

“YOU CAN’T MARGINALIZE ME!”:

TRADITION AND INDIVIDUALITY IN MEMPHIS RAP

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Introduction

During the 1970s economic crisis, arts programs in public school systems throughout the nation became endangered, given extensive budget cuts in the public education sector. One of the neighborhoods to be affected by this was that of South Bronx, one of New York’s most impoverished neighborhoods and also the birthplace of hip hop.¹ Hip hop is a subcultural movement whose key features include breakdancing, turntablism/DJing, graffiti art, and MCing/rap. Seen as a response to the systemic oppression of urban youths and persons living in these communities in general, those directly involved in the movement viewed it as a medium of creative expression directly influenced by living in these less than satisfactory conditions. For these youths who were, in many cases, not afforded the opportunity to receive classical instrumental training, like the previous generation of “jazz babies” of the Bronx as well as youths from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, the turntable became “their instrument” and allowed them to express themselves creatively.²

Scholars note that the origins of hip-hop can be seen as having many influences, such as the story-telling practices of West African traditions, to Jamaican dancehall, and even rock. One key figure in the development of hip hop in New York was DJ Kool Herc. Born April 16, 1955 in Kingston, Jamaica, Clive Campbell moved to the Bronx, New York in 1967 along with his

¹ Randy Ojeda and Eduardo Roman, “Terror Since the Public School Error: Reconciling Hip Hop and Education (Loyola University Chicago School of Law, 2013), 2-3.

² *Something From Nothing: The Art of Rap*, directed by Ice-T and (2012; US: Indomina Films, 2012), DVD.

parents and five siblings.³ During this time, Kool Herc became a witness to the ways that urban culture was influenced by overarching systemic practices—specifically how government policy and urban planning perpetuated divisiveness and poverty within these marginalized communities. The continued construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway throughout the ‘60s and ‘70s proved to dislocate many families and create destruction and disunity in this region.⁴ A gang culture, which was a direct result of these social occurrences, was on one hand violent and on the other hand a fuel for artistic expression; opposing “crews” would battle one another musically and through dance. Herc was responsible for creating a new sound that provided the blueprint for hip-hop wherein he manipulated and combined elements of the dancehall culture of his native Jamaica with rock as well as Latin-inspired percussive sounds, among other influences. In addition, he is noted for the popularization of the break, whereby one loops a minor percussive section of a record and creates a much longer section, which, according to Herc, was especially beneficial for the dancers of these neighborhood parties which accompanied the early hip-hop movement. While Herc, was not able to achieve the mainstream success of his contemporaries, his contribution to hip-hop provided the basic elements of rap that can still be seen in today’s rap.⁵

While the origins of rap in the South Bronx can be viewed as being a direct product of the disheartening social conditions of those living in urban ghettos during the latter part of the 20th century, the same can be said of the rap which grew out of the more Southern regions, specifically the Mid-South. According to 8Ball & MJG, pioneers in the Memphis rap scene, their music was heavily influenced by their mere coming of age in the culturally rich city. Their music

³ Kermit E. Campbell, *Gettin' Our Groove On: Rhetoric, Language, and Literacy for the Hip Hop Generation*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005).

⁴ Peter Shapiro, *Rough Guide to Hip-Hop*, (London: Rough Guides, 2005), 4.

⁵ Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, (New York: St. Marten's Press, 2005), 68-75.

provided the means through which to depict the harsh realities of urban life. The duo, in addition to crediting their New York counterparts for influencing their sound, cite the music of their parents' and grandparents' generation as particularly influential; their music also can be assessed to have, by default, some linkage to Delta Blues. "Soul is like — kinda like pain. You hear that even in the voice tone or the selection of music, and it just feel dark and painful, like the struggle," Memphis rapper Yo Gotti says in an early 2014 interview.⁶ This pain is evident in the tracks which emerged from the area during the early 90's. Rappers such as 8Ball & MJG, drew on inspiration from the R&B/soul and blues of their parents' and grandparents' generations and manipulated these sounds into contemporary ones, complete with heavy bass lines and gritty lyricism detailing the harsh realities either directly experienced or witnessed secondhand. Early Memphis rap was also heavily influenced by the horrorcore sound, specifically by artists such as the Geto Boys; this source of inspiration is apparent in the work of Three 6 Mafia and affiliate Lord Infamous, who explore dark themes such as death and grim spirituality.⁷ Many of their themes include elements common in Memphis and urban communities throughout the nation alike, such as discrimination, "pimpin'"/prostitution, the drug culture, violence, and crime.

Other pioneers of the Memphis rap scene included artists such as Kingpin Skinny Pimp, Al Kapone, and a host of others. Indisputably, these artists drew upon Southern inspiration in the development of their art form. Such inspiration came from the soul records that ubiquitously existed in the region during the latter half of the 20th century, and can be assessed to have stemmed from the Delta blues tradition which was popularized during the earlier half of the 20th century. Many themes such as systemic oppression, romantic relationships, crime, and the supernatural that were common in earlier Black musical traditions can be seen in the rap culture

⁶ Frannie Kelly, "Eightball, MJG and Rap from Memphis 20 Years On", *NPR*, February 06, 2014.

⁷ Chaz Kangas. "The History of Horrorcore Rap," *LA Weekly*, November 5, 2013.

and music that grew out of the Memphis music scene in the late 80's/early 90's, as well as in the later wave of Memphis rap.

At a recent panel—which consisted of pioneers in the Stax tradition—hosted by Rhodes College during the spring of 2014, Don Nix, who was one of the panelists, proclaimed that the new generation of musicians, specifically rappers, had no “damn” talent and that he was tired of them using his original material. He based his argument in his belief that musicians from previous generations, including his, were required to develop proficiency in one or more instruments in order to be considered a respectable musician, whereas in the present digital age, all one had to do was be aware of how to operate electronic mediums of music. On the other hand, Willie Hall, who worked as a percussionist with Stax expressed his belief that the newer generation did possess musical ability; however, they had grown to express themselves in a different way. He also argued that every generation consists of art forms that are not as respected among members of previous generations. The present research is an attempt to assess musical and thematic relationships between Memphis rap and earlier art forms, specifically the blues and soul traditions. In doing so, it is my attempt to show the social and political significance of this genre of music and to also present how the articulation of the human experience and emotion is similar across genres.

