of Cop Killer. It is an affront to the officers—144 in 1992 alone—who have been killed in the line of duty while upholding the laws of our society and protecting all its citizens.⁷⁷

This was a commonly expressed perspective, but it reflected a particular view which came largely from white-dominated organizations. Barry Shank, writing in his article “Fear of the White Unconscious: Music, Race, and Identification in the Censorship of ‘Cop Killer’,” quotes Ronald Hampton, the spokesperson for the National Black Police Association, who comes to the band’s defense, claiming that “[t]his song is not a call for murder. It’s a rap of protest. Ice-T just isn’t making this stuff up. He’s expressing his concerns about police misconduct. He’s responding to a very real issue that affects many Americans, especially blacks and Latinos: police brutality.”⁷⁸ To understand why the band was often only labeled as rap instead of metal,

⁷⁶ Ice-T, *The Ice Opinion: Who Gives a Fuck?* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 100.

⁷⁷ Dennis R. Martin, “The Music of Murder,” Internet Archive, April 6, 2004, <https://web.archive.org/web/20040406031225/http://www.axt.org.uk/HateMusic/Rappin.htm>.

⁷⁸ Barry Shank, “Fears of the White Unconscious: Music, Race, and Identification in the Censorship of “Cop Killer,” *Radical History Review* 66, (1996): 132.

we have to understand the public's response to "Cop Killer." In assessing the reaction to Body Count and "Cop Killer," there are two important considerations: the presence of the artist's body (Ice – T), and the lyrical content. While writers like Shank and Christopher Sieving address Ice – T's identity as a black rapper in a white dominated rock scene, neither situates Body Count's reception within the broader context of the rap – rock scene of this time. In contrast to these works, I argue that by examining the treatment of Body Count and the response to their music, we can better understand how and why audiences and critics reacted to rap – rock in different ways through the mid-1990s.

The first aspect we will examine is the role of the artist's body. "Cop Killer" is just one example where stereotyped preconception about an artist's body plays a role in audiences' reception of musical genres. Shank addresses this phenomenon through the lens of white audiences hearing a black man, Ice – T, discuss the killing of cops, a topic which often appeared in the lyrics of harder-edged rap songs, but Ice-T is discussing it in the aural space of heavy metal. Shank argues that white audiences who agreed with the corporate and governmental censorship's of "Cop Killer" felt that they had to "identify with black rage" because rock music is targeted toward white audiences.⁷⁹ Shank's article never explicitly discusses the music. Instead, he focused on audience reception to theorize why audiences were having these reactions. The presence of Ice-T's body caused some audiences to be unable to hear this as metal, and instead only associated him with rap. Jay Schulkin, meanwhile, writing in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and the Body*, argues that "[a]daption is a core feature of musical sensibility; the biological systems are tied to auditory acuity and the prediction of auditory events... Music is no

⁷⁹ Shank, "Fears of the White Unconscious," 125.
Sieving, Christopher. "Cop Out? The Media, "Cop Killer," and the Deracialization of Black Rage." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 22, No. 4 (October 1998): 334-353.

different; unconscious inferences, expectations and the generation of habits underlie the perception and production of musical experiences.”⁸⁰ *Body Count* challenges the visual expectations that listeners have when listening to – and looking at – metal. Due to the song’s almost immediate removal from shelves (less than 500,000 units were sold) there was never a music video released for the song, but the album cover seemingly provides all the visuals a listener needs. As seen in Figure 4, the album cover for *Body Count* (1992) features a drawing of a black man with the phrase “cop killer” tattooed across his chest.⁸¹ The man we see on the cover depicts a number of stereotypes, possibly including what a hardened gang member who has/would kill a cop would look like. This depiction is a direct reflection of the idea of double consciousness as discussed in Antonia Randolph’s article “‘Don’t Hate Me Because I’m Beautiful’: Black Masculinity and Alternative Embodiment in Rap Music.” The idea of double consciousness was coined by the philosopher W.E.B. Du Bois in 1903 in his book *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois had spent his career trying to understand the historic conditions that black Americans had faced during the 20th century, and how these conditions effected them within their own consciousness. As stated in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,

[i]n *Souls of Black Folk* that second concern was with capturing in words ‘the strange meaning of being black’, with describing the ‘spiritual world’ and the ‘spiritual strivings’ of ‘the American Negro.’ Out of this interest rose the term ‘double consciousness,’ meaning that it is ‘a ‘sensation’, one which falls short of ‘true’ self-consciousness, but is a consciousness of one’s self, nonetheless. It is also part of a more complex feeling of

⁸⁰ Jay Schulkin, “Music and Movement : Expectations, Aesthetics and Representation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and the Body* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 44-45.

⁸¹ Body Count, *Body Count*, released March 31, 1992, album cover, Rhino/Warner Records.

‘two-ness’, of disparate and competing ‘thoughts’, ‘strivings’, and ‘ideals’. This is not an episodic or occasional sensation, but a fixed and persistent form of consciousness.⁸²

Randolph explains double consciousness as the lens through which blacks view themselves in two different lenses, one through their own view of being a black person, and another of how the dominant culture (whites) view them. He also claims that rappers satisfy this double consciousness by using these stereotypes to meet white audience’s stereotypes of black people, as well as satisfying their own masculine desires.⁸³ Randolph continues, stating that, “Black men have been both over identified with their bodies and denied the pleasures of it. While some physicality is desirable within American society, men who are overly associated with their bodies are seen as less civilized and thus inferior to Whites. This has been most evident in popular culture in the discourse surrounding the natural giftedness of Black athletes, which ends up as a backhanded way to deny the fullness of their humanity.”⁸⁴ These ideas of double consciousness and physical desires amongst black communities have continued to influence the ways many black musicians have felt they have had to act, as well as how white audiences have perceived them. *Body Count*’s album cover reflects both of these ideas by playing into the physical presence of a domineering black man on the cover that fits the stereotypes of what a hardened gang member would look like through clothing, tattoos, and art style.

The lyrical content also breaks the expectations of metal listeners with its focus on police brutality, which by the 1990s had become synonymous with rap due to songs like “Fuck the Police,” from N.W.A. (1988), the main pioneers of the rap sub-genre known as gangsta rap.

⁸² “Double Consciousness,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified February 16, 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/double-consciousness/#DoubConsSoulBlacFolk>.

⁸³ Antonia Randolph, ““Don’t Hate Me Because I’m Beautiful”: Black Masculinity and Alternative Embodiment in Rap Music,” *Race, Gender & Class* 13, issue 3/4 (2006): 201.

⁸⁴ Randolph, “Don’t Hate Me,” 201.

Characteristics of this genre include representations of violence and violent masculinity, urban clothing styles, and realism in the music videos.⁸⁵ The lyrics of “Cop Killer” thus resonate with common conventions of the gangsta rap genre. According to Randolph,

gangsta rappers insisted that the fearsome, criminal masculinity that they promoted was part of their act as entertainers. However, the dominant culture seemed to take the masculinity gangsta rappers performed as some true representation of essential Black male behavior. Thus, a boorish, hegemonic masculinity came to be viewed as typifying rap music.”⁸⁶

Both the lyrics and image of Ice – T within the context of the band Body Count were aural and visual signals that this group was assumed to not belong in metal music. N.W.A provides an apt summation of these ideas in the lyrics of “Fuck the Police,” which state “They put up my picture with silence, 'Cause my identity by itself causes violence.”⁸⁷ The reactions to “Cop Killer,” as discussed above, provides us with general context to examine how the public responded to the presence of Body Count in rock music, which in turn helps us understand how black bodies were viewed in rock and in the overall public sphere. With this context in mind, let us return to rap – rock during the first half of the 1990s in order to discuss how the reactions to “Cop Killer” reflect the continued development of the genre, and its subsequent transformation into nu-metal.

“Bring the Noise”: From Rap-Rock to Nu-Metal

In 1991, Anthrax released a remix of their 1987 song “I’m the Man” with a completely new backing track that featured less of a guitar-driven style in favor of drum machines and

⁸⁵ Randolph, “Don’t Hate Me,” 205.

⁸⁶ Randolph, “Don’t Hate Me,” 207.

⁸⁷ N.W.A., “Fuck Tha Police,” released 1988, track 2 on *Straight Outta Compton*, Priority Records.

sequencers. The vocal track is also completely new, with a new and perhaps better-crafted set of lyrics. The first verse relates that they had written the original “I’m the Man” seven years before, and more significantly, said that they had “opened the door that no one attempted before.”⁸⁸ The changes in the instrumental track from 1987 to 1991 are significant for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the engagement of a seminal thrash metal band with rap-related production. This in turn foreshadows a longer trend in rap-rock crossover that will culminate by the end of the 1990s, morphing into what would come to be called “nu-metal.”

As it would turn out, Anthrax’s most serious foray into rap in the early 1990s might be seen as the beginning of this transformation. According to *Kerrang!* magazine in “The Story of Nu-Metal in 14 Songs,” the first substantial nu-metal song was released in 1991 with the collaboration between Public Enemy and Anthrax on the song “Bring the Noise.” Nick Ruskell from *Kerrang!* describes the event as such:

It should have been a pairing like oil and water: Big Four thrashers Anthrax in one corner, and hip-hop pioneers Public Enemy in the other. And this was in a time, remember, when the dividing line between metal and hip-hop, not to mention the respective fans, was much more pronounced than it is now. But the common ground was bountiful, too. Both acts were from the streets of New York, both were willing to experiment, and both, ahem, brought the noise. Thus, having given Anthrax a shoutout on the original in response to guitarist Scott Ian wearing their merch onstage, Public Enemy joined the ’Thrax to redo it in metal style (with a riff Scott later admitted was just Black Sabbath’s Warning sped up). Some hated it, some loved it, and though not the first mash-

⁸⁸ Anthrax, “I’m The Man ’91,” released 1991, track 7 on *Attack of the Killer B’s*, Island Records.

up of rock and rap, it ably demonstrated just how heavy the concoction could be, and what could be done with it. From here, a thousand seeds bloomed.⁸⁹

Before this 1991 collaboration, “Bring the Noise” had originally been recorded by Public Enemy for the film *Less Than Zero* (1987) and then re-released on their album *It Takes a Nations of Millions to Hold Us Back* (1988). Most popular music listeners likely became familiar with Public Enemy from their single “Fight the Power” (1989) from their album *Fear of A Black Planet*, which was also used as the theme song for Spike Lee’s film *Do the Right Thing*. Public Enemy’s image, as epitomized by “Fight the Power,” has been described as “symbols of black authenticity rooted in defiance and confrontation” and as “the theme of young Black America.”⁹⁰ Even though Public Enemy’s music was centered around black audiences and black experiences, *It Takes a Nations of Millions to Hold Us Back* was well received by both critics and audiences, including rock fans. There was a mutual admiration between Public Enemy and Anthrax, with “Bring the Noise” referencing Anthrax in the lyrics “wax is for Anthrax”. Anthrax had exhibited this mutual admiration as early as 1987, as seen on Scott Ian’s Public Enemy shirt in their 1987 “I’m the Man” music video.

