Head-to-Head Musical Conflict: The Competitive Aspects of Hip Hop Culture in Rap, Dance, and DJ Battles

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HEAD-TO-HEAD MUSICAL CONFLICT: THE COMPETITIVE ASPECTS OF HIP HOP CULTURE IN RAP, DANCE, AND DJ BATTLES

By

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ABSTRACT

Competition has always been central to hip hop culture’s four primary elements of rapping, dancing, DJing, and graffiti writing. This thesis focuses on the competitive practices associated with hip hop’s musical elements: rap, dance, and DJ battles. In a battle, two opponents face-off directly and take turns attacking one another while presenting their own skills. I break down how these battles are conducted in each different type of performance, what is valued in those battles, and what is discouraged.

In order to understand these battles, I look at how they were conducted in three distinct organized competitions which include the World Series of Hip Hop rap battles, the All Targets Leveled b-boy/b-girl competition, and the Battle for World Supremacy event in the Disco Mix Club’s World DJ Championships. Looking at these three events also allows me to explain the role of organized competitions in hip hop culture. Besides promoting and preserving these sometimes marginalized modes of performance, musical competitions also encourage performers to develop their skills while giving them opportunities to build their reputations and achieve financial success.
INTRODUCTION

Competition has been an important part of hip hop since the urban culture’s beginnings in the South Bronx in the 1970s. As hip hop, together with its four main constituent elements of graffiti writing, dancing, rapping, and DJing have spread around the world and changed over time, competition has remained a central cultural value. This competitive spirit can be seen in graffiti writing when artists try to get their name on more trains than anyone else, in breakdancing when b-boys and b-girls learn new dance moves and transitions to outdo their competition, in freestyling when rappers take turns verbally insulting one another through rhyme, and in DJing when DJs take turns crafting insults with records and out-scratching one another.

Hip hop musical competition manifests itself in the form of rap, dance, and DJ “battles,” which are contests where competitors engage in a much more direct form of conflict than in most other music cultures. By having both competitors face one another head-on, they are not only able to taunt and ridicule one another directly, they can also respond to those attacks and customize their routines to capitalize on the perceived weaknesses of their opponent. These musical duels began on the street, where “ciphers,” which are circular crowds, formed around b-boys or rappers, and at block parties, where DJs would use large sound systems to try to drown out other DJs and attract a larger crowd. As hip hop culture gained popularity first in New York City and then around the world, hip hop enthusiasts and event promoters saw an opportunity to promote this growing musical culture while reaping financial awards. They did this by organizing formal competitions where the winners would receive some sort of prize and the title of champion. In this research I will show the important role that head-to-head musical competition continues to have in hip hop culture and how this strong competitive spirit has shaped the musical practices of rap, hip hop dance, and DJing or “turntablism.”

I became interested in hip hop culture beyond mainstream, popular rap music when I was finishing high school and during my first few years of college when a good friend purchased turntables and introduced me to turntablism. He exposed me to many artists and films that still guide my understanding of hip hop today. I learned about hip hop’s elements and their history as he became involved in them as a performer, and I
enjoyed watching his crew rehearse, perform, and compete whenever I could. Just last year I purchased my own set of turntables and have been slowly building my record collection while learning to mix and scratch ever since. I originally intended for this thesis to be an analysis of DJing and turntablism, but soon realized that the competitive practice of head-to-head battling that connects all of hip hop’s elements was the topic that I needed to address.

Music and competition have been intertwined in many cultures throughout history. Competition can be seen as an inherent aspect of all life on earth. Darwin famously explained the role of competition between individuals of a single species in the advancement of that species. If we acknowledge that all human cultures have music and that all humans must compete in some way in order to thrive, perhaps we can also find where these two ideas meet and acknowledge that music, as a creative endeavor, is also inherently competitive. Musical ideas compete for acceptance while musicians compete for positions, performance opportunities, and awards. This research focuses on a very direct and observable competitive musical practice. While competition in hip hop culture is closely related to competitive practices in the African diaspora, it is important to acknowledge that head-to-head musical competition is not unique to Africa and the African diaspora. It can be found in the history of Western art music as well as in other cultures around the world. The specific, insult-heavy practices associated with battling that will be analyzed in this research, however, seem to belong uniquely to hip hop culture.

In order to explain why head-to-head musical competition is such an integral part of hip hop culture, I have looked at a wide variety of musical competitions in the world and developed a broad interdisciplinary understanding of competition and how it functions in different cultures. In the following chapters, I will relate this broad understanding of competition to three specific organized competitive events, each representing one of hip hop’s primary musical elements. I have studied these events and musical practices through fieldwork consisting of participant observation and interviews with rappers, dancers, DJs, event organizers, and fans.

The first chapter, “The Importance of Competition in Hip Hop Culture” covers the history of hip hop and its major players largely through the 1970s and the 1980s. It
specifically focuses on the role musical competition played in the development of hip hop’s musical elements, and their proliferation throughout New York City and beyond. The chapter closes with the theories of competition that will guide the subsequent analyses of hip hop’s competitive musical practices.

In the second chapter, “War of Words: The Freestyle Rap Battle,” I will address the history and aesthetics of competitive rapping by specifically looking at the World Series of Hip Hop series of rap battles. While rapping has become the most commercially successful of hip hop’s musical elements, what one hears on the radio and in music videos is often quite different from the style of rapping one would hear in a rap battle. While popular rap songs are meticulously crafted and written before being recorded, battlers traditionally depend on an improvisational style of rap known as freestyling. In a freestyle battle, two competitors will take short turns attacking each other with insults while glorifying themselves. Success in a battle is often determined by a rapper’s lyrics, their “flow” or delivery, and their cleverness and confidence in attacking their opposition. The discussion of the World Series of Hip Hop in this chapter will also address how rap and freestyling fit into an historical tradition of African American verbal dueling games, and the role that insults play in that tradition.

I address hip hop dance in Chapter Three, “B-Boys, B-Girls, and Hip Hop Dance Battles.” Here I explain the various forms of hip hop dance that can all be practiced competitively in the context of head-to-head battles. I specifically focus on b-boying or b-girling, arguably the best known and most popular of hip hop dance forms, although it is often misunderstood and addressed as breakdancing. I analyze b-boying and b-girling, sometimes called “breaking,” by looking at All Targets Leveled, an international battle organized by the Burn Unit b-boy crew that took place in Atlanta on October 25, 2008. This event allows us to understand how dancers choose techniques and improvise a routine to outdo their opponent, while using dance to insult and attack their opponent without ever establishing physical or verbal contact. The unique design of All Targets Leveled, in which street-themed objects were placed in the arena and competitors were encouraged to incorporate them into their routine, also allows us to look at how these organized competitions recall and pay homage to the streets where these competitive practices began.
The fourth chapter, “Understanding Turntablism and the DJ Battle,” discusses the history of competition among DJs as well as the rise of turntablism, which is the act of creating new music through the manipulation of sounds using records on a set of turntables and a mixer. In analyzing DJ battles, I discuss the Battle for World Supremacy event in the annual DMC World Championships. The Disco Mix Club’s World Championship is the most prestigious international turntablist competition, and the Battle for World Supremacy is the portion of the DMC Championships conducted in the tradition of “old school” head-to-head battles where two DJs face each other on stage, directly attacking one another with music and sound. In looking at turntablism and battling, this chapter will also address the important and changing role of technology and how turntablism is changing in North America.

The fifth and final chapter, “Organizing Conflict: Issues, Consequences, and Organized Hip Hop Competitions,” links the individual studies of rap, dance, and DJ battles by looking more broadly at the role of organized competitions in modern hip hop culture. It looks at the reasons for organizing and participating in head-to-head battle competitions. The final chapter also looks at how these competitions often place themselves in a continuity of hip hop culture to help firmly establish these practices as traditions with distinct histories and practices.
CHAPTER ONE

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMPETITION IN HIP HOP CULTURE

By using music in the realm of competition, the purpose and values associated with that music are often transformed. However, unlike most other musical genres, hip hop has been competitive since the music’s inception in the Bronx in the 1970s which minimized the transformative effect competition often has on music. It is important that we look at the origins of hip hop culture so that we can understand the socio-cultural situation that fostered musical innovation along with a strong competitive spirit. This chapter will unpack the history of hip hop culture and the important role competition played in its development and endurance in the 1970s and 1980s in New York City. I then present the theories of competition, musical and otherwise, that will guide this research through the individual case studies to its conclusion.

Although the history hip hop has appeared and been acknowledged in numerous books, articles, and documentaries, it is still largely a silent narrative. It is a story known to the majority of those in the hip hop community who practice one or more of these musical elements, but remains unknown to most of those who listen to popular rap music. The history that follows is primarily derived from published scholarship on hip hop. While there has been a significant amount of this scholarship, the majority of it is focuses on rap as a genre of popular music. Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation by Jeff Chang is an in-depth history of hip hop from its precursors to its status in 2005. It covers all the facets of hip hop culture, although once it reaches the late 1980s, the focus is primarily on popular rap recording artists and trends. Rap Music and Street Consciousness by the ethnomusicologist Cheryl Keyes chronicles the history of rap from its origins in African American traditions through its status as one of the most popular genres in popular music at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The literature on hip hop dance primarily consists of popular articles although the attention

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1 For an example of the transformative effect competition has had on the steel band tradition in Trinidad, see Shannon Dudley’s Music from Behind the Bridge: Steelband Spirit and Politics in Trinidad and Tobago (Oxford University Press, 2008).
given to hip hop dance in academic circles seems to be increasing. There is a similar lack of scholarship on DJing and turntablism; most information can be found in non-academic books or popular articles and websites. Documentary films also make up an important branch of hip hop scholarship and analysis. Some of these films include *Scratch, Planet B-Boy, Freestyle*, and *The Freshest Kids*.

**Competition and the Rise of Hip Hop**

**Socioeconomic Precursors**

The South Bronx is most commonly cited as the place where a variety of cultural influences, coupled with severe economic distress, created the backdrop that gave rise to the various forms of hip hop musical expression in the 1970s. One major factor that drastically altered the demographics and economic status of the borough was the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway in the 1950s. The expressway was designed by the New York Regional Plan Association in 1929, in order to make Manhattan a center of wealth. This expressway would be directly connected to the suburbs through a network of highways that would cut right through the heart of many outer boroughs. In the Bronx, over 60,000 residents were forced from their homes in order to make room for the expressway. Residents were given a mere two-hundred dollars per room as compensation for their homes; those who could afford it, mostly middle-class whites, moved to the suburbs. Others were moved into vast, densely populated housing complexes situated around desolate, soon-to-be crime-ridden parks. This population shift was coupled with the movement of jobs out of the inner city. By the mid-1970s, the Bronx had lost 600,000 manufacturing jobs, which was 40% of the previous job market.

Conditions in the Bronx worsened as slum landlords neglected to upkeep apartments while charging black and Latino residents exorbitant rent. Exacerbating matters, some landlords devised schemes to evade taxes and collect insurance payoffs by hiring stooges to force residents out by burning down the apartments. Between the years of 1970 and 1975, there were 68,456 fires in the Bronx, more than thirty-three each

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2 This spring will see the release of *Foundation: B-boys, B-girls and Hip-Hop Culture in New York* by Joseph G. Schloss, available from Oxford University Press.

night. Journalists Joe Conason and Jack Newfield, who investigated arson patterns in New York City, wrote, “In housing, the final stage of capitalism is arson.” Daniel Patrick Moynihan, New York’s Democratic senator, addressed the issues of fires in the South Bronx as well as the rise of radicals like the Black Panthers in a 1970 memo to President Richard Nixon, in which he famously wrote, “The time may have come when the issue of race could benefit from a period of ‘benign neglect.’” President Nixon penciled, “I agree!” on the memo before forwarding it to his cabinet.

This meant that even less government funding would be going to troubled urban areas like the Bronx. As the number of fires increased, fire stations were closed and firefighters were laid off. Crime escalated as neighborhood gangs formed to police their apartments, projects, and streets from outside invaders. By 1973, New York City gangs totaled 315 with over 19,000 members. Dwindling federal funding for schools caused extracurricular school programs for inner-city youth as well as the public school system’s arts programs to be cut. As instrumental music programs disappeared, black and Latino youth in the Bronx had an excessive amount of free time because there were no jobs, and they became involved with neighborhood gangs who had started using graffiti to mark their territory.

The Four Elements and the Evolution of Style

Graffiti was the first urban art form to gain popularity among New York City youth. As a method of individual expression and rebellion, it would eventually join the musical elements of DJing, b-boying, and rapping to become the basis of hip hop culture. While graffiti writing was being used as a marker of gang territory, it gained widespread popularity as a way for poor urban youth to accumulate fame as individuals by propagating their name across the city. A name was like a commodity that gained value through recognition. The New York Times did one of their first features on graffiti in 1971 which focused on the artist who went by TAKI 183; after people saw the recognition he

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6 Chang, 14.
7 Keyes, 44-6.
received from his art and the media, the popularity of graffiti exploded. Just writing your name was not enough to stand out and be noticed; it had to be written more often and larger than others, as well as somewhere that could be seen but not easily reached. If someone covered up your tag with theirs, you had to go back and put your name on top of that. Most importantly, it had to be written with individual style.

Hip hop as a musical phenomenon was closely related to the musical traditions of Jamaica, and its development was facilitated by heavy Caribbean immigration to New York during the 1960s. In the same way that a depressed economy in Jamaica encouraged producers to recycle musical material to maximize profits, the absence of adequate funding for music programs in New York City’s public schools in the 1970s caused young musical aspirants to turn to their parents’ music collections and home playback equipment for musical source material and inspiration. There they found the soul music and jazz of the 1960s as well as the popular 1970s urban dance genres of funk and disco that could be deconstructed and reconfigured through the use of two turntables.8

This model of musical reimagination was popularized in the Bronx by Jamaican immigrant DJ Kool Herc (b. Clive Campbell, 1955) who essentially transplanted the Jamaican sound system model to New York City. Herc first presented his style of using two turntables at his sister’s back-to-school party in August 1973 where he debuted his technique of isolating and extending the break section of a record. The break, a term for the part of a dance or funk record where the melody takes a rest and the drummer takes over, was especially appealing to dancers, but it usually only lasted a few seconds. Herc would play a series of breaks one right after the other, skipping the other parts of the songs by alternating between two turntables. He also began using two copies of the same record so that he could repeat the same break over and over. His mixing technique was very basic with no attempt to preserve the beat; instead he just faded from one record to another, often talking to the crowd over the transition similar to the Jamaican practice of “toasting.”9 His revolutionary style would inspire many other DJs to follow suit.10

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9 Toasting is a practice that can be traced to various African traditions and was popularized as an aspect of Jamaican soundsystem culture when the DJ would talk to the crowd and boast about the skills of himself and the skills of the soundsystem engineer.
One of these DJs, Grandmaster Flash (b. Joseph Saddler, 1958), took Kool Herc’s style, and through technological innovations and musical expertise, was able to develop the technique necessary to seamlessly cut between one record and another by using headphones. Another important development for hip hop DJs was the invention of the “scratch,” which is commonly attributed to Grandmaster Flash’s protégé, Grand Wizard Theodore (b. Theodore Livingston). Hip hop DJs became increasingly popular as their techniques became more advanced. They were no longer able to easily talk to the crowd, so they began to hire MCs to accompany them. These MCs talked intermittently to excite the crowd and engage them in call and response. Soon popular DJs used a group of MCs to accompany them, and these musical groups became known as crews. For instance, with the hiring of Clark Kent, Jay Cee, and Busy Bee Starsky, Herc became the leader of the Herculords. Grandmaster Flash and his original crew, the Three MCs, were the first to popularize the rhyming MC as a central part of the performance. Instead of simply talking occasionally to the crowd while the DJ spun records, each of Flash’s MCs executed their phrases in a rhyming and rhythmic fashion that would come to be known as “rapping.” By 1979, the rhyming MC and DJ concept had become the norm throughout New York City.

The dancers in the Bronx that were drawn to a record’s break section became known as “b-boys,” a term often credited to Kool Herc that is short for “break boys.” The original b-boy pioneers danced upright, a form that became known as “top rockin’.” This style fused dance forms and influences from James Brown’s “Good Foot,” salsa, tap, Brooklyn-style uprocking, and Afro-Caribbean dances. While top rockin’ had an identifiable structure, individual creativity and style would regularly be expressed in competitive ciphers. Dancers extended their techniques to be more original and

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12 The term MC also originated in Jamaica, and it stands for “Microphone Controller.” The acronym is often assumed to mean “Master of Ceremonies,” as this is what MC stood for in prior American dance subcultures.
13 Keyes, 56-64.
14 Good Foot is the term often used to characterize James Brown’s high-energy dance style from his stage shows. The term comes from Brown’s 1972 funk single, “Get on the Good Foot” which became a number one hit on the R&B charts.
impressive in competition, which led to the fancy leg movements done on the ground that were eventually defined as “footwork” or “floor rocking.” Over time, b-boys and b-girls developed an impressive vocabulary of footwork, ground moves, freezes, and power moves, such as backspins and headspins, useful for defeating their opponents in turn-based competition.\textsuperscript{15} B-boying gained popularity in New York City throughout the late seventies, and b-boys formed crews such as the now famous Rock Steady Crew, which was founded in the Bronx in 1977. To get into this exclusive crew, you had to take on the difficult task of successfully battling one of the other members.\textsuperscript{16} Other dance forms such as uprocking from Brooklyn and the West coast funk forms of popping and locking, also came to be associated with hip hop and adopted competitive practices similar to b-boying.

Afrika Bambaataa (b. Kevin Donovan, 1957), who was also of Caribbean descent, was one of the DJs inspired by DJ Kool Herc, and he was crucial in promoting the transition from gang culture to hip hop. As a teen, Bambaataa was drawn into the gang life of the Bronx. He made a name for himself as a member of the Black Spades by being unafraid to cross turfs and forge relationships with other gangs. Soon young Bambaataa was named a warlord in the organization and was responsible for building the ranks and expanding the turf of the Spades, who had moved into the projects of the other boroughs and quickly became the largest gang in New York. In 1971 as racial tensions exploded along the borders of the Bronx, a peace truce brought together black and Latino gangs in the South Bronx. This truce had a profound influence on Bambaataa, and he found that he could be just as effective in organizing peace as he was at mobilizing for war. He became interested in Kool Herc’s style of DJing and soon became a DJ himself, gaining the nickname Master of Records. After winning a Housing Authority essay contest which gave him the opportunity to travel to Africa, Bambaataa was inspired to start the Zulu Nation which had the motto of “Peace, Love, Unity and Having Fun.” By the late seventies, the Zulu Nation and the four elements of hip hop had expanded beyond the Bronx and spread throughout the tri-state area, where Bambaataa encouraged musical

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competition as an alternative to violence, and hundreds of young DJs, MCs, graffiti writers, and breakdancers looked to him for spiritual guidance in their lives and stylistic guidance in their art forms.\textsuperscript{17}

**The Proliferation of Hip Hop through Competition**

As gangs dissolved, urban space was rearticulated in the form of neighborhood block parties where b-boys, who could now safely travel across the borough, could find other kids to battle. DJs competed at block parties in sound system battles that mimicked those found in Jamaica where DJs would use impressively large sound systems to try to drown out the other DJs and draw the largest crowd. Jazzy Jay described the situation saying, “Instead of gangs, they started turning into little area crews where they would do a little bit of dirt. In every area, there would be a DJ crew or a breakdance crew. They would be like, ‘Okay, we all about our music and we love our music but you come in this area wrong and we all about kicking your ass.’ Competition fueled the whole thing.”\textsuperscript{18}

Ken Swift of the Rock Steady Crew also counters the common argument that hip hop and competition fully supplanted violence in the late seventies. Instead, he said that it was not uncommon for battles to lead to fights. To prevent this, b-boys avoided both eye contact and physical contact with members of other crews while battling, and confrontational behavior that is common in battles today, such as grabbing your crotch or taking someone’s hat, would have inevitably lead to violence back then. This was the nature of battling on the street. DJs had to protect their sound systems from sabotage, people would sometimes throw broken glass and nails into the middle of a cipher where someone was dancing, and fights would break out, but the potential for violence to escalate into urban warfare was minimal when compared to the gang culture of the late sixties and early seventies.\textsuperscript{19}

As the decade of the seventies came to an end, however, the youth movement that was hip hop appeared to be ending with it. Hip hop’s first generation had graduated from high school and moved on. They now had to focus on making money, and audiences no longer interested in block parties with sound system battles could go to drinking-age

\textsuperscript{17} Keyes, 95-107.
\textsuperscript{18} Chang, 80.
\textsuperscript{19} Ken Swift, interview with author, Atlanta GA, October 25, 2008.
nightclubs. Some popular club DJs, like DJ Hollywood, began incorporating hip hop turntable techniques and rapping into their routines, and found some success by performing in clubs outside the Bronx. Then, with the release of 1979’s “Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugarhill Gang, rapping would gain major popularity throughout and beyond New York City, and it would start a money-fueled scramble by record companies to sign similar acts. Hip hop’s founding fathers had never seriously considered putting hip hop on record, because they did not think it could be done. In a sense they were right, because while the success of “Rapper’s Delight” helped revive the Bronx club scene, it was with rap as the focal point at the expense of hip hop’s other musical elements. B-boys nearly disappeared as dancing in clubs stopped, and DJs were considered expendable and placed behind the rapper.