Imitation as Flattery: How Early Memphis Rappers Drew Inspiration from Earlier Musical

Traditions:

During a random encounter with a DJ, who will go unnamed in this research, that pioneered the traditional Memphis rap sound, he asserted the following when an old souls record came on in the nightclub: “Now this the type of music I came up on. There wasn’t no rap.”

Interestingly, he also said that he was inspired by jazz more than any other genre of music. When prompted to explain sources of inspiration and sampling choices, he explained that, while the soul tradition, was influential in creating the Memphis sound, he was mostly influenced by “the area,” meaning that the day-to-day life of growing up in Memphis, Tennessee was the single-most important influence on the sound he created. Nonetheless, an interesting aspect of the musicality of Memphis rap, and the genre in general, is the way in which contemporary urban artists incorporate samples from songs of previous generations in order to create a fresh, innovative, and oft-unrecognizable, sound. Many of these artists, such as 8Ball & MJG and Three 6 Mafia, “borrowed” melodic material from the Stax era in the recording of much of their early work. In the 2014 NPR interview about their musical origins, 8Ball & MJG, born Premro Smith and Marlon Jermaine Goodwin, examine the ways in which their soulful upbringing subsequently impacted them creatively. They offer that when they moved to Houston, Texas, where they were offered a “rudy-poo deal,” they carried with them a suitcase filled with older records retrieved from their parents. These were records of artists rooted in the soul tradition, such as Stax Records artists, and soul artists like Chaka Khan & Rufus, and Simply Red.⁸

In 8Ball & MJG’s 1993 single “First Episode,” the duo samples Booker T. & the MG’s cover of the Beatles record “I Want You (She’s So Heavy)” from the critically acclaimed *Abbey Road* album. The original Beatles song is essentially a dramatic profession of Lennon’s love for his partner, Yoko Ono. It consists of a simple melody of merely fourteen words, with much of the song being primarily instrumental. This particular single was later covered by Booker T. & the MG’s, who adds their own soulful, more bluesy spin to the song.

8 Ball & MJG use the latter in order to tell the intense story of a pimp, the prostitutes who work for him, and community/political leaders who are secretly involved in this underworld.

⁸ Kelly, “Eightball, MJG.”

Combined with a quicker tempo and a heavy bass line, the duo offers that “pimpin’” is not dead and imply that this kind of existence is simply a direct result of being a product of the world in which they live. The artists use stock characters, such as “the feds” and “the governor” to speak of political corruption. 8Ball, in the song’s second verse expresses that the protagonist is “makin’ easy money from the judge and the preacher.” He supports this by saying that these pillars of the community, despite their notable reputation, engage in illegal involvement with prostitutes and actively seek out engagement in lewd activities, despite their wholesome image. Similarly, in the sixth verse, MJG responds to a monologue, wherein a male speaker argues that the drug dealer poses a threat to the urban community by “sellin’ cocaine to (one’s) brothers,” thereby “killin’ us all off.” MJG responds with the following: “The cops work for me ‘cause I keep good stuff // And plus the government ain't never paid dem tricks enough // And every time a cop bust some dope in the drug raid // Feds swangin birds in the hood by the next day.”⁹ In these specific lyrics, the artist further iterates the idea that those in charge are not as morally sound as they present themselves to be socially. For example, following a drug bust, the officers do not merely confiscate the illegal drugs and punish the criminals accordingly; instead, they too engage in criminal activity by perpetuating the confiscated cocaine throughout the given urban community.

This lyrical content is highly political in nature because it further emphasizes the widely accepted sentiment present in many urban social contexts that promotes the idea that the government purposefully works to hinder urban communities and to keeps its occupants in marginalized states. Specifically, the duo argues that officers of the law are not acting in the best interest of the urban communities they are employed to protect and serve; instead, they work in favor of their own interests. A similar sentiment is expressed in Motown soul legend Marvin Gaye’s 1971 single “Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler).” The late singer sings in the

⁹ Eightball & MJG, “The First Episode,” *Comin’ Out Hard*, Suave Records, 1993.

fourth verse: “Crime is increasing // Trigger happy policing // Panic is spreading // God knows where we’re heading.”¹⁰ This verse highlights how desperate times lead to less than noble behavior, or crime, in response to the changing social conditions. In this context, instead of them behaving morally, police officers are “trigger happy,” and, one could assess, wrongfully murder innocent bystanders. In addition, Gaye extends the idea of corruption to the federal government when he sings “send that boy off to die” in the second verse. This lyric is an allusion to the American involvement in the Vietnam War, of which Gaye was opposed. In the more modern context, 8Ball & MJG imply that the police officers, who may or may not be trigger happy, continue in the tradition of drug-peddling, thereby killing young, Black men and women. Though their specific portrayal is twenty years removed from Gaye’s soulful expression of police corruption, it maintains the fundamental idea that those living in urban communities are not given the same external protection as members of communities based in more advantaged circumstances.

In a *Commercial Appeal* article published in 1999, MPD Detective Paul Sherman offers that “80 to 90 percent of home burglaries and car break-ins” directly result from the use and sell of crack cocaine, and also offers that crack cocaine fuels “the violent crime.”¹¹ Related research published in 2005 by Roland G. Fryer (and others), offers that the crack cocaine index in the city of Memphis rose from 0.005 in 1985, to 0.439 in 1993, and finally to 1.468 in 2000.¹² These statistics are pertinent in the discussion of the social significance of the lyrics 8Ball & MJG,

¹⁰ Marvin Gaye, “Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler), *What’s Going On*, Tamla Records, 1971.

¹¹ Kristina Goetz, “Undercover police work in Memphis neighborhoods ravaged by drugs: Officers blend into street life as part of what has been called the nation’s best covert program,” *The Commercial Appeal*, November 20, 2009, accessed July 15, 2014, <http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/local-news/under-cover-for-addicts-streets-are-a-buyers-in>.