Aurally, it made sense that a heavy metal band and a gangsta rap group would collaborate since both genres have often been considered “noise.”⁹¹ The concept of “noise” provides a significant point of affinity between rap and metal, and on this point it is worth considering the work of Robert Walser, who in the 1990s conducted some of the most significant scholarship on both metal music and rap music. Walser’s book *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and*

⁸⁹ Nick Ruskell, “The Story of Nu-Metal in 14 Songs,” *Kerrang!*, August 5, 2021, <https://www.kerrang.com/the-story-of-nu-metal-in-14-songs>.

⁹⁰ Loren Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Songs* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015), 3.

⁹¹ Ron Hart, “Public Enemy Talks ‘It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back’ on It’s 30th Anniversary,” *Billboard*, June 30, 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/music/rb-hip-hop/public-enemy-it-takes-a-nation-of-millions-to-hold-us-back-8463262/>.

Madness in Heavy Metal Music is often considered one of the foundational books on popular music scholarship, especially in the area of metal research, while his article “Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy” aided significantly in furthering scholarship on hip-hop music as a whole.⁹² “Noise” is the foundation of Public Enemy’s production style, as described by Walser in his article on Public Enemy:

In the high-tech environment of their production studio, the producers of the Bomb Squad often turn their equipment against itself, in search of the rawness that is essential to Public Enemy's conflicted urban soundscape, where sirens and drills punctuate the polytextured layers of modernity. They "misuse" their samplers, hobbling them at very low sampling rates and sometimes resampling samples in order to get a gritty sound, just as grainy photographs are often shot purposely with expensive cameras.⁹³

Heavy metal was dependent on a similar idea of “misusing” equipment in order to get a harsher or more “distorted” sound. The idea of distortion can be traced back to guitarist Jimi Hendrix in the 60s, with many rock bands adopting it in the 1970s. Punk in the 1970s took distortion to a new level, where all of the previous technical refinement and “high art” idea of rock that had been instigated by groups like the Beatles was completely thrown out for simplistic chordal structure, unrefined singing, and just plain “noise.”

The 1991 version of “Bring the Noise” was originally credited to Anthrax; Public Enemy’s presence on the track was just through the use of vocal samples. The idea of rock or metal bands using sampling techniques was a taboo subject up to this point. Sampling was

⁹² Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2014).

Robert Walser, “Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy,” *Ethnomusicology* 39, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 1995): 193-217.

⁹³ Walser, “Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rhetoric,” 197.

associated almost exclusively with hip-hop and rap music.⁹⁴ Anthrax's use of samples was still very limited on this track. They simply took the vocal track from Public Enemy and created a new backing track with their usual instrumentation. But, even though this was a modest case of sampling, it was sampling nonetheless, which continued to help break down the barriers between rap and rock. Anthrax's version was released on the album *Attack of the Killer B's* in 1991, and became certified Gold in November of that year.⁹⁵ The success of Anthrax's "Bring the Noise" prompted the creation of a music video. An analysis of this music video demonstrates how black identity in rap-rock had begun to be removed, prompting the genre to slowly be recast as a white genre, as discussed later in this section.

Crispin Sartwell claims that rap music is a form of autobiography and philosophy, especially in the works of Ice – T and Public Enemy, arguing that for white audiences rap "is an invasion of silence by the spoken word of the silenced, using the modes of expression to which they have been consigned in order to attack white culture as its most vulnerable points."⁹⁶ He writes that "[t]he slave narrative made the slave's truth a possession and a weapon; it asserted the slave's ownership of his truth. Rap, too, is an assertion of ownership of the truth or of the reality; the predominant mode of aesthetic evaluation of rap is not, say, beauty, but precisely reality (blackness) and the authority to present it."⁹⁷ White performers appropriate black musicians' styles because those styles are compelling aesthetically, but white listeners are often more comfortable hearing them from white performers; Pat Boone and Vanilla Ice present two

⁹⁴ Jon Blistein, "Watch Anthrax Recall Public Enemy Collaboration in Smithsonian Mini-Doc," *Rolling Stone*, January 28, 2016, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/watch-anthrax-recall-public-enemy-collaboration-in-smithsonian-mini-doc-60585/>.

⁹⁵ "Anthrax," Gold and Platinum, Recording Industry Association of America, accessed February 19, 2023, https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&se=Anthrax#search_section.

⁹⁶ Crispin Sartwell, *Act Like You Know: African-American Autobiography and White Identity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 13-14.

⁹⁷ Sartwell, 166.

infamous examples.⁹⁸ Boone had been an extremely popular musician during the 1950s in the U.S., with much of his success – and subsequent criticism – stemming from the fact that he covered popular R&B artists of the 1950s, such as Fats Domino and Little Richard, who wouldn't be played on mainstream pop radio due to their skin color; In recalling Run DMC's video for "King of Rock," we see this illustrated through their reactions to clips of Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis.⁹⁹

A variation on this phenomenon can be seen in the changes made between the Public Enemy and Anthrax versions of the song "Bring the Noise." Aurally, the Anthrax cover of "Bring the Noise" takes on new meanings compared to Public Enemy's original version due to the changes in instrumentation and style. But the first major change between the two versions happens at the very beginning, before the music starts. Public Enemy's version opens with the phrase "too black, too strong" repeated twice. This phrase is a sample from a section of Malcolm X's "Message to the Grassroots" speech that was delivered in 1963 in Detroit, Michigan: "It's just like when you've got some coffee that's *too black*, which means it's *too strong*. What you do? You integrate it with cream; you make it weak. If you pour too much cream in, you won't even know you ever had coffee. It used to be hot, it becomes cool. It used to be strong, it becomes weak. It used to wake you up, now it'll put you to sleep."¹⁰⁰ This analogy of weakening black coffee by adding cream is used to explain how black people are perceived as too strong alone, so they must be watered down with white people and/or culture. Public Enemy's use of this speech reflects their affiliation with Black Nationalism and self-determination, which had

⁹⁸ Sartwell, 167-168.

⁹⁹ "About Pat Boone," Pat Boone's website, accessed February 20, 2023, <https://patboone.com/about-pat/>.

¹⁰⁰ BlackPast, "(1963) Malcolm X, 'Message to the Grassroots'," August 10, 2010, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1963-malcolm-x-message-grassroots/>.

become central to their image.¹⁰¹ Anthrax's version removed this sample from "Message to the Grassroots," which does exactly what Malcom X implied by removing the "black coffee" from the Public Enemy version, and instead put in more "cream." One of the founding members, Richard Griffin (AKA Professor Griff) was a member of the Nation of Islam and became the group's "Minister of Information," as well as assembling the backup dancers that became known as the "Security of the First World." As Alan Light states in an essay for the group's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Induction, "'Bring the Noise' and 'Don't Believe the Hype,' ...shot the group to hip-hop's greatest heights. These two 1988 singles got to the essence of the message- shouting from the rooftops that the system, top to bottom, needs shaking up, and that hip-hop is the means to do it."¹⁰² Public Enemy's music brought crystal clear attention to the social problems happening around them, and pairing up with Anthrax would allow their message to reach an even broader audience.

In 1987, when both the original "Bring the Noise" and "I'm the Man" recordings were made, Anthrax and Public Enemy were both associated with Def Jam Records, and often ran into one another when doing recording sessions.¹⁰³ According to Ron Hart from *Billboard*,

When you couple the Anthrax shout-out with the sheer brute force of the Bomb Squad's production — which also included a mash-up of Slayer's "Angel of Death" and James Brown's "The Funky Drummer" as the construct for "She Watch Channel Zero?!" — it was no surprise how much *It Takes A Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* appealed to the punk and metal communities. For a group who was so feared and revered for its black

¹⁰¹ Kajikawa, *Sounding Race*, 79.

¹⁰² Alan Light, "Public Enemy," Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Induction Essay, 2013, 2, <https://www.rockhall.com/inductees/public-enemy>.

¹⁰³ Hart, "Public Enemy Talks," <https://www.billboard.com/music/rb-hip-hop/public-enemy-it-takes-a-nation-of-millions-to-hold-us-back-8463262/>.

militant stance, a bunch of suburban-dwelling headbangers and skate kids found a kindred outlet for releasing their adolescent hostility in hip-hop that gave them the same rush as their favorite Bad Brains and Black Flag albums.¹⁰⁴

Public Enemy member Flava Flav emphasized this seeming affinity, noting that their collaboration with Anthrax on “Bring the Noise” “broke the racial barrier clean open.”¹⁰⁵

Despite Flav’s positive spin on the Anthrax version, the music video for Anthrax’s cover version reveals the continued removal of rap elements, visually and aurally illuminating how rap was often conceived within rock contexts. The entire video takes place in one location underneath a train overpass in the inner-city or another urban environment. Both Anthrax and some members of Public Enemy perform on a stage in front of an audience underneath this overpass. The inner-city/urban environment is reinforced by the addition of the siren sound being produced by Anthrax’s guitar player, which presumably is supposed to replicate the sounds of sirens in this urban space. Public Enemy’s original version also includes siren sounds, but they are sampled from actual sirens. Sirens have had a long history within rap music, especially in songs like N.W.A.’s “Fuck tha Police” and KRS-One’s “Sound of da Police.” While hip-hop is intimately connected with inner-city and urban life, at least as far back as the 1982 music video for Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s “The Message,” for a rock music video this is a very unusual location.¹⁰⁶ Rock music videos (especially in the 1980s) were often in a format that is now commonly known as “performance videos,” which are clearly defined by the presence of the musicians “performing” (through miming and/or lip synching) on a stage at a large venue

¹⁰⁴ Hart, “Public Enemy Talks,” <https://www.billboard.com/music/rb-hip-hop/public-enemy-it-takes-a-nation-of-millions-to-hold-us-back-8463262/>.

¹⁰⁵ Hart, “Public Enemy Talks,” <https://www.billboard.com/music/rb-hip-hop/public-enemy-it-takes-a-nation-of-millions-to-hold-us-back-8463262/>.