It would take a group of young teens and pre-teens who remembered watching their role models b-boy and DJ at block parties to reinvigorate these elements of hip hop, as well as the competitive tradition that accompanied them. Crazy Legs (b. Richard Colon, 1966) was one of these young b-boys who fondly remembered the past, and at the age of thirteen he battled to join what was left of the Rock Steady Crew. He lost, but had shown a lot of heart and style so was allowed to join. Most crews had dissipated and very few people were b-boy ing, so in an effort to prove himself and satisfy his competitive spirit, Crazy Legs embarked on a mission to find and challenge every remaining b-boy in the city. He said:

I went and met this guy named Lil’ Man, who eventually became Lil’ Crazy Legs. I met Take One, this kid named Quiquito, we used to call him Little Kicks, and I battled them. When I would come across b-boys, I would start hanging out with them and one person would tell me, ‘Yo, I know a b-boy from this area down here.’ My little kung-fu flick mission continued. And eventually I recruited all of them.20

Because of his motivation and recruitment abilities, Crazy Legs became the leader of the Rock Steady Crew. They spread across the city and expanded membership to include kids interested in any of the old Bronx arts. There were at least five hundred people claiming allegiance to Rock Steady Crew in the early eighties, and many members went on to form their own crews, some of which would become Rock Steady’s fiercest competition.

20 Chang, 137.
With the help of groups like the Rock Steady Crew and the Zulu Nation, hip hop had escaped near-death. Rap remained popular in clubs while young people were encouraged to participate in a variety of ways. The number of crews and individual performers flourished, and in order to build a reputation and make a name for themselves, performers turned to competition. Event organizers and club owners also saw financial opportunities in organizing competitions, and in the early 1980s, organized battles were one of the most common venues for hip hop performance. I have looked at 173 flyers advertising hip hop parties and concerts in New York City, the majority of which were created between 1980 and 1983.\(^21\) Approximately one-fourth of the flyers that I looked at advertised a competition of some sort, many of which were billed as talent shows, conventions, or battles between local high schools.\(^22\) Other flyers were issued as direct challenges from one hip hop crew to others, and they would often taunt specific people or groups to encourage them to attend.\(^23\) Regional battles were also common, in which performers representing one area of the city would compete against others. Some examples of these flyers are included in Appendix A.\(^24\)

These organized competitions gave young people financial incentives along with the opportunity to build their reputations and challenge rivals. While there were competitions for b-boys, DJs, and rappers, rapping was still the most popular and economically viable element of hip hop. This meant that many rappers saw organized competitions as a method of not only building a reputation but starting a career as a recording artist. This was especially true when competitions offered winners recording contracts or possible membership in a crew that had already found some commercial success.\(^25\)

Rap continued to gain popularity around the world as a genre of popular music, and the other elements of hip hop would get some mainstream exposure and recognition outside of New York City through film. Small films such as *Wild Style* and *Style Wars* showed the potential for movies about hip hop. Richard Grabel of the *Village Voice* wrote

\(^{21}\) Author’s hip hop flyer archive. The majority of flyers were found at: “Party Flyers,” Toledo Hip Hop Org. http://toledohiphop.org/images/old_school_source_code/. Additional flyers have been found on other websites and in publications. Flyers will be referred to as #YEAR-DATE (mmdd).

\(^{22}\) Author’s hip-hop flyer archive #1981-0101, #1981-0116, #1981-0227.

\(^{23}\) Author’s hip-hop flyer archive #1980-1225 and #1981-1024b.

\(^{24}\) Author’s hip-hop flyer archive #1981-0417.

\(^{25}\) Author’s hip-hop flyer archive #1981-0404 and #1980-1103.
that “Wild Style” might be the first of a new genre … A teen film for the ‘80s. Or its verisimilitude might help posterity see it as something more important, a The Harder They Come of hip hop.”26 Hollywood filmmakers saw this potential and cast members of Rock Steady Crew for small cameos b-boying to “It’s Just Begun” in 1983’s Flashdance. The massive success of this film led to a wave of critically-panned, teen-targeted hip hop films in the mid-eighties including Breakin’, Beat Street, Body Rock, Fast Forward, Krush Groove, Delivery Boys, Turk 182, Rappin’, and Breakin’ 2: Electric Boogaloo.

While the content of these films was largely inaccurate and misrepresentative of hip hop culture, it made breakdancing, DJing, rapping, and graffiti writing accessible to the rest of the world, and groups of people on every continent became interested in hip hop culture. When Hollywood decided the hip hop fad was over and moved on and overexposure had killed much of the hip hop scene in New York City, hip hop communities in Asia and Europe were flourishing.27 Hip hop has become an international phenomenon, and organized competitions outside the United States have played an important role in not only preserving the hip hop traditions of b-boying and DJing, but in popularizing them around the world again. While hip hop may have started in New York City, it has expanded far beyond the United States to truly become a world tradition.

While popular rap music is dominated by African Americans in the United States, the other, now more marginalized elements of hip hop have much more diverse demographics and it is really common to find Asians, Latinos, and whites competing and in the audience at events.

Rap continued to gain popularity into the 1990s, and the extremely popular subgenre of gangsta rap drew a lot of criticism from parents’ groups and the mainstream media. This violent and often misogynistic music was supposed to be a reflection of life in the inner city, but as it gained momentum, it seemed to effectively be promoting the gangster lifestyle it presented. This genre also exposed the American public to a very different kind of conflict and competition, as rappers from the East coast and West coast would feud through their songs and the media. Unlike a battle, which provides resolution with the selection of a winner, these conflicts were allowed to fester and eventually

27 Planet B-Boy, directed by Benson Lee, Elephant Eye Films, 2008, DVD.
become violent, culminating in the deaths of prominent rappers Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls. The following chapters will show how rap, dance, and DJ battles often evoke or simulate violence but rarely result in an actual altercation, and why competition in hip hop culture may actually prevent violence.

Theories of Musical Competition in Hip Hop Culture

There have been many books and articles that discuss musical competition in a variety of musical styles which can provide helpful insight to competition in hip hop culture. These include *Mashindano!: Competitive Music Performance in East Africa* edited by Frank Gunderson and Greg Barz. The book contains twenty-one different essays that describe organized competitive events in East Africa. The book *Competition in Education* by John Martin Rich and Joseph L. DeVitis is also a useful analysis of competition because it describes the role of competition in American culture and various theories about the function of competition in education.

Competitiveness is a pervasive characteristic of American culture. According to Stanley Eitzen, “Competition is highly valued in American society. Most Americans believe it to be the one quality that has made America great because it motivates individuals to be discontented with the status quo and with the second best.” The ideology of economic competition has dominated American life, and democracy promotes more political competition than most other forms of government. Children are encouraged to compete from a very young age in contests, projects, athletic events, and for merit badges in Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts.²⁸

John Martin Rich and Joseph L. DeVitis describe multiple functions of competition, a number of which apply directly to musical competition in hip hop culture. It promotes the full use of one’s abilities because it spurs interest in striving to outdo or surpass a competitor or rival. Competition stimulates advancement and leads to higher standards by showing people what has previously been achieved and encouraging them to surpass those levels. This is clearly seen in DJ battles as techniques like scratching have continually gotten faster and more complex since their introduction in the competitive arena. Competition helps promote learning. Many young rappers develop their skills

through freestyle rap battling and treating it like a game as opposed to a serious contest. Competition can also be harmful when contestants refuse to abide by the rules and attempt to win at any cost.\textsuperscript{29}

Hip hop aesthetics are largely driven by individual style, and individuals are able to showcase their styles through head-to-head competition. The importance of style is formalized in organized competitions through adjudication which promotes those musical features important to the hip hop community. In addition to individual style, judges look for features such as virtuosity, originality and cleverness, as opposed to reusing the same routine multiple times. Stealing rhymes or a dance or DJ routine from someone else is the very definition of having no style, and it will certainly cause the offender to lose their battle and possibly be banned from the competition completely.

An additional function of hip hop culture at the individual level is building a reputation for the performer. Participants in the hip hop community traditionally create a performance identity with a new name and possibly even new ways of acting and dressing. Competition is one of the main ways to build a reputation for that identity, while also gaining social capital and asserting dominance over others. On the street, these competitive practices acted as a way for individuals and crews to not only build reputations, but to challenge one another and settle rivalries without significantly risking violent confrontations. Reputations are won and lost at organized competitive musical events all around the world much like in hip hop competition. It is for this reason that organized hip hop competition is typically a realm for amateur performers; professionals and those who already have strong reputations are fully aware that they risk diminishing those reputations in competition. However, this becomes more complicated when champions are expected to defend their titles in subsequent years.\textsuperscript{30}

Organized music competitions are seen as great social equalizers because they challenge existing orders and help bridge the gaps between social classes.\textsuperscript{31} Inner city and urban youth regularly see a career in rap music and hip hop as a viable means of social mobility and financial success, and competition is seen as one of the primary ways to

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{29}{Ibid., 9-12.}
\footnote{30}{Frank Gunderson and Gregory F. Barz, eds., \textit{Mashindano!: Competitive Music Performance in East Africa} (Dar es Salaam, Oxford: Mkuki na Nyota Press, 2000), 7.}
\footnote{31}{Ibid., 11.}
\end{footnotes}
achieve that goal. This is related to the ideology of the American Dream that is reinforced through this type of competition as described by Rich and DeVitis. They say that this ideology may be the most potent in both sports and American life, and I believe that it applies to this style of musical competition as well. They define the American Dream as the combination of values that Americans generally believe, such as achievement, success, and materialism, in conjunction with equal opportunity, ambitiousness, hard work, and the means of attainment. Hip hop, like professional sports, is teeming with rags-to-riches stories. The belief that with talent and hard work one can gain success and be rewarded with fame, power, and money is central to organized hip hop competition.\(^3\)

Mark Katz proposes that the DJ battle acts as a “safe place” for young men, comparing the multicultural turntablism community to the community of white heavy metal fans described by Robert Walser. These groups are generally made up of adolescent males lacking social, physical, and economic power while being surrounded by cultural messages that promote such forms of power as important attributes of masculinity.\(^3\) Head-to-head hip hop battles, which can often be seen as simulating violence, provide a way for young people to act out aggression and assert their power in a constructive and creative way. More than just acting out aggression, however, hip hop allowed a generation of largely ignored inner-city youth including males and females to construct identities with social value, and competition helped them to solidify those identities and increase their value.

Hip hop battles are often very antagonistic and heavy with insults, but the game-like atmosphere and rules for participation keep the event peaceful. A participant uses their skills to embarrass and insult their opponent, making fun of things such as their personal life, musical ability, family, home, sexual orientation, and sometimes even race. While these topics are considered unacceptable and capable of provoking violence in other contexts, the atmosphere of the battle desensitizes these subjects and makes them insignificant. This type of relationship between competitors has previously been called a “joking relationship,” which is a combination of friendliness and antagonism that forces behavior that would regularly be considered hostile to not be taken seriously. Radcliffe-

\(^3\) Rich & DeVitis, 75.
\(^3\) Mark Katz, Capturing Sound: How Technology has Changed Music (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, 131-5.)
Brown described this relationship as one of permitted disrespect.\textsuperscript{34} In this sense, competition requires cooperation between participants. Rich and DeVitis argue that competition and cooperation are contrary terms, not contradictory ones.\textsuperscript{35}

Competition has also played an important role in the preservation of hip hop culture. In the early years of hip hop culture, it created social situations that allowed the people who practiced these musical forms to interact with others who they did not have contact with in normal social situations. Competition encouraged people to go into other areas of the city and meet other crews. This had the effect of encouraging hip hop culture to spread beyond the confines of the Bronx while also promoting stylistic interaction and change. B-boys, rappers, and DJs incorporated stylistic features of others into their own styles, creating something new and allowing hip hop to advance and change stylistically which helped it to survive.

Along with encouraging change and advancement, music competitions often serve the purpose of displaying, recalling, and reinforcing traditional community values and ideologies. In the hip-hop community, the aesthetics of “old school” hip hop are reinforced at these competitions often in opposition to modern commercial rap which is so often fixated on money, violence, and the subjugation of women. Shannon Dudley argues that competitions provide recognition for marginalized constituencies and modes of performance.\textsuperscript{36} Freestyle rappers, breakdancers, and turntablists are one of these marginalized constituencies in our current society, in which hip hop has been primarily distributed and presented through the limited selection of rap music videos on television networks like BET and MTV which have come to define hip hop culture for most Americans. Competitions help to legitimize these groups, and by showcasing and rewarding the performers who are the most talented and representative of hip hop culture, they encourage new people to participate in these art forms and carry the traditions forward.

\textsuperscript{35} Rich & DeVitis, 22-26.
In the following chapters, I will provide concrete examples of how these theories manifest themselves in competitive hip hop performance, while looking at specific case studies of organized hip hop competitions. We have already seen the important role competition has played in the development of hip hop culture, and in looking more closely at freestyle rap battles, b-boy battles, and DJ battles, we can see how competition exists today and the important role it continues to have in hip hop culture.
CHAPTER TWO

WAR OF WORDS: THE FREESTYLE RAP BATTLE

Rap is the most popular and most commodified element of hip hop, but competitive head-to-head rapping, which is arguably older than hip hop culture at large, is a marginalized and underrepresented mode of performance when compared to commercial rap. Freestyle, a form of rap that is improvised on the spot, is the dominant mode of performance in a rap battle, and it is very different from the meticulously crafted and produced raps commonly found on a commercial rap album. This chapter will describe and analyze the competitive practice of modern freestyle rap battles by breaking down how they are constructed, what is valued, and what is considered inappropriate. I will also look at how the modern rap battle is related to various African American traditions of verbal dueling and the important role of insults and boasts that connect those traditions with modern battles.

The World Series of Hip Hop

This chapter will look at rap battling through the World Series of Hip Hop, a series of four rap battles that were broadcast live on the internet on September 27, 2008. The competition was initially advertised as an open tournament for both rappers and breakdancers that would take place in Atlanta, so I planned on using this event as the primary site for my fieldwork. The promoters advertised the event saying it would be sponsored by MTV, broadcast on Pay-Per-View, and judged by a panel of major hip hop stars including DMC of Run DMC, Rakim of Eric B and Rakim, Big Daddy Kane, Yo-Yo, Doug E. Fresh, Roxanne Shante and Slick Rick. There were supposed to be a total of six rap categories based on age and gender, and the grand prize for both top categories (Heavyweight Male and Heavyweight Female) was one million dollars.

In May 2008, shortly after the event was officially announced, Roxanne Shante, the official spokeswoman of the World Series of Hip Hop said, "This is an opportunity of a lifetime. This is like a hip-hop lottery; you have to be in it to win it. I can't wait to see some unknown rapper really shame some industry rapper. Most people get in the industry
to make a million dollars. But very few make one dollar. Here's a chance for them to make $1,000,000.00 in one night!”\textsuperscript{37}

Furqaan Clover, the organizer of the competition, added, “I’ve spoken to established artists who are signed. They have told me that $1 million is enough to go into battle. They feel it's like taking candy from a baby, but the competition is going to be stiff. Established artists can enter but they have so much to lose.”\textsuperscript{38} The potential financial gains and the opportunity to make a name for oneself created a lot of excitement for the World Series of Hip Hop. Rappers and breakdancers started to sign up, and I reserved a nearby hotel room in Atlanta about a month before the event.

Then less than a week before the competition was going to start, its website completely changed to describe the World Series of Hip Hop as a series of rap battles that would be broadcast on the internet for a small fee. There was no mention of where it would be filmed or if it would be open to the public. After doing some research I discovered that it was being filmed at the National Black Theatre in Harlem, so I purchased a $10.00 “e-ticket” to watch the live webcast. Instead of a large tournament with rapping and breakdancing, there were only eight pre-selected rapping competitors in four battles. The first battle, between T-Rex from New York and Tech 9 from Philadelphia, offered a ten thousand dollar prize. The next two battles offered twenty-five thousand dollar prizes, the first of which was between New York’s Murda Mook and Philadelphia’s Young Hot. This was followed by the female battle between Lady Luck from New Jersey and New York’s Rece Steele, who also appeared on the reality show Miss Rap Supreme. Finally, the main event for one-hundred thousand dollars was between Mysonne from New York and E.Ness from Philadelphia, who was on the MTV reality show Making the Band.

The battles were hosted by the female, English emcee and radio personality Monie Love. Technical difficulties with sound, the camera, and internet streaming were worked out during two rap performances that took place before the battles started. During the battles, the organizers had trouble with the audience crowding the stage, smoking, and


\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
trying to film the event with their own cameras, but the battles themselves took place largely without incident. After the over three hour event, people could vote for the rappers they thought had won by sending a text message with that rapper’s code to the designated number at the cost of ninety-nine cents per vote.

Since the battles took place, however, the World Series of Hip Hop has been surrounded by controversy. On October 2, 2008, less than a week after the competition, the World Series of Hip Hop released a statement saying that there was an error with the majority of text message votes. The chairman of the World Series of Hip Hop, Furqaan Clover, wrote, “New keywords have been assigned to each artist. To make it simple we will just change the zero to a one. So Mysonne’s code is now motv11 instead of motv01, etc. Voting will be extended another week, and will close on October 10th. The winners will be announced on Saturday October 11th.”

October eleventh came and went, but no winners were announced. In the following weeks, E.Ness, Lady Luck, Murda Mook, and

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T-Rex were told that they had won and that they would be paid shortly. As of now, no one has been paid, and Furqaan Clover cannot be reached. The participants have generally agreed that the World Series of Hip Hop was a fraud and they have been quite vocal about it, giving comments to hip hop news sources and posting videos on YouTube and World Star Hip Hop. Rek and MC of The Source wrote:

> Whether WSOHH meant to front on its participants or not, this is bad for hip hop. It’s a time when rappers are looking for alternative ways to generate income through battles and live shows because of all the bootlegging going on. It’s also a time when competitive emcee battles are so necessary to a culture that is seldom producing real emcees and lyricists. The World Series of Hip Hop could have been a way to kill two birds with one stone, instead of another case of rappers getting jerked.⁴⁰

How this controversy has affected the stated purpose of the World Series of Hip Hop will be discussed in-depth in Chapter Five. This chapter will use the battles from the World Series of Hip Hop to illustrate how rap battles are conducted and what aspects are considered most important to rap battling.

**Rap Battles and Freestyling**

A rap battle is a head-to-head verbal duel in which the two competitors take turns using rhymes to insult or “diss” their opponent, boast about themselves, and generally showcase their rapping skills. Rap battles can occur on the street where they are informal and take place in a cipher that has formed around the two competitors. In this situation, the rappers either perform a cappella or over a beat provided by someone in the cipher who can “beatbox” (the art of vocally imitating percussion) or by a small stereo. The winner is typically decided by the other members of the cipher. In a formal, organized competition, the two competitors generally battle on some type of stage where they either perform a cappella or over a beat provided by the competition DJ. The winner is either selected by a panel of judges or by the audience.

While battle raps can be prewritten, battling has become synonymous with freestyling, an improvisatory style of rap that uses very few or no precomposed lyrics. In the documentary film *Freestyle*, the rapper Otherwise described freestyling as “coming

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off the head, you know straight up making it up, straight up rhymes off your head, not nothing that you wrote down. So if you’re sitting there freestyling, or claim to be freestyling and your boy is behind you saying every word you saying, then it’s evident you’re not really freestyling.” Freestyling in a battle as opposed to performing prewritten rhymes is also important because it allows the rapper to react to his opponent and capitalize on any mistakes they may have made.

Learning to freestyle well requires a lot of practice, which often takes the form of writing. While this may seem contradictory, writing raps and rhymes regularly at home allows freestylers to ingrain a greater amount of rhyming words and short phrases into their heads that can later be used while freestyling in a battle or cipher. Writing and meticulously composing more complex rhymes also pushes freestyle rappers to create more intricate phrases in the context of a freestyle. Practice also commonly takes the form of unserious battles or ciphers where aspiring rappers can work on their lyrics and creativity, while receiving helpful feedback without being judged for their mistakes. These playful “battles” can consist of many hours of going back and forth, and they usually take place between close friends who trust one another implicitly and understand that they are only playing. It is the lack of this trust and camaraderie in public rap battles that creates the need for established routines and clear rules.