¹² Roland G. Fryer, Jr., et. Al., “Measuring the Impact of Crack Cocaine,” (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2005).

given that these lyrics in “First Episode” were inspired by the negative presence and impact of crack cocaine on urban communities, especially their own. Musically, it is intriguing how the duo is able to loop simple, melodic material from a song recorded 20 years prior and create a more contemporary sound, still marked by social awareness and militancy. While the original Beatles track provided a sense of longing and emotional intensity for the protagonist’s beloved, 8Ball & MJG manipulate the musical source in order to create a more urban-friendly sound, which provides them with the platform to offer insight on themes and occurrences that they experienced, or at least witnessed, firsthand. Another similarity between the soul classic and the rap song is the abrupt ending that occurs at the end of each, which provokes an inconclusive feeling.

In their 1995 single “Top of the World,” the duo borrows melodic material from another soul legend: Isaac Hayes. The song incorporates elements of Hayes’ 1970 single “The Look of Love,” which itself was a unique cover of Dusty Springfield’s 1967 single of the same name. In Hayes’ cover of the song, which originally invokes a soft jazz type of feeling, he changes the instrumental background, making it conform to the soul tradition. However, the lyrics are unaltered and maintain the original romantic intent, wherein the protagonist expresses the feeling of love he believes his love presents. He says that he wants for their union to be a continuous feeling.¹³ 8Ball & MJG’s borrowing of the material, though, is anything but romantic. Instead, they express what it feels like to feel that you have reached a new level of success.

The song’s optimistic lyrics work in connection with a tempo quicker than the original, added percussive sounds, in addition to a soulful hook wherein the singer sings: “MJG and that...8Ball // Are on top of the world.” Obviously, the rappers do not believe that they are literally on top of the world; on the contrary, the song is actually an expression of the

¹³ Isaac Hayes, “The Look of Love,” ...*To Be Continued*, Enterprise Records, 1970.

contentment they feel with the progress they have made musically and with their subsequent success. However, the duo expresses that even with their newfound reputation as respectable underground rappers, they will forget neither the circumstances of their upbringing, nor their old stomping grounds. In the first verse, 8Ball raps:

It only seems like yesterday thinking back
 I had to work a job and hustle just to keep a sack
 Stuck in Orange Mound, ten toes down
 Nowhere to go but up
 I'm underground I'm so down
 But God blessed me with this gift of poetry¹⁴

In this particular verse, it is interesting to note the juxtaposition of illegal activity with the notion of religion. The MC alludes to a perhaps rocky financial situation he endured in Orange Mound, where he had to “hustle just to keep a sack,” a reference to drugs. Unlike many critics of the genre seem to believe, 8Ball (and many other rappers for that matter) does not seem to glorify the lifestyle of a drug dealer. Instead, he provides that this is a route that the song’s protagonist—and one can extend this to represent many drug dealers of urban communities—has chosen to embark upon during times of desperation. On the other hand, he ironically makes a reference to the Christian God and acknowledges his belief that his talent and ability to rap is directly because of a blessing he was given. One can assess, then, that this “poetry” is not something that he selfishly uses for his own self-advancement; instead, he views it as a tool that he has been given in order to positively contribute to the world via art.

The duo also juxtaposes their status as rappers with that of “young G’s on the streets banging. They insinuate that, for many, living in an urban context invokes a “survival of the fittest” mentality and that one’s existence is characterized with thinking of how to survive “day to day.” They discuss the ills of success, specifically how one has to be cautious of enemies who

¹⁴ 8Ball & MJG, “Top of the World,” *On Top of the World*, Suave House Records, 1995.

want to see them fail. In the last verse, MJG expresses that if someone tries “jack (him) your whole family’s going down”; this is inclusive of “your motha” and “your daddy”, but also applies to one’s extended relatives such as your aunts and cousins. This is important to note because this type of mentality is present in the drug culture which is highly present in many urban social contexts; herein lies the idea that one must use violence as a means to protect himself and his namesake, not only for mere respect, but also because this is necessary in order to ensure his prowess in the streets and further protect himself from opposing forces. In the late 80’s and early 90’s, the cases of homicide for young African-American males ages 14-25 nearly doubled due to the growing crack cocaine epidemic.¹⁵ In this context, it was necessary for one to defend his turf in order to survive in the drug game and exploit the system in order to secure financial stability. Present herein is the idea that even with their newfound success and newly acquired financial stability, they are not completely removed from the environment of which they are a product, given their references to violence as a need for self-protection.

Three years after the release of 8Ball & MJG’s “On Top of the World” album, another Memphis rapper released a hit single that continues to get spins on urban radio in cities throughout the Mid-South. Playa Fly, born Ibn Young, a former affiliate of Three 6 Mafia, released “Nobody Needs Nobody,” which consisted of vocals from his late father, a blues/Soul singer whose stage name was “Mr. Bill Chill,” as well as a verse from Gangsta Black. In this tune, the artist further iterates ideas presented in previous rap works by artists like the aforementioned 8Ball & MJG: self-reliance, respect for one’s territory, and perseverance in the face of opposition. In the hook, Playa raps “Nobody needs nobody // All I need is me and my dogs // So fuck all of y’all...”¹⁶ This particular refrain is interesting because it differs from early

¹⁵ Fryer, “Measuring the Impact of Crack Cocaine.”

¹⁶ Playa Fly, “Nobody Needs Nobody”, *Movin’ On*, Super Sigg Records, 1998.

key rap works in that the ‘enemy’ is not the government, or even systemic foundations; however, the enemy is Playa’s fellow Black brethren who “hate on him.” However, one could assess that this holds political and social significance given the context of the urban community of South Memphis from which Playa Fly was based.

There has been countless evidence for and research examining the ways in which social structures, urban planning/development, and government initiatives in general cause division in the urban community. Whereas the construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway led to many urban residents becoming displaced and the youths of these areas forming a gang culture based on territorial bounds, one’s origins in the Memphis community determines what side one must rep and plays into one’s own social identity. Playa raps that he only needs his “dogs,” and that outsiders are irrelevant from their frame of reference. In addition, while Playa gives a shout out to Memphis as a whole, he specifically makes a reference to South Parkway in an attempt to serve as a voice for his community.