¹⁰⁶ Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, “The Messenger,” posted August 24, 2015, music video, YouTube, <https://youtu.be/PobrSpMwKk4>.

with an audience present; occasionally, bands would use live performance videos and overlay the recorded track over the top. The presence of both groups performing on the stage while accompanied by stacks of amps and a crowd of fans right at the stage's edge reinforces this stereotype of rock music videos, as opposed to rap videos which often have less of a stage orientation. This video can therefore be fundamentally regarded as a rock music video with rap artists as guests; a less charitable interpretation might regard them as novelties. This treatment is similar to the Run-DMC version of "Walk This Way" and its music video; the rappers emerge from backstage while Aerosmith's Steven Tyler and Joe Perry are out in front and performing. In fusing rap and rock aesthetics, "Bring the Noise" attempts to blend both the "performance" style of music video with the urban environment associated with hip-hop music. But which one would viewers see, especially when accompanied by a fusion of rap and metal?

Rap music's potential treatment as a "novelty" is further reinforced in the music video in the ways that turntables and scratching are treated by the members of Anthrax. As mentioned previously, Anthrax created this cover by taking samples of Chuck D's vocals from the original version and adding them to a completely new metal style instrumentation with another critical addition from hip-hop: a turntable. Public Enemy's use of turntables in their version of "Bring the Noise" used very advanced techniques, such as scratching and overlaying multiple samples at once, manipulating them into their own new grooves. Anthrax's version removed these complex turntable techniques which were heard in the original version, and instead employed seemingly "random" scratching throughout the song as a form of sonic reference to hip-hop DJing techniques.¹⁰⁷ Turntablism is a skill that is intimately connected to the history of rap and hip-hop

¹⁰⁷ Mark Katz, *Groove Music* (Oxford University Press; Illustrated Edition, 2012), 80.

Scratching is the action when someone takes a record and moves it back and forth under the needle, creating a sort of "zigga-zigga" sound.

as a whole, so its nearly complete removal and/or change from the intricate and heavily practiced style heard in Public Enemy's version to the "random" scratching used in Anthrax's version again reinforces how rock musicians regarded the turntable as a lesser instrument than a guitar. This in turn might echo a strongly held belief in the rock and metal communities that turntables are not real instruments and that they require no skill.¹⁰⁸ As Robert Walser writes in his article on Public Enemy, many traditional musicians are offended by the word "rap" because it is assumed it is "easy" to make, while rock is believed to be a sort of "high art" that takes years of practice on an instrument to be a real musician.. He states that "rappers don't 'sing' in the usual sense of that word, and hip-hop's reliance on sampling, whereby producers extract, manipulate, and reassemble bits of music from many sources, means that the people who make it don't play 'musical instruments,' in the usual sense of that term; instead, they use sophisticated studio equipment to manipulate sound, often the sounds of others playing traditional instruments."¹⁰⁹

This is further illustrated by the ways in which Anthrax's members act around the turntables in the music video. At the 2:11 time stamp, we see the only close up of the turntables in the entire music video. During this closeup we see one of the MC's of Public Enemy, Flavor Flav, using his turntables, and a member of Anthrax (Joey Belladonna) joins him on the left hand side, as shown in the screen grab below (Figure 5).¹¹⁰ I want to bring attention to the mannerisms that Joey Belladonna expresses when "playing" the turntables. In all the zoom-ins during this ten second or so long section, Belladonna is actually never touching the records on the turntable, but instead is just miming along with Flavor Flav. The acting itself seems almost mocking, as

¹⁰⁸ John Rudolph Covach and Andrew Flory, *What's That Sound?: An Introduction to Rock and Its History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 456.

¹⁰⁹ Walser, "Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rhetoric," 195.

¹¹⁰ Anthrax & Public Enemy, "Bring the Noise," posted May 25, 2016, music video, YouTube, 2:11, <https://youtu.be/k11hgXfX5-U>.

Belladonna just carelessly slides his hands back and forth on the metal. It is an extremely small detail in this video, but besides the presence of Chuck D and Flavor Flav on stage, it is the only common element from rap performances that was incorporated into the Anthrax video.

This analysis of both the Public Enemy and Anthrax versions of “Bring the Noise” indicates that while stylistic integration between rap and rock was occurring, it was often limited to surface level gestures. Anthrax’s version of “Bring the Noise” had only taken the aspects of rap music that appealed to them, and they chose to leave out the political messages and more nuanced musical aesthetics and techniques. As the 90s progressed, rock artists began to assimilate – with or without acknowledging it – more elements of rap with the rise of later rap-rock groups such as Limp Bizkit and the Red Hot Chili Peppers, groups that would be eventually labeled as “nu-metal,” a term that would come into more common usage in music periodicals when describing bands that fit groups whose work was sonically similar to Anthrax’s reworking of “Bring the Noise.” But understandings of the term were – are remain – imprecise. Even today, the definition of what constitutes what a nu-metal band sounds like is debated frequently by fans, as shown in this discussion board post from Reddit;

The problem is that Nü Metal is a fairly vague term. A bastard mishmash of several styles of metal, hip hop, grunge and punk. But if we break it down fundamentally a nü metal band features downtuned percussive style guitar riffing that draws influence from thrash metal, traditional death metal, traditional punk and grunge... Some nü metal bands such as Slipknot amongst others featured a DJ for ambient effects/sampling/scratching which alienated fans of other metal genres. Vocals that can range from rapping to singing to screaming... Drummers typically use more hip hop and rap influenced beats although this

is very much not the case for Slipknot as Joey Jordison spoke of his influences being Slayer and Anthrax.¹¹¹

What is not mentioned here, aside from a reference to “influenced beats,” are direct connections to rap, hip-hop, or rap-rock as a stylistic forerunner. But these connections can clearly be heard in bands like the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Faith No More, who were often labeled as “alternative” despite a clear rap-rock orientation. And these groups enjoyed enormous popular success; the Red Hot Chili Peppers had 15 Number 1 hits and 27 Top 10 Hits overall on *Billboard*’s Alternative Airplay chart, which started in 1988.¹¹² Another recently-formed band, Bakersfield, California’s Korn, had similar success on the Alternative Airplay chart with five Top 10 Hits. But Korn would transcend both the rap-rock and alternative labels, arguably becoming the face of the growing nu-metal movement upon the release of their 1994 self-titled debut album *Korn*. Sam Law, writing in *Kerrang!* magazine about the album’s single “Blind,” pegs the label directly to the band.

‘ARRRE YOU REAAADY?!’ It’s the immortal line that started the nu-metal movement: less an introduction to the Bakersfield outcasts than a spontaneous call-to-arms. Artists like Faith No More, Helmet, Rage Against the Machine and Ministry played their parts in breaking genre boundaries and the popularisation of rap-rock, but it was Korn’s distinctive debut that truly crystallised the nu-metal attitude and aesthetic: all down-tuned guitars, rubbery five-string bass, hip-hop beats, heightened angst and willful weirdness. Blind felt like its purest iteration.¹¹³

¹¹¹ xXIronSausageXxx, “The Problem is that Nü-Metal,” Reddit, posted April 28, 2022.

¹¹² Red Hot Chili Peppers, “Alternative Airplay Chart,” *Billboard*, accessed February 22, 2023, <https://www.billboard.com/artist/red-hot-chili-peppers/chart-history/mrt/>.

¹¹³ Sam Law, “The 20 Greatest Korn Songs- Ranked,” *Kerrang!*, April 20, 2021, <https://www.kerrang.com/the-20-greatest-korn-songs-ranked>.

A pertinent detail from this passage is how Law uses both nu-metal and rap-rock to describe Korn. Musically, Korn's music borrows from hip-hop in a number of ways; including the bass lines, sample styles that mimics scratch guitars, and electronic 808 kicks.¹¹⁴ This statement from Sam Law re-affirmed the connection between rap-rock and nu-metal sonically, which led rap-rock to be re-labeled as nu-metal.

Outside of their music, Korn's clothing also reflects the continued assimilation of hip-hop into popular culture that had begun in the late 1980s with *Yo! MTV Raps* and black-themed television. In 1996, Korn released the album *Life is Peachy*, which featured the song "A.D.I.D.A.S." This chapter opened with a discussion of Run-DMC's "My Adidas" situating the song as reflecting the deeper meaning adidas clothing had to Run-DMC, and to hip-hop culture as a whole. In the case of Korn's "A.D.I.D.A.S.," the song highlights how popular adidas clothing had become during the 1990s, but on the other hand, due to Korn's associated image with adidas, the clothing brand had become synonymous with nu-metal as well. Sam Law explains how "A.D.I.D.A.S." was received by audiences:

Where other bands wore the clothes, though, Korn sublimated them into the edgy outsider culture. Twisting the popular schoolyard conceit that adidas is an acronym for All Day I Dream About Sex, 1997 single A.D.I.D.A.S. dared play with the sort of filth-under-the-fingernails sleaze and sexual self-deprecation that was unimaginable from nu-metal contemporaries who pushed a more toxic machismo. JD explains that it also reflected how ubiquitous the adidas brand had been as a kid in America, and that it was as ripe for nightmarish subversion as swing-sets and hopscotch courts. Even the title of parent album *Life Is Peachy* referenced American teens' Pee-Chee All Season Portfolio

¹¹⁴ Law, "'It Was About Smashing Down Walls'," <https://www.kerrang.com/it-was-about-smashing-down-walls-how-adidas-invaded-nu-metal>.

which they'd commonly carve up to say 'Life is Peachy, but sex is an All-Season sport' (Pee-Chee declined to have their product depicted on the record's artwork).¹¹⁵

Explicit messages referencing sex, drugs, and violence became an integral part of the nu-metal image by the end of the 1990s; notable examples include "Bodies" by Drowning Pool, "Butterfly" by Crazy Town, and "Break Stuff" by Limp Bizkit. These are the same messages heard in the rap lyrics of the late 1980s and early 1990s as well, but recontextualized for a largely white rock audience. As it continued to become more popular throughout the 1990s, rap-rock's connections to hip-hop were gradually removed, as new faces and styles dominated the genre. By the end of the decade, as we shall see in the next chapter, this sense of removal was nearly complete.

¹¹⁵ Law, "'It Was About Smashing Down Walls'," <https://www.kerrang.com/it-was-about-smashing-down-walls-how-adidas-invaded-nu-metal>.