The World Series of Hip Hop posted rules that would function to maintain order and establish a routine for the battles when it was originally going to be a tournament that used a panel of judges to decide the winners. All of these rules and regulations can be found in Appendix B of the thesis. Some of these rules, such as these, simply dictated how the rap battles would be carried out:

15. Each match will consist of three (3) rounds, with each rapper having the same allotted time.

16. Championship matches will consist of five (5) rounds, with each rapper having the same allotted time.

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41 Freestyle: The Art of Rhyme, produced by Henry Alex Rubin, directed by Kevin Fitzgerald, 75 minutes, Palm Pictures, 2004, DVD.
17. If the score is tied after three rounds, the competing rappers will continue into Sudden Death rounds.

18. In Sudden Death each rapper will have a turn; the allotted time will be doubled. At the end of the round Judges will score the round, if the scores remain tied Sudden Death continues for additional rounds until the tie is broken.\(^{44}\)

In the battles that did happen, each round was three minutes long. There was some confusion in the final round between E.Ness and Mysonne, however, over whether they were meant to go three or five rounds. Mysonne said he prepared for five while E.Ness was expecting three, but because he was a skilled freestyler, E.Ness had no problem going an additional two rounds.

Other rules are used to maintain peace and order. The most important of these rules in the World Series of Hip Hop were:

10. While inside the Cipher rappers are not to touch opponents. Judges are instructed to penalize the offending rapper.

11. While inside the Cipher rappers are not to speak or make sound effects during his/her opponents’ allotted time. Judges are instructed to penalize the offending rapper.\(^{45}\)

It is when these rules are broken that the joking relationship, previously defined as a relationship of permitted disrespect that is marked by a combination of friendliness and antagonism, is most likely to break down and be replaced by violence. For this reason, during the World Series of Hip Hop battles that did take place, the referees were regularly reminding the rappers that they were not allowed to touch one another.

We can look at some additional rules and judging guidelines that were originally released for the World Series of Hip Hop in order to understand what is important and valued in rap battles. According to the event’s website, judges were going to rate competitors according to three categories: lyrics, flow, and presence.\(^{46}\) Although the actual event did not use judges, these categories still show what is valued in a rap battle.


\(^{45}\) Ibid.

\(^{46}\) Ibid.
Monie Love, the host of the battles that took place on September 27, 2008, reiterated these ideas before the battles began. She said, “Poise, lyrical content, flow. If you’re proficient with your swagger and your words and the whole nine yards, and you can get up on this stage and hold your own, then World Series of Hip Hop is for you.” To help clarify what is meant by these three categories, I will now break them down individually.

**Lyrical Content**

Lyrics or lyrical content refer specifically to what the rapper says. Rhyming is extremely important, but so is individual creativity. Individual style predominantly drives hip hop aesthetics, so plagiarizing lyrics, either by “biting” (copying someone else’s lyrics) or using ghost written lyrics (lyrics written by one person for another’s use), is a major offense. For that reason, the World Series of Hip Hop had these rules:

13. No biting. Rappers are not to use lyrics that he/she heard or read from any other rapper whether these lyrics where used in the WSOHH tournament and/or from a published recording. Two consecutive bars of bitten lyrics will result in the automatic disqualification of the offending rapper. His/her opponent will advance to the next round.

14. ABSOLUTELY NO GHOST WRITING. Any rapper found to have used ghost written lyrics in the World Series of Hip Hop shall be banned from the World Series of Hip Hop tournament for life. The offending rapper will be required to return any and all prizes awarded by the World Series of Hip Hop in any current or previous tournament participation.\(^{47}\)

While not nearly as bad as using someone else’s lyrics, reusing lyrics is also frowned upon because it is a sign of limited creativity. To prevent this, the World Series of Hip Hop implemented this rule:

12. No tournament recycling. Rappers are not to recycle lyrics he/she used in an earlier round. At the conclusion of each round WSOHH staff members will review tapes of the winner’s previous rounds. The offending rapper will be automatically disqualified and his/her opponent will advance to the next round.

Skilled freestyle rappers can easily avoid falling into these creative and plagiaristic traps while those who use written lyrics have much more difficulty.

\(^{47}\) Ibid.
In addition to being original, there are various ways rappers can express their individual cleverness and creativity through lyrical content in order to gain favor from judges and audience members. A rapper’s funniest and cleverest lines often contain metaphors or similes, and they often form the backbone of an advanced rapper’s technique.\(^{48}\) An example from the World Series of Hip Hop includes this line from Young Hot:

*I feel like Stevie Wonder, I’m a ribbon in the sky.*

The example from Young Hot also illustrates how skilled rappers often make references to popular culture or current events. This technique helps the rapper to connect with the audience because the allusion brings in an object from outside of the battle that the audience members already have knowledge of, and therefore a relationship with. In referencing this object, the rapper shows that he also has that knowledge, which creates a connection between the audience and rapper. In this example, Murda Mook makes references to Michael Jordan and Allen Iverson, and in doing so he draws a powerful reaction from the audience:

*And I do think I’m the greatest, I believe in the hype.*
*That’s why every time you hear me, I compare me to Mike.*
*Example: Remember A.I. crossed Mike out at sneakers,*
*It seemed so much worse ’cause we didn’t think Mike had a weakness.*
*All for that one move A.I. got his fame,*
*They forgot Jordan had 35 and still won that game.*

Murda Mook’s lyrics also functioned to insult Young Hot’s home of Philadelphia where Allen Iverson played for the 76ers.

Another example of a more obscure but extremely effective popular culture reference happened in T-Rex’s battle with Tech 9, when T-Rex makes a reference to the HBO television series *The Wire* by impersonating the character Clay Davis and using his most common catchphrase, earning him many cheers from the audience.

*This nigga’s stupid, he aint shootin’, he DJin.*
*Niggers told me he was scared, once they three-wayed him.*
*He said, “I know where but I’m beat chasin’.”*
*Look in my eyes, you can see I aint playin’.*
*You gettin’ this money? “Sheeeeeeit,” I’m Clay Davis.*

\(^{48}\) Emcee Escher.
Later in the same round, T-Rex also referred to Bernie Mac and the death of the Crocodile Hunter. During a later round of the same battle, Tech 9 was able to elicit a strong audience reaction by bringing up the 2008 presidential election which would be taking place slightly more than one month after the World Series of Hip Hop.

I bang bang, I pull this off the hamstring.
You try to save some more money, I’m gonna blow this shit tonight doing a damn thing.
I’m gonna buy all you niggas drinks, bottles of champagne,
And they gonna vote for me because I’m Barack Obama, he John McCain.

By using these references in metaphors or similes to form insults or boasts, a rapper can get the most value out of his lyrics. Insults and boasts are arguably the most important part of a rapper’s lyrical content, and they are most effective when rappers take advantage of the techniques already mentioned. The different types of insults and boasts most commonly used in rap battles will be addressed later in this chapter.

Flow

A rapper’s flow is closely linked to his lyrical content, because one cannot succeed without the other. Flow is the term used to describe how a rapper delivers his lyrics, and it is defined by cadence, prosody, as well as speed. Writer and music critic Mtume ya Salaam had this to say when describing flow:

The concept of flow differentiates rap music from other music with spoken lyrics (like, for example, the music of Gil Scott-Heron, The Last Poets, or even Cab Callaway). Rap lyrics are delivered in a rhythmic cadence, not simply recited or melodically half-sung. A rapper with good lyrics and style who can’t flow is like a singer with a good voice and a well-written song who ignores the melody. When a rapper flows, the lyrics blend into a continuous melodic line like the flow of notes from a jazz soloist’s horn.49

The beat and rhythm a rapper uses to coordinate his lyrics are the primary elements of flow, because they can determine whether a rhyme or phrase will succeed or fail. Flow also indicates tempo and the use of rubato (stretching, slowing or hurrying the tempo for the purpose of expression) to stress certain words or phrases, and when rapping over a beat, flow is what creates the relationship between that beat and the rapper’s lyrics. The

flow on early rap records, such as the Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight,” typically employed a simple cadence in which phrases were closely aligned with the beat and there was very little syncopation. The majority of popular rap artists today, on the other hand, have a more complex, versatile cadence to their flow that is much less concerned with a strict relationship to the beat.

In some formal rap battles, a DJ will often provide a beat for rappers to perform over, so how well they match that beat will partly determine how their flow will be judged. In the World Series of Hip Hop, however, the rappers performed a capella so they did not have to be concerned about their flow matching an external beat. They still had to be consistent with themselves and had to avoid tripping over their words or stopping. For that reason, the scoring rules contained this guideline:

3. Stuttering (S) - Judges may penalize 3 points to the offending rapper for stammering or stopping during his/her delivery.\(^{50}\)

This is related to another important aspect of flow, the ability to keep rapping without stopping. In Emcee Escher’s Ten-Step Technique to Learning to Freestyle Rap, he writes: “Make your first freestyle rap verses your stupidest verses just to get them out of the way. Keep flowing. Can’t think of a rhyme? Keep flowing! Stutter over words? Keep flowing. It’s inevitable that at some point some of your lines won’t rhyme, won’t make sense, or that you will inadvertently diss yourself … Just keep flowing.”\(^{51}\)

A rapper’s virtuosity is also determined by his flow, and being able to rap quickly is often considered an important sign of skill. The current world record for the fastest rap is held by Rebel XD (born Seandale Price) from Chicago, Illinois, who rapped 852 syllables in 42 seconds on July 27, 2007.\(^{52}\) Rapping quickly in a rap battle is only effective, however, when it is also done clearly which requires good enunciation and breath control. In the battle between Murda Mook and Young Hot, after Murda Mook delivered many well-received insults in his first round, Young Hot attempted to regain the crowd’s favor by displaying his virtuosity. This was not as effective as he had hoped it would be, because it was sometimes difficult to make out his words.

\(^{50}\) World Series of Hip Hop, “Rap Rules.”
\(^{51}\) Emcee Escher.
**Presence/Poise**

A rapper’s presence or poise is related to how that rapper presents him or herself in battle. Can they avoid becoming flustered by their opponent’s words and actions? Are they able to stand tall and maintain a sense of humor? Can they react to their opponent while maintaining control of the situation? In a battle, it is a rapper’s goal to say something so clever and insulting that it causes their opponent to make a mistake. This could either be by tricking them into reacting instantly and therefore breaking the standard rule of not interrupting your opponent when it is their turn to rap, or by causing them to stammer during their round in an attempt to quickly respond and turn the momentum of the battle back onto their side. The audience can also make a rapper frustrated, either by being vocally partial to their opponent or disruptive, which can lead to a scoring reduction in this category if it forces a reaction from the rapper. If a rapper makes either of these mistakes and becomes visibly frustrated, they would lose points in poise and presence.

Poise is also partially determined by a rapper’s swagger. How well do they boast and brag about themselves when compared to their opponent? Can they nullify their opponent’s boasts with their insults? Can they avoid making mistakes and accidentally insulting themselves? While poise is certainly more closely linked to how something is said over what is said, boasts and insults can be taken into account. The important role of boasts and insults in earlier African American verbal dueling traditions and the role they play in modern freestyle rap battles deserve a closer look.

**Verbal Dueling Traditions**

The tradition of insulting one’s friends or acquaintances through rhythmic rhyme, which led to rapping and rap battles, can be traced to African American verbal dueling traditions often referred to as “playing the dozens”. While these are all roughly the same game of ritualized insult exchange, variations in name and practice have arisen in different locales. The renowned linguist William Labov looked closely at these related traditions in the 1960s and early 1970s. In his published research on the subject, he wrote that the term *sounding* was most common in New York, *woofing* in Philadelphia, *joning* in Washington, *signifying* in Chicago, *screaming* in Harrisburg, and that general terms
such as cutting or chopping have been used on the West Coast.\textsuperscript{53} I will use the term sounding here in order to be consistent with Labov’s usage.

These practices have often been associated with insulting the relatives, particularly the mother of the opponent, although direct, personal insults have an important role to play as well. The insults are typically presented in the form of rhymed couplets. Labov says that sounding is “essentially a competitive activity which is evaluated immediately by the audience,” and that the winner in this contest is typically “the man with the largest store of couplets on hand, the best memory, and perhaps the best delivery.” Sounding and rap battling are therefore similar practices, at least in how they are conducted, but what is valued and considered important is quite different. While competitive hip hop practices value individual style and creativity along with skill, sounding does not. Labov continues, “But there is no question of improvisation, or creativity when playing, or judgment in fitting one sound into another. These couplets can follow each other in any succession; one is as appropriate as the other. The originators certainly show great skill, but no one is expected to manufacture them in the heat of the contest.”\textsuperscript{54}

Simile and metaphor are commonly used in sounding. They are typically found in phrases such as, “Your mother is (like) …” and Labov notes that mass media and commercial culture provide a rich body of material that is often employed in these metaphoric insults. Obscenity also plays a major role. “The speaker uses as many ‘bad’ words and images as possible – that is, subject to taboo and moral reprimand in adult middle-class society.”\textsuperscript{55}

Labov also argues that there is a line between the ritual insults in sounding, such as the “your mother” insults, and personal insults; he says that the former is a part of the play in sounding, but that the latter brings that play to an end and results in a serious situation. This is based upon the observation that a ritual insult by one competitor will be followed by another ritual insult from the other, whereas a personal insult is answered by a denial, excuse or mitigation. Because personal insults are denied, Labov sees them as

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 84-6.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 97.
ending the sounding contest. Thomas Kochman, however, disagrees with this stance in his article “The Boundary between Play and Nonplay in Black Verbal Dueling.” While Labov defines personal insults by their subsequent denial, Kochman argues that a personal insult does not require a denial and that it can still be a part of sounding. It is instead when a participant feels the need to deny a personal insult that play ends. Therefore, “the responsibility for determining whether the play frame shall be maintained or not belongs with the recipient. If the latter responds to a personal insult, then his response will constitute a sound and indicate a decision to maintain the play frame.”

Personal insults are then seen as provocative, but not necessarily determinative of what will follow. The reaction one has to a personal insult is therefore closely related to their poise in a rap battle. If a rapper takes an insult seriously and feels the need to deny it instead of insulting his opponent back, play comes to an end and that rapper’s presence or poise is diminished. Kochman wrote that this “is a process that works to raise thresholds of tolerance and endurance by learning to take what is normally serious as play, until it can, more comfortably, become play.”

We will now look at the effect this process has had on insults used in rap battles, where no type of insult is considered to be off-limits.

**The Joking Relationship and the Art of Insult**

Because insults play such an important role in rap battles and any type of insult is considered legal in the context of a battle, the joking relationship becomes an extremely important part of head-to-head competitive rapping. The combination of friendliness and antagonism that the joking relationship provides is a necessary element for all varieties of verbal dueling traditions and head-to-head competitive hip hop practices. Crazy, a young rapper from Chicago, described how play is maintained but tested in battling:

> Oh, it’s fun, it’s almost like you’re a kid all over again, talking about somebody, like you back in elementary, bringing back the kid inside, it’s just fun … I don’t take it serious. I just know that they’re trying to make me get mad. Like me being a kid again, like I can keep poking you just to

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58 Ibid., 334.
try and get you mad [he mimics a child’s mocking tone]: “I’m not touching you, I’m not touching you.”

Insults function to test the recipient’s ability to maintain the joking relationship which allows play to continue. By looking at the insults and boasts put forward by the participants in the World Series of Hip Hop along with scholarship on other competitive music traditions that employ insults, we can delineate various types of insults and explore how they are used to test the joking relationship in rap battles.

Daniel Avorgbedor, in his analyses of the now banned insult-heavy “Halo” tradition of the Anlo-Ewe in Ghana, defined three basic forms of insulting texts: factual/reportage (the statement of facts that can be considered insulting or embarrassing), fictive (half-truths, inventions, libels or false accusations), and maledicta (insults and scatological materials). I would also consider the insults of a specifically sexual nature to belong to Avorgbedor’s category of maledicta. To these three categories, I would also add a fourth category of intimidation that is largely concerned with violent imagery, threats, and life on the street, and a fifth category of performative criticism in which one insults the rapping and skills of their opponent. These different types of insults are normally interwoven to be more effective. We can also use these same categories to classify the different types of boasts rappers use while toasting themselves in battle.

Insults in the factual/reportage category are the least common. Avorgbedor writes that these texts “present and, to some extent, attempt to reconstruct historical events, personal experiences and testimonies, biographies, commiserations, chronologies, philosophical and didactic texts; they also include common and rare social labels assigned individuals and small social groups.” The reason this is the least used insult category is that when rappers use a historical event as the basis for an insult, they will typically exaggerate or add to it in order to make it more insulting which effectively puts it in the fictive category. Avorgbedor described this process as when “factual information is passed through veiled, deconstructive modes of discourse, with embellishments,

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59 Weinstein, 104.
insertions, extrapolations, and intertextual references in order to claim veracity for a de-facted fact.  

Avorgbedor goes on to say that:

Highly imaginative texts that often make use of some known fact or trait as a starting point belong to the fictive category. The imagination involved centers on the ability to invent and associate specific behavioral traits, an ignoble deed, questionable ancestry, or a condition with an opponent. Long narratives can be constructed, either wholly or partially, along the fictive category.

An example of a fictive narrative can be found in this insult Murda Mook tells about Young Hot:

When he was young, he was a bum. No peers and no hobbies. Dirty clothes, Lysol in his hair, nose snotty. Bitches wouldn’t touch him, said he had the cooties. Niggers would snatch a hat off his head and place a loogie. On the basketball court, he was pussy, small cat. They take his right, he turn Ricky like, “Gimme my ball back.”

Murda Mook was able to make up this narrative and use it effectively because he capitalized on the fact that Young Hot was smaller than him, and because his opponent describes himself as young. When Murda Mook says, “When he was young” he is cleverly implying that these negative attributes are still applicable. He also gains the crowd’s favor by referencing a scene from the John Singleton film Boyz n the Hood, in which the character of young Ricky Baker has his ball stolen. Another common technique found in narratives such as this is what Avorgbedor calls a performance-within-performance, a “metaperformative strategy [used] to heighten the dimension of drama, and hence to persuasively recreate and communicate the scene and progress of the alleged social deviation.” Rappers typically do this in battle by quoting someone else and using another’s voice, often the voice of the person that they are insulting.

The category of maledicta contains most simple and direct insults such as name-calling and insults of a scatological or sexual nature. The male rappers commonly used

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61 Ibid., 19.
62 Ibid., 19.
insults of this variety to deconstruct the masculinity of their opponent, much like in many other male-dominated verbal contest forms, typically by describing them as or implying that they are homosexuals. I was not surprised to see and hear the use of homophobic insults in this competition, but I was still shocked by the number of times some rappers used the term “faggot.” I found the repeated use of the word much more offensive than when a rapper would imply that his opponent was gay by describing him participating in a variety of homosexual acts. Perhaps this is because they were not using such inflammatory language and were using their skills and creativity in crafting the insult. However one sees it, insults related to homosexuality were prevalent throughout the battles. When the female battle between Lady Luck and Reece Steele began I was curious if there would be anything similar to the construction and deconstruction of masculinity found in the male battles. While the insults were different, they used just as many obscenities as the men. Homosexuality did come up when Lady Luck said, “I know dykes that wouldn’t fuck you with a fake dick,” but that trope was not nearly as pervasive as it was in the male battles. “Slut” turned out to be the most common single-word insult in the female battle. One of the strongest criticisms of hip hop is the seemingly constant presence of homophobia, which is a reflection of a commonly held attitude among many Americans, although the presence of homophobic lyrics in rap music has been excessive for years. Many have speculated that this is closely related to the perceived homophobia commonly found in the African American community.

Intimidation insults are then used to question a rapper’s “street cred” (one’s credibility or respect arising from life in an urban environment), and they are typically combined with threats of violence and boasts of the insulting rapper’s own history of life on the street. Here is another example of Murda Mook insulting Young Hot:

And don’t talk about all your AKs and ARs and shotguns,
Mac tens, nines that you spray off.
Give me a metaphor, punch line.
You never done a crime.
Word is he had an encounter with one crime, one time.
And it wasn’t for no gunnin or bustin a shot.

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It’s cause he didn’t go to court for a summons he got.

This insult also functions as performative criticism. Murda Mook is telling Young Hot that his raps are predictable and not clever. Performative criticism is especially useful in battles, because it allows a rapper to point out flaws in his opponent’s performance to both judges and the audience.

The use of the n-word in these insults and rap music in general also deserves some attention. Some have argued that the variation of the n-word, nigga, is a term of endearment when used between African Americans. In the case of these rap battles, the word was used as an insult between African Americans, which raises the issue of internalized racism. Internalized racism arises when people who are targeted by racism unintentionally agree with and further the distortions of racism. The common use of the historically hateful slur by African Americans is a complex issue. The n-word is debated in the hip hop and African American communities, and there is not yet a clear consensus on how, if ever, it should be used.  

Conclusion

Like the African American verbal dueling tradition of sounding, rap battles are primarily constructed around insults. It is individual style and creativity, however, that makes those insults most effective in gaining the favor of the judges or the audience. This is why most successful competitive rappers perform freestyle. By making up their rhymes on the spot, they are more unpredictable and able to react to their opponent, but freestyling continues to be an underrepresented mode of performance in modern popular culture where it has been overshadowed by commercial rap and club hits. The World Series of Hip Hop set out to fix this imbalance, if only a little, but this purpose was overshadowed by the controversies surrounding the event.