Musically, it is very intriguing to examine the ways in which this particular work is based in musical traditions popularized in earlier generations. There is obviously a blues/soul connection given his Mr. Bill Chill’s own musical background; however, it also contains other elements found in the blues tradition, such as the blues note and Chill’s improvisational singing style. The song, especially Mr. Bill Chill’s vocals, are highly reminiscent of other genres such as jazz, early gospel, and even can be related back to early slave field songs. The singer is slightly under pitch throughout the song, as were many early singers in the African-American tradition. (Note: A plausible explanation for this could be a direct result of a lack of formal training in music and/or the use of poorly tuned pianos in early Black churches.)

The New Generation of Memphis Voices

With the turn of century, the 2000s saw a rise of Memphis rappers attempting to gain notoriety for their individual sound. One of those rappers was Yo Gotti, who was born Mario Mims in 1981. When Yo Gotti debuted on the scene in 2000, he became well-known for the stories he painted of the drug culture that plagues many urban communities. Like 8Ball & MJG before him, he spoke about the glamorous side of this particular lifestyle, such as the ability to acquire tangible possessions symbolizing wealth. On the other hand, he also alluded to the negative aspect of this lifestyle, such as the associated crime and the danger that participation in this lifestyle proposes. Yo Gotti, too, incorporated soulful elements into his early music and even in his subsequent material. However, this is not surprising, given that he has been quoted saying that coming from Memphis gives one a sense of soul, and thus, pain by default. Upon meeting the CEO of Cash Money Records, Birdman, he recalls a particular conversation the two had: "I remember when I met him he was like, 'Money, drugs, sex is never gone leave. No matter how strict the laws get for it, people still gonna do it, so it's always gonna be listeners for that type of music. Because people gone always be able to relate to it.' Because people living it."¹⁷

In his 2013 single, "Cold Blood" Yo Gotti fuses a jazz- and/or soul-inspired instrumental with poignant lyrics detailing the circumstances that force one into becoming part of an adverse lifestyle. He creates a character who epitomizes the stereotypical young black male that becomes hardened by the external circumstances of living in an urban community. He raps:

If I could paint a picture
 I would show the image of a dog ass nigga
 Yeah, raw ass nigga
 Popping pain killers
 Ridin' for the cause
 For dogs with them pistols, natural born killas
 He sold crack to his mother

¹⁷ Kelly, "8Ball, MJG"

Turned his back on his brothers
 Killed his partner for the plug he think errthing a hustle
 Cold mothafucka, holmes numb, black heart, no feelings, just a gun
 He was raised in the trenches
 Not to mention all the hoes that had dissed him,
 So Holmes think the whole world against him
 Played Ball, coach benched him
 Grandpa Klan lynched him
 He was raised in Mississippi but he moved up to Memphis
 Kinda hard to adapt
 So holmes turned to a strap
 Didn't succeed, tried rap, couldn't fight, got slapped
 Shot dice, do crap, did time, back out, damn¹⁸

This particular portrayal of a specific character can be paralleled with the life of many young, African-American males coming of age in urban environments throughout the nation. He speaks of the character becoming emotionally “numb” as a result of daily interaction with the struggle. He speaks of being “benched” by the coach and having his grandfather being lynched by the Klan. This desensitization is an important theme throughout the song and proposes the idea of black masculinity in this urban context. One is expected to present himself as a strong person and to conceal his emotions in fear of being presented as weak; it is a necessary tool of survival that one must learn to adopt in this particular social setting.

Yo Gotti juxtaposes this idea of hyper-masculinity with the practice of drug abuse. There is no evidence that the character is experiencing any type of physical pain; however, he resorts to “poppin’ painkillers,” which can be viewed as a coping mechanism. Research shows that there is a general distrust of the healthcare system, specifically that dealing with mental illness, within the Black community at large; because of this, some Blacks hold the belief that it is unnecessary to pursue methods of psychiatric treatment, such as talk therapy, due to the belief that the system

¹⁸ Yo Gotti, “Cold Blood,” *I Am*, CMG & Epic Records, 2013.

is a “White system.”¹⁹ The idea that it is not necessary for one to receive external treatment in the dealing with emotional distress can inevitably lead to irreversible effects on the human being and the community at large. In this example, that idea is manifested by the character resorting to showing no emotionality, other than aggression, perhaps, and the abuse of painkillers. Yo Gotti argues that in place of feelings, the character merely has a “gun.” This weapon can be viewed literally as the object that it represents, but it can also be viewed metaphorically, to represent the character’s overall belligerence. He acts in a way that he feels serves in the best interest of his own survival, even if it is at the expense of those around him: selling drugs to his mother; murdering his friend to ensure his own success in the drug world. While Yo Gotti clearly appropriates fault to the character for all of his wrongdoings, he does not exactly hold him solely responsible; instead, he argues that due to his inability to adapt to the troubling social conditions of which he is a product, he adopts violent means as a medium of self-preservation. What is most striking, though, is the conclusion of the verse, wherein the rapper alludes to a continuous cycle of struggle that is a recurring theme throughout the character’s existence. He goes to jail as a result of his criminal involvement; however, there is no evidence that he possesses the necessary tools that he would need in order to live a noble life upon his return to the civilian world. Thus, Yo Gotti inconclusively ends the verse with a mere “damn.”

In the third verse of “Cold Blood,” the rapper paints a similar picture of one going to extraordinary, and criminal, means in order to survive in a given urban context. He speaks of an impoverished upbringing, wherein a strong-willed maternal figure is embarrassed by her inability to adequately care for her young children. Though the family is faced with deplorable living

¹⁹Christina Nicolaidis, Vanessa Timmons, Mary Jo Thomas, A. Star Waters, Stephanie Wahab, Angie Mejia, and S. Renee Mitchell, “You Don’t Go Tell White People Nothing”: African American Women’s Perspectives on the Influence of Violence and Race on Depression and Depression Care, *American Journal of Public Health* 100 (2010): 1470, accessed June 28, 2014, doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2009.161950

conditions, such as economic hardship, “roaches all around the kitchen,” and inevitable eviction, the mother does not wish to receive external help, which only serves to worsen their current living conditions, but also creates a similar attitude within her young son who watches his mother struggle and adopts the idea that one must be one’s own savior: “That created the hunger // And that made the monster // Got the game from my mama // That’s some ill shit.” Due to the adoption of this particular ideal, the young, male character becomes a “lookout” for a neighborhood drug dealer at the age of thirteen and quickly “master(s) the game.” However, the character is killed right before his planned exodus from the lifestyle: “Right when he thought it was over, he got took out...” Fellow rapper, J. Cole concludes the song with an outro, wherein he toys with the idea of “the good (dying) young” and wonders about there being a heaven for “real niggas,” a question he poses to a preacher:

They say the good die young, that’s the truth
 My nigga floating up in heaven now, that’s the proof
 I ain’t make it to the funeral, but homie rest in peace
 If this world get too cold, I hope one day you rescue me
 Nigga maybe we can fly someday
 Oh we can fly someday
 Yeah up in the sky someday
 Do real niggas get to heaven?
 That’s that shit I ask the reverend

In this passage, there is the implication that the person who is a direct product of the grimy street life deserves the honor and title of a “real nigga,” which again expresses the idea that aggressiveness is the main facet of black male masculinity in many urban social contexts. Weakness is not something that is respected in this environment, especially from males, and there is the underlying idea that early death is a widely accepted, and also expected, outcome for many of these individuals. These compelling ideas are juxtaposed with religious ideals. While the rapper clearly believes in the concept of afterlife in the form of heaven, he struggles with the

idea of whether or not persons from inner-city, disadvantaged backgrounds—specifically, “real niggas”—have a place in this supernatural existence. While grappling with this, he interestingly poses this question to “the reverend.” In this line, there seems to be an underlying distrust of the church system and thus the preacher, which can be seen in the way he raps “the reverend,” as opposed to saying “my reverend.” This important distinction is to be noted because it further emphasizes the idea of general distrust that many urban Black youths have of overarching systems.

In 2008 during the earlier phase of his career, Don Trip released a YouTube video that would garner much praise and lead to mainstream exposure for the Memphis artist. The video, entitled “Letter to my Son” featured Trip in a sparse studio with dim lighting, rapping over a sample of the 1973 soul hit “If and When” by Three Degrees. It offers a vulnerable side to Trip typically avoided by mainstream artists who possess hyper-masculine public personas. There is an interesting overlapping between the original lyrics and the personal relevance the lyrics hold for the rapper. In the original, the Three Degrees lead singer, Sheila Ferguson sings about a former lover who has abandoned her and offers that she is open to the possibility of reconciliation in the future.²⁰ In the first verse, which is sampled in its entirety by Trip, she offers that she is anticipating feelings of loneliness and describes the emotional impact it has on her. She offers that she sees “loneliness” in her future and the “light of love has gone out.” Don Trip, on the other hand, adopts an unromantic, yet highly emotional, approach in describing his longing for a relationship with his young son.

In the first verse, Trip raps: “Please, no pity for a G // Though I got a son that I barely get to see.” Paralleled alongside Trip’s expression of the emotional torment he experiences due to

²⁰ Three Degrees, “If and When,” *Three Degrees*, Philadelphia International Records, 1973.

estrangement from his son is the idea of hyper-masculinity. One key aspect of this masculinity is the idea that one must never appear to be vulnerable or show weakness; this could lead to a lack of street credibility. However, Trip ignores this long existing sentiment in order to give an accurate portrayal of his experience as a father who just wants to see his son:

Please, No pity for a G
 Though I got a son that I barely get to see
 I see him for an hour, after that he gotta leave,
 On top of that I only get to see him once a week,
 Yeah, right, lucky me, well fuck Keltra Pope and whoever disagree
 I learned a valuable lesson indeed,
 But I'm just tryna be the best father I can be
 Apparently I'm an unfit father, cause all I know is dope,
 And all I got is dirty dollas
 But I'm selling dope to help my family get farther
 Cause no 9 to 5 is gonna prevent us from starving
 I'm sorry Jaylen, I don't get to see ya like I want to
 I just want to let you know I want to
 If the court grant me visitation then I'm going to,
 But you're too young to understand what were goin through
 And your mamma low down
 Shes just doin everything to hurt me right now
 Why? cause I don't love her like I used to
 So to get back at me she know she gotta use you
 And I don't know what else to do
 She don't understand that this shit will bruise you too
 And now I gotta take the bitch to court
 So either way it's a lose lose²¹

In a society where young Black males are oft-portrayed as absentee fathers and a primary cause of disjointed family structures, it is refreshing to recognize Don Trip as someone who has the opposite experience; he wishes to adequately provide for his son and to have a strong relationship with this son, but this right is denied by the child's mother, Keltra Pope, whom Trip portrays as spiteful and "lowdown." Trip argues that because of her discontent with the end of their own romantic relationship, the destruction of which she views as Trip's fault, she attempts to "hurt" the rapper by taking away the thing that is seemingly most important to him: "And ya

²¹ Don Trip, "Letter to My Son," 2008.

momma low down // She just doin' everything to hurt me right now." Again, this expression of pain and emotional strife is something that is relatively rare compared to the influx of music that serves as expressions of hyper-masculinity. In the original video, Trip wipes his index finger down his cheek, perhaps to invoke the idea of crying; this is important to note because this provides another example of Trip offering a soulful expression of his personal life, yet still maintaining a sense of masculinity and strength.

Trip also provides insight into his social perspective he when alludes to an unfair justice system. He expresses that he is at an irreparable loss in dealing with the issue because even if he takes his child's mother to court, there is a high probability that he will lose the case. The idea that the "court" will deny him visitation rights and be partial to the mother's position due to Trip's status as a Black male and as a criminal brings into question several complicating factors. One factor is the safety and protection of the child—is Trip the ideal parent for the young child, given his involvement in a lifestyle that could potentially threaten the child's safety? The environment of drug dealing that the child could be exposed to as a result of being in close proximity could leave negative long-term effects on the child. Other the other hand, Trip argues that his own shortcomings should not interfere with his opportunity to be directly involved in his son's life. He argues that there are certain phases throughout the child's life that are essential for the father to be a part of, such as learning to count, learning to read, and learning to write. One could argue for either of these positions: 1. Despite Don Trip's passion and strong desire to have a positive impact on his son's life, exposure to Trip's lifestyle would serve as a threat to the young child; 2) Trip has a valuable contribution to make to his son's life and should be given the right to do so, even if he is a criminal. Despite the position that one takes on the issue, what cannot go unrecognized is the emotional toll that the process has on the artist.