CHAPTER 3

“Listen All Y’all, It’s A Sabotage”: Nu-Metal and the Erasure of Blackness in Rap-Rock

As the 1990s progressed, developments in mass media technology continued to exert a profound influence on the course of popular culture. The rise of the internet and digital culture, as well as developments in television broadcasting, fundamentally altered the nature of the public’s engagement with current events, particularly as 24/7 news broadcasts became standard. News coverage of major events such as the Rodney King incident, the O.J. Simpson trial, the first Gulf War, and the Branch Davidian siege in Waco brought the “real world” into the homes of “Middle America.”¹¹⁶ By the start of the decade, cable television was in 57% of television audience’s homes, which brought with it a collection of new channels, including Cartoon Network, Court TV, Cable News Network (CNN), and Comedy Central. Additionally, video cameras had been integrated into the home and everyday life, further blurring the line between the public and private spheres.¹¹⁷ For example, footage of the Rodney King beating in 1991 by the LAPD that was filmed by bystanders became the catalyst for major incidents of protest and racial unrest. Other news events that were continuously broadcast on television (including the Clarence Thomas sexual harassment allegations and the Simpson trial) created deeper rifts amongst Americans along the lines of race, class, and gender.¹¹⁸ With respect to race, such rifts would serve to heighten negative reactions to black artists; the case of Ice-T, as discussed in the previous chapter, is a notable example.

¹¹⁶ Colin Harrison, *American Culture in the 1990s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 98.

¹¹⁷ Harrison, 122, 97.

¹¹⁸ Harrison, 102-103.

Music consumption also changed drastically during this decade. Colin Harrison writes that “[b]y the 1990s, the conditions determining the relation between youth and popular music were very different. In the intervening decades teenagers and young adults had been steadily transformed into consumer groups, markets for an expanding range of media and lifestyle products such as fashion, computers, video games and youth-oriented film and television.”¹¹⁹ The digitization of music, first through the introduction of the compact disc in the 1980s, then with the adoption of the MP3 format in the 1990s, revolutionized the listening and sharing of music. Such technological developments were paralleled by an increasingly centralized and consolidated recording industry.

MTV, which stood at the intersection of developments in media technology and corporate growth, found itself in an awkward position. How could the network exist as a central player in the media industry, while still maintaining a sense of the upstart, outsider status which defined its early programming? The network attempted to address this question with the introduction of its animated program *Beavis and Butthead*, which featured two male adolescent characters who loved heavy metal and believed everything was either “cool” or it “sucked.” The premise of each short episode focused on the two boys sitting on the couch and watching music videos while viewers listened to their running commentary. Beavis and Butthead’s bias toward heavy metal is obvious in many of the episodes (most visibly with the Metallica and AC/DC shirts the characters wear), where just about everything except metal “sucks.” One episode in particular illustrates an especially important link with the discussion of rap-rock, featuring Beavis and Butthead’s commentary on rap group Onyx and metal band Biohazard’s collaboration on the song “Slam.” As soon as the music video starts, one of them exclaims “yes! These dudes kick

¹¹⁹ Harrison, 77.

ass.” Once Onyx begins the first verse, one of them states that “slamming is cool, ‘cause like, if you’re at a concert and some dude smacks you, you can like smack him back.”¹²⁰ Beavis and Butt-head’s stamp of approval on the Onyx and Biohazard version of “Slam” illustrates the ways in which rap-rock had seemingly become accepted in the rock world by the early 1990s. But by the end of the decade, rock audiences were seemingly far less willing to acknowledge such connections, a process which was illustrated through the rise in popularity of nu-metal. In the remainder of this chapter, I trace these developments through an examination of the emergence of two major acts who were often associated with nu-metal, Limp Bizkit and Kid Rock, culminating in the ill-fated 30th anniversary Woodstock festival in 1999.

“Welcome to the Jungle, Punk”: The Rise of Limp Bizkit and Lyrical Violence

Through the mid 1990s, a number of different terms were used to refer to rap-rock fusions.¹²¹ Geoffrey Himes, writing in *The Washington Post*, refers to the latest heavy metal adaption as “groove metal,” which he describes as “the marriage of hard rock with dance music and hip-hop. This gives the loud, crunchy guitars a black-flavored dance pulse and gives the wailing vocals the punchy rhythms of rap and funk.”¹²² Himes’ description of this style having a “black-flavored dance pulse” signals that groups like Korn were clearly using influences from black music and culture. Another term, “asshole rock,” appeared in the early 1990s in a *Rolling Stone* article:

You remember Faith No More (they rapped!), Red Hot Chili Peppers (they lisped!),

Henry Rollins (he read Nietzsche!) and his Henry Rollins Band (what a way with

¹²⁰ VHS Archive, “Beavis and Butt-head: “Slam” (Onyx (featuring Biohazard)),” posted February 3, 2015, YouTube, <https://youtu.be/L6DWzA9-HWw>.

¹²¹ Anonymous, “Hot Comeback: Asshole Rock,” *Rolling Stone*, August 19, 1999, 78.

¹²² Geoffrey Himes, “Korn: Heavy on the Hip-Hop,” *The Washington Post*, October 30, 1998.

words!)..... But Korn, Limp Bizkit, Kottonmouth Kings, Kid Rock – they ain’t having this vida loca shit. Their grunting devotion to heavy guitars, white bassists and the letter K have brought asshole rock back to ‘roid-raging life.... You may regard these assholes as important musicians or as the voice of a generation or as life-support systems for tattoos. But one thing is clear: They’re assholes. And they rock.¹²³

In both of these descriptions, we can see how connections to hip-hop and black culture were increasingly sidelined by music critics as rap-rock became more popular among rock audiences.

But by 1998, critics were beginning to settle on the term “nu-metal” to describe these artists and their music. The earliest primary document which used the term nu-metal to describe a musician under the nu-metal title is most likely an article from 1998 in *Music Week*, which claimed Marilyn Manson was a “welcome blast of nu-metal.”¹²⁴ This early example of the use of “nu-metal” to describe Marilyn Manson’s music doesn’t provide us with a description of what actually makes his music “nu-metal.” The use of this term to describe Manson is surprising, given the relative lack of hip-hop influence in his music, and this seems to be an outlier in writing on his work. Instead, it would be Korn who, in the pop press, at least, would come to be defined as the pioneering group in what would become nu-metal. But its influence on the style was arguably overshadowed by the emergence of another band that would, for better or worse, serve to define the genre by the end of the decade: Limp Bizkit.

Korn were significant early supporters of Limp Bizkit, helping them expand their audience past Florida.¹²⁵ Limp Bizkit’s first album, *Three Dollar Bill, Yall\$*, was released in 1997 with two featured singles, “Counterfeit” and “Faith,” the latter an aggressive cover of

¹²³ Anonymous, “Hot Comeback: Asshole Rock,” *Rolling Stone*, August 19, 1999, 78.

¹²⁴ “Reviews- For Records Out On 9 November 1998,” *Music Week*, October 31, 1998, 14.

¹²⁵ Steven Daly, “Send Pornstars, Funk and Money: The Limp Bizkit Story,” *Rolling Stone*, August 5, 1999, 32.

George Michael's 1987 hit. Fred Durst's rapping style on "Counterfeit" highlights how the rap thread continued to be manifested in this new rap-rock/nu-metal style. Durst explained in an interview for *Melody Maker* that "[i]t's great cos a lot of who like hip-hop feel too intimidated to go to a black hip-hop show, but they'll come to this."¹²⁶ In the same article two young fans, identified as Mike and George, state this about Limp Bizkit, "'Limp Bizkit are the best band in the world!' screams Mike. 'Yeah!' agrees George. 'They're not like all these other rappers hiding behind their gold chains, they're real.'"¹²⁷ George's statement highlights how relatable Limp Bizkit's image is to what clothing styles George and Mike wear. Somehow, because Limp Bizkit does not wear chains they are viewed as more "real" than rap artists who do. George's statement also highlights many similarities between Durst and Eminem, seemingly situating them both within the rap sphere (they would later tour together).¹²⁸ After the release of *Three Dollar Bill, Yall\$*, Limp Bizkit went on to tour with many high profile metal bands at the time like Faith No More and Korn.¹²⁹ They also became a common sight on MTV, going so far as to perform "Counterfeit" live on MTV's *Fashionably Loud* Spring Break Special in 1998.¹³⁰ In 1999 *Three Dollar Bill, Yall\$* went platinum in March and then double platinum in 2001.¹³¹ Over the course of a year, Limp Bizkit had become one of the most popular groups in the country, and would remain so through the end of the 1990s

¹²⁶ Mark Sutherland, "Limp Bizkit and Eminem: Anger is an Energy...", *Melody Maker*, October 25-October 31, 2000, 21.

¹²⁷ Mark Sutherland, "Limp Bizkit and Eminem: Anger is an Energy...", *Melody Maker*, October 25-October 31, 2000, 21.

¹²⁸ Carol Clerk and Andre Paine, "Eminem/Limp Bizkit Announce US Tour," *Melody Maker*, October 4-October 10, 2000, 6.

¹²⁹ Jay Gabler, "Rock and Roll Book Club: 'Small Victories' Tells the Story of Faith No More," *The Current*, January 16, 2019, <https://www.thecurrent.org/feature/2019/01/15/faith-no-more-small-victories>.
Daly, "Send Porn Stars," 32.

¹³⁰ "Limp Bizkit – Counterfeit & Nobody Loves Me at MTV Spring Break 1998," posted October 5, 2013, Youtube video, <https://youtu.be/cRfbPto-rHk>.

¹³¹ "Limp Bizkit," Gold and Platinum, Recording Industry Association of America, accessed February 1, 2023, https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&ar=Limp+Bizkit&ti=Three+Dollar+Bill%2C+Y%27All&format=Album&type=#search_section.

In some ways Limp Bizkit's image can be seen to reflect more of a rap oriented perspective, rather than a rock-based identity. The album artwork seen on *Three Dollar Bill, Yall\$* is reminiscent of many street art image styles seen during the 1990s; Limp Bizkit's cover uses the colors red, white, and black drawn with what looks like a pen. Even though the character is only in black and white, the stance and the clothing is reminiscent of rap artists of the 1990s (Figure 6). The baggy, low rise pants were a popular clothing choice for rap fans, as evident in this photo of the kid rap group Kris Kross from around 1992 (Figure 7).¹³² Similarly, Durst's staple clothing choice of a backwards red MLB baseball cap, baggy pants, adidas sneakers, and an oversized t-shirt or sweater became popular amongst fans who often emulated the style; this can be seen in the music video for "Break Stuff," which also features a cameo from Snoop Dogg and the use of a DJ style turntable.¹³³ These nods to hip-hop are important, especially with Snoop Dogg's presence being a clear stamp of approval from a major rap act.

