

Thibeault, M. D. (2010). Hip-hop, digital media, and the changing face of music education. *General Music Today*, 24(1), 46 –49.
doi:10.1177/1048371310379097

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Hip-hop, digital media, and the changing face of music education

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Here's a story you can share with your students: a young man wants to make hip-hop music and share it with the world. Devoted, he constantly writes and records raps on top of his friend's beats, sharing the songs via the internet. He also lifts beats from other people, using digital software to sample and loop the beats from other popular songs, over which he records new rhymes. He even samples some of his own rhymes, reinserting and developing them into new songs that he releases. He dreams of taking all he has learned to put out an album on a major label that goes to the top of the charts, with all the kids around the country and especially where he grew up infatuated with every song he releases.

It's a true story about Dwayne Carter Jr., a rapper most music educators probably don't know but beloved throughout the world as Lil Wayne, or Weezy, or a host of other nicknames. Although he released music on a label for nearly a decade, during 2007 virtually all of his work was released solely online through a series of free downloads and illegal leaks. He was astonishingly prolific, often recording three or four new songs a day (Frere-Jones, 2007). He recorded so many songs that *Vibe* magazine felt the need to assist their readers in weeding through them with their November 2007 cover story, "The 77 Best Weezy Songs of 2007". Many of Wayne's songs were built upon the beats of other artists, including a double CD set called *Da Drought 3*. This album consisted entirely of

Lil Wayne's new versions of hip-hop hits by other artists, 29 tracks that in many instances are more highly regarded than the original songs he built upon. This level of output led Pitchfork reviewer Ryan Dombel to write, "He's given away more worthwhile free music online than most artists of his stature ever release officially." (Dombal, 2008).

All of these albums were unofficially leaked or posted on the internet, provided to fans at no charge, but Lil Wayne did profit indirectly. He used the ideas and feedback he collected when he went into the studio, recording *Tha Carter III*. Released in June of 2008, it went on to sell 2.88 million copies, making it the top selling recording of the year in the United States, enough for nearly 1% of the population or 2.5% of all households to own one (Hasty, 2008).

Critics overwhelmingly proclaimed Lil Wayne the top rapper in the hip-hop game, and the album and his work leading up to it were universally regarded as some of the most important hip-hop music available (Christgau, 2008). His fans, including young students and teachers in his hometown of New Orleans, obsessed over everything he released. One of the richest portraits of a teacher connecting with his students through music can be found in, "I Will Forever Remain Faithful", David Ramsey's essay, with a title drawn from a Lil Wayne line (Ramsey, 2009). The author details the incredible challenges in his first year teaching in post-Katrina New Orleans, where he was assessed by his students through his answers to questions about where he was from, whether he had "a lady", and whether he listened to "that Weezy". The article is structured around a series of quotes from Lil Wany as Ramsey details how students loaned him stacks of Lil Wayne's mixtapes and he found that, "My kids sang his songs in class, in the hallways, before school, after school. I had a student who would rap a Lil Wayne line if he didn't know the

answer to a question.” (p. 8). Lil Wayne, the young man who dreamed of making it big had more than arrived, becoming a global phenomenon.

I expect most readers found much of the previous description of Lil Wayne’s creative practice alien to their own ideas about teaching music. Many traditional musicians can’t imagine being an artist who samples recordings, who makes their music exclusively in the studio rather than in face-to-face performance, who predominantly performs via the internet, who gives away their recordings, and who raps instead of playing an instrument or singing in Western art style. I also expect that some educators would not like Lil Wayne’s recordings if they listened to them, and they often as explicit as old blues singers. Nevertheless, his work is a concrete example of the mainstream level of hip-hop, as well as some of the new musical practices that are emerging from digital media: new ways to be a musician, new ways to perform, and new music that is fundamentally different from what is offered in most music education programs. Throughout the rest of this article, I will lay out some of the big ideas at play and some of the leading scholars who are addressing these ideas.

Hip-Hop as Post-Performance Musical