Like most organized competitions, the World Series of Hip Hop laid out rules and judging guidelines that help to clarify what aspects of performance are considered most valuable and important such as individual creativity in lyrical content, talent and virtuosity in flow, and a cool steadiness in poise and presence. The controversy

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65 See the 2004 documentary film, *The N Word* from director Todd Williams for an in-depth analysis of this complex issue.
surrounding the World Series of Hip Hop will be given more attention in the final chapter as part of an analysis of the purpose and function of organized competitions after competition in breakdancing and DJing have been analyzed.
CHAPTER THREE

B-BOYS, B-GIRLS, AND HIP HOP DANCE BATTLES

B-boying or b-girling is the most physical element of hip hop and arguably the most competitive. B-boying or breaking is more commonly known as breakdancing, but this is a problematic term because it was coined during the early 1980s when the mass media exploited hip hop culture for use in movies, commercials, and television shows which ultimately harmed hip hop’s reputation and the general population’s opinion of it. While breakdancing was mostly forgotten and left behind as a fad for most Americans in the 1980s, b-boying has come back in the last decade. In this chapter, I will define b-boying and b-girling as well as the other primary hip hop dance forms before looking at the competitive practice of head-to-head b-boy battles. All Targets Leveled, a b-boy and b-girl competition that was held in Atlanta, will serve as the primary case study for looking at how b-boy battles are conducted and assessed.

Hip Hop Dance Forms

While this chapter will focus primarily on b-boying, there are other important dance forms that are associated with hip hop as well. Another problem with the term breakdancing is that it is often used to refer to all hip hop dances when there are in fact various distinct hip hop dance forms that each have their own moves and techniques and that can all be practiced in the context of a head-to-head battle. In order to clear up the confusion surrounding the term breakdancing, we will look at some of the primary forms of street dance that proliferated in the 1970s, and have come to be associated with hip hop.

New York Forms

The two major hip hop dance forms that developed in New York City were breaking or b-boying in the Bronx and uprocking in Brooklyn. Breaking was largely based on James Brown’s “Good Foot” style of dance combined with influences from various other dance styles. This highly improvisatory form was originally danced upright,
and it gained the name b-boying after being associated with Kool Herc’s style of DJing when the dancers were referred to as “break boys” or “break girls.” In the mid-seventies, b-boys and b-girls extended their techniques by dropping to the ground to execute moves that became known as “footwork.” Techniques such as freezes and power moves, which are typically semi-acrobatic moves that often involve spinning, were also incorporated into b-boying around this time. Specific aspects of these and other b-boy techniques will be discussed in a later section of this chapter.

Uprocking, which was primarily developed in Brooklyn, was originally known as rocking but practitioners changed the name to alleviate being confused with fans of hard rock music. This form is almost always done competitively. It involves opponents facing each other and engaging in a type of war dance that involves foot shuffles, spins, turns, sudden body movements called “jerks,” and the use of hand gestures and the miming of weapons being drawn against one another called “burns.” Uprockers often do this in groups by standing in a line called the “Apache line,” while facing an opposing line which allows them to execute their burn gestures toward one another. Physical contact is never allowed, and uprocker crews typically battle simultaneously for the duration of a complete song. This differentiates it from most other competitive forms of hip hop which use a turn-based model of battling. Uprocking was originally done to soul, funk, and some rock music, but it is now largely associated with hip hop. Uprocking largely depends on quick wit, humor, and finesse as opponents try to humiliate one another on the dance floor. Various aspects of uprocking (such as the use of burns) have been incorporated into b-boying.66

West Coast Funk Forms

The primary hip hop dance forms that developed on the West coast were “locking” and “popping,” which were originally associated with funk music. Locking was originated by Don Campbell in Los Angeles, who in the late sixties added some new effects to a local dance called the “funky chicken.” Instead of doing the dance fluently, he

locked the joints of his arms and body to the beat of the music, which became the basis of locking. Occasional finger points (known as “Uncle Sam points”) and relaxed hip and leg movements, were added to round out the basic dance form. The dance normally consists of these moves strung together into combinations complete with transitional movements between the locking positions. Locking went on to be popularized by Campbell’s dance group, The Lockers, who performed on television shows such as *The Tonight Show*, *The Carol Burnett Show*, and *Saturday Night Live*. A member of The Lockers, Fred “Mr. Penguin” Berry, further popularized the dance through his portrayal of the character Rerun on the television show *What’s Happening!!* Lockers were also characterized by their attire, which commonly included suspenders, bright shirts, pants that stopped at the knees, loud striped socks, bow ties, large hats, and white gloves. This style of clothing is still often worn by competitors in locking competitions which consist of head-to-head showdowns where the competitors take turns performing virtuosic routines in an effort to outdo one another.\(^\text{67}\)

Popping was largely inspired by locking, and its creation is typically traced to the funk dance group the Electric Boogaloo Lockers, who formed in 1976 in Fresno, California. “Popping” was a term originally used to describe a sudden muscle contraction with the triceps, forearms, neck, chest, and legs that would give the dancer’s body a quick, jolting effect that accented the dancer’s movements. Transitions between steps, moves, and sub-forms would be quick and precise while also being fluid and unpredictable. Popping went on to become an umbrella term for various related funk forms including boogaloo (a dance done by moving the body continuously and constantly in different directions), strut, and dime stop. Popping battles typically employ all of these forms and are similar to locking battles.

Both of these West coast funk forms became associated with hip hop in the late seventies, but while they spread throughout the country they were often mischaracterized as a single dance form called “pop-locking.” They would be further distorted in the early 1980s when all of these forms would be grouped under the umbrella term of

breakdancing. Jorge “Popmaster Fabel” Pabon of the Rocksteady Crew points to why this is problematic in an article entitled “Physical Grafitti.” He says:

The mixing and blending of popping, locking, b-boys/b-girls, and uprocking into one form destroy their individual structures. Unfortunately, the younger generations of dancers either haven’t made enough effort to learn each dance form properly or lack the resources to do so. However, the outcome is the same: hybrid dances with unclear form and structure.68

Organized competitions help to promote the differentiation of these forms by rewarding and featuring those who show an understanding of their form and its identifiable structure. All Targets Leveled, a b-boy/b-girl competition that was held in Atlanta, helped do this by clearly identifying itself as a b-boy and not a breakdancing competition and by using judges that were highly knowledgeable about b-boys and its history.

A.T.L. – All Targets Leveled

All Targets Leveled, or A.T.L. (a clever reference to the host city), was a b-boy competition organized by the Burn Unit, one of Atlanta’s leading b-boy crews, on Saturday, October 25, 2008. Over the last ten to fifteen years, Atlanta has become a hub for the hip hop community in the United States, and it is the center of the regional hip hop sound that has come to be known as the “dirty South,” so it is a logical place to hold a hip hop competition. This competition was designed around a series of head-to-head battles that would take place in an arena filled with “street-themed” objects that the competitors would be encouraged to incorporate into their routines. The b-boys who would enter the arena were to be chosen by the judges from ciphers that would be going on for the first part of the night. The three judges were b-boy Ken Swift of the Rocksteady Crew, b-girl Aruna from Holland, and b-boy Totem from Burn Unit. There was also a b-boy workshop the day of the event hosted by Aruna on the Georgia Tech campus, and an autograph signing with Ken Swift in downtown Atlanta, both of which I attended.

All Targets Leveled took place at a studio called Ambient, which was in a converted warehouse in Atlanta. It was right across the street from a scrap yard complete with barking pitbulls and was surrounded by condemned buildings. This was not a nice

68 Pabon, 25.
part of town, and another volunteer even joked that the Burn Unit deliberately chose this location in order to establish their street cred. The competition took place on the second floor of the studio which had ten thousand square feet of nice hardwood floor and painted white brick walls. In the center was the main arena. It was an octagon made of chain link fence. The only way to get in and out was by going underneath the DJ’s platform which made up one of the sides and was partly blocked by a trashed car. Inside the octagon was a large brown square on the floor with a Red Bull logo that looked like a recreation of the broken down cardboard boxes b-boys commonly use on the street. The side opposite the car had a blue dumpster, another side had a park bench and one had some steps. There was also a trash can, an oil drum, and a pair of Fila sneakers hung from a wire above the arena. A variety of warning and street signs surrounded the arena which helped to recreate the atmosphere of urban decay from right outside.

Figure 2. The All Targets Leveled arena before the competition. All photos by Tim Storhoff, Atlanta GA, October 25, 2008.
There were smaller squares for ciphers on both sides of the center arena. The side furthest from the entrance had a large screen where video was projected and a line of tables for vendors. The event was videotaped to be projected onto the screen, and later was made available to order and watch through Comcast OnDemand. The event was sponsored by Red Bull, so there was free Red Bull all night long while bottles of water cost one dollar.

I arrived around 6:00 PM, about two hours before the event got started, in order to volunteer. B-girl Severe, the member of the Burn Unit who was the head organizer of the competition, asked me to help out by working the bag check outside of the entrance. We were supposed to check bags in order to stop people from bringing in markers, stickers, and weapons, to protect the venue from being vandalized, and keep the event peaceful. Someone mentioned that there was the potential of people in the area causing trouble, but that the number of people working there should deter most of the problems. After more volunteers arrived, I was able to leave my post and go inside the studio for the competition.

By 7:00 participants and spectators were arriving and the DJs had started playing music. They played a wide variety of music for the b-boys and b-girls all night, including modern and classic hip hop, break records, electro-funk, and remixed soul and R & B classics. You could see the b-boys and b-girls all stretching on the floor and against the walls before entering one of the two ciphers that were getting started. By 8:30 the ciphers had grown quite large and were going strong, while the judges observed all the participants in order to determine which eight dancers would be chosen to enter the center arena for the head-to-head battles.

I estimated the ratio of male to female competitors to be approximately two to one. While still being a male dominated tradition, the growing number of b-girls today makes breaking the hip hop element that is closest to being gender neutral. The competitors also illustrated the ethnic diversity of b-boys and b-girls with no single ethnic group outweighing the others. The audience at the event was similarly diverse; the majority of the spectators were white but they were not significantly greater than any other group. There were males and females in the audience ranging from parents with small children to elderly grandmothers there to see their grandchildren compete.
There were twenty registered participants in total, and they were each given a paper sign with a number on it to pin to their clothing for the judges to identify them. While rotating in and out of the cipher’s center, the b-boys and b-girls would only dance for short periods of one to two minutes before letting someone else try to impress the judges and audience members by trying to outdo the competition. I noticed that participants had to be aggressive in taking their turn; if they did not actively take over the center of the cipher when there was an opportunity, the others would not wait for them. Occasionally two people would enter the center of the cipher at once and they would both try to dance for a short time before one of them was forced back onto the side. This sometimes resulted in short, impromptu battles where the b-boys or b-girls would respond to each other’s moves and mock one another with hand gestures. Some books and shirts were given out to those dancers with particularly impressive moves and routines.

Figure 3. B-boy Jesus doing a freeze in one of the ciphers.
It was around 10:30 when the judges announced who they had chosen to battle head-to-head in the arena for one thousand dollars. All eight finalists were b-boys, and I am not sure what specific criteria the judges used to make their final decision. The DJs played a set and there was a rap performance as people gathered around the chain link fence that surrounded the center arena. At this point, Burn Unit took advantage of the fact that A.T.L. was taking place shortly before Halloween and the presidential election by treating the crowd to a mock battle between Barack Obama and John McCain as played by b-boys in ties and masks, which the audience really enjoyed.

![Figure 4. “Barack Obama” doing some footwork in the arena.](image)

The eight participants then had the chance to walk around and investigate the arena while Totem, one of the judges, explained how the battles would take place. Each battle would be one-on-one, have two rounds for each b-boy, and they would be conducted in a tournament style. While using the street objects was not required, it would earn the competitors extra points with the judges. “The objective is to destroy your enemy or your opponent,” Totem said, “So smash away.”
After each battle, Pako the Panik of Burn Unit counted to three, and at that point the judges would point to the side of the b-boy they thought had won. This method was quick and efficient, although it once resulted in a tie and therefore an additional round when Aruna could not decide on a winner and pointed to both sides. After the four initial battles and two semifinal battles, there was a short break while the DJs performed and a young kid who must have only been four or five years old was let into the arena so he could try b-boying; the audience loved it.

The final battle, which went for three rounds, was between b-boy Jesus who was number eight and b-boy Turtle, number eleven. Both competitors took full advantage of the objects in the arena for the final battle by doing things like sliding under the picnic table, jumping off the car, and doing flips off of the dumpster. While both Jesus and Turtle were impressive, in the end it was no contest as Jesus had the foundation, style, skill, and creativity to come out the clear winner. He was handed an oversized check for
one thousand dollars while the DJs played the theme from *The Price is Right* before a rap performance closed the event. Jesus was able to win the competition partly because he displayed an understanding and mastery of the basic moves and techniques that make up the foundation of b-BOYING which are an essential part of any successful b-boy routine.

**Foundation and Style**

Foundation is the term often used to describe the most basic structures, moves, and techniques that provide the framework for b-BOYING and upon which individual style is built. Understanding foundation is important, and the different aspects of b-BOYING, which include top rockin’, footwork, and freezes, each have their own foundation. B-boys and b-girls often disagree about what, specifically, makes up the foundation of the dance, but we will look at some of the most basic, generally agreed upon moves.

“Top rockin’” is the term for the upright dancing that originally characterized b-BOYING. As previously mentioned, top rockin’ was heavily influenced by James Brown’s “Good Foot” while also being influenced by Brooklyn uprock, tap, salsa, Afro-Cuban dances and even martial arts films from the 1970s. A b-boy will always start their routine by top rockin’. It is how they establish a feel for and get into the music. Top rockin’ is often done while staying in one stationary position, but it can also be used to move around. A b-boy or b-girl stays on the balls of their feet when top rockin’, and their heels rarely touch the ground. It typically involves stepping forward with one leg and crossing it over the other before stepping back, hopping up, and doing it with the other leg, all to the beat of the music. The arms are often swung back and forth while doing this or else they can be used for flashing burns at an opponent during a battle. There are many variations of top rockin’ with specific names and defined movements, but it is also a highly improvisatory dance with a lot of room for dancers to add some personal style.

B-boys and b-girls typically follow top rockin’ with a transition or “drop” that takes them down to the ground where they support their body with their arms and execute a variety of elaborate leg movements called either “footwork” or “floor rocking.” The most basic footwork move is called the “six-step.” While attending the dance workshop hosted by b-girl Aruna, people said they generally wanted to work on footwork, so she

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69 Ibid., 20; *The Freshest Kids*, directed by Israel, Image Entertainment, 2002, DVD.
asked if everyone knew the six-step. While I did not, almost everyone else did, so we moved on to variations of the six-step and I picked up the foundation as we went along. To begin, the dancer starts in a position similar to when doing a push-up; the right leg then moves in front of the left leg while the dancer shifts all of his weight to his or her right arm. The left leg comes forward slightly and the right leg is then swung in front of and under the dancer so that so that they are in a near-crouching position. The dancer’s weight is then shifted to their left arm while their left leg kicks out in front of the right leg. The right leg then steps back, is followed by the left leg, and the dancer is back in the push-up position. This has the effect of having the b-boy or b-girl spin in a circle while sweeping their legs around and shifting their body from one side to the other. While this is the most basic footwork move that b-boys and b-girls initially learn, many variations have been developed including the five-step, eight-step, and twelve-step. We worked on a couple variations in the workshop including one that involved spinning on both knees and one in which the right leg swung out as far as possible to use the maximum amount of space. Aruna pointed out the importance of keeping the body’s weight on the finger tips while doing footwork because it allows for more mobility, and she said that, as a judge, if she ever sees anyone with their palms flat on the ground while doing footwork they will probably lose.

Freezes involve the dancer stopping and holding their body in one position for a period of time, and they demonstrate a dancer’s control, power, and precision. Freezes can also be used to mock an opponent in battle. The most common freezes are known as the “baby freeze” and the “chair freeze.” When doing a baby freeze, the b-boy or b-girl supports their body with their head and their arms while facing one side; one of the legs is then supported by the elbow of one of the arms while the other leg is slightly bent and above the other one. While doing a chair freeze, the dancer’s body is in a similar position, but instead of having both legs in the air, the left foot is flat on the ground while the right leg is crossed over it, mimicking how one sits cross-legged in a chair.

Beyond the foundation of top rockin’, footwork, and freezes, b-boys and b-girls add individual style and excitement to their routines through what are commonly called “power moves.” These include spins such as the popular backspin and headspin, flares where the dancer holds their body in the air while quickly moving in a circle with the legs
kicking out, and acrobatics such as back flips. Power moves became popular in the early 1980s and pushed the dance into a new direction with a heavy focus on spins and acrobatics, but these moves, which often do not follow the beat of the music, overshadowed the original essence of the dance.\footnote{Pabon, 21.}

![Figure 6. A b-boy doing a baby freeze in the All Targets Leveled arena.](image)

Just because a b-boy has mastered the foundations, their variations, and a number of power moves, he still would not be a successful performer or battler until he develops an individual style. B-boying is considered to be a mode for individual expression, so executing these moves and techniques without adding any originality is frowned upon. In addition to choosing from a variety of power moves, b-boys and b-girls can add originality to their routines through the way they interact with the music, how they use the dance floor, the moves they choose, and how they transition between and execute those moves. Individuality becomes extremely important during battles, which will be explained next.
Breaking Down B-Boy and B-Girl Battles

Like the other competitive elements of hip hop discussed in this study, b-boy and b-girl battles are conducted in a turn-based, head-to-head fashion. Whether in a cipher or a formal battle with judges, the dancer needs to show that they are as skilled as their opponent, while also displaying their creativity and personal style. The dancer must also always remember to consider and be guided by the music.

Even though b-boysing/b-girling is comprised of many well-defined moves and techniques, it is still an improvisatory style. It is now common, however, for some dancers to create complex, choreographed routines that they then try to use in the context of a battle. The organizers of All Targets Leveled tried to discourage this through the use of the street-themed arena which the competitors did not get to see in advance, but were encouraged to take advantage of. Severe, the event organizer from Atlanta’s Burn Unit said:

Competitions have become too choreographed. Breakdancing is a freestyle dance but in battles most competitors end up performing something rehearsed, regardless of their environment or most importantly the music! We wanted to encourage people to be creative and improvise. The winner, Jesus, was the perfect example of someone utilizing the space.  

While dancers only have a certain number of moves that they know at any time, the improvisatory or freestyle element of the dance comes from what moves the dancer chooses to use and how they are strung together. This makes transitions an extremely important part of b-boysing/b-girling, because they are what will make a routine flow. During her workshop, Aruna stressed the importance of rehearsing impressive final transitions or “ends,” because in the heat of a performance it can become confusing as to what one should do next. If the dancer knows their final transitions really well, however, it is easy for them to transition out of whatever position they are in and dance their way back onto the sidelines without ever making it apparent that they were lost or confused.

Using a choreographed routine would hurt a competitor with the judges, and it also prevents them from fully interacting with the music that the DJ plays. “The music will tell you what to do,” Aruna said during the workshop she hosted. RoxRite, a

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71 Severe, e-mail communication, November 10, 2008.
professional competitive b-boy from California, described the important role of music in a recent interview:

If you get a good break or a good beat, you get a certain energy, and you wanna release that energy. Freeze to me are like releasing a certain energy. That’s me releasing energy that beat gives me, to come up with certain things. A good beat, a rare break, a dope song that I’ve never really breaked to before will give me a new feeling, a new movement.\footnote{Calvin Son, “Those are the breaks: RoxRite,” \textit{More Than a Stance}, February 1, 2009, \url{http://morethanstance.com/features/mf/2009/02/those-are-the-breaks-roxrite/}.}

This was noticeable during All Targets Leveled multiple times. At one point during the ciphers, the DJ put on the high intensity, up-tempo song “Bombs Over Baghdad” by OutKast, which not only raised the energy of the dancers, but of the audience as well. As the crowd started bouncing up and down to the music, the speed and intensity of the dancers’ footwork increased with the song. Later, at the beginning of one of the head-to-head battles in the arena, the DJ started playing “Super Bad” by James Brown, which led Jesus to begin his routine by doing the splits and jumping back up, mimicking James Brown’s famous onstage dancing.

Using a choreographed routine also hampers a dancer’s ability to effectively respond to their opponent which is an essential part of b-boy battles. During the first round of a battle, the dancer who is going first will showcase their skills to challenge their opponent. For instance, if the first b-boy showcases his footwork before ending with a freeze, the next dancer may want to do another type of footwork and end with a combination of multiple freezes. RoxRite also explained his battling strategies and competitive mindset saying:

A lot of it is mental - you have to not fear your opponent. That’s the number one thing, first off. Don’t underestimate anybody, but don’t fear anybody. Let’s say there’s an airbaby trick you’ve got. Say you wanna set them up for this. You throw a complex round with technical things, then go into a quick airbaby. The guy says, ‘I got something for that.’ Then he throws something with an airbaby. Then you respond with your killer. Set them up for defeat. That’s very old school. It comes from ‘90s power. There’s many more ways of how to attack. You always want to be confident, but not too cocky. You gotta believe in yourself, or then people watching or judging aren’t gonna believe in you in the battle.\footnote{Ibid.}
A b-boy or b-girl’s confidence during a battle is similar to the swagger or poise a rapper needs to have when battling.

Insulting your opponent is another important part of any b-boy or b-girl battle, but it must be done through bodily movements and not words. Eye contact is often used to intimidate opponents and make insults more effective, and these insults can be as simple as making faces at the other competitor. One of the most common ways men insult their opponents in b-boy battles is by grabbing their crotch while facing their opponent and possibly thrusting their pelvis in the opponent’s direction. It is also common to see b-boys mime attacking their opponent with weapons, a practice that likely comes from Brooklyn uprocking. During All Targets Leveled I saw people do this by pretending to fire guns at their opponent or by pretending to beat their opponent with a baseball bat. To make these insults more effective, a b-boy will often use them in conjunction with another aspect of their dance such as a freeze or a transition out of a power move. While insults of this nature are common in b-boy battles today, Ken Swift explained to me that in the seventies in New York City, insults were not a part of battling. In fact, he said, grabbing your crotch or even making eye contact with an opponent could result in physical violence. The prevalence of insults in battles today shows how the joking relationship has developed over hip hop’s history to make modern battles possible.⁷⁴

A b-boy or b-girl’s victory in a battle ultimately comes from simply proving their superiority over their opponent. The anxiousness and drive to do that, however, can sometimes cause a dancer’s literal downfall. For instance, trying to hold a freeze just a little too long or trying to do one spin too many can lead to a fall which will almost always result in a loss for that dancer. In competitions like All Targets Leveled, the judges make the ultimate decision as to who wins or loses, but b-boys and b-girls will try to impress the audience as well. B-boying or b-girling is a dance form for the expression of individual style, so people generally want to exhibit that style while also comparing their style to that of others, and competition provides an excellent opportunity for that.

⁷⁴ Ken Swift, personal interview by author, October 25, 2008.
Conclusion

Dance is the most commonly misunderstood element of hip hop culture, and it is arguably the element that has been practiced competitively the longest. It is the closest of all hip hop elements to being gender neutral, and there are more b-girls taking on the art every year. Dance was the first element of hip hop to become a part of mainstream popular culture by appearing in film, television, and commercials in the early 1980s, so it also became the first element to be dismissed as a passing fad. It has, however, endured. The term breakdancing is still often used to mischaracterize hip hop dance forms such as uprocking, locking, popping, and especially b-boying and b-girling.

It has been largely through competition that these dances have remained viable by exposing new generations who were not around for the breakdancing fad to b-boying and b-girling. Competitions like All Targets Leveled promote these dance forms through community experiences centered on nonviolent conflict between individuals. These
competitions also help to dispel the misconceptions that surround b-boying/b-girling by featuring the dance as a distinct, improvisatory form with a variety of distinguishable moves and techniques, and by awarding competitors like Jesus who display a mastery of the dance’s foundation and an understanding of individual style, it encourages people to participate in the dance correctly from the very beginning.
CHAPTER FOUR

UNDERSTANDING TURNTABLISM AND THE MODERN DJ BATTLE

The final competitive musical element of hip hop to be covered in this study is the modern DJ or turntable battle. Like rapping and b-Boying, DJ battles were originally performed head-to-head, but the style and technique competitive DJs use today is extremely different from those heard in the South Bronx in the 1970s. Today, these competitors are known as turntablists, a term coined in the mid-1990s to connote the act of manipulating records on a set of turntables to create new music. Through the use of various techniques from the basic scratch to the complicated art of beat-juggling, turntablists have transformed the turntable not only into a widely accepted musical instrument, but into a musical weapon as well. DJ battles and competitions have traditionally been where turntablists hone their skills, debut newly-developed techniques, and make a name for themselves. This chapter will define and explore the idea of turntablism as a mode of musical performance in a historical context while looking at how turntablism battles are conducted and judged. The Battle for World Supremacy in the Disco Mix Club’s World DJ Championships will be the primary case study and example of an organized DJ competition. This chapter will also look at the important role technology and equipment play in turntablism and the effect that they have in competition.

The History of the DJ and the DMC

As mentioned in Chapter One, the roots of hip hop DJing can be traced to Jamaican streets and dance halls in the 1960s. DJ Kool Herc, who emigrated from Jamaica to the Bronx in New York City in 1968, introduced his own style of DJing that had been largely influenced by the DJs he saw and heard in Jamaica. His style of playing music was based around the technique of isolating and extending the break sections of funk, soul, and disco records, and this style of DJing would draw in the other disparate elements of b-Boying, rapping, and graffiti writing that would come to define hip hop culture. Other DJs, like Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash, would emulate Kool
Herc’s style while also expanding upon it and refining it. Afrika Bambaataa gained the nickname “Master of Records,” because of his massive vinyl collection that he used to expand hip hop’s musical boundaries beyond funk, disco, and soul. Grandmaster Flash was studying electrical engineering in the mid-seventies and had a passion for music, so after being inspired by Kool Herc’s DJing, Flash used his skills as an electrical engineer to alter his turntable mixer so that he could use headphones to pinpoint precise locations of a record and preview mixes without the audience hearing it. This allowed for much cleaner and more precise transitions. Flash is also credited with mastering the technique of cutting or sharply switching from one record to another without losing the beat.

The next major development in hip hop DJing that would eventually lead to turntablism was the invention of the scratch in the late seventies by Grand Wizard Theodore, a protégé of Grandmaster Flash. The popular story states that while Theodore was in his room practicing with his turntable, his mother came in and told him to turn his music off, so he pulled the record back with his hand so as not to lose his place. The interesting sound that resulted became the scratch, and within a few years it would become one of the primary techniques of the hip hop DJ. As rappers began to receive mainstream media attention and recording contracts in the 1980s, DJs were mostly left behind, and the standard symbiotic relationship between MCs and DJs that had dominated hip hop music began to dissolve. This encouraged DJs to become solo musicians themselves, a feat they largely accomplished through scratching. Scratch DJs, who would come to be known as turntablists, found that battles provided the best environment for showcasing their latest techniques. While DJ battles were nearly as old as hip hop itself, the original battles closely mimicked their Jamaican counterparts; competition was based around DJs trying to drown out other DJs with increasingly powerful sound systems at parties and attract more of the crowd. This was not allowed,

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77 Cheryl L. Keyes, Rap Music and Street Consciousness (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 59-64.
however, in many smaller in-door venues, so DJs had to take turns and eventually a turn-based style of competition emerged. This style of competition was a perfect fit for scratch DJs, and it also lent itself well to formal, organized competitions.

The British DJ organization Disco Mix Club, or DMC, started the annual World DJ Championships in 1985 through its magazine *Mixmag*. While it was originally meant to be a mixing competition, DJ Cheese from the United States introduced scratching into his routine in 1986, winning the world championship and changing the course of all DMC battles that would follow. The DMC World Championship has been the most well known DJ competition for the last twenty years, and it has been a common venue for DJs to showcase complex battle routines and to establish themselves as industry heavyweights. The original and still primary world championship event is a solo competition where DJs are given scores by a panel of judges, and a team-only competition was added in 1999. The following year, the Battle for World Supremacy became the newest DMC event.

The Battle for World Supremacy, according to the DMC, is “the most exciting style of DJ competition … conducted in the tradition of the old school head to head battles in which two DJs pair off and battle each other in two rounds of 90 seconds per round.” In this style of competition, the two DJs do not receive scores. Instead, the judges simply vote on a winner who gets to move on to the next round while the loser is eliminated. This single-elimination competition begins regionally, and the victors move on to face competitors at the national and international level. In the end, the DJ crowned the Battle for World Supremacy champion is the only person to successfully knock out every one of his competitors without falling himself.

In the 2007 Battle for World Supremacy, the representative from the United States, DJ Shiftee, took home the championship after beating France’s DJ Or D’Oeuvre. This chapter will later look at how Shiftee, a senior mathematics major at Harvard at the time of his victory, used specific techniques and strategies in his routines to be crowned

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81 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid.
World Supremacy champion. Before doing that, however, it is important to take a closer look at the idea of turntablism in order to understand what makes a DJ a turntablist and how turntablists have profoundly affected the practice of competitive DJing.

Understanding Turntablism

The scratch shifted the focus in DJ battles from volume and record selection to technique and live musical composition, which would be the basis for modern turntablism. The term turntablism was first coined in 1995 by DJ Babu of the hip hop group Dilated Peoples and the DJ crew the Beat Junkies to refer to the art of creating music with turntables and a mixer. This term created a distinction from traditional DJs who play records but are not typically thought of as musicians. Mark Katz wrote:

Although turntablists consider themselves—and are—musicians, their originality is sometimes questioned because they perform on machines designed for automatic playback. The use of an “ism,” therefore, lends weight to the practice, suggesting an art form with a cohesive doctrine and conferring a seriousness that demands respect.84

While the term was only coined in the mid-nineties, the practice had been around since shortly after Grand Wizard Theodore invented the scratch and it was known simply as DJing or scratching.

The advancement of the art form and development of new techniques that would lead to modern turntablism owe much to DJ Supreme from the United Kingdom who was a DJ for the hardcore hip hop group Hijack in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As a member of Hijack, he focused on creating new scratches in order to make a name for himself and contribute to the art of DJing. In an interview he said:

It’s kind of strange actually, because at the time when I was scratching my goal was to gain respect and street cred as a DJ … I wanted to be remembered for bringing something incredible to the scene - and to do that I had to be the best. I know it sounds egotistical but at that age we all think ‘the world is mine’. So I practiced with the intention that one day I’d be there with Theodore, Flash, DST, Cheese, Jam Master Jay, Jazzy Jay, Jeff, Cash and all the others. That is all that mattered.85

84 Mark Katz, Capturing Sound: How Technology has Changed Music (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 116.
With the breakup of Hijack in 1992, however, Supreme came to the conclusion that he would never get the recognition he desired.

What Supreme did not know was that his work with Hijack would help to encourage multiple groups of turntablists in the mid-1990s on the West coast of the United States to actively promote and advance this underground musical style. One of the most well known of these groups was the Invisibl Skratch Piklz which formed in 1997 and included the DJs D-Styles, Yogafrog, MixMaster Mike, Shortkut, and QBert, all from the San Francisco Bay Area. MixMaster Mike and QBert had previously made names for themselves by winning the DMC World Championships in 1992 (with DJ Apollo), 1993, and 1994. They would go on to gain more fame as part of the Invisibl Skratch Piklz by releasing albums, playing concerts, and giving seminars and tutorials around the world to promote turntablism. Other major turntablist groups from the 1990s included the Beat Junkies, which was an amalgamation of DJs from various groups along the West Coast, and the X-Ecutioners (formerly the X-Men, but trademark issues forced them to change their name) who were from New York.

With this explosion of turntablism in the late 1990s, DJ Supreme finally got the recognition he wanted. He said:

People like the Piklz, Babu, DJ Shadow, Disk and all that lot had come out of the West Coast and totally blown the whole scratching thing up. Next thing I hear is these people are talking about Supreme and Undercover from Hijack and I was quite shocked! It basically took 10 years for me to find out that in fact we were recognized and did make that impact on the scene. It was like an Oscar winning moment for me, finally getting the recognition by the world scratch community, at Scratchcon, and being named as an inspiration to some of the world’s best DJs of today. Q-Bert would tell me how he got hold of our tapes and would listen to them for hours and just want to scratch for ages afterwards. By that point a lot of people had become very good, strong all round DJs, but I was being recognized for the impact I made on just scratching.

88 Laurent, “The Turntable Trixters, an interview with DJ Supreme.”
As Supreme was recognized for the influence he had on a generation of DJs a decade earlier, a new generation of kids were being inspired to buy turntables and start scratching by the likes of D-Styles, QBert, and Babu.

**Turntablist Demographics**

While the origins of hip hop DJing can be traced to the African diaspora, specifically in Jamaica and New York City, today it is a multicultural phenomenon. In the United States, it is common to find a mix of black, white, Asian, and Latino members of the turntablist community. In fact, Asian Americans, specifically Filipino Americans, make up a disproportionate number of the turntablists in the United States. This is partly because many high profile American turntablists happen to be of Filipino descent, including QBert, D-Styles, and Babu, while there are few other high profile Filipino Americans visible in American popular culture.\(^8^9\) The Invisibl Skratch Piklz were even honored by *A Magazine* in 1999 as members of its "A-100," a listing of the 100 most influential Asian Americans of the past decade.\(^9^0\)

Even in the competitive circuit, most DJs contend that while race is not invisible, it is not an issue of contention. Rob Swift, an African American member of the X-Ecutioners, has been quoted as saying, “If you’re white and you have skill and you’re creative I’m going to respect you. But if you’re black and you’re not creative and you don’t have skills and you suck, I’m not going to respect you.”\(^9^1\)

Turntable battles are very similar to b-boy battles in this way.

In contrast to this multiculturalism, however, there is little gender diversity. There are various possible reasons for this imbalance, but direct discrimination does not seem to be one of them. While women are a clear minority of turntablists in general, they make up an even smaller percentage of competitive turntablists. Women are welcome and encouraged to participate in DJ competitions, but participants and audiences continue to

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\(^9^0\) “Invisibl Skratch Piklz Corporate Profile.”

\(^9^1\) Katz, 122.
be overwhelmingly male. One reason suggested by Christie Z-Pabon, the current organizer of the DMC USA Championships, is that mainstream rap music has driven women away from the other elements of hip hop. She said, “Considering that so much misogyny exists in today’s rap music, perhaps many conscientious women and girls just shut it out all together, not realizing that they could get involved in the non-rap elements.”

Mark Katz also suggests that this could be related to the common engendering of technology in American culture where women have long been discouraged from pursuing highly technical careers and interests while stereos and sound systems have long been associated with men, and turntablism requires intimate knowledge of various pieces of equipment.

**Turntablism Techniques**

Before looking at how turntablists employ a variety of specific techniques in competition, we need to understand what these primary techniques are and how turntablists use their basic equipment of two turntables, a mixer, and records to create the sounds their art is known for. The majority of these techniques depend on the DJ manipulating the record with one hand while the other hand controls the crossfader on the mixer. The crossfader, which is typically placed at the lower center of the mixer, is what controls the volume of the two turntables in relation to one another, so when moving it from one side to another it fades one channel out while fading the other one in. The ability to control the volume and mute the record being manipulated is a crucial part of creating the sounds and effects that turntablism is known for.

The baby scratch is the simplest turntablism technique, and it is the one that was invented by Grand Wizard Theodore in 1975. On his DVD series, *DJ Qbert’s Complete Do-It-Yourself*, Qbert explains that the baby scratch is the easiest scratch to execute as you do not use the fader and simply move the record back and forth. Adding the use of the crossfader to the baby scratch then creates the forward scratch (by muting the part of the baby scratch when the record is pulled back) and the back scratch (by muting the part

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92 Ibid., 134.
93 Ibid., 134-6.
94 “Baby Scratch,” *DJ Qbert’s Complete Do-It-Yourself*, directed by Eric Henry and Syd Garon, 120 minutes, Thud Rumble Video, 2002, DVD.
of the baby scratch when the record is pushed forward). Many more scratches have been built upon the baby scratch by altering the relationship between the use of the crossfader and the movement of the record.

The transformer, which is named after the popular cartoon with robots who transform into automobiles, is said to have been created by Philadelphia’s DJ Spinbad although it was made famous when Cash Money used it to win the DMC World Championships in 1988 and Jazzy Jeff put it on record. To execute the transformer, the DJ must move the record slowly and steadily forward and then backward while quickly opening and closing the crossfader to cut the extended scratch into a series of sharp, rhythmic noises. Broughton and Brewster recommend thinking of it “as a drumbeat or a stab on the horns.” Numerous variations built upon the transformer are used commonly today.  

Beat-juggling is one of the most difficult and impressive techniques a turntablist can use. DJ Steve Dee, the technique’s creator and founding member of the X-Ecutioners, defines beat-juggling as “the act of manipulating individual drum beats, or vocal phrases, in order to create a unique composition using multiple turntables.”  

Turntablists most commonly use this technique to create new drum patterns by using the crossfader to isolate individual kick and snare drum hits on multiple records and recombining them with a new rhythm and in a new order.

It is important for the turntablist to be able to find the right sound on the record or cue it in the right place when using these techniques. In order to do this quickly while performing, DJs will commonly mark their records. They can do this by either putting a mark on the label of the record that they can use as a reference to find the sound they want or by putting a small sticker directly on the vinyl near where the sound begins which can then catch the needle, causing it to fall in the groove of the record at the correct spot. Executing these techniques also requires the DJ to be able to manipulate the record’s movement very quickly, so they need to use slipmats (which sit between the record and the turntable) with extremely slick bottoms to minimize the friction between the turntable and record. Turntablists commonly make these themselves or purchase them.

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from specialty retailers. It can take years of practice to master these techniques, and integrating them into a successful battle routine is a difficult technique all its own.

**Anatomy of the DJ Battle**

Like other head-to-head competitive hip hop practices, virtuosity needs to be combined with individual creativity in order to create a successful performance. One major difference between DJ battles and hip hop’s other musical elements, however, is the effect that equipment can have on a competitor’s creative output. When turntablists arrive to battle at an event like the Battle for World Supremacy, their resources are limited to the records they have with them (although a skilled turntablist can find a variety of ways to use even the most basic record), two turntables, and a mixer. Sponsorship stipulations in the DMC World Championships even require that participants use Technics SL1210 MK2 turntables (the most popular model used by turntablists) equipped with Ortofon brand styluses. These equipment considerations necessitate much more planning and foresight than the other competitive hip hop practices which are traditionally highly improvisatory.

Along with virtuosity and creativity, the head-to-head aspect of competitions such as the Battle for World Supremacy requires attacking your opponent directly. Since turntablists must speak through their records, they use recorded fragments of dialogue or song to insult their opponents or boast about their own skills, often at the beginning or end of a routine. DJ Shiftee said, “I’ll use a variety of records to do that. One type … that’s effective are old comedy records,” citing comedians such as Andrew Dice Clay, Richard Pryor, and Dave Chappelle. While the DJ will rarely, if ever, speak, they will often mouth the words or gesture while the records play. These messages are considered crucial to the battle DJ’s art, and they will often spend a considerable amount of time digging for records with useful names or phrases. Records that contain a DJ’s pseudonym are especially useful for customizing “scratch sentences” into personalized disses or boasts. The Battle for World Supremacy, however, differs from many other organized battles in that participating DJs do not know who their next opponent will be until shortly

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before the next round when matches are chosen by random drawing. This requires DJs to use their wits and creativity to choose or customize appropriate messages using only the records they have with them in their record crate.\textsuperscript{100}

While these often profane and offensive messages are standard in the Battle for World Supremacy and DJ battles in general, they create little animosity among DJs. Like other forms of hip hop competition, the head-to-head format of these DJ battles requires the maintenance of the joking relationship. Rob Swift explained how this works when he said, “Once you get off stage it’s all cool. You shake hands, you hug, and that’s it.”\textsuperscript{101}

While recorded messages play an important part in the Battle for World Supremacy, the bulk of a battle routine is a dense and carefully constructed musical composition in which the DJ attempts to showcase his various turntable techniques in original and innovative ways. They use different types of scratches from the simple baby scratch to scratches with names like the chirp, flare, orbit, and crab to name a few as well as techniques such as transforming and beat-juggling.\textsuperscript{102} Using a variety of these techniques in multiple ways is important in showing one’s versatility as a turntablist. DJ Shiftee has attributed his victory in the 2007 championship match partly to the fact that he used both beat juggling and scratching, while his opponent, DJ Or D’Oeuvre used almost all scratching in his routine.\textsuperscript{103}

In the end, the originality and cleverness of a routine is what will set it apart from all the rest. DJs use recorded messages, a variety of turntable techniques, and body tricks such as spinning in place or scratching behind their backs to be original, but record selection can be just as important. A ninety second routine, however, doesn’t leave a DJ much time for changing records. To use their time most efficiently, they will often stack a couple of records on a turntable so that when it is time to switch, they only need to remove the top record and can then use the one beneath it. It is very common in the Battle for World Supremacy and other battles to see DJs using breakbeat or battle records that are usually compiled by well-established DJs and contain spoken passages and the portions of songs that a DJ would use in a routine. While widely accepted, DJs often try

\textsuperscript{100} The History of the DMC DJ Championships.
\textsuperscript{101} Katz, 125.
\textsuperscript{102} Katz, 125.
not to rely exclusively on these records in order to be more original. Recently, the use of custom records has become fairly standard in the DMC World Championships while continuing to be controversial among battle DJs. Custom records are personalized and commissioned at a significant cost for an individual DJ’s battle routine. This allows them to design a routine in which they rarely, if ever, need to change records, because they had the routine in mind when selecting the individual tracks which often include boasts specifically referring to themselves. DJ Shiftee said, “This is probably the central debate in battle DJing. I was probably one of very few people actually using real records in the competition ...That used to be the norm. I’d like to see a return to that.”