Limp Bizkit's popularity rose significantly upon the release of their second album *Significant Other* in 1999. Released on June 22, *Significant Other* shot up the charts with the album becoming certified gold on August 9 and reaching seven-times platinum status on September 13, 2001.¹³⁴ Arguably, the best known songs from this album are "Nookie," "Break Stuff," "Re-Arranged," and "N 2 Gether Now." Out of those four songs, "Nookie" had become the "song of the summer" in 1999 according to MTV presenter Ananda Lewis in the documentary *Trainwreck: Woodstock '99*.¹³⁵ "Nookie"'s lyrics are about Fred Durst's anger toward his ex-girlfriend that had cheated on him, but, in the end he states that it doesn't really

¹³² Kris Kross, *Totally Krossed Out*, released 1992, album cover, Ruffhouse and Columbia.

¹³³ Limp Bizkit, "Break Stuff," directed by Fred Durst, 2000, music video, <https://youtu.be/ZpUYjpKg9KY>.

¹³⁴ "Limp Bizkit," Gold and Platinum, Recording Industry Association of America, accessed February 1, 2023, https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&se=Significant+Other#search_section.

¹³⁵ *Trainwreck: Woodstock '99*, episode 2, "Kerosine. Match. Boom!," aired August 3, 2022, on Netflix, 23:44.

matter because he “did it all for the nookie.” Even though the song isn’t explicitly violent in its lyrics, the song ends with the band discussing how great the recording was, and then someone breaks (what is assumed to be) the glass partition between the recording booth and the sound engineer booth. The shattering of the glass is met with laughter from multiple people, accompanied by what would turn out to be a prescient statement: “That’s how you do it.”¹³⁶

“I’m Not Straight Out of Compton, I’m Straight Out the Trailer”: Kid Rock and the Contradictions of Identity

Another important figure in the rap-rock movement of the mid 1990s was Detroit-based Bob Richie, better known by his stage name, Kid Rock.¹³⁷ His career started in 1990 with the release of his first album, *Grits Sandwiches for Breakfast*. The album, according to Mark Benelli, is reminiscent of earlier rap-rock efforts, “a snotty, Beastie Boys-influenced effort notable primarily for its explicit rhymes and a sleeve shot of Rock with a ridiculous Kid ‘N Play flattop.”¹³⁸ It was not until his fourth album, *Devil Without a Cause*, released on August 4, 1998, that he would experience his first real mainstream success, making him a star virtually overnight. By August 1999 Kid Rock had been labeled as the “Godfather of Detroit’s honky-rap scene” and as an “Eminem prototype.”¹³⁹ Precisely what “honky-rap” refers to here is not immediately clear.

Kid Rock’s origins as a rap artist can be traced to his teenage years, when his mother had bought him a pair of turntables for Christmas. A few years later he had been invited to a party in Detroit where he was allowed to sit in with the DJ, allowing him to learn the showmanship and

¹³⁶ Limp Bizkit, “Nookie,” released in 1999, track 3 on *Significant Other*, Interscope.

¹³⁷ Gary Graff, “Kid Rock,” *Music Connection*, January 2013, 37.

¹³⁸ Mark Benelli, “Kid Rock On a Roll,” *Rolling Stone*, September 2, 1999, 3.

¹³⁹ Hobey Echlin, “Kid Rock Exposed!,” *Alternative Press*, August 1999, 52.

techniques which would later be a feature of many of his live performances.¹⁴⁰ His music can be best described as a fusion between rock, rap, and country with a focus on the idea of “trailer park culture.”¹⁴¹ Steve Jennings explains in *Mix* magazine that Kid Rock was “a bit of an oddity for a mixer in that he is not any one thing: metal, rap, rock, county, bluegrass, gospel. He expects his country songs to sound country.... And his hip-hop stuff, he wants to punch you in the face and rumble your seat.”¹⁴² Similarly, Gary Graff writes that “Kid Rock introduced us to punk rock/hip-hop/Southern rock musical manifesto. Add some blues, funk, soul, and country to that, and you have the all-American mix....”¹⁴³ Both of these descriptions of Kid Rock’s music highlight the seemingly never-ending influences which are incorporated into his music.

The image and persona developed by Kid Rock during the last half of the 1990s detaches rap from the singular context of the inner city, instead aligning it with white suburban or exurban culture. The connections between his musical image and such cultural associations are evident in the music video for “Bawitdaba,” (1998) which was released as a single from *Devil Without a Cause*. The video opens as a collage of different music videos happening at the same time, with images ranging from concert signs, Kid Rock singing, someone playing the turntables, to fellow musician Fred Durst. Then, the scene zooms into one of the smaller videos to show Kid Rock standing in an open field in a bright green sequin shirt and pants. From here, the video primarily moves to a trailer park with dirt bikes jumping over trailers, while Kid Rock sings on the roofs. The remainder of the video has intermittent shots of him driving, dancing, and performing on a makeshift stage. Kid Rock’s identification with the trailer park is central to the location in this video. Such an emphasis on location is significant in light of the importance of this concept in

¹⁴⁰ Binelli, “Kid Rock on a Roll,” 3.

¹⁴¹ Binelli, “Kid Rock on a Roll,” 1-2.

¹⁴² Steve Jennings, “All Access: Kid Rock,” *Mix*, September 2011, 32.

¹⁴³ Graff, “Kid Rock,” 37.

rap, particularly in representations of urban landscapes. Representative examples of this can be seen in Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message" and the title of N.W.A.'s album *Straight Outta Compton*. Kid Rock's relocation emphasized that he was not from the inner-city, but instead the trailer park, underscoring the disconnect from the origins of rap.

"Bawitdaba" was nominated for the Best Rock Video in the 1999 MTV Video Music Awards, which ultimately went to Korn for "Freak On a Leash." He was invited to perform live at award ceremony in collaboration with Run-DMC and Aerosmith, which had the effect of explicitly linking him to the longer canon of rap-rock history. The performance opens with Run-DMC already on stage and Kid Rock coming out on a red carpet that was rolled out for him to the opening of "Bawitdaba." Run-DMC are mainly positioned at the periphery of Kid Rock's performance, only contributing small interjections between Kid Rock's phrases. Later, Steven Tyler and Joe Perry of Aerosmith enter from the back of the audience for "Walk This Way." Run-DMC's participation is relatively marginal compared to the performance of Steven Tyler and Kid Rock since both begin to sing over Run-DMC during the verses.¹⁴⁴ The pioneers of rap-rock had been pushed aside physically and musically during this performance in the most public manner possible, demonstrating both Run-DMC's enduring influence on rap-rock, as well as the increasingly marginalization of Black artists within the genre.

"Break Stuff": Woodstock '99, Rage, Music, and the Radicalization of Violence

The biggest musical event of the last half of the 1990s was almost certainly Woodstock '99. From July 23-July 25th, 1999 in Rome, New York at Griffiss Air Force Base, an estimated 400,000 people gathered for a weekend of "peace, love, and music," except there was very little

¹⁴⁴ Arquivo M T V, "Kid Rock Feat. Aerosmith & Run-DMC- Bawitdaba/Walk This Way (VMA 1999)," posted October 20, 2020, YouTube, <https://youtu.be/vNe3zu4g7gY>.

peace and love by the festival's end.¹⁴⁵ Woodstock '99 presents a very specific case study on the culture which had developed around nu-metal music by the end of the 1990s, illuminating how popular the genre and culture had become amongst teenagers and young adults at this time.

The events surrounding Woodstock '99 were a direct manifestation of the trajectories of hyper-capitalism which increasingly defined the music industry, and global commerce as a whole, by the late 1990s. Tickets for the three-day event were priced at \$150 dollars each and concert-goers were not allowed to bring their own food or water. In a classic illustration of supply and demand, with 400,000 people all trapped inside the base, food prices skyrocketed during the event, with bottled water averaging \$4 a bottle (which in 1999 averaged about 65 cents).¹⁴⁶ Budweiser had also sponsored a beer garden at the event, which led to many patrons drinking throughout the day and becoming inebriated.¹⁴⁷ The excessive price of water was made worse when the average temperature on the base that weekend was around 100 degrees Fahrenheit, with the hot tarmac pavement of the base exacerbating the situation.¹⁴⁸ The conditions deteriorated further with the discovery that the free tap water sources provided to all of the patrons was contaminated with feces due to the water lines leaking and being exposed to the overflowing porta-potties on the concert grounds.¹⁴⁹ As documented in the film series *Trainwreck: Woodstock '99*, the living conditions, besides the drinking water contamination,

¹⁴⁵ Helen Ray, "Carson Daly on Woodstock '99's Chaos: 'I Thought I Was Going to Die'," *CBS News*, August 13, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/carson-daly-on-woodstock-99/#text=An%20estimated%20400%2C000%20people%20were%20destruction%2C2220according%20to%20AP>.

¹⁴⁶ Barry Walters, "Nü Metal and Woodstock '99," *The Rock History Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Theo Cateforis (New York: London: Routledge, 2013), 303.

Trainwreck: Woodstock '99, episode 1, "How the F**ck Did this Happen?," directed by Jamie Crawford, aired August 3, 2022, on Netflix (Netflix, 2022), 28:30.

¹⁴⁷ *Trainwreck: Woodstock '99*, episode 1, "How the F**ck Did this Happen?," directed by Jamie Crawford, aired August 3, 2022, on Netflix (Netflix, 2022), 18:00.

¹⁴⁸ *Trainwreck: Woodstock '99*, episode 1, "How the F**ck Did this Happen?," directed by Jamie Crawford, aired August 3, 2022, on Netflix (Netflix, 2022), 27:03.

