

ML is for Music and Lyrics

Hip Hop is a genre fueled by music and lyrics, poetically formed together through the voice of the artist, transforming the body into an instrument used along with the music. My personal journey with Hip Hop has shaped a lot of my life and is something that I cherish. The goal of this project was to create my own Hip Hop lyrics to record and document what my experience was like during that process.

Interest Sparked by an Experience

My experience that sparked my interest for this project is my life. Really, my life has been driven by music for as far back as I can remember. I don't remember the first steps I took or being potty trained, but I do remember the first time I heard Dr. Dre. I can't quite recall all the toys I had as a kid, I don't even think I remember the clothes I used to wear, but I do remember sitting in front of my dad's CD collection staring at all the names, Jay-Z, Tupac, Notorious B.I.G., he even had a couple albums from Led Zeppelin and The Doors. I grew up listening to my dad rap in the kitchen, listening to instrumentals on his stereo, while I'd be in my room making up my own rhymes to whatever he was writing to. I figured, if I had to hear the beat over and over anyway I might as well rhyme to it too.

As I got older I became addicted to music, I had to be in the presence of music, even if I didn't quite understand the lyrics. If you asked me what I listened to at different points in my life you might get a lot of different answers. If you asked when I was nine or ten, I would've said Eminem is my favorite rapper hands down, no contest. If you asked when I was twelve or thirteen I would've said I'm really into Cam'Ron and Kanye West or something, but if you checked my CD player I was probably listening to Gorillaz or Daft Punk. At fifteen I was listening to a lot of Beastie Boys and Ice Cube but Staind and System of a Down could also be found on my ipod if you look close enough. By eighteen I started my collection of music, and now if you ask I have to give you a bunch of different answers, just because I listen to so much.

To accompany my love for music I gained a love for lyrics. My dad raised me to pay attention to what was being said in a song first before the beat or just a catchy chant. Before sixth grade I probably didn't practice this, I just liked to hear the rhymes. But when I did start listening and start understanding, I started feeling. Every word became my own word, when I felt trapped or like the world was against me, Hip Hop became my outlet. I started writing my own lyrics at thirteen, but never thought I could pursue music in any way, so I never actually rapped them out loud, I would just write them.

The Dynamic Between Me and Nature

During this project, I spent a lot of time in a secluded soundproofed room. The first time I recorded I found myself weighted with an unusual anxiety. The very first time I recorded my voice was when I was eight, my dad had said he wanted me to try and write my own lyrics and rap them to the music. So I sat there on the floor writing words down on our living room table for about ten minutes then sat in the chair in our kitchen next to the microphone to record them. The rap was pretty bad, some of the words didn't even rhyme and when I spoke them they were off beat. I walked back into the living room to receive a barrage of smiles and laughter when I returned, and to my eight year old mind that meant I was being made fun of.

So I never recorded anything again, I instead kept all my raps a secret from the world. Until this project, where I would face my fear of recording my voice. I stood there awhile waiting for something to happen, trying to press any word I could out of my body, but nothing. I froze up every time I started to speak.

"Rap is an oral poetry, so it naturally relies more heavily than literary poetry on devices of sound. The MC's poetic toolbox shares many of the same basic instruments as the literary poets, but it also includes others specifically suited to the demands of oral expression...Add to this those

elements the MC draws from music, tonal quality, vocal inflection and so forth, and rap reveals itself as a poetry uniquely fitted to oral performance.”

Bradley, (xvii)

Reading this excerpt from *Book of Rhymes* made me think, Hip Hop is reliant on music and lyrics, but the music and lyrics of Hip Hop are reliant on the voice. Of course there is the instrumental track that creates the song itself, and that plays a very important part, but the musicality of the voice and the way the lyrics are written are what make the artist an artist. There’s an air of confidence every artist has to have in order to create effectively, like a basketball player dribbling down court and getting ready to shoot, they have to be positive that they can do it, in order to avoid any mistakes. So what was blocking my air of confidence? Nobody was in the room with me, it was late so no one was in the library to walk past and catch a glimpse of me working, so what was the issue?