Trip's willingness to be absolutely vulnerable in this work is a wonderful alternative to the brash lyrics present in other works of his genre and of the region which he is a product. In the sampling of "If and When" he manipulates the idea of someone's lover taking away his/her happiness by leaving and translates this into the idea of his son's mother bringing his happiness to a halt by refusing him the right to be involved in his son's life. He perpetuates the idea of pain; however, he places it in a modern context in order to yield an emotional response, and thus an understanding of his experience.

Mid-South Rap and Delta Blues

According to 8Ball, a real artist is one who is able to create music not only about tangible possessions, but also about the wide-range of emotions one experiences as a human being. He cites growing up in Memphis as inevitably giving his group's early music a linkage to the blues: "Being from Memphis and Memphis having that blues background—and blues and rap music being so closely connected—all of my music got a real blues feel. Everybody talking about the hard times in their life with blues. Right now rap just got on another page, with the jewelry and Cristal and shit...But all the time it ain't about that. It's gonna be other feelings you gonna feel, and if you're a real artist you're gonna express that through your music."²²

Like blues, Memphis rap offers expressions of desperation experienced by Southern characters of marginalized backgrounds. As 8Ball noted, there has been somewhat of a departure from the sheer expression of human emotion and the experience of hardship to that of braggardism, materialism, and misogyny (more so than in the past). However, the controversial topics, such as sex and drug culture, are not unique to Memphis rap, or rap in general. In the

²² Roni Sarig, *Third Coast: Outkast, Timbaland, and How Hip-Hop Became a Southern Thing*, (Boston: Da Capo, 2007), 74.

early 1900's bluesman throughout the Mid-South propagated controversial ideas and set the platform for a new generation of Southern musicians to speak freely and openly about taboo topics. Though in the past, blues artist did indeed speak about issues that were considered too strong for public consumption, much of the grittiness was expressed metaphorically and sometimes was concealed as not to come off too brashly. In 1937, Peetie Wheatstraw (b. William Bunch) released his "Shack Bully Stomp," wherein he recites the following. "I used to play it slow /But now I play it fast /Just to see the women /Shake their yass, yass, yass." (Note: Peetie Wheatstraw, the bluesman, took his name directly from a character in Black southern folklore. This character was "the devil's son-in-law" and the "high sheriff of hell.") In modernity, rap artists would more than likely have the liberty to use the implied profanity; however, this freedom, as well as the inspiration to do so, has root in the blues tradition. Peetie Wheatstraw, a native of Ripley, Tennessee, was one of the first bluesman to speak openly about these controversial topics, and his doing so provided the foundation for later bluesman, and subsequently rap artists, to do the same. One such artist was Rudy Ray Moore.

Born 1927 in Fort Smith, Arkansas, Moore was a musician and comedian who based the foundation of his career out of the practice of toasting, which stems from the Black oral tradition. In toasting, one recounts an oral tale, often putting a fictional spin to it to make it more entertaining. During the 1970s, he released extremely graphic albums such as *Eat Out More Often* and *This Pussy Belongs to Me*. These works attracted a cult following, and contained "unprecedented profanity and semi-nude cover photos." Because of this, record stores kept his albums concealed as to not offend customers. Nonetheless, his music inspired subsequent hip-hop artists to have the freedom to incorporate vulgar, overly sexual lyrics into their music. Rappers such as Ice-T--who is credited as having the first gangsta rap release with "6 in the

Mornin'”—and 2Live Krew drew inspiration from Moore, with the latter sampling multiple works from him.²³ This is an important relationship to note, given that the grittiness present in much of the rap from the city of Memphis, was preceded by controversial works of West Coast gangster rap artists, like Ice-T, as well as the bass heavy sound of Miami, which included artists like 2 Live Krew.

Rap music was not the first genre of music to depict tales of heartless criminals, sex and violence. In Peetie Wheatstraw's 1940's act "Gangster Blues" the protagonist makes threats such as "dropp(ing) you off on the riverside," "bound(ing) your mouth so you can't talk," in addition to tying one's feet to inhibit the ability to walk, in addition to "tear(ing) you a-pieces) and reassembling one's body. While there is evidence that Wheatstraw delved into speaking about taboo issues in order to increase his reputation, there is something to be said about the way in which similar messages are communicated and received in modern times. In 2006, Three 6 Mafia—who, like Wheatstraw, have been speculated to associate with demonic forces due to their name—caused a big stir socially when they won an Academy Award in the Best Original Song category for their 2005 single "It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp" from the *Hustle & Flow* soundtrack. There was support from those who appreciated the song for its depiction of real life, while others were repulsed by its misogynistic lyrics. The year following their Oscar win, the group was scheduled to perform at the Beale Street Music Festival; this prospect was met with much local opposition. One critic of the proposed performance was local columnist Wendy Thomas who declared the following: "The time is now to declare war on misogynistic music. We could begin by ending this city's love affair with the home-grown ghetto darlings Three 6 Mafia,

²³ Sarig, *Third Coast*, 61-62.

who have given us “It’s Hard out Here for a Pimp,” at least seven songs with “ho” in the title, and another that instructs women to lick their testicles.”²⁴

In this particular song, which nabbed an Oscar nomination and subsequent award, the rappers detail the reasons why “it’s hard out here for a pimp.” They speak of growing in North Memphis, specifically 7th Street, and discuss the widespread poverty and the disadvantages growing up in such an environment has on its residents morally and psychologically. The characters in the song must resort to “making money off these women” in order to stay “above water.” Juicy J speaks of being a witness to murder, poverty, and crime; however, he argues that “it might be new to you” but it has become a normalized circumstance from his perspective. Again, presented is the idea of desensitization that accompanies coming of age in overwhelmingly marginalized communities. Another theme in this song, and in songs examined earlier in the research, is the presence of prostitution in Memphis. In speaking of prostitution, one must inevitably acknowledge the ways in which this promotes the objectification of women and misogynistic ideals. Critics of the song, and songs like it, such as the aforementioned Thomas, oppose the lyrics due to the ways that women are presented as submissive characters whose sole responsibility is to satisfy the sexual desires of men. Rarely are women presented as intelligent, autonomous individuals who are in control of their own sexuality. They are to perform sexual acts at the request of men and to the financial benefit of men. In discussing this, the lines become blurred between the right of the artist to express himself/herself creatively in the manner he chooses and the responsibility of the artist to put out music that is socially conscious.