¹⁴⁹ *Trainwreck: Woodstock '99*, episode 3, "You Can't Stop a Riot in the 90s," directed by Jamie Crawford, aired August 3, 2022, on Netflix, (Netflix, 2022), 4:47.

were not suitable for multiple nights, with many patrons sleeping in tents or just out in the open in the fields around the tarmac.¹⁵⁰ The combination of poor conditions and exorbitant prices led to an outpouring of anger from fans, which was then fueled by the “angry, aggressive music” from the bands that were performing.¹⁵¹

Although the artists chosen to play at Woodstock '99 were drawn from many different genres, and included James Brown, Sheryl Crow and Ice Cube, Woodstock promoters actively choose to have a more rock oriented programming, most likely in order to keep some of the original nostalgia for the rock groups heard at Woodstock '69. But the main headliners for Woodstock '99 were primarily bands like Korn, Kid Rock, Red Hot Chili Peppers, and Limp Bizkit, who were by this point commonly described by critics and fans as “nu-metal.” The lyrical content of many nu-metal songs is often full of rage and aggression toward the world around them, as exemplified by Limp Bizkit’s “Break Stuff” and “Nookie.” The lyrics of both “Break Stuff” and “Nookie,” for example, focus on violence and anger towards women, a point which would be particularly relevant when considering the events of Woodstock '99 in light of the numerous attacks on women during the festival, as well as overall violence directed at the venue itself. While the headlining nu-metal bands (especially Limp Bizkit) themselves cannot be the single focus of blame for the events seen at Woodstock, the connections to the violence seen at the event to some of the most popular music of that summer is not without merit.

By the second day of the festival, assaults on women became rampant, with women being touched inappropriately while crowd surfing and being harassed by groups of men.¹⁵² Violence

¹⁵⁰ *Trainwreck: Woodstock '99*, episode 2, “Kerosine. Match. Boom!,” directed by Jamie Crawford, aired August 3, 2022, on Netflix (Netflix, 2022), 3:50.

¹⁵¹ Walters, 303.

¹⁵² *Trainwreck: Woodstock '99*, episode 2, “Kerosine. Match. Boom!,” directed by Jamie Crawford, aired August 3, 2022, on Netflix (Netflix, 2022), 21:04.

initially began to break out at Woodstock '99 during Limp Bizkit's performance on the second night of the festival. About halfway through their set, pieces of plywood begin to make their way through the audience towards the front of the stage. Audience members stood on the pieces of wood in a sort of crowd-surfing frenzy as the bass-line from "Stuck" rang out amongst the audience.¹⁵³ The pieces of plywood seen in the videos and photos from Limp Bizkit's performance had come from the sound system tower that was in front of the stage, surrounded by the audience. As Limp Bizkit's set continued, more and more audience members began ripping off the pieces of plywood that were protecting the sound tower in order for people from the audience to climb over and into the tower. While introducing the song "Break Stuff," Durst asks the crowd "How many of you have ever woke up one morning, and just decided it wasn't one of those days and you're gonna break some shit?" As this was happening, the workers in the tower began to fear for their lives and were evacuated by security as more audience members breached the sides of the tower.¹⁵⁴ In an attempt to keep the crowd from causing more damage, the band was pulled offstage early by one of the festival's promoters.¹⁵⁵

By the third and final day, the conditions for audience members had declined greatly. As more fans became sick from the contaminated drinking water and more dehydrated, they began to take out their anger on the infrastructure of the festival itself. Fans began to tear down the perimeter walls around the base in an act of defiance toward the festival.¹⁵⁶ While the "peace and love" of the original 1969 festival had largely been a reflection of the 1960s counterculture

¹⁵³ Woodstock 99, "Limp Bizkit Live Woodstock '99," posted January 4, 2020, Youtube, 28:51, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ACh04DwnUT0>.

¹⁵⁴ *Trainwreck: Woodstock '99*, episode 2, "Kerosine. Match. Boom!," directed by Jamie Crawford, aired August 3, 2022, on Netflix (Netflix, 2022), 29: 28.

¹⁵⁵ *Trainwreck: Woodstock '99*, episode 2, "Kerosine. Match. Boom!," directed by Jamie Crawford, aired August 3, 2022, on Netflix (Netflix, 2022), 34:25.

¹⁵⁶ *Trainwreck: Woodstock '99*, episode 3, "You Can't Stop a Riot in the 90s," directed by Jamie Crawford, aired August 3, 2022, on Netflix, (Netflix, 2022), 11:06.

movement as a whole, the '99 festival reflected the violence which was, though the increased coverage of cable and internet news, becoming somewhat normalized in American popular culture. As the day wore on, many fans chose to leave the festival early due to the poor conditions. Carson Daly, one of the MTV news presenters, began interviewing people as they drove out of the festival. One group had this to say about why they were leaving; "It stinks in there," the man says. "It's too dirty," says the woman. Another couple stated that "we're exhausted, man. The heat totally drove us into the ground."¹⁵⁷

The last act to perform at Woodstock '99 was the Red Hot Chili Peppers, with rumors spreading amongst the audience that there would be a secret special guest that would officially close out the festival after the Red Hot Chili Peppers.¹⁵⁸ At the end of the Chili Peppers' set, there was a candlelight vigil in honor of recognizing gun violence in the United States in the wake of the Columbine High School shooting, which had occurred only a few months earlier.¹⁵⁹ As "Under the Bridge" echoed out across the festival, fans were given candles to hold in recognition of the victims of gun violence, even though the festival had confiscated all lighters when they had walked through the gate. Once the Red Hot Chili Peppers had finished their set, the festival ended with the organizers showed a tribute video of Jimi Hendrix projected onto the screens, instead of having a special guest end the festival.¹⁶⁰ A report in the *New York Times* describes the events; I quote this passage at length:

The incident began around 10 P.M, when concertgoers, using "peace candles" that had been distributed with the consent of Woodstock organizers, overturned and set ablaze the

¹⁵⁷ *Trainwreck: Woodstock '99*, episode 3, "You Can't Stop a Riot in the 90s," directed by Jamie Crawford, aired August 3, 2022, on Netflix, (Netflix, 2022), 5:56.

¹⁵⁸ Paul Zielbauer, "Woodstock '99 Kicks Off, But Without the Stardust," *New York Times*, July 24, 1999, B5.

¹⁵⁹ *Trainwreck: Woodstock '99*, episode 3, "You Can't Stop a Riot in the 90s," directed by Jamie Crawford, aired August 3, 2022, on Netflix, (Netflix, 2022), 17:12.

¹⁶⁰ *Trainwreck: Woodstock '99*, episode 3, "You Can't Stop a Riot in the 90s," directed by Jamie Crawford, aired August 3, 2022, on Netflix, (Netflix, 2022), 22:46.

Mercedes-Benz, to the right of the east stage. “At that point, we assessed that these fires were not a danger to the crowd,” Superintendent McMahon said, speaking to the reporters this morning. He added that police officials were reluctant to risk driving a fire truck into the crowd near the stage, and believed the fires would simply die out.... As the concert’s floodlights were turned off, about 10:30 P.M., the blazes quickly multiplied, illuminating silhouettes of men and women running and dancing around them, sometimes through them.

By 11 P.M., with no police in sight, some people had razed a canvas tent, but not before looting the booty: Woodstock ’99 T-shirts. Unchallenged, they grew bolder, feeding the bonfires with large tables, plywood, even portable toilets.

Meanwhile, groups of men were repeatedly slamming three cash machines on the former Griffiss Air Force Base runway, hoping to see a spray of 20\$ bills. “Back up! Everyone will get money!” one beefy man shouted, pulling smaller revelers off a dog-pile that had formed around one broken cash machine....

In all, the melee went on unchecked for at least an hour before hundreds of state police troopers, who had not been a presence inside the Woodstock grounds all weekend, finally barreled onto the concert site to restore some order at 11:40 P.M. Corraling the revelry and putting out the fires they had set, however, required several hours.

Before the crowd was deemed to be under control, about 5 A.M., concertgoers had looted a stand filled with hardware and camping supplies for sale, burned the 12 trailers, smashed into a local radio station’s truck and burned a telephone company truck in the campground, the police said.¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ Paul Zielbauer, “Woodstock Festival Faces a Bad Hangover: What Began with Peace, Love, and Music Ends in Fire, Rampage, and Loot,” *New York Times*, July 27, 1999, B5.

The description above from the *New York Times* gives us an almost blow-by-blow account of what happened that evening, and why it took so long for order to be restored amongst the concert-goers. In the space of a couple of hours Woodstock '99 had changed from a peaceful protest about gun violence into its own spectacle of violence.

The aftermath and reactions to Woodstock '99 brought attention to how the music, artists, and attendees were viewed by broader audiences, posing questions about how the violence seen at Woodstock '99 was initially deemed to be largely “harmless,” while any violence associated with rap groups was viewed as severely dangerous. John Scher, Woodstock '99's promoter, was quoted by Paul Zielbauer saying “‘Of course we blame ourselves to a degree,’ he said, but he called the four-hour melee ‘an aberration’ created by a few ‘bad kids.’”¹⁶² Scher's decision to describe the mob that burned 12 tractor trailers and broke into three ATMs “a few bad kids” clearly minimized the gravity of the situation and the damage that was done. According to Barbara Diamant in the *Morning Call*, there were an “estimated 200 to 500 rioters” with thousands more watching and cheering them on, which is a lot more than just “a few bad kids”.¹⁶³ Barbara Diamant writes this in the *Morning Call* to explain the differences between the 1969 festival and the 1999 festival:

Officials were caught off-guard by the sheer number of young people in 1969, and by the eruption of violence in 1999. But there is also a major difference. An element of the 1960s crowd may be blamed for being sloppy, starry-eyed and intemperate. And they boldly displayed scorn for the conventions of their parents. But at their three-day festival, they hurt no one, and if some individuals had lost sight of the underlying social causes

¹⁶² Zielbauer, “Woodstock Festival,” B1.

¹⁶³ Barbara Diamant, “Between Woodstock Concerts Idealism Was Lost Somewhere,” *Morning Call*, Allentown, PA, August 4, 1999, A15.

which had given birth to their unrest, the music of the day reverberated with anti-war, pro-fellowship lyrics. Today's troubled youth turn to hard-core rioting, looting, and assault. And while just a fraction of the 1999 Woodstock crowd engaged in criminal activity, they were encouraged by thousands more, a frightening solidarity. When the state police arrived at the melee, they were pelted with lemons and oranges. As for the reason this Woodstock generation resorts to violence, no one does exactly know. The newspaper accounts suggest a link to the music of Korn, Rage Against the Machine, and Limp Bizkit, whose performance triggered a violent mosh pit only seconds after the first song.¹⁶⁴

Diamant illustrates the seeming difference between '69 and '99 by stating that the fans of '69 had music that "reverberating with anti-war" and "pro-fellowship lyrics," (depending on who the audience was listening to), she contrasts this with the audience of '99 with a single sentence: "Today's troubled youth turn to hard-core rioting, looting, and assault." Diamant's emphasis on the looting and assault seen at '99 highlights disparities in the coverage of violence in the mainstream press. Looting has arguably almost always been associated with Black communities, and not white communities; this was clearly evidenced by the coverage of the Rodney King incident and its aftermath. However, when white concertgoers rioted at Woodstock, it was often described as an "aberration." We can see sentiments such as these expressed in the 1977 song "White Riot" by the punk band The Clash, which states "Black man gotta lot a problems, But they don't mind throwing a brick, White people go to school, Where they teach you how to be thick, And everybody's doing, Just what they're told to, And nobody wants to go to jail."¹⁶⁵ These lyrics emphasized the socialized understanding of how riots have historically been a part

¹⁶⁴ Diamant, "Between Woodstock," A15.