Shiftee’s old school sensibilities likely gave him an edge in the 2007 Battle for World Supremacy, as he was one of the few competitors to play almost all rap and hip hop albums incorporating recognizable songs from artists like Jay-Z and OutKast while many of his competitors in the final rounds played various types of electronica and techno. This battle and others can be found on the 1997 Battle for World Supremacy DVD released by DMC. It seems somewhat fitting for the American competitor from New York with an inclination for traditional hip hop to capture the championship of a competition designed to emulate classic head to head DJ battles. The battle scene in North America, however, has been steadily declining for the last few years.

**Turntablism and Competition in Modern North America**

While the DMC remains popular and shows no signs of disappearing, the numbers of heats and participants in the United States and Canada have gone down in the last couple years. Other national competitions and organizations for turntablists have struggled to survive entirely. In 2004, the Guitar Center chain of music stores held “Spin Off,” a national DJ competition; it continued to be held annually for the next two years, but after 2006 the event was canceled and there are no plans for it to continue. The International Turntablism Federation, formed in San Francisco in the late 1990s by the turntablism groups The Invisbl Skratch Piklz, the X-Ecutioners, and the Beat Junkies,

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104 Ibid., 119.
organized large national competitions in North America with the intentions of raising awareness of turntablism and DJ culture. Following a few years of waning interest and reduced numbers, the ITF officially suspended its activities in 2006. Shortly thereafter, the ITF’s agencies in thirteen European and Asian countries reformed as the International DJ Association, and they held their first international competition in the fall of 2007 in Krakow, Poland. Neither the United States nor Canada was represented.\textsuperscript{108} 

Many theories have been put forward as to the reasons for this decline. One of the most popular is that the battle scene simply reached its peak of popularity a couple years ago and is now leveling off. DJ Lamont from Grazzhoppa’s DJ Big Band said, “I hate the battle scene so much right now! It's become an extreme sport, techniques above everything else. A lot of the new kids don't even think about concepts, composition or musicality in their sets, they're just trying to pull off a quadruple click tear flip in their juggling and it doesn't even matter if the timing's wack or not. It's been like that for the past 3-4 years and people's interest is fading because of it.”\textsuperscript{109} Tallahassee DJ Maniac Magee agrees, pointing to the changing expectations of audiences. “It’s tough to stand there for an hour and just watch somebody scratch … My point is that’s not what people are going out for anymore. People aren’t going out to watch a performance as much as they’re going out to party … and unless you’re a huge name it’s really tough to get people to sit there for an hour and watch you.”\textsuperscript{110} 

DJs have cited other reasons for not wanting to participate in battles as well. It is still an underground culture, and perfecting battle routines requires a large amount of time and effort. DJ Shiftee said, “It’s like a subculture of a subculture. Outside of it, not many people know about it. On a larger scale, I’d like to make music that isn’t necessarily niche-based.”\textsuperscript{111} He added, “It interests me in the short term, but I'm pretty sure I don't want to be some 45-year-old guy who's still doing battle routines.”\textsuperscript{112} Many DJs have also pointed to the fact that these annual competitions require a full year of


\textsuperscript{110} DJ Maniac Magee, interview with author, Tallahassee FL, February 19, 2008.

\textsuperscript{111} Mandel.

\textsuperscript{112} Deahl.
preparation which can be mentally and physically draining, especially if you compete a few years in a row. This is the reason cited by DJ Craze for retiring from the battle scene after winning his third DMC World Championship in 2000.¹¹³

Despite this decline in the North American battle scene, turntablism continues to be an important part of DJ culture in the United States and Canada. Many former battle DJs now teach at DJ schools like the Scratch DJ Academy in major cities across North America. While most of these institutions are only a few years old, they are growing in popularity and becoming more common.¹¹⁴ This spring, Qbert is opening his online “Skratch University” that will incorporate webcams to facilitate online distance learning and one-on-one lessons.¹¹⁵ Turntablists are also using their skills and techniques in other, more traditional styles of club DJing. DJ Maniac Magee said, “That battling style, scratching and cutting up samples and stuff like that, it’s impacted the performance style of the party DJ … The impact is made; it’s not going away.”¹¹⁶ For example, three time world champion DJ Craze has returned to being a drum ‘n’ bass DJ while still using his turntablist skills and playing across musical genres to bring a resurgent popularity to what he terms his Miami bass sound.¹¹⁷

While the DMC World Championships and the Battle for World Supremacy expand into new countries, where they regularly increase the popularity of turntablism each year, in North America the interest in organized DJ competitions is dwindling. Turntablism, however, remains popular although it is being used and performed in different contexts. The high cost of purchasing two turntables, a mixer, and records, however, continues to hinder the growth of turntablism, and this determining factor will likely be amplified during times of economic downturn. Despite these changes in turntablism, there will still be DJs representing the United States and Canada in the Battle for World Supremacy for years to come, and as long as they maintain the competitive and creative spirit inherent to hip hop and DJ culture they have a good chance of walking away a world champion.

¹¹³ Brad Blondheim, Ernest Meza, and Doug Pray, Scratch, Palm Pictures, 2002, DVD.
¹¹⁶ DJ Maniac Magee.
Equipment, Technology, and the Evolution of Turntablism

While competition will continue to be an important part of turntable culture, it will occasionally be forced to change and adapt to new technologies. DJ battles have become common occurrences on the internet. On websites like djforums.com, members issue a challenge with certain parameters. When someone accepts, they each record a routine and post it on the website. Other members can then vote on the winner and critique their performances. As webcams become more common, online DJ battles will be able to better incorporate the head-to-head aspect that has made battling popular. This type of online competition gives “bedroom DJs” (the common term for DJs who practice their art in private) the opportunity to compete and develop their skills while maintaining some level of anonymity through the internet.

Digital DJing with software like Serato Scratch LIVE is also becoming common practice for DJs in North America. This software allows DJs to play digital audio tracks on traditional vinyl turntables, and instead of hauling crates of records around with them, they only need to bring a single laptop. By using digital music files in performance, they are able to incorporate rare tracks and sounds that cannot be found on vinyl as well as tracks that they produced themselves on their computer. It is also common for club DJs to use compact synthesizers and other devices to augment their sets, and there has been some discussion about incorporating these into competition as well. The DMC is currently planning on implementing a new competition for digital DJing that allows programs like Serato, which has already gotten the attention of many North American DJs. How exactly they will integrate digital DJing with their other competitions and what stipulations will be imposed remain to be seen, but they hope that this will help the DMC World Championships remain relevant to DJ culture for years to come.

Conclusion

Turntablism was a term coined in the mid-1990s for a practice that had been going on for years, but it was with the introduction of that term that turntablism became an internationally popular phenomenon. With roots that trace back through hip hop.

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pioneers like Grand Wizard Theodore, Grandmaster Flash, and Kool Herc to the Jamaican soundsystem tradition, turntablists in the 1990s expanded upon what came before them while acting as ambassadors for their quickly developing art form. Celebrity DJs from groups like the Invisibl Skratch Piklz and the X-Ecutioners increased turntablism’s profile by openly sharing their techniques with those interested in learning and showcasing them in competition.

Competition and turntablism have been inextricably linked throughout their history. Scratching was introduced to the DMC World Championships in 1986 by DJ Cheese and it has been a showcase for turntablists ever since. The DMC World Championships has been where many DJs have debuted their newly mastered techniques such as the transformer and beat-juggling in order to take home the championship title. The Battle for World Supremacy was added to the DMC World Championships in 2000, and integrating the head-to-head style of battling that hip hop is known for has revitalized the event.

The role equipment has in turntablism is one of the major differences between it and the other musical elements of hip hop which only require the practitioner to use his or her body. While equipment does have an effect on competition through things such as record selection and a DJ’s familiarity with the equipment he or she is using, in the end it is their creativity, virtuosity, and wit, like the other competitive elements of hip hop, that will determine whether they come out as either a winner or a loser. The next and final chapter will look at what head-to-head competition implies about these musical elements of hip hop and the role organized competitions have in preserving these traditions.
CHAPTER FIVE

ORGANIZING CONFLICT: ISSUES, CONSEQUENCES, AND ORGANIZED HIP HOP COMPETITIONS

This research has largely focused on battling in three different organized competitions instead of the more impromptu and unpredictable street context of battling. This chapter will look at organized competitions more broadly in order to understand the reasons and purposes for organizing them, the reasons and effects of participating in them, and the consequences and effects of these events on hip hop culture. This chapter will primarily focus on the competitions already discussed: The World Series of Hip Hop rap battles, the All Targets Leveled b-boy and b-girl competition, and the Disco Mix Club’s World DJ Championships. Other competitions will also be looked at briefly to further illustrate the points being made.

Why Organize?

As explained in the first chapter, the musical elements of hip hop were originally practiced competitively on the street, in clubs, or at block parties. The reasons for battling were typically to settle disputes between individuals or crews through nonviolent means, to gain respect and build a reputation, or simply for entertainment and practice. At the end of the 1970s when hip hop was declining in popularity, Crazy Legs from the Rocksteady Crew used battling to meet and eventually unite the remaining b-boys who were disseminated across New York City. This helped bring a resurgence of popularity to hip hop culture, and because rap records had already raised its profile, club owners and promoters took notice.

By 1980, party promoters began organizing battles, often billing them as talent shows or other types of competitions. Now besides the reasons listed above, people had new reasons to compete and battle; for the first time there were prizes and financial awards on the line. These competitions offered trophies, money, and even the chance to get a record deal as prizes. While there are various reasons for organizing these competitions, the most obvious motivation is financial. In an interview with Tallahassee DJ Maniac Magee, he said, “The motivation behind organizing battles, still to this day, is
about trying to get more people in the room which means selling more tickets and a bigger crowd, but it was so perfect for hip hop because there was so much competitiveness already.

Event organizers could charge an entry fee for competitors while also having a cover charge at the door for spectators, and depending what they offered as a prize they could make a significant amount of profit. Practices like this certainly continue today, and monetary issues are one of the main sources for disagreements and criticisms of competitions. One of these problematic events, the World Series of Hip Hop, has already been discussed here. In that case, no one got paid and people were taken advantage of and swindled out of their money directly. The effect this controversy could have on hip hop culture and organized rap battles will be discussed later in this chapter.

There are also less direct ways in which performers can feel exploited through competitions. DJ Lamont of Grazzhoppa’s DJ Big Band described one of these situations related to DJ battles when he said, “It's all good when you're new to the scene and you get a couple of wins, but after a while you start seeing the negative sides of the battle crap, there's politics involved. DJs working an entire year for one or two appearances and not earning a dime of video sales and so on and so on.” DJ Max the Mortician, a North Dakota based turntablist, described a situation to me where he and his crew felt that DJs were being exploited by event organizers who simply wanted to throw parties, but called them battles so that they only had to pay one of the many performing musicians. Thankfully, not all reasons for hosting hip hop competitions are as cynical and laced with ulterior motives. In the early 1980s, one very good and altruistic reason for organizing competitions and other hip hop related events was likely to help keep the youngest members of the hip hop community off of the streets and in a more easily controlled situation. There are still numerous events and hip hop organizations today that exist partly for this purpose, a couple of which are briefly profiled in the documentary films Scratch and Planet B-Boy.

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121 Laurent, “Lamont – Big Band pt 2.”
122 DJ Max the Mortician, telephone interview with author, April 2, 2008.
123 Planet B-Boy, directed by Benson Lee, Elephant Eye Films, 2008, DVD; Scratch, directed by Doug Pray, Palm Pictures, 2002, DVD.
In an online video, b-girl Severe from Atlanta’s Burn Unit crew explains why they thought of and hosted All Targets Leveled:

We were tired of going to b-boy and b-girl events and saying wow what a dope event but they should’ve done this or they should’ve done that or we just felt ripped off because it was a great event but the door price was so much so we wanted to do something really, really cool; really, really challenging; and really affordable.\(^{124}\)

As her explanation shows, Burn Unit’s motivation was almost the exact opposite of the financial motivations mentioned above. One very likely reason behind this is that All Targets Leveled was a competition for b-boys and b-girls that was organized by b-boys and b-girls. Hip hop events that are organized by members of the hip hop community are now much more common than they were fifteen to twenty years ago when hip hop was still commonly exploited by those from outside the hip hop community. The fact that these competitions are now often made by the hip hop community for the hip hop community allows them to have a greater impact on hip hop culture, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

**Participation and Reputation**

An obvious reason people often enter these competitions is for the chance to win a significant prize, which can vary greatly from competition to competition. All Targets Leveled had the smallest prize out of the competitions focused on in this study, with a single grand prize of one thousand dollars. Each of the events in the DMC World DJ Championships offered ten thousand dollars as a grand prize with various pieces of equipment as runner up prizes. The World Series of Hip Hop advertised the largest prizes, although they were prizes that no one actually received; the advertised prizes consisted of one hundred thousand dollars for the main battle, twenty-five thousand dollars for the two middle battles, and ten thousand dollars for the lowest battle. People’s decision on participating in these types of events would then be partly decided by the amount of money they could possibly make in relation to the cost of participating. For instance, if a b-boy lived in the Pacific Northwest it would probably not be worth the cost

of flying to Atlanta and staying in a hotel room for a weekend to compete in All Targets Leveled. In the case of the DMC World DJ Championships, the winners of the national contest have their travel costs covered to compete in the world finals which are held in London which greatly reduces the cost of participation.

Money, however, is not everything. As mentioned in Chapter One, a primary function of competition is to establish and build a reputation. It is through competition that individual styles, which play an extremely important part in hip hop aesthetics, are compared and contrasted. Competition also allows someone to build a reputation for themselves and their style. Taking home the grand prize from one of these events can play a major role in a performer making a name for themselves, and it is something that they can list on their biographies and resumes. It is also through competition, then, that reputations can be lost as well. Potential competitors must once again weigh the possible rewards for their reputation against the possible downside. Murda Mook, in his battle with Young Hot during the World Series of Hip Hop, directly addressed the issue of money and what he was risking by going up against a young unknown competitor:

Now I’m stuck, like what the fuck, I gotta get this pay. For 25k run away?
No fucking way. I get a call the next day, heard this nigga wanna play.
Okay, we did the contract signing and whatnot and that’s how you’re all sitting here looking at Young Twat.
I know I said I’m retired, I’m apologizing to my fans.
But for 25 grand, I figured you’d understand.
But damn, I’m in a lose-lose situation
because I’m Murda Mook and he’s the third string replacement.
You’re all expecting me to kill him, you all know he can’t rap.
Whatever’s lower than the underdog, he lower than that.
So when he’s through spinning shit and say something okayish
It’s gonna sound ten times better because he’s going against the greatest.

Murda Mook, however, was obviously not too seriously concerned because he still battled Young Hot and was declared the winner.

Some other participants in the World Series of Hip Hop felt they had something to prove and believed that the World Series of Hip Hop would allow them to do that. Both Reece Steele and E.Ness had previously been featured on television reality shows; Steele was the winner of VH1’s Miss Rap Supreme while E.Ness had appeared on Making the
For E.Ness, the need to build a reputation on the World Series of Hip Hop was less of a priority than for Reece Steele, because he already had a record deal with Puff Daddy’s Bad Boy Records and was a fairly well known battle rapper. Reece Steele, on the other hand, did not have very much respect and the only reputation she had was for being on a low rated reality show. She was likely hoping that by winning a battle in the World Series of Hip Hop she could gain some credibility within the hip hop community to go with her television title of Miss Rap Supreme. This did not work for her, however, because she was booed while on stage and needed the help of Lady Luck, who Steele was battling, to calm the crowd, and she ultimately lost.

There is also an important element of locality related to hip hop culture, competition, and reputation that can be traced to the 1970s when b-boys from one borough would challenge b-boys from another. Organized competitions often allow competitors to represent their home city. This was obvious in the World Series of Hip Hop when the majority of the battles were between rappers from New York City and rappers from Philadelphia. Winning in a competition like that increases not only the reputation of the competitor but also of the hip hop community in his or her home city. All Targets Leveled was a competition that had a strong local theme, and it promoted the Atlanta b-boy and b-girl community. By winning a competition like this, Jesus will not become a national celebrity, but it will cement his status and reputation as one of the Atlanta area’s dominant b-boys. Large events that have regional, national, and international levels of competition such as the DMC World DJ Championships allow winners’ reputations to grow while the area they represent grows as well. In the case of DJ Shiftee in the 2007 Battle for World Supremacy, he came to represent the entire nation after winning the United States championship, and in the finals he went up against the representative of France before being declared the World Supremacy Champion.

Hip hop competitions partly function then to facilitate interaction between people from across town and across cultures. The fact that many elements of hip hop culture have become standard throughout the world points to the potential for future cross-cultural interaction through hip hop. The film *Planet B-Boy*, which follows various crews

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from different countries as they prepare for and compete in the Battle of the Year, shows how practices like competitive b-boying can create connections between people even when language barriers prevent verbal communication.

**Competition, Controversy, and the Preservation of Tradition**

Organized hip hop competitions often position themselves as an alternative that is sometimes in opposition to mainstream, commercial rap music and its representation of hip hop culture. This was made explicitly clear during the World Series of Hip Hop when Monie Love, who was hosting and serving as the announcer for the event, said this:

I just want to say this, to everyone who came here this evening, to all the MCs, and I call you MCs because I respect what you are because I am of you, and I know that we are in a really crazy state as far as hip hop, the corporate end of hip hop. I know that we’re in a really crazy state that labels are not necessarily signing like they used to and they’re not cultivating artists like they used to. A lot of MCs, people in this room, can feel like damn, I’m doing all of this for what. You know what I’m saying, I gotta eat, I gotta feed my family. I spit this shit, but you know what I’m saying, these dudes aint trying to give a break and all of that stuff. I understand what’s going on in this business, I really do, and I just want to tell you, keep spitting and aspiring to get where you’re trying to go. I don’t give a shit who’s signing what. At the end of the day there’s a lot of stuff I play on the radio that when I’m in the studio I turn the shit down because it’s garbage and a lot of what you guys are doing is real spittin. Do not get discouraged. I just want you all to understand that. If you’re an MC in this room give yourself a round of applause for standing up for MCing, period.

She deliberately casts the freestyle rappers in the World Series of Hip Hop as “real” MCs, in contrast with the majority of commercially successful rappers. As mentioned in Chapter Two, rapping was originally performed freestyle and often competitively, so the World Series of Hip Hop is also drawing a line that connects it to the earliest traditions of rapping. The website for the World Series of Hip Hop, wsohh.com, even contains short profiles, images, and trivia labeled “Rap History.”

Reece Steele also implies that the World Series of Hip Hop will partly function to give these rappers a voice and possible financial opportunities, because she explained that battles like this would take place each

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month giving new people the opportunity to compete for some money. No additional battles ever happened.

Everything she said along with the other purposes of the event became empty and meaningless, however, when no one was paid what they were promised. The apparent financial desire of the event’s organizer, Furqaan Clover, seems to invalidate everything else about the event. When *The Source* published an article describing the situation, people were able to post comments with their reactions. One poster going by Kiki wrote, “Wow, we are supposed to help upcoming rappers make it so hip-hop will continue on, but this is rediculous, I understand the economy is bad and money is tight, but give the people what they deserve. This is not a good image for hip-hop they need to do something about this and fast.” Another poster with the name of “Mr B!” also wrote, “That is f#cked up, straight up. This is kinda behaviour that kills hip-hop.” The public fallout from this event has been visible in the hip hop community through various news sources and websites, and it can have the effect of discouraging people from offering to participate in organized competitions like this. Murda Mook came out of his retirement from battling to participate in the World Series of Hip Hop, and he angrily told *The Source*, “I’m trying to be patient but shit aint lookin good, fuck World Series of Hip Hop. When I get my bread it’s still fuck em, them niggas are liars and conmen.”

While one can look at the World Series of Hip Hop as trying to draw a connection to “old school” hip hop values and traditions but falling short because of controversy, the establishment and reinforcement of tradition is a common theme in these competitions. This can be done various ways, primarily through the use of judges and sponsors or the rules and design of the competition. All of the competitions featured in this study did at least one of these things.

