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Autoethnography: The Identity of the Underground Rapper

I'll never forget the night I watched my first rap battle. On my computer screen were two guys slinging rhyming jokes and insults at each other, and despite never being one for disputes myself, I could not help but find some of their lines witty and hilarious. From there, I started watching more battles, and as I became familiar with more rappers, I excitedly delved into the past and present of the culture, becoming engrossed in the world of battling and hip-hop.

Battle rap has been around since the inception of hip-hop. It is a lyrical war of words between two emcees who take turns dissing each other in rhyme form. Originally, battles took place on street corners and were freestyled (Freestyle (verb): The act of rhyming off the top of the head) with relatively simple bars (Bars (noun): The lyrics to a rap song. In its singular form, a "bar" refers to one measure of a verse). In the 90's, an annual freestyle battle tournament called Scribble Jam was started, which attracted emcees from around the world to Cincinnati, Ohio for a shot at being recognized as a Scribble Jam champion. Although Scribble Jam had a strong run, the organizers could not put together any more events after 2008 due to a lack of funds. This is seen by many as the end of the freestyle era.

Despite Scribble Jam becoming a defunct company, there were many battle leagues ready to keep battle rap alive. However, battles were now prepared for in advance, allowing for more complex rhyme schemes and intricate disses. In the early days of the "prewritten era," the prominent league was Grind Time Now, but later, leagues such as Canada's King of the Dot,

New York's Smack/URL, Newark's UW Battle League, and the UK's Don't Flop took over as GTN faded away.

Over the years, the art of battle rap has evolved into a lucrative business with those four leagues putting on major events throughout the year. It is slowly being pushed into the spotlight as figures such as Diddy, Drake, and Eminem are starting to publicly promote it. Despite its mainstream exposure, battle rap is still fundamentally the same as it has always been: a lyrical clash between two emcees who bring real bars to the table.

Although I was introduced to hip-hop by battle rap, at this point in my life, I am far more concerned with music than I am with battling. I started listening to hip-hop music around the time I started watching battle rap, and the music resonated well with me for a few reasons. At first, I liked it simply because I enjoyed the instrumentals and the rappers' voices. However, as I started to pay more attention to the lyrics, everything changed. For the emcees I followed, rap was an outlet through which their voices and thoughts could be heard. I came to fully realize that rap was very much like, if not the same as, poetry. They both incorporate rhyme and rhythm, and they are both ways an artist can express his emotions. Through a rapper's lyrics, I am able to learn more about him and relate to him. At some point, I wanted my own voice and thoughts to be heard, so I started to write my own bars.

When I first started writing during my junior year of high school, I was absolutely terrible. Some may say that I'm being too hard on myself, but they really can't argue with "my lyrics are as clean as your computer screen." I wrote verses like they were a sort of rhyming journal, and I still write to this day.

Sitting on my desktop amid the jungle of syllabi and pictures is a text file simply entitled “BARS.” Again, the term “bars” is another word for “lyrics” in hip-hop culture, and the file contains just that: my rap lyrics. I created BARS while I was on my flight back to New Jersey for winter break so that I could consolidate all of my lines of the past and future into this one file. It contains several complete verses as well as a “Miscellaneous Bars” section, which contains dozens of random punchlines and rhyme schemes I have devised but find no place for in any current projects. I add anything that comes to mind to this file throughout the day, whether it be a short idea or a more complex rhyme scheme.

The bars in this file are not simply a fun collection of rhymes I have written. Rather, they serve as a reflection of my ideas and thought process. And because my bars are arranged chronologically, I can see how these things mature over time.

As the archeologist observes stratum to examine how a civilization changed over the centuries in response to external factors, I go through my past bars and see how events occurring at the times of a verse’s writing affected my lines. The difference is that while the archeologist is detached from his site, I am emotionally attached to what I write. The wall of rhymes I see on the computer screen tells the story of my past and present. Whether it be times of struggle or an infatuation with a cute girl I met in class, I’m inspired by my thoughts and thread them into poetry. I see the creation of this file as the point in time when I wanted to start taking rap more seriously.

And as I started the second semester of college, I did so. However, I realized that I could not grow as an emcee without talking to other more experienced rappers. Coincidentally, an

English project I was working on at the time required me to interview some rappers, so I saw this as an opportunity to talk to some seasoned emcees about hip-hop.

My interviewees were A-Class, Sonny Bamboo, and J9. The first two are established rappers who got their start with battle rap and now make music while still battling around the globe. J9, however, is a friend of mine and an Emory College student. Through my interviews, I was able to get to know more about their perspectives on hip-hop and why it resonates well with them.

The first question I asked all of them was intended to have them think about what drew them to hip-hop and made them identify with the art. Among all three of them, a common reason was that they wanted to make themselves heard, whether it be by “[forging] an identity... as a rapper,” as J9 discussed; rebelling as A-Class did; or wanting to wow crowds as Sonny Bamboo did. I believe that for all of them as well as myself, rap is “a voice for the people who were previously unheard to be heard,” as Sonny articulated to me during his interview.

What differentiated J9 from the others was his discussion of “keeping it real,” which is the main tenant of hip-hop culture. According to him, “the whole concept of the 'hip-hop lifestyle' is to 'keep it real,' and the job of the rapper is to explain what that is to the listener. It’s kind of like how the pastor of a church teaches the congregation how to fear and love God, and in the hip-hop sense, the emcee is teaching the listener what it means to keep it real.” This idea of “keeping it real” stuck with me for a while and made me really think about what it meant.

The next question pertained to their writing style and delivery, and they all had their own distinct answers. J9 put it this way:

Essentially, it starts with one line, and if I think that it's cool, I build upon that. Those moments are the moments where I feel like I'm shining the most, where I know that I'm writing something from my soul. But often, I write maybe four bars and let it sit. But later, I'll be listening to a beat and remember those four bars and continue from there... I'm very much a storyteller. Also, I think I write best when I'm writing with a person in mind because it feels like I'm talking directly to him or her. Those are the songs that come out the most naturally.

For J9, a big part of his writing process is writing from the soul. Sonny Bamboo also mentioned writing from the soul, as he described his style as “presenting deep, hair-raising, emotional kind of real stuff.” A-Class, too, has a very organic way of writing by “[putting] on a beat, [getting] a little cadence going in [his] head, and just [rolling] with it,” as he told me.

I feel like my writing style is very similar to theirs, as whenever I feel like I need to write, I turn on some beats and let my thoughts flow. What first comes to mind is what I want to write about, as the tone of my verse must match the tone of the beat. Once I pick up a rhythm in my head, I start to put words to them.

My first rule of writing is that I can never force anything. For example, even if a song about growing up in desperate conditions may sound profound and deep as a concept, I would not be able to write it because it is simply not my reality. Even if I were to try my best at it, the song would not flow correctly because it is not coming from my heart.

Once I have a topic, I'll try to freestyle about it until I stumble across a good opening line. Starting a verse is very much a game of trial and error. As the miner must first dig through dozens of pounds of rock to get to a few ounces of diamond, I must go through several mediocre lines until I find the perfect one. From there, I must make the verse flow rhythmically as well as have quality lines that are both meaningful and witty.

These two qualities, smooth flow and quality lines, can be very difficult to find a perfect balance between. If I focus too much on my flow, I end up delivering filler line after filler line. On the other hand, if I give too much attention to the punchlines, the verse ends up choppy with several different rhythms and breaks in the flow. The perfect rapper, in my opinion, can make a verse flow without any hiccups while throwing in intelligent references. I put emphasis on "intelligent" because a reference such as "I flow like a water faucet," which I came up with after about two seconds of thought, will simply not suffice for any self-respecting lyricist.

My final question was directed more towards A-Class and Sonny Bamboo, as it was related to living off of music, which J9 did not see in his future. I asked them how they would react if a record company were to offer them a good amount of money to rap a song that they saw as wack (Wack (adjective): Terrible). Although I expected them to say that they would never agree to it, they both expressed reservations about turning such an offer down.

During my conversation with J9, he described what it meant to "keep it real." When I asked him this third question, he told me that it did not apply to him, but he understood the decisions of rappers who would take the offer despite it meaning not sticking to their roots.

After talking to these rappers and thinking about this concept of "keeping it real" myself, I came to realize that "keeping it real" means more than simply writing bars that solely reflect what I'm feeling. This is evidenced by what Sonny Bamboo and A-Class have to deal with. They live off their art--this isn't just something they do for fun. It's what puts bread on their tables, roofs over their heads, and clothes on their backs. Sometimes, rappers must make compromises so that they can pay their bills. Both A-Class and Sonny said that they would never take anything they saw as horrible, but they would try to negotiate. As A-Class told me, "It's real life, man. If I

can get some money that's gonna help me and my people eat, I'll take it." Also, Sonny Bamboo told me that he wants to live off rap, and "even if [he] might see something as kinda corny, [he] would rather be doing what [he loves] than going and flipping burgers." Although in such a case they would not be completely independent with their music, I believe they would be keeping it real by putting real life first and pursuing what they love.

I have come to the conclusion that the emcee must keep it real with himself. He writes lyrics from the heart and is a true artist. However, at the same time, he is just another person trying to survive. Even if he must make compromises to feed his family, he'll do it because he must. While having pride in what he does, he must sometimes put his pride aside and put real life first. The emcee keeps it real not only in his rhymes but also in his life. And as an emcee, this is what I strive for.