¹⁶⁵ The Clash, "White Riot," released March 1977, track 4 on *The Clash*, Sony Music UK.

of black pathology, while white students are taught in schools that riots are not regarded as a viable option.

In his article “Real Woodstock Still the Best Woodstock,” Rick Horowitz further highlights how the violence at Woodstock ’99 wasn’t taken seriously. He calls the festival a “big mess” and states “well, of course they rioted- the burritos were overpriced!” This reference to the high prices of food at the festival is a tongue-in-cheek reference to how hyper-corporatized the festival had become, while at the same time failing to fully acknowledge the festival’s very nature as a corporate event. Horowitz continues to discuss his own perspective on the destruction seen at ’99 in comparison to ’69, which illustrates how some people didn’t take the violence seriously at all:

‘Golly, Rick,’ you’re saying to me. ‘You were at the original Woodstock, weren’t you? You trod the sacred sod of Yasgur’s farm all those years ago. Doesn’t it make you sad to see how the Woodstock name and the Woodstock ideals were reduced to ashes?’ Don’t be silly. I couldn’t be happier- and I’m not the only one. In fact, on behalf of my entire generation, allow me to share with you the following sentiment, offered with all the sincerity that’s in me: ‘Hah!’ And once again, for emphasis: ‘Hah!’ See, a disaster at Woodstock ’99 is exactly the kind of thing that veterans of Woodstock ’69 love to see. And by ‘veterans of Woodstock,’ I don’t mean just those of us who were actually at that place at that moment, but everyone who was alive and rocking back then and would have been there, too, if only they’d realized ahead of time what a total touchstone it was going to turn out to be. You have to understand: The last thing my generation wants is some other generation beating us at our own game. Any of our own games. How could we possibly keep telling ourselves (and everyone else within earshot) that we’re the best

generation that ever was, the only generation that ever knew how to throw a party, stop a war, save a tree, eat a peach, if some young whippersnappers suddenly came along and did the very same thing we did, only better?¹⁶⁶

Horowitz's statement illustrates a measure of contempt for the current youth generation. It was a good thing in Horowitz's eyes that Woodstock '99 wasn't a success, he argues, because then the older generation can continue to believe that it was the "better" generation. Horowitz fails to acknowledge why these concertgoers had chosen to rebel, instead making a joke about the price of the burritos.

Interviews conducted with fans in the aftermath of the violence expressed a widely-held belief that the violence was not intended as a form of protest. Paul Zielbauer interviewed a female audience member named Meghan MacIver in the aftermath of the festival who stated that "[i]t was sheer fun.... There was looting and lots of damage- but not to anyone's tents... As riots go, it was a very friendly riot."¹⁶⁷ Another attendee, Jason Hamet, stated, in reference to the festival's final day, that he "tried to start a riot twice today because I was bored."¹⁶⁸ Even members of the bands performing felt the hostile environment from the audience, as recalled by The Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart the day after the festival ended, "There's a lot of anger out there- it's definitely a lot scarier.... This isn't 1969, this is 1999, and those who came looking for the spirit of '69 won't find it. It isn't here and it shouldn't be. That spirit belonged to us, we owned it. People in 1999 have to find their own spirit."¹⁶⁹ Before the festival started, the townspeople of Rome, New York (where the base was located) expressed uncertainty about what

¹⁶⁶ Rick Horowitz, "Real Woodstock Still the Best Woodstock," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, July 28, 1999, 10.

¹⁶⁷ Zielbauer, "Woodstock Festival Faces a Bad Hangover," B5.

¹⁶⁸ "Woodstock 1999," *The Press Democrat*, July 27, 1999, B4.

¹⁶⁹ Finbarr O'Reilly, "Discontent and Naked Hostility: 'This Isn't 1969, This is 1999, and Those Who Came Looking for the Spirit of '69 Won't Find It'," *National Post*, July 26, 1999, D1.

kinds of people would be attending the festival. Resident Brian Pabis stated in an interview on July 24th that “[a] lot of people are afraid...Businesses are closed because they have a notion of the kind of people that are coming, and they’re worried about looting and stealing.”¹⁷⁰ Despite the fact that such looting and stealing in the town did not materialize, what is perhaps most striking about these residents’ expressions of unease is the emphasis on potential loss of property, rather than concerns about physical violence to people.

Black rap music has a long history of being marginalized in the music industry simply because of incidents of violence seen at shows, while white rap-rock groups at Woodstock ’99 faced comparatively less blame. According to a December 1989 *Billboard* article about rap tours, “venue availability is down 33% because buildings are limiting rap shows.” In her book *Black Noise*, Tricia Rose explains how the death of 19 year-old Julio Fuentes at a Nassau Coliseum rap show in 1988 was what may have crystalized this historical fear of hosting rap shows. Rose explains that after the concert “TransAmerica cancelled blanket insurance coverage for shows produced by G Street Express in Washington, D.C., the show’s promoter. Although G Street has since obtained coverage, the fallout of that cancelation has cast a pall over rap shows, resulting in many venues imposing stringent conditions or refusing to host the shows at all.”¹⁷¹ In some ways, the reaction to Woodstock ’99 is similar to that for the Altamont ’69 free concert, which resulted in the death of a Meredith Hunter (who was a young black man) after he pulled a gun and was stabbed by a member of the Hell’s Angels Motorcycle Club, who had been hired to be the security for the event.¹⁷² After this tragedy happened, none of the performing musical acts

¹⁷⁰ Zielbauer, “Woodstock ’99 Kicks Off,” B5.

¹⁷¹ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 130.

¹⁷² “Woodstock ’99,” *The Press Democrat*, July 27, 1999, B4.

David Chiu, “Altamont at 50: The Disastrous Concert That Brought the ‘60s to a Crashing Halt,” *Forbes.com*, December 3, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidchiu/2019/12/03/altamont-at-50-the-disastrous-concert-that-brought-the-60s-to-a-crashing-halt/?sh=1ef8c587194>.

were blacklisted from performance venues, and instead the event seems to have become a part of popular music lore. A similar lack of severe consequences awaited Limp Bizkit and their peers in the wake of Woodstock '99.

This isn't to say rock music hasn't had its moments of scrutiny. During the mid-1980s, for example, the Parent's Music Resource Center, The American Family Association, and Focus on the Family organizations all targeted metal artists with intense public criticism for their perceived indecency and, in some cases, links to Satanism and the occult.¹⁷³ But as Rose goes on to explain, even though there is a tendency to compare rap and rock discourse along such lines, such comparisons ultimately fall short:

[t]here are critical differences between the attacks made against black youth expression and white youth expression. The terms of the assault on rap music, for example, are part of a long-standing sociologically based discourse that considers black influences a cultural threat to American society. Consequently, rappers, their fans, and black youths in general are constructed as coconspirators in the spread of black cultural influence. For the antirock organizations, heavy metal is a "threat to the fiber of American society," but the fans (e.g. "our children") are *victims* of its influence. Unlike heavy metal's victims, rap fans are the youngest representatives of a black presence whose cultural difference is perceived as an internal threat to America's cultural development. *They* victimize *us*. These differences in the ideological nature of the sanctions against rap and heavy metal are of critical importance, because they illuminate the ways in which racial discourses deeply inform public transcripts and social control efforts.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Rose, *Black Noise*, 129.

¹⁷⁴ Rose, *Black Noise*, 130.

Rose's statement illustrates that again, when white rock stars are connected to violent events, it is viewed as an outlier, a singular event in the long history of rock, but black artists' careers are often intimately tied to any violent event, often making it harder for them to book shows. These different perspectives on white violence versus black violence can be seen in the aftermath of Woodstock '99, in which "a few kids" or "poor management" were the main culprits.

What these narratives reveal is that the transformation of rap-rock into nu-metal during the 1990s, a process which accelerated with the work of Korn, Kid Rock, Limp Bizkit and their peers, and which culminated in the events of Woodstock '99, had the effect of de-coupling rap as a performance practice from its origins in Black hip-hop aesthetics and communities. This is illustrated in a number of ways, from the different responses to violence at performances, to the marginalization of pioneering rap-rock artists, to the re-location of rap from urban to extra-urban settings. But nu-metal cannot be so easily separated from earlier forms of rap-rock from either a musical or stylistic perspective; we can observe this in the rapping of Fred Durst and Kid Rock, and in the styles of clothing worn by fans and artists. These and many other nu-metal artists took, to borrow from the provocatively titled book by Greg Tate, "everything but the burden"¹⁷⁵ in adopting the practices and trappings of hip hop into rock settings. And given the ways in which Black musical forms had been filtered through the perspectives of white artists in a continuous line from George Gershwin to Pat Boone to Eric Clapton to Vanilla Ice and beyond, this should not be at all surprising.

¹⁷⁵ Greg Tate, *Everything but the Burden: What White People Are Taking from Black Culture* (New York: Penguin, 2003).

CONCLUSION

It's Just Noise: The Fall of Nu-Metal and the Post-Rock Era

According to an article in *Decibel*, nu-metal died in 2003, with the article claiming that nu-metal has become “one of the most maligned and despised genres since the dawn of rock ‘n’ roll. Despite certain bands having weathered the backlash—Korn still headlines music festivals; Linkin Park’s *The Hunting Party* debuted at #3 on *Billboard* last year—the legacy of nü-metal is now considered a gimmicky fashion show, rife with faux aggression, simplistic songwriting and arrhythmic rapping.”¹⁷⁶ The downfall of nu-metal so soon after its rise in popularity raises a number of questions. Why did opinions nu-metal change so drastically in only a few years from being the coolest genre to being a “gimmicky fashion show”? Was it because of Woodstock ’99? Changes in musical trends? By the 2000s, the style was being disowned by many large figures in the rock music scene. Green Day, Tom Morello of Rage Against the Machine, and Tool all spoke out publicly about their distaste for nu-metal. Maynard James Keenan, lead singer of Tool, said in an interview that “there should be a separate *Billboard* chart [for nu-metal] that has to do with clever marketing plans. So, like, McDonald’s being right up there with McNuggets, then like, those bands you mentioned would be up there.... They shouldn’t really be on a music chart.”¹⁷⁷ Keenan’s comment on nu-metal being a commercial commodity that is just as meaningless as McNuggets highlights how nu-metal had lost its cultural meaning, and instead had become just another fad in popular culture. The loss of cultural meaning may well have occurred when the connections to rap and hip-hop were lost in translation as the genre transitioned from rap-rock to

¹⁷⁶ Shane Mehling, “They Did It All For The Nookie: Decibel Explores the Rise and Fall of Nu-Metal,” *Decibel*, August 13, 2015, <https://www.decibelmagazine.com/2015/08/13/they-did-it-all-for-the-nookie-decibel-explores-the-rise-and-fall-of-nu-metal/>.