The 2008 DMC USA finals featured judges that included Grand Wizard Theodore, DJ Steve Dee, GrandMaster Roc Raida (of the X-Ecutioners), DJ Spictakular (who was an Internation Turntablist Federation world champion), and DJ Boogie Blind (who is one of the X-Ecutioners newest members). Putting these DJs onto a judging panel

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128 Ibid.
together has the effect of creating a lineage for turntablism that connects the inventor of the scratch, Grand Wizard Theodore, to original members of the X-Ecutioners and more recent members. The judges of All Targets Leveled had a similar effect, particularly Ken Swift who is often called “The Original B-Boy.” By putting him on a panel with a b-girl from Holland and one of the most respected local b-boys, it creates a historical and spatial context for the competition that connects it to history through Ken Swift, places it in the modern international world of b-boysing and b-girling with Aruna, and establishes local tradition with Totem. The World Series of Hip Hop also tried to position itself as a significant continuation of the rap tradition by originally advertising judges that included DMC of Run DMC, Rakim of Eric B and Rakim, Big Daddy Kane, Yo-Yo, Doug E. Fresh, Roxanne Shante and Slick Rick.

The design and setup of All Targets Leveled very clearly tried to invoke the history of b-boysing and b-girling and encourage a connection to those roots. This was seen in the arena with street themed objects. Severe explained about the street theme, “Well it just came about naturally, because people used to breakdance in the street.”129 The design of the competition also encouraged dancers to improvise and interact with the music, something that has become much rarer today when complex, choreographed routines akin to those seen in television dance competitions like So You Think You Can Dance and America’s Best Dance Crew are becoming more common. They also made the event larger than the actual competition itself by incorporating a workshop with Aruna and a meet-and-greet with Ken Swift which also have the effect of reinforcing tradition, through direct education and contact with an important figure from the history of b-boysing.

There is another DJ competition, Roc Raida’s Gong DJ Battle which is a direct throwback to an earlier brand of hip hop competition based off of the classic television show The Gong Show. Competitors face off head-to-head, but when one of them screws up or becomes uninteresting, the judges will hit the gong and that person is eliminated. The description of Roc Raida’s battle states, “In 2006, weary of the corporate competitions the DJ battle scene had to offer, 1995 DMC World Champ, Roc Raida didn't complain like some namby-pamby. He's a man! He made up his own battle! Roc

129 Severe, e-mail communication, November 10, 2008.
Raida’s Gong DJ Battle is so maniacal, so exacting, that only the most bravehearted of DJs will enter.”130 By bringing back this style of hip hop competition, Roc Raida is drawing directly from hip hop’s history and traditions.

Figure 8. A flyer from a 1981 Gong Show competition (#1981-0108).

The Battle for World Supremacy in the DMC World DJ Championships simply says directly that it is “conducted in the tradition of the old school head to head battles” and makes the historical and traditional connection explicit.131 By making these connections to the past, whether explicit or subtle, and placing these competitions and practices in a tradition’s continuity, the modes of performance are further legitimated.

When facing the hegemony of popular, commercial rap, the other elements of hip hop and their competitive practices are often marginalized and dismissed, and organized competitions help to prevent that.

When b-foying and b-girling were largely dismissed as fads in the mid-1980s, the number of people who practiced them in the United States dropped significantly. Many of those who remained dedicated to the dance form and its promotion were those like Ken Swift and Crazy Legs from the Rocksteady Crew, but their avenues for performance and advocacy were severely limited. In places like Europe and Asia, however, people were first getting into the dance form through films like *Beatstreet and Flashdance*. B-girl Aruna explained that this was how she was introduced to b-girling. While what they saw was not very accurate, it still provided a starting point from which they could discover the roots of the dance. The Battle of the Year was first held in Hannover, Germany in 1990, and it featured nine b-boy crews from around Europe and about four hundred visitors attended. The event gained popularity and became more international each year, eventually drawing crews from every inhabited continent. The event, which features a choreographed dance competition and head-to-head battles, eventually drew the attention of some of the earliest b-boys. As they and other Americans saw what was happening at the Battle of the Year, b-foying in North America began to gain popularity again, as explained in the documentary film *Planet B-Boy*. The DMC World DJ Championships had a similar effect on raising the profile of DJing and what would come to be known as turntablism after the DJ had been largely neglected during rap’s rise to prominence. After DJ Cheese from the United States introduced scratching to the competition in 1986 and was declared the world champion, the number of new DJs in North America began to increase significantly.

**Conclusion**

Organized musical competitions serve various functions in hip hop culture. The previous examples illustrated the important role that organized competitions have played in preserving these competitive practices and marginalized elements of hip hop culture. In some cases, competitions have even helped to bring them back from near extinction.

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132 “History of ‘Battle of the Year’,” *Battle of the Year*, http://www.battleoftheyear.de/about/history.html.
Hip hop competitions are one of the few institutions where the musical elements of hip hop outside of rap are regularly performed and acknowledged. Some of these competitions, such as the World Series of Hip Hop, directly oppose the popular mainstream while encouraging people to participate in the more overlooked modes of performance.

There are various reasons for organizing a competition, the most common of which are for personal financial gain or to promote the art form being featured. Members of the hip hop community have increasingly gained control of and organized these competitions to transform them into positive events that promote hip hop culture. Performers commonly enter these organized competitions in order to make money, increase their reputations, and possibly further their careers. In the end, a competition will strengthen and promote the mode of performance featured when it is successful, or discourage and stigmatize it when the competition fails or is mired in controversy.
CONCLUSION

Hip hop and competition have been closely related since Kool Herc began throwing block parties where b-boys would dance and rappers would perform; hip hop battles became an alternative to violence for settling disputes. The fact that freestyle rapping, b-BOying/b-girling, and turntablism are most commonly found today in competitive contexts makes sense when considering the history of hip hop. Organized competitions provide a venue for an individual performer, whether they are a rapper, dancer, or DJ, to showcase his or her unique style of performance by putting it up against someone else’s in a head-to-head battle. These battles require the performer to show that they are better than whoever they come up against, so they require confidence, intelligence, and more often than not, a sense of humor. These battles are typically improvised so that the performer can react to his or her opponent the best way that they can. While these battles are often confrontational and laden with insults, they take place within a larger community of performers and hip hop enthusiasts that thrive on competition, which encourages them to be the best they can possibly be.

This research has looked at the head-to-head competitive practices of rap, b-boy, and turntablism battles as well as how these battles function in organized competitions such as the World Series of Hip Hop, All Targets Leveled, and the Battle for World Supremacy in the DMC World DJ Championships. Each of these musical elements of hip hop and the organized competitions associated with them have their own values and traditions, but they all value individual style and creativity in attacking opponents as an important part of the competitive act.

Rap battles, like the African American verbal dueling traditions that came before them, are constructed around insulting an opponent directly. Simply being mean and insulting, however, does not make one a skilled battle rapper. It takes individual style and creativity to craft insults and boasts that can successfully gain the favor of the judges or the audience. Rappers who perform freestyle by making up their rhymes on the spot, are more unpredictable and able to react to their opponent more easily. This makes them far more effective at battling than rappers who compose and rehearse their rhymes ahead of time. The commercial rap that is most commonly heard on records is carefully written,
often in consultation with a producer, to create a lasting product that will not have the spontaneity of freestyle rap. This effectively makes freestyling an underrepresented mode of performance.

The World Series of Hip Hop, a series of rap battles that were broadcast on the internet, set out to fix this imbalance by promoting battle rappers and freestylers as “true MCs,” and giving them the opportunity to win significant cash prizes. In the second chapter, I looked at the specific rules and judging guidelines that were originally laid out by the World Series of Hip Hop to clarify what aspects of performance are considered most valuable and important in a rap battle. The three major categories were lyrical content, which valued individual creativity in the rhymes used; flow, which depended on a competitor’s talent and virtuosity in executing those rhymes; and poise or presence, which rewarded a rapper’s steadiness and confidence while battling.

The controversies surrounding the World Series of Hip Hop, which included the changing logistics and failure to pay any winners, overshadowed any positive outcomes the event may have had. The rappers, primarily from New York City and Philadelphia, entered the World Series of Hip Hop to make money and build their personal reputations as well as the reputations of the cities they came from. The problems with the event meant that no one was very successful in achieving what they planned, and freestyle or competitive rapping was also hurt by the event’s failure.

Hip hop dance has had its share of problems as well. It is the most commonly misunderstood element of hip hop culture, and while there are multiple distinct forms of hip hop dance, including b-boying/b-girling, uprocking, locking, and popping, they are often mislabeled as one practice called breakdancing. As the first element of hip hop to become a part of mainstream popular culture, hip hop dancing could be found in numerous films, television shows, and commercials in the early 1980s. Unfortunately, this exposure also made it the first element of hip hop to be dismissed as a passing fad. It has, however, endured, and b-boying or b-girling has reached heights of popularity not seen since the 1980s.

It has been largely through competitions that b-boying and b-girling have remained viable and been able to expose new generations of kids to hip hop dance. Competitions like All Targets Leveled, which was organized by the Atlanta b-boy/b-girl
crew The Burn Unit, promote these dance forms by making them affordable community experiences with workshops and performances that go beyond the competition itself. All Targets Leveled also promoted the dance as it was traditionally practiced, by setting it inside of a street-themed arena and encouraging improvisation over the use of a prepared choreography. These competitions feature the dance as a distinct, improvisatory form with a variety of distinguishable moves and techniques, and award the dancers who display a mastery of the dance’s foundation and an understanding of individual style. By showcasing b-boying and b-girling in this way, competitions like All Targets Leveled promote the accurate portrayal of what these dances are and seek to overcome the misunderstanding that has plagued hip hop dance for so long.

It was through Kool Herc’s style of DJing that the other disparate elements of hip hop came together to form a unified urban culture, and DJing is also the element that has undergone the most transformation since that time. Competitive DJing today takes the form of turntablism, which is a term that was coined in the mid-1990s to connote the creation of new music through the manipulation of records with turntables and a mixer. One can trace the history and development of turntablism from modern performers like Qbert and Mix Master Mike to DJ Supreme, and hip hop pioneers like Grand Wizard Theodore, Grandmaster Flash, and Kool Herc to the Jamaican soundsystem tradition. The success of turntablism in the 1990s and early 2000s was largely the result of celebrity DJs from groups like the Invisibl Skratch Piklz and the X-Ecutioners actively promoting turntablism by openly sharing their techniques with those interested in learning and showcasing them in competition.

Competition and turntablism have been closely related since before the term turntablism even existed. DJ Cheese introduced scratching to the DMC World DJ Championships in 1986, and it has been a showcase for turntablists ever since. The DMC World DJ Championships is the highest profile DJ competition in the world. It has been where many DJs have debuted newly mastered or developed techniques in order to gain an edge over their competitors, which also has the effect of encouraging everyone else to learn those techniques before the next year’s competition. The Battle for World Supremacy, which is conducted in the head-to-head style of battling characteristic of hip hop, was added to the DMC World DJ Championships in 2000. This event, which
encourages DJs to attack one another directly with the sounds on their records, has helped revitalize the World Championships while also promoting traditional battling.

The dependency DJs and turntablists have on equipment is what separates it from all the other musical elements of hip hop which only require the practitioner to use his or her body. The role of equipment in DJing is sometimes pointed to as a reason for the lack of female DJs, and some also see it as being able to unfairly give one DJ an advantage over another in competition. Competitions like the Battle for World Supremacy, however, are set up so that it is ultimately the DJ’s creativity, virtuosity, and wit, like the other competitive elements of hip hop, that determine whether they are successful in a battle.

This research has shown how organized competitions promote the traditional practice of whatever performance medium they feature, while also promoting hip hop culture as a whole. Sometimes the organizers of these competitions even position the element of hip hop being promoted as being in direct opposition to mainstream, commercial rap that dominates the public’s perception of hip hop culture. Competitions also serve a community function by bringing hip hop fans together and giving skilled rappers, b-boys, b-girls, and DJs the chance to win money and possibly further their careers as performers. The motivations for organizing a competition, which can range from personal greed to the love of hip hop culture and the desire to promote it, will typically impact the effect the competition will have.

Hip hop has always been competitive. The practice of using rap to compete by insulting your opponent and boasting about yourself can be traced to various African American verbal dueling traditions such as sounding. B-boy battles often seem to mimic the martial arts showdowns from the films that helped inspire some of the dance’s techniques, and people have been trying to out-dance one another in dance contests around the world for centuries. Hip hop DJing has its origins in the Jamaican soundsystems which began competing for crowds since they were popularized in the 1950s.

Graffiti writing, rapping, b-boying or b-girling, and DJing all allow for and encourage individual creativity and expression. Individual style is central to hip hop culture, and head-to-head musical competition drives the development of individual style. The head-to-head style of hip hop competition differentiates it from most other
competitive musical practices. The direct interaction between participants and the street-based origins of the culture can give battles a combative tone that often evokes violence, but the joking relationship between competitors helps to prevent that violence from becoming real. Hip hop has proven its longevity as it approaches its fourth decade. The culture’s endurance can be partly traced to the competitive customs associated with its four main elements, and as long as those elements exist, we can assume that they will be practiced competitively.
APPENDIX A

COMPETITION FLYERS, 1980-1983

Figure 9. Flyer for a “Battle of the DJs” (#1981-1025)

Image from the author’s hip hop flyer archive. The majority of flyers were found at: “Party Flyers,” Toledo Hip Hop.Org, http://toledohiphop.org/images/old_school_source_code/. Additional flyers have been found on other websites and in publications. These flyers are from various artists, and they were passed out at local high schools and posted around the city before various people scanned them. The use of these images falls under “fair use” (See section 107 of the Copyright Act) because the purpose and character of the use is for nonprofit, educational purposes and the use will not affect the potential market for or value of the work. Flyers will be referred to as #YEAR-DATE (mmdd).
Figure 10. Gong Show and Talent Show flyer (#1981-0101)

Figure 11. Flyer for an M.C. tryout where people could compete to possibly join Kool Herc’s crew, the Herculords (#1980-1103)
Figure 13. Flyer advertising a battle between high schools (#1981-0227)
Figure 14. Flyer for a 1982 performance with “A Catholic High School Throwdown” (#1982-1124)
Figure 15. Flyer in which the Funky 4 calls out other MCs to battle (#1980-1225)

Figure 16. Flyer where Grand Wizard Theodore and The Romantic Fantastic Five call out Coldcrush to compete (#1981-1024b)
Figure 17. Flyer advertising a battle between different regions of the city (#1981-0417)
Figure 18. Dance competition flyer (#1982-1113)
Figure 19. Flyer advertising a talent show competition that offers a recording contract to the winner (#1981-0404)
APPENDIX B

FULL WORLD SERIES OF HIP HOP RULES AND REGULATIONS

These rules and regulations can be found at http://www.wsohh.com/raprules.html.

EFFECTIVE: April 7, 2008
APPROVED BY: Furqaan Clover, Chairman
World Series of Hip Hop
Atlanta, GA 2008

SECTION I – TOURNAMENT REGISTRATION

1. As used herein, “WSOHH” means World Series of Hip Hop and its parent, affiliates and subsidiaries including, but not limited to, Indie Film Exchange, Inc. World Series of Hip Hop reserves the right to refuse anyone entry into the tournament, in its sole and absolute discretion.

2. Any person or entity paying a registration fee for himself, herself on behalf of another rapper warrants and affirms that he/she/it is not engaged in illegal activity and that no funds derived from such activity will be used to pay the registration fee. World Series of Hip Hop will, in its sole and absolute discretion, determine its satisfaction with the warranty given anyone who registers for the tournament.

3. Entry into the World Series of Hip Hop is limited to rappers with proof of age that World Series of Hip Hop, acting in its sole and absolute discretion, deems appropriate.

4. One entry per person. If a rapper enters as a member of a Crew, WSOHH will use its best efforts to insure that members of the same crew do not face each other in opening rounds. Crews may not substitute members at any time.

5. World Series of Hip Hop may limit the number of entries into the WSOHH and may award entries in its sole and absolute discretion. World Series of Hip Hop may award a limited number of entries through satellite tournaments, third party marketing arrangements and or other promotional activities in its sole and absolute discretion.

6. There are six (6) registration categories: 1. Heavyweight Male – Rapper must be a male twenty-five (25) years of age or older. 2. Heavyweight Female – Rapper must be a female twenty-five (25) years of age or older. 3. Middleweight Male – Rapper must be male between the ages of twenty-one (21) and twenty-four (24). 4. Middleweight Female – Rapper must be female between the ages of twenty-one (21) and twenty-four (24). 5. Lightweight Male – Rapper must be male between the ages of eighteen (18) and (20). 6. Lightweight Female – Rapper must be female between the ages of eighteen (18) and (20).
Birthday cutoff is August 4, 2008; rapper must register in the category he/she will qualify for as of the birthday cutoff date. Registering for the wrong category may cause a rapper to lose his/her place in the tournament. Such rapper will be refunded his/her registration fee.

7. Winners must show their valid picture identification (driver’s license, state identification card, or military identification card) at registration, and in order to collect prize. If participant is not a U.S. citizen, a current passport, consular identification or alien registration card is required. Winners are responsible for any and all taxes, licenses, registrations and other fees.

8. Employees of World Series of Hip Hop and its parent, subsidiaries, affiliates, owned, operated or managed properties, contractors hired for the operation of the WSOHH or parent companies and immediate family members of such employees at director level or higher as determined by World Series of Hip Hop are not eligible to compete in any WSOHH events, unless approved in advance by World Series of Hip Hop Chairman. Immediate Family is defined as: spouse, children, and any relative or other person residing in the employee’s place of residence.

SECTION II – BATTLE RAP RULES

9. Rappers may not use or carry any ‘props’ into the Cipher. No external items of any kind may be used to enhance a rapper’s lyrics. Judges are instructed to penalize the offending rapper.

10. While inside the Cipher rappers are not to touch opponents. Judges are instructed to penalize the offending rapper.

11. While inside the Cipher rappers are not to speak are make sound effects during his/her opponents allotted time. Judges are instructed to penalize the offending rapper.

12. No tournament recycling. Rappers are not to recycle lyrics he/she used in an earlier round. At the conclusion of each round WSOHH staff members will review tapes of the winner’s previous rounds. The offending rapper will be automatically disqualified and his/her opponent will advance to the next round.

13. No biting. Rappers are not to use lyrics that he/she heard or read from any other rapper whether these lyrics where used in the WSOHH tournament and/or from a published recording. Two consecutive bars of bitten lyrics will result in the automatic disqualification of the offending rapper. His/her opponent will advance to the next round.

14. ABSOLUTELY NO GHOST WRITING. Any rapper found to have used ghost written lyrics in the World Series of Hip Hop shall be banned from the World Series of Hip Hop tournament for life. The offending rapper will be required to return any and all prizes awarded by the World Series of Hip Hop in any current or previous tournament participation.
15. Each match will consist of three (3) rounds, with each rapper having the same allotted time.

16. Championship matches will consist of five (5) rounds, with each rapper having the same allotted time.

17. If the score is tied after three rounds, the competing rappers will continue into Sudden Death rounds.

18. In Sudden Death each rapper will have a turn; the allotted time will be doubled. At the end of the round Judges will score the round, if the scores remain tied Sudden Death continues for additional rounds until the tie is broken.

SECTION III – TOURNAMENT SCHEDULING

19. World Series of Hip Hop reserves the right to change WSOHH tournament times in its sole and absolute discretion.

20. World Series of Hip Hop may cancel, modify, relocate or reschedule the WSOHH for any reason with prior notification to all participating rappers.

21. World Series of Hip Hop is not responsible for electronic transmission errors or delays resulting in omission, interruption, deletion, defect, delay in operations or transmission, theft or destruction or unauthorized access to or alterations of entry materials, or for technical, hardware, software, or telephone failures of any kind, lost or unavailable connections, fraud, incomplete, garbled, or delayed computer transmissions, whether caused by World Series of Hip Hop, users, or by any of the equipment or programming associated with or utilized in the promotion or by any technical or human error which may occur in the processing of submissions which may limit, restrict, or prevent a participant’s ability to participate in the tournament.

22. World Series of Hip Hop is not responsible for injuries or losses arising or resulting from participation in the WSOHH and is not liable for any acts or omissions by employees, whether negligent or willful, in the conduct of the WSOHH, and is not liable in the event of any equipment or software malfunction.

23. If for any reason the tournament is not capable of running as planned, including infection by computer virus, bugs, tampering, unauthorized intervention, fraud, technical failures, or any other causes within or beyond the control of World Series of Hip Hop which corrupt or affect the administration, security, fairness, integrity, or proper conduct of this tournament, World Series of Hip Hop reserves the right at its sole discretion to cancel, terminate, modify or suspend the tournament.

SECTION IV – RAPPER CONDUCT AND TOURNAMENT INTEGRITY
24. World Series of Hip Hop may impose penalties upon any person or Crew, who gives, makes, issues, authorizes or endorses any statement or action having an effect prejudicial or detrimental to the best interest of the tournament as determined by World Series of Hip Hop, acting in its sole and absolute discretion. This may include, but shall not be limited to expulsion from the event and property, forfeiture of a rapper’s entry fee(s) and prize monies entitled and/or loss of the right to participate in this or any other tournament conducted by World Series of Hip Hop. World Series of Hip Hop may hold responsible and may impose penalties on an individual rapper for the actions and/or conduct of members of his/her Crew, even if the offending crew members are not participating in or have been eliminated from the tournament.

25. World Series of Hip Hop may disqualify any person for any prize based upon fraud, dishonesty, violation of promotional rules or other misconduct while on the property or otherwise occurring in relation to the World Series of Hip Hop or as otherwise reasonable or necessary for World Series of Hip Hop to comply with applicable statutes and regulations, in its sole and absolute discretion.

26. Any attempt by any person to deliberately damage any program or to undermine the legitimate operation of this tournament may be a violation of criminal and civil laws and should such an attempt be made, World Series of Hip Hop reserves the right to seek damages from any such person to the fullest extent of the law.

27. All decisions regarding the interpretation of World Series of Hip Hop rules, rapper eligibility, scheduling and staging of the tournament, and penalties for misconduct lie solely with World Series of Hip Hop Chairman, whose decisions are final.

28. World Series of Hip Hop employees will use reasonable commercial efforts to consider the best interest of the tournament and fairness as the top priority in the decision-making process, with the understanding that “best interest of the tournament and fairness” shall be determined by World Series of Hip Hop, acting in its sole and absolute discretion. Unusual circumstances can, on occasion, dictate that the technical interpretation of the rules be balanced against the interest of fairness. World Series of Hip Hop decision is final and non-appealable and shall not give rise to any claim for monetary damages.

29. The WSOHH is subject to all applicable federal, state, and local laws and regulations.

30. Tournament Rules and any and all changes in the rules effective as of April 7, 2008 through April 6, 2009 will be available at the tournament facilities.

31. Where a situation arises which is not covered by these rules, World Series of Hip Hop shall have the authority to render a judgment, including the imposition of a penalty, in accordance with the best interests of the tournament and the maintenance of its integrity and public confidence.

SECTION V – RAPPER LIKENESS AND IMAGE
32. Prior to entering and competing in the Tournament, each rapper must execute a Rapper Release Form. Failure to do so may, at the option of World Series of Hip Hop subject the rapper to immediate disqualification at any point in the Tournament. If the rapper is disqualified he or she shall forfeit all entry fees and not be entitled to any Tournament prize monies or any other prize consideration that he or she may have qualified for at the point of disqualification.

33. World Series of Hip Hop reserves the right at all times to ban any apparel or other means of advertising that contains obscene images or words or is otherwise deemed objectionable by World Series of Hip Hop. World Series of Hip Hop also reserves the right to exclude any individual(s) acting in a disruptive or inappropriate manner.

SECTION VI – PRIZING AND CIPHER ASSIGNMENTS

34. First three (3) opening rounds of the tournament will consist of one (1) minute rounds. Subsequent rounds will consist of one minute and thirty seconds (1:30). Final 8 through Championship rounds will consist of two minute (2) rounds.

35. Prize structures are set forth in Section IX. Prizes and entries are non-transferable.

36. Rappers will be assigned a Cipher and slot time through a random computer selection.

37. If the rapper is not present at his/her assigned Cipher no more than two (2) minutes after the slotted time, his/her opponent shall advance to the next round and the offending rapper shall record a defeat. If rapper shows up after his/her slot time but enters the Cipher before two minutes have elapsed he/she may compete. Judges will award first round to opponent of offending rapper.

SECTION VII – WSOHH SCORING RULES

38. Matches are scored on a three (3) category; five (5) points must system. The three categories being: 1. Lyrics; 2. Flow; 3. Presence. Judges must award five points in each category to the rapper they believed to be most efficient in the respective category of the round.

39. Judges will penalize rappers for violations inside the Cipher during a match. Cipher violations are: 1. Talking (TK)- Judges may penalize 3 points to the offending rapper for talking and/or making any sound effects during opponents active time. This penalty may also be incurred by a rapper continuing to rap after his/her allotted time has lapsed. 2. Touching (T) - Judges may penalize 3 points to the offending rapper for touching his/her opponent at anytime while inside the Cipher. 3. Stuttering (S) - Judges may penalize 3 points to the offending rapper for stammering or stopping during his/her delivery. 4. Props (P) - Judges my penalize 3 points to the offending rapper for the use of any items inside the Cipher to enhance his/her performance.
40. “Body”: If judges award the first two rounds to a rapper, the so awarded rapper automatically advances to the next round, his/her opponent records a defeat. The rappers forgo the third and final round.

41. Score Card Decision: If the first two rounds of a match are split between rappers, they will continue for a third and final round. At the conclusion of the third round the score cards are collected by WSOHH staff and delivered to the onsite score card panel. At the end of the respective round results will be posted along with matches for the next round.

Sample Score Card:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MATCH RESULTS</th>
<th>LYRICS</th>
<th>FLOW</th>
<th>PRESENCE</th>
<th>PENALTIES</th>
<th>TOTALS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RAPPER A</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>T (-3), S (-3)</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAPPER B</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>TK (-3), T (-3)</td>
<td>-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAPPER A</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>P (-3)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAPPER B</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

MATCH RESULTS:
In round 1 Rapper B earned 10 points for exhibiting a better Flow and Presence, while Rapper A had the better Lyrics of the round. Rapper A was penalized twice, once for touching his opponent and once for stopping in the middle of his delivery, thus Rapper one ends the round with a deficit of -1.
AFTER ROUND 1: RAPPER B LEADS 10 to -1
In round 2 Rapper A came on strong winning all categories and earning 15 points for the round. While Rapper B incurred two penalties ending the round with a deficit of -6.
AFTER ROUND 2: RAPPER A LEADS 14 (-1 + 15) to 4 (10 + -6)
NOTE: The first two rounds are split so we continue to a third and final round.
In round 3 Rapper A is awarded 5 points for having the better Lyrics of the round and is penalized for using a prop in the match, ending the round with a total of 2 points. Rapper
B is awarded for both Flow and Presence and does not incur any penalties for the round for a total of 10 points.

RAPPER A WINS THE MATCH 16 (-1 + 15 + 2) to 14 (10 + -6 + 10)

NOTE: Rapper B won rounds 1 and 3 but loses the match on points, primarily because of penalties incurred.

SECTION VIII – MOST VALUABLE CREW AWARD ELIGIBILITY

42. To be eligible for the Most Valuable Crew Award and its accompanying cash prize as set forth in Section IX, a Crew must have a minimum of three rappers competing and in good standing. Each member must have acknowledged and named the Crew on his/her registration form at the time of registration. At no time will any changes be allowed to any rappers registration form to add/change crew affiliations.

43. If a Crew member is disqualified from tournament competition for any reason his/her crew will not be eligible for the Most Valuable Crew Award and its accompanying cash prize.

44. The cash prize will be made payable to the Crew name only. WSOHH has no jurisdiction as to the disbursement of these funds.

45. Scoring formula for the Most Valuable Crew Award is as follows:
   1st Round Loss = -20
   1st Round Win = .5
   2nd Round Loss = -15
   2nd Round Win = 1
   3rd Round Loss = -10
   3rd Round Win = 5

   Subsequent rounds Losses increase by 5 and Wins increase by 5.

   Example:
   Rd. 4 Loss = -5, Win = 10
   Rd. 5 Loss = 0, Win = 15
   Rd. 6 Loss = 5, Win = 20

   Crew is awarded 10 point bonus for each member advancing to Championship Rounds. Each Crew’s total score is then divided by the number of members competing in the rap battle tournament; the result is the Crew’s final score.

46. In the event of a tie score, the Crews will face off in a five round battle. Each round will consist of three (3) minutes. Only one Crew member may rap in any one round. No one Crew member may rap for more than two rounds. Judges may declare a “Body” if one Crew has won the first three consecutive rounds, otherwise the match continues for the full five rounds and the score cards are tallied. If the score cards are tied, the battle goes into Sudden Death rounds.
By submitting a Pre-Registration form and Registration Fee to World Series of Hip Hop for registration in and/or participation in the WSOHH, such persons and/or entities agree to these rules.

SECTION IX – BATTLE RAP TOURNAMENT PRIZE STRUCTURE*

Most Valuable Crew Award
The winner of the Most Valuable Crew Award will earn a cash prize of $100,000

HEAVYWEIGHT MALE
Final 64-Heavyweight Male rappers who advance to the final 64 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $1,000.
Final 32-Heavyweight Male rappers who advance to the final 32 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $2,500.
Final 16-Heavyweight Male rappers who advance to the final 16 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $5,000.
Final 8-Heavyweight Male rappers who advance to the final 8 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $25,000.
Final 4-Heavyweight Male rappers who advance to the final 4 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $50,000.
Championship Round-Heavyweight Male rapper who suffers defeat in the championship round earns a cash prize of $100,000
HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION MALE earns cash prize of $1,000,000

HEAVYWEIGHT FEMALE
Final 64-Heavyweight Female rappers who advance to the final 64 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $1,000.
Final 32-Heavyweight Female rappers who advance to the final 32 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $2,500.
Final 16-Heavyweight Female rappers who advance to the final 16 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $5,000.
Final 8-Heavyweight Female rappers who advance to the final 8 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $25,000.
Final 4-Heavyweight Female rappers who advance to the final 4 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $50,000.
Championship Round-Heavyweight Female rapper who suffers defeat in the championship round earns a cash prize of $100,000
HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION FEMALE earns cash prize of $1,000,000

MIDDLEWEIGHT MALE
Final 64-Middleweight Male rappers who advance to the final 64 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $500.
Final 32-Middleweight Male rappers who advance to the final 32 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $1,250.
Final 16-Middleweight Male rappers who advance to the final 16 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $2,500.
Final 8-Middleweight Male rappers who advance to the final 8 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $12,500.
Final 4-Middleweight Male rappers who advance to the final 4 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $25,000.
Championship Round-Middleweight Male rapper who suffers defeat in the championship round earns a cash prize of $50,000
MIDDLEWEIGHT CHAMPION MALE earns cash prize of $500,000

MIDDLEWEIGHT FEMALE
Final 64-Middleweight Female rappers who advance to the final 64 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $500.
Final 32-Middleweight Female rappers who advance to the final 32 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $1,250.
Final 16-Middleweight Female rappers who advance to the final 16 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $2,500.
Final 8-Middleweight Female rappers who advance to the final 8 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $12,500.
Final 4-Middleweight Female rappers who advance to the final 4 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $25,000.
Championship Round-Middleweight Female rapper who suffers defeat in the championship round earns a cash prize of $50,000
MIDDLEWEIGHT CHAMPION FEMALE earns cash prize of $500,000

LIGHTWEIGHT MALE
Final 64-Lightweight Male rappers who advance to the final 64 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $250.
Final 32-Lightweight Male rappers who advance to the final 32 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $625.
Final 16-Lightweight Male rappers who advance to the final 16 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $1,250.
Final 8-Lightweight Male rappers who advance to the final 8 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $6,250.
Final 4-Lightweight Male rappers who advance to the final 4 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $12,500.
Championship Round-Lightweight Male rapper who suffers defeat in the championship round earns a cash prize of $25,000
LIGHTWEIGHT CHAMPION MALE earns cash prize of $250,000

LIGHTWEIGHT FEMALE
Final 64-Lightweight Female rappers who advance to the final 64 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $250.
Final 32-Lightweight Female rappers who advance to the final 32 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $625.
Final 16-Lightweight Female rappers who advance to the final 16 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $1,250.
Final 8-Lightweight Female rappers who advance to the final 8 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $6,250.
Final 4-Lightweight Female rappers who advance to the final 4 round and suffer defeat in that round earn a cash prize of $12,500.
Championship Round-Lightweight Female rapper who suffers defeat in the championship round earns a cash prize of $25,000
LIGHTWEIGHT CHAMPION FEMALE earns cash prize of $250,000

*Prize structure based on minimum amount of registrations, WSOHH may increase or decrease prize structure based on total number of registrants. Final prize structure will be posted on http://www.wsohh.com/ August 1, 2008.
APPENDIX C

HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL AND INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Office of the Vice President For Research
Human Subjects Committee
Tallahassee, Florida 32306-2742
(850) 644-8673 · FAX (850) 644-4392

APPROVAL MEMORANDUM

Date: 10/3/2008

To: Timothy Storhoff
Address: 603 E. Call St. #602 Tallahassee, FL 32301
Dept.: MUSIC SCHOOL

From: Thomas L. Jacobson, Chair

Re: Use of Human Subjects in Research
Head-to-Head Musical Conflict: The Competitive Aspects of Hip Hop Culture in Rap, Dance, and DJ Battles

The application that you submitted to this office in regard to the use of human subjects in the proposal referenced above have been reviewed by the Secretary, the Chair, and two members of the Human Subjects Committee. Your project is determined to be Exempt per 45 CFR § 46.101(b)2 and has been approved by an expedited review process.

The Human Subjects Committee has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human participants and the aspects of the proposal related to potential risk and benefit. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals, which may be required.

If you submitted a proposed consent form with your application, the approved stamped consent form is attached to this approval notice. Only the stamped version of the consent form may be used in recruiting research subjects.

If the project has not been completed by 10/2/2009 you must request a renewal of approval for continuation of the project. As a courtesy, a
renewal notice will be sent to you prior to your expiration date; however, it is your responsibility as the Principal Investigator to timely request renewal of your approval from the Committee.

You are advised that any change in protocol for this project must be reviewed and approved by the Committee prior to implementation of the proposed change in the protocol. A protocol change/amendment form is required to be submitted for approval by the Committee. In addition, federal regulations require that the Principal Investigator promptly report, in writing any unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risks to research subjects or others.

By copy of this memorandum, the Chair of your department and/or your major professor is reminded that he/she is responsible for being informed concerning research projects involving human subjects in the department, and should review protocols as often as needed to insure that the project is being conducted in compliance with our institution and with DHHS regulations.

This institution has an Assurance on file with the Office for Human Research Protection. The Assurance Number is IRB00000446.

Cc: Frank Gunderson, Advisor
HSC No. 2008.1716
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

I freely and voluntarily consent to be a participant in the research project entitled “Head-to-Head Musical Conflict: The Competitive Aspects of Hip Hop Culture in Rap, Dance, and DJ Battles.”

This research is being conducted by Tim Storhoff, a graduate student in ethnomusicology at Florida State University. I understand that this research project is to better understand the role head-to-head competition plays in hip hop musical culture specifically in the areas of rapping, breakdancing, and turntablism. I understand that if I agree to participate in this project I will be asked questions about these topics.

The total time commitment will be from one to two hours. I understand my participation is totally voluntary and I may stop participation at any time.

I understand that my conversations with Tim Storhoff will be documented with an audio and/or video recorder and later transcribed. I understand that these recordings will be used for research purposes only. I understand that any music or performance recorded will not be used for commercial purposes. I understand that with my permission, all tapes will be deposited in the EVIA ethnomusicology digital archive at Indiana University at the conclusion of the project.

I understand that I may contact Tim Storhoff (tps07d@fsu.edu; 701-306-7736) for answers to questions about this research or my above mentioned rights.

I understand that I can agree to be identified by my stage name or to remain completely anonymous in the final written product resulting from this interview. I understand that all information will remain confidential, to the extent allowed by law.

I understand that if I have any further questions, I may contact the advising professor for this project, Frank Gunderson (fgunderson@fsu.edu; 850-644-6106) or the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Florida State University, through the Human Subjects Office (850-644-7900).
I have read and understand this consent form and agree to be identified by my stage name/alias. I agree to have my interview tapes deposited in the EVIA archive at Indiana University.

_______________________________________________    _______________________
']==(Subject)                                                                                                  (Date)

_______________________________________________
(Witness)

I have read and understand this consent form and wish to remain anonymous. I agree to have my interview tapes deposited in the EVIA archive at Indiana University.

_______________________________________________    _______________________
']==(Subject)                                                                                                  (Date)

_______________________________________________
(Witness)

I have read and understand this consent form and agree to be identified by my stage name/alias. I do not agree to have my interview tapes deposited in the EVIA archive at Indiana University.

_______________________________________________    _______________________
']==(Subject)                                                                                                  (Date)

_______________________________________________
(Witness)

I have read and understand this consent form and wish to remain anonymous. I do not agree to have my interview tapes deposited in the EVIA archive at Indiana University.

_______________________________________________    _______________________
']==(Subject)                                                                                                  (Date)

_______________________________________________
(Witness)
APPENDIX D

GLOSSARY

**B-boy/B-girl** – A person who breaks (breakdances) or, more broadly, someone devoted to hip hop culture.

**Battle** – A head-to-head duel in hip hop culture, typically conducted in a turn-based format allowing the participants to insult and respond to one another directly.

**Battle record** – A record specifically designed for turntablism and for use in competition. It typically contains many short, repeated tracks and spoken phrases that a DJ can use with various turntable techniques and to craft insults.

**Beat boxing** – Vocally producing percussion sounds, most typically a drum beat, that rappers can then perform over.

**Beat juggle** – A difficult turntablist technique that involves isolating and manipulating individual drum beats or vocal phrases on a record, in order to create a unique composition using multiple turntables.

**Bite** – To steal a rhyme or routine from someone else and use it as one’s own.

**Break** – The portion of a dance or funk record where the melody line drops out, and the drummer is allowed to solo or play with the bass. Kool Herc pioneered the technique of extending the break on records which was especially appealing to dancers.

**Breaking (Breakdancing)** – The hip hop dance form that became associated with the break section of a record. The dance can be done upright (top rock) and on the ground (footwork). Its original influences were James Brown’s “Good Foot,” salsa, tap, Brooklyn-style uprocking, and Afro-Caribbean dances. Commonly referred to as b-boying or b-girling.

**Burn** – An insult. Also refers to gestures done towards opponents during dance battles.

**Cipher** – A circle of people which forms around b-boy and rap battles that contains participants and observers.

**Crew** – A group of hip hop performers that can represent just one or all of hip hop’s elements.

**Flow** – How a rapper delivers his lyrics, and it is defined by cadence, prosody, as well as speed.
**Footwork** – The portion of b-boying when the dancer is on the ground, using their arms to balance while their legs execute various techniques.

**Foundation** – The basic techniques and moves of b-boying upon which individual style is built. Foundation often includes basic top rock, footwork, and freezes.

**Freestyle** – Improvised style of performance which is closely associated with hip hop’s musical elements and battling.

**Joking Relationship** – A combination of friendliness and antagonism that forces behavior that would regularly be considered hostile to not be taken seriously and allows battles to remain nonviolent.

**Locking** – A West coast funk dance form that is now associated with hip hop. The dance features the locking of arm and body joints to the beat of the music combined with relaxed hip and leg movements.

**MC** – Microphone Controller, used to refer to rappers in the hip hop community. It has also stood for Master of Ceremonies during certain events.

**Popping** – A West coast funk dance form now associated with hip hop that developed out of locking.

**Power move** – Flashy and complex b-boy techniques which include spins and acrobatics.

**Presence** – How one holds themselves and faces their opponent during a battle.

**Rock Steady Crew** – A group of b-boys from the Bronx that formed in the 1970s that was instrumental in the preservation and proliferation of hip hop culture. The Rock Steady Crew is still active today.

**Scratch** – The most basic turntablism technique created by Grand Wizard Theodore. It involves moving the record back and forth with the hand to create a scratching sound.

**Sound System** – A mobile combination of turntables and speakers that was originally popularized for outdoor parties in Jamaica. Kool Herc brought the sound system concept to New York City where it was popularized as a part of hip hop culture.

**Sounding** – An African American verbal dueling tradition. It is also known as woofing, joning, and signifying.

**Top Rock** – The original style of breaking that is done upright.

**Transformer** – A turntablism technique in which the DJ must move the record slowly and steadily forward and then backward while quickly opening and closing the crossfader to cut the extended scratch into a series of sharp, rhythmic noises.
**Turntablism** – Term coined in 1995 by DJ Babu to refer to the art of creating new music with turntables and a mixer and to create a distinction from traditional DJs who play records but are not typically thought of as musicians.

**Uprock** – An upright dance form that developed in Brooklyn and later became associated with hip hop. It typically involves crews lining up and facing one another during competition.

**Zulu Nation** – The organization created by Afrika Bambaataa to promote hip hop culture with the motto of “Peace, Love, Unity and Having Fun.”
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Timothy Storhoff was born in Fargo, North Dakota on April 10, 1984. It was while growing up in Fargo that he became interested in music and began to play the piano, alto saxophone and bassoon. He did his undergraduate studies at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, Iowa where he studied bassoon with Benjamin Coelho and received a Bachelor of Music degree in Bassoon Performance and a Bachelor of Arts degree in American Studies.

Timothy is currently a graduate student in musicology at Florida State University in Tallahassee, Florida. His research interests include the music of the Americas, competitive musical practices and popular culture. He plans on continuing his education at the doctoral level so that he may continue to conduct research, teach and perform for the foreseeable future.