Conversation as Process

I sat for a minute and observed the room, I had never even been in here, I felt I needed to learn it from corner to corner and build up a relationship of trust with it. The silence in the room was beautiful, quietly speaking, it opened itself up to me, in a way that said “you can make any noise you want right here, right now, and nobody will hear you”. As a test of the rooms honesty, I turned on some music and started rapping the lyrics to songs that I knew. My voice began as a low whisper, I felt comfort here, at a level where I could speak but not be heard. But I needed to be uncomfortable, I raised it to a raspy tone between speaking and whispering. I was less comfortable but it was like halfway stepping into a pool of cold water, you might as well jump in. I jumped, a bit too deep I think. I was standing in this room, alone, practically yelling by the second song, and had now built up the confidence to record something myself.

The first few times I recorded, it felt forced. I was still carrying the anxiety of many years of fear of being heard. But that was why I was doing this, to be heard. So, after a few times, I produced my own therapy, I didn’t even want to leave the room. Just having that space where I

could be myself, with no judgement, no interruption, it was liberating. I began recording as much as possible, after a while I forgot I was doing any of this for a project, I just wanted to get away. That room became my sanctuary, my place of peace and comfort and where I could speak freely.

My dad once told me about rap, "it's not what you say but how you say it". When he said that, I understood it as I just needed to change the way my voice sounded and I would be fine. But during this project I thought about that more and more. I can only change my voice so far, so what could he have meant? As I read into *Book of Rhymes*, I found it to mean something more than that. It was about feeling the music, it was about using your voice as an instrument even when you couldn't sing. Matching the rhythm of your words to the music, using a unique style to tell your story in a way that fits the energy of the instrumental. In recording this way, you become the instrument, like a violin or a piano, and you have all the right notes and words at your disposal.

But also like a violin or a piano, you must learn how to use this instrument. I ended up at this point when I realized that my voice never really changed inflection the way it does when i'm speaking. So I began exploring the range of my instrument, making my voice louder, quieter, changing the way that I said things so that I could create this oral art. The challenge is to make the music of the voice reflect the music of the lyrics, and there I hit some speed bumps. This isn't something that is just learned overnight, especially alone, it's a work in progress. But I found that the trick is to figure out the middle ground between the feeling in the lyrics, speaking the lyrics in a way that reflects the emotion and is unique, and also being able to keep the musicality in the voice while recording.

Time consuming and tedious, recording sessions take a lot out of me. Without having any windows, i'm pretty sure I would stay in that room until the sun was up, but when I did decide to leave, I left exhausted. In exchange for it's services, I gave my microphone all the energy I had through my breath, through multiple takes, through standing for hours on end,

dedicated to what we were here to do. It was like a full circle, I brought the lyrics, contributed them into the microphone, the microphone put it through the interface, into my laptop and made them part of the music. Then, after all of this was done, I would listen to my music, I would feel it and have a sense of self satisfaction with a slight smirk coming across my face every time, even if I had made a mistake.

Experience Gained in Self and Nature

The experience I feel I have had during this project has been interesting. As far as my anxiety about recording my voice, I don't feel it's completely gone, but I have at least overpowered it. That room, that room and I have built up a relationship, I can't possibly go the rest of the year, month, maybe even day without going to visit. It's soundless sound of silence drives me internally, pushes me to push myself but holds me back when I push too hard and try too much too soon. I feel as though my voice and I are better discovering each other. I'm discovering it by testing its limits and finding out new ways to use it. It's discovering me by waiting to see which words I choose to spout out of it.

Making Hip Hop music is a grueling process, it requires a lot of it's creator, without really anything immediately in return. I spent a ton of time trying to figure out if I should just be speaking in my normal voice or kind of half singing, and figuring out how to rap in the pocket of the beat, out of the pocket, should I be at a whisper or a yell, and when should I gasp for air? It's ridiculous, but I love it all the same, I would do it all day long if I could. Writing Hip Hop lyrics is like a process before the process, deciding on content, wordplay, rhyme patterns, and making it rhythmic enough to be exciting to a listener and fit into a Hip Hop instrumental. But the positive feelings and satisfaction I get from rhyming words together surpasses any negative ones.