¹⁷⁷ Loudwire, “Musicians Reacting to Nu Metal,” Youtube, posted July 19, 2021, <https://youtu.be/gDAbvXS1hW4>.

nu-metal, creating a commodity that did not stand to produce change in the world around us, unlike what many hip-hop and rap artists were attempting to do.

This story began at the end of the 1970s with Disco Demolition Night, which had been created by Steve Dahl, a white rock DJ who believed disco was a lesser genre in comparison to rock. Disco Demolition Night, intentionally or not, had an underlying connection to long-standing racial issues, since disco music was assumed to be a “black” genre, while rock music was “white.” During the 1980s on MTV, hip-hop/rap and rock music began to cross over through the music of Run-DMC and the Beastie Boys, but this crossover wasn’t fully accepted with respect to MTV’s programming choices (or by many metal fans). Yet rap-rock crossover would continue through the 1990s, arguably peaking at the Woodstock ’99 festival, where concert-goers caused massive amounts of property damage in the name of over-priced food and horrible living conditions. By the end of the 1990s, the vast majority of nu-metal bands were white groups that had removed many (if not all) of the cultural connections that rap-rock had tried to keep in relation to hip-hop and rap’s origins, just as white rock musicians had done with early black rock musicians 50 years earlier. Questlove from The Roots highlights this in an interview at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony for the Beastie Boys: “It’s ironic that the Beastie’s entry into the hip-hop world was the same scenario that it was for black artists in the 50s that didn’t put their faces on their album covers until you were sucked in already.”¹⁷⁸ The Beastie Boys’ entry into the hip-hop and rap world had followed the same trend as black rock artists getting into the pop mainstream in the 1950s, repeating the same cycle 30 years later but with white musicians crossing into the black music world.

¹⁷⁸ Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, “Questlove of the Roots Talks About the Beastie Boys,” Youtube, posted April 25, 2012, 0:00-0:18, <https://youtu.be/FBEiZz99fZw>.

Run-DMC was the first rap-rock group inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, in 2009, introduced by Eminem:

Run-D.M.C. was a group of firsts. The first rappers featured prominently on MTV, to appear on Saturday Night Live, to grace the cover of Rolling Stone, and to win a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award. They broke down barriers for future rap acts, crossed boundaries between rap and rock and dispelled old notions of what rap could be. Run-DMC was inducted alongside Metallica in the same ceremony, which holds a certain amount of irony in this story, since Metallica has a long history of speaking out against “posers” in the rock genre. Overall, the consensus about Run-DMC’s induction was positive from critics and newspaper sources. Still, as seen in an article from the *Detroit Free Press* some writers did critique the Rock Hall for failing to include particular rock groups before rappers: “The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame announced its latest round of inductees Wednesday, but many Michigan rock fans will be disappointed by an increasingly familiar omission: the Stooges.” The only mention of Run-DMC in the article comes much later after a discussion of some of the other inductees, “[t]hough Run-DMC wasn’t the first rap act, it was the first to achieve widespread mainstream success, and the first to notch a platinum album. The rapping duo of Joseph (Run) Simmons and Darryl (DMC) McDaniels – plus their DJ, the late Jam Master Jay – were rap’s first rock stars...”¹⁷⁹ Run-DMC was never a target of criticism in this article; rather, the institution itself is targeted for ignoring the influence of the Stooges in the history of rock. It is also interesting that author Brian McCollum describes Run-DMC as “rap’s first rock stars,” which points to Run-DMC’s status as crossover artists from rap to rock. Run-DMC’s induction was followed by the Beastie Boys in 2012, who were inducted by Chuck D of Public Enemy and

¹⁷⁹ Brian McCollum, “Stooges Snubbed by Hall; Run DMC In,” *Detroit Free Press*, January 15, 2009, A.2.

LL Cool J. But, contrary to Run-DMC, the Beastie Boys were never acknowledged as a rock or rap-rock group by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame; instead they were just labeled as hip-hop: “Although the Beastie Boys first found fame as a rude 'n' crude party band, the hip-hop pioneers eventually settled into a more conscious groove driven by clever wordplay, inventive genre splicing and elaborate videos.”¹⁸⁰

Run-DMC and the Beastie Boys are currently the only two rap-rock groups that have been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. The Rock Hall has continued to illustrate the changing perception of what constitutes as “rock” in recent years. A number of artists have been inducted from the rap and hip-hop genres, including Eminem, Jay-Z, Chris Rock, and Public Enemy (More recently, country legend Dolly Parton was inducted, which caused some controversy amongst critics who felt the decision was not appropriate, a perspective which Parton shared, at least initially). Intentionally or not, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame has been illustrative of rock’s initial hostility to rap music, but as more artists borrowed from genres outside of rock, they began to open the door a bit wider for artists in other genres to be recognized. As more and more rock artists crossed over into rap music, and visa versa, the “institution” that decides what is (or is not) rock music had to eventually acknowledge that these influences belonged in the canon. The pro-rock counter-revolution launched in 1979 at Disco Demolition Night would ultimately fail, and Run-DMC would ascend to their exalted position as true “kings of rock.”

¹⁸⁰ “The Beastie Boys,” Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Inductees, accessed March 10, 2023, <https://www.rockhall.com/inductees/beastie-boys>.

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Appendix: Illustrations



Figure 1: Poster from the Twisted Sister Fan Club in 1979 that was awarded to Steve Dahl for his “victory in the battle against Disco.”



Figure 2: Album cover for Run-DMC's single "Walk This Way."



Figure 3: Run-DMC's album cover for *Tougher Than Leather*.

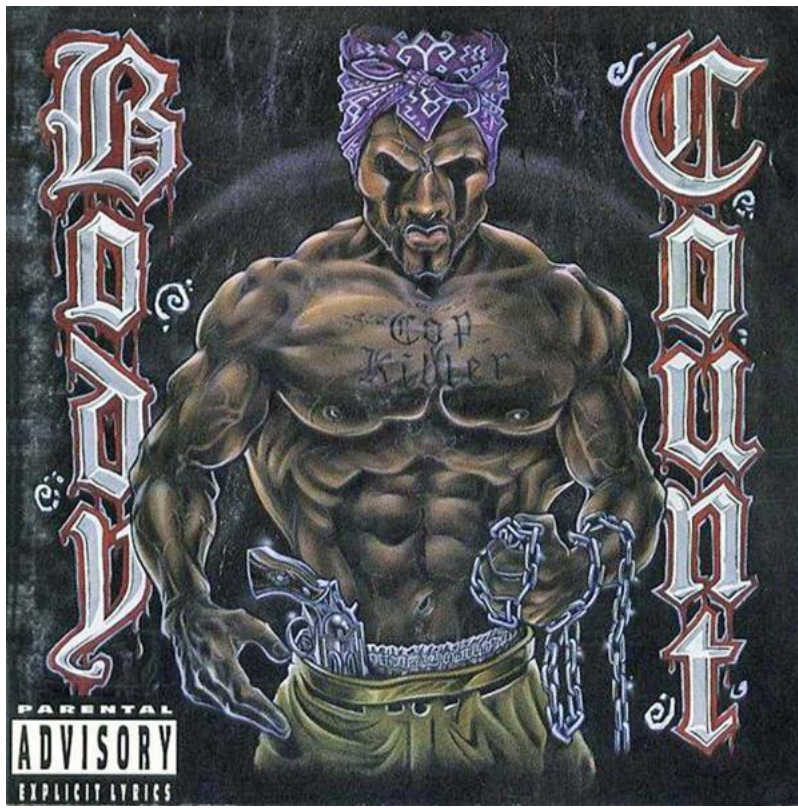


Figure 4: The album cover for Body Count's first album, *Body Count*.



Figure 5: This is a screengrab from the music video for Anthrax's "Bring the Noise."

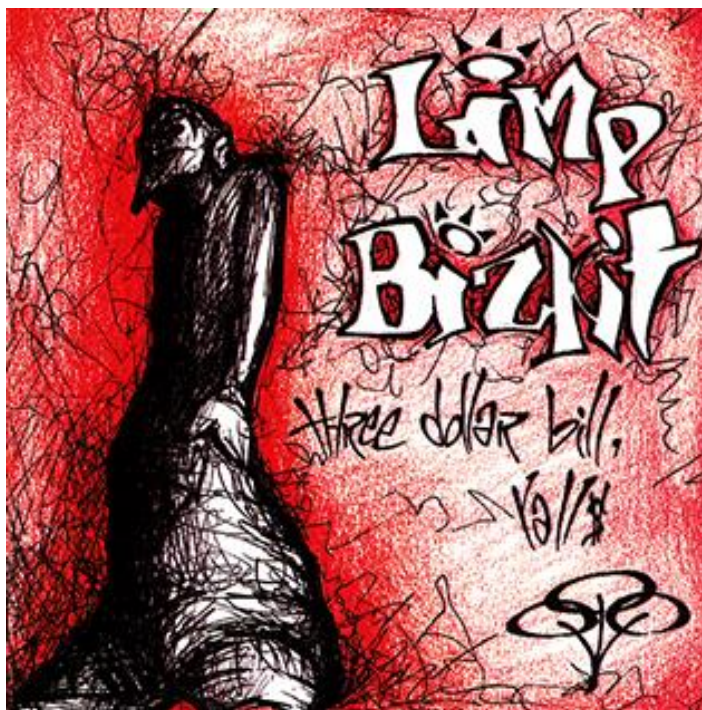


Figure 6: Album cover for Limp Bizkit's *Three Dollar Bill, Yall\$*.



Figure 7: Album cover for Kriss Kross's album *Totally Krossed Out*.