²⁴ “Controversy over Three 6 Mafia Performance in Memphis,” XXL Magazine, accessed July 15, 2014, <http://www.xxlmag.com/xxl-magazine/2007/04/controversy-over-three-6-mafia-performance-in-memphis>.

One should also remember the systemic and historical forces that promote the idea of gender inequality. The institution of slavery saw the rise of African-American women being used as mere sexual objects at the hands of their White slave masters. Along with this, religious ideals rooted in Southern tradition promote ideas that suggest that women do not have the competence to maintain dominant social roles like their male counterparts. Due to the ways that women are limited in mainstream society in general, it is not surprising that pure misogyny exists in these specific rap lyrics. A plausible explanation for the hyper-presence of misogyny, in the form of prostitution, in rap lyrics specific to the Memphis tradition is the existing presence of prostitution in the city itself. In 2008, MPD detective Paul Sherman reported in the *Commercial Appeal* that during a two-year undercover investigation, there was about 70 prostitution-related arrests. As Memphis is a city whose underground scene is often associated with the practice of “pimpin’” it is sometimes referred to as “Makin’ Easy Money Pimpin’ Hoes in Style.” Gangsta Pat argues that the presence of prostitution in Memphis has largely historical roots: “Memphis was one of the first cities where all of these cathouses and whorehouses set up back in the day because pimping derived from slavery. From the slave master coming in, fucking the black women, and there wasn’t nothing the black man could do about it. So he started to teach the black women to don’t just give your pussy up, ask for some food or something.”²⁵ This quote transfers the fault of the mistreatment of women from that of modern-day African-American male pimps to the White male slave masters whose message to their Black female slaves was that their bodies were not their own; they were subject to sexual exploitation at any given time, in order to preserve the sanctity of their own wives. Because of the social treatment of women, it is relevant that artists such as Three 6 Mafia and even artists of the blues tradition like Wheatstraw creatively speak of this misogyny.

²⁵ Sarig, *Third Coast*, 62-63.

It is also important to note the limited presence of women in the Memphis rap tradition. However, this is not something that comes as a surprise given the limited presence of women, as compared to the male presence, in the rap tradition in general. Since the 90's, there has always been a "token" female to represent any rap posse, and in her representation, she is usually presented as an overtly sexual creature. However, this overt sexuality, is marketed as an image that exists because of her own willpower, meaning she portrays this image of herself organically, not because of instruction from the man: For Bad Boy (Junior Mafia), there was Lil' Kim; for Slip-N-Side of Miami, there was Trina; for Young Money, Nicki Minaj currently represents the token female of this rap franchise. In the early stages of the Memphis rap tradition, Gangsta Boo, was the female voice of the underground movement. Gangsta Boo, and female artists like her, attempted to retain the sense of female autonomy and to turn the tables against men, using them to her own financial advantage. In her most popular single, "Where Dem Dollas At," Boo claims her own sexual identity and speaks of seducing men with her "Vicky lingerie":

What you see in me, nigga roll is what I meant to be
 Sippin' on Henn and grinning in your face
 Tryin' to get your cheese, why you be's
 Sayin' I'm doggin' you out, but still pagin' me
 Never answering the phone, cause your name be on my caller ID
 I guess you can say I'm kinda crazy in my own ways
 Fuck bein' broke for days, ladies gots to get paid²⁶

Gangsta Boo's presence on the early Memphis hip-hop scene is important because she is essentially the only women to have a significant influence on the Memphis rap scene during this time. However, there is much to be said about the fact that she was never able to reach the level of success as her early affiliates such as Juicy J and DJ Paul.

²⁶ Lady Boo, "Where Dem Dollas At," *Enquiring Minds*, Relativity Records, 1998.

In addition to addressing gender expectancies and the socially enforced gender expectancies, another direct link between the blues tradition and that of Memphis hip-hop is the depiction of the mistreatment and criminalization of marginalized groups. In his 1940 single, “Parchman Farm Blues,” Delta Blues singer Bukka White, born Booker T. Washington White, poignantly describes his experience at the Mississippi State Penitentiary, otherwise known as Parchman Farm. White, who claims that he shot a man in self-defense, was sentenced in 1937 to time at the facility, which is noted for its harsh treatment of its inmates and of a system of physical punishment that was informed by a hierarchy of power among the inmates; pre-determined prisoners were encouraged by authority figures to administer harm to fellow prisoners. In addition to mistreatment at the hands of fellow inmates, White and his peers at the labor farm were expected to work extremely long hours. In the song, White sings:

If you wanna do good,
 Ydou better stay off ol' Parchman farm
 We got to work in the mornin'
 Just at dawn of day
 Just at the settin' of the sun
 That's when the work is done²⁷

As the institution is a center of cotton production, White offers the ways in which criminals must endure inhumane working conditions as punishment for whatever criminal act they have been convicted of. Just as White speaks of the harsh realities of the penal system, Memphis rappers have also explored ideas of incarceration and detailed the implications it holds for the individual.

In his 1996 single “One Life to Live,” Kingpin Skinny Pimp, born Derrick Dewayne Hill, raps about the prospect of going to prison and spending a significant amount of time in the system. He speaks of his involvement with illegal drugs, which is one of the plausible causes for why he is imprisoned in the first place. His occupation as a drug dealer is something that he

²⁷ Paul Oliver, *The Story of Blues*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 137-138.

presents as being necessary to survive. It is not something that he seems to glamorize, but is used as a tool to care for his family. Also, before the exact arrest, he speaks directly about the police brutality he endures upon his capture: “I’m mad as fuck ‘cause the cuffs tight on my hands I’m takin’ an ass whippin’, dreamin’ for the ambulance...”²⁸ Again, is the idea regarding the inhumane treatment of prisoners. This idea of police brutality is important to note here, because it is common theme between this particular piece and “Parchman,” but also due to the fact that police and government corruption appears throughout many of the early works of Memphis rappers. The ubiquitous nature of this theme implies that there is a larger social presence of it, either in the past and/or at the present.

Another interesting facet of this work is Skinny Pimp’s reference to the Christian God. In the first verse, he offers that he has reached out to God, but is unable to get an answer from Him. He offers that God’s phone might be “off the hook” as a possible explanation. Again, even with all of the seemingly immoral behavior presented in some of the early Memphis rap music, there is a common theme of religion. The Christian God is viewed not only as a giver of all things good, such as the “gift of poetry,” but also as the entity who interferes when things are not going quite as well as one would like. The intersection and relationship between God and the profane in this music could be a direct result of the church serving as a main staple in the community for many Black communities, but it could also hold regional implications as well, due to religious ideology which seems to be rooted in Southern Black tradition.

Memphis Rap and the Stax Legacy

In addition to there being musical and thematic relationships between the music of Stax Records and Memphis hip-hop, the mere fact of place and familial connections also serve as interesting link between musical traditions of the past and present. Many of the key figures involved in the early Memphis rap scene had a direct connection to the Stax legacy by way of having a parent

²⁸ Kingpin Skinny Pimp, “One Life 2 Live,” *King of da Playaz Ball*, Prophet Entertainment, 1996.

working as a musician with the label. We have also seen evidence that the place in and of itself serves as a source of inspiration for those living there. According to Devin Steel, a radio DJ with local radio station, “Memphis is one of those cities where everyone has an uncle, or a dad, who’s a member of a band or related to music somehow.”²⁹

Two artists involved in the early Memphis scene, Jazze Pha and Gangsta Pat grew up around music because of their parent’s involvement with Stax Records. Gangsta Pat, born Patrick Hall, is considered the first Memphis rapper to have a mainstream hit. According to Pat: “Rufus Thomas had to run across the street to get me a bottle so I’d stop crying.” For Pat, whose father, Willie “Too Big” Hall worked as a drummer with the Bar-Kays and later with the Blues Brothers, the mere presence of being in close proximity to the source informed his musicality. He was able to travel with his father to shows and become proficient in instruments such as drums, keyboards, trumpet and guitar. His rap music was also influenced by the hardships he endured while living in various areas of Memphis, such as White Haven—which later came to be known as “Black Haven” due to the White flight it witnessed over the years. As children, Gangsta would play with another member of the Stax legacy, producer Jazze Pha, born Phalon Alexander. He is the son of James Alexander, bassist for the Bar-Kays, and of R&B singer Deniece Williams. Though, Alexander is oft-associated with the Atlanta music scene, the influence of soul and the Stax sound can be seen in some of the musical choices he makes in his music, such as the soulful singing that more often than not accompanies the beats he produces. The sons of Willie Mitchell, who ran Hi-Records, also attempted to make their mark on the Memphis rap scene. Archie and Lawrence “Boo” Mitchell’s duo M-Team was not able to

²⁹ Sarig, *Third Coast*, 65.

witness the same level of success as many of their contemporaries; however, they continued their musical careers by working as producers in their famed father's studio.³⁰

The generation of urban Black Memphians before the hip-hop generation lived face-to-face with not only the rise and decline of the great musical presence of Stax Records, but also with the Civil Rights struggle that informed the social climate of Memphis then, which still has some lasting impact today. The social deterioration of many Memphis neighborhoods has its roots in the past and has been speculated to have been directly influenced by such occurrences as the Sanitation Worker's Strike of 1968 and the subsequent death of Martin Luther King Jr. This led to much disenfranchisement and uproar within the Black community and the effects of it can still be seen today. In the cover art for his 2014 album, "I Am," Yo Gotti draws upon inspiration from Ernest Withers' *I Am a Man* photography. He features his posse in the background holding signs such as "I Am Gangsta," "I Am Real," and "I Am the Struggle." According to the rapper, there is an apparent relationship between the soul music of the Stax era and subsequent rap music.³¹

According to Yung Dolph, the Memphis sound differs in general because there is a different sense of struggle found here than is present elsewhere: "My aunties and uncles always told me about how they could ride past Stax and might see Isaac Hayes, and a whole lot of other singers from back in the day... They had they cars, they whips out there, they at the studio, it's like the down-south Motown. Motown was just more shinier and more prettier, but all them struggle hits — a lot of stuff came from Memphis."³² Paralleled with the concept of Stax versus Motown, is that of Memphis rap, especially the early Memphis rap of the 90's, and that of rap music elsewhere. True, the genre itself is derived from a sense of struggle and was used as a tool

³⁰ Sarig, *Third Coast*, 64-65, 68.

³¹ Kelly, "Eightball, MJG"

³² Kelly, "Eightball, MJG"

which gave disenfranchised urban youths a voice for creative expression outside of mainstream American; however, Memphis rap is unique in and of itself because of the ways that it draws upon source material found in the region and manipulates it into a musical form that is relatable to the new generation. While rap artists from Memphis do draw inspiration from music from other regions, what is the common denominator in the musical inspiration borrowed for the new sound is the idea of soul and emotional connection.

Final Thoughts

While there are scholars, such as Mark Anthony Neal and Nelson George, who have contributed very insightful literature on hip hop music as an art form and as an entity of social significance, there is still much room for discussion on the genre, specifically in the Southern region. As for Memphis hip hop, there is a minimal amount of writing on the subject in comparison to the current amount of literature that exists on the indigenous rap of other areas, such as Atlanta or New York. Yes, the South in general has struggled in the past to be recognized as a place which produces quality, conscious rap music. However, the Southern sound is becoming a major feature on radio stations throughout the nation, which should cause one to wonder what within the music specifically causes persons of varying backgrounds to be drawn to the music.

With Three 6 Mafia, of Memphis, being the only rap act to date that has an Academy Award under its belt, it is important to examine the social significance of Memphis rap. Why is it that a rap group from Memphis, Tennessee that had little mainstream exposure prior to this occurrence was able to make such an impression on the Academy that they actually won the award? What is the social significance of their music? In addition to their musical connection

with persons of varying backgrounds, other music from the *Hustle & Flow* soundtrack also made a lasting impact on the culture, such as Al Kapone's "Whoop that Trick," which is regularly played at Memphis Grizzlies games. What is striking is that a musical movement, which began as a self-contained movement and as one which provided a voice for an otherwise marginalized group of people has been able to evolve and make a wide cultural impact. Due to this, hip-hop music, especially that of Memphis, is worthy of further discussion, not only as an art form, but as a social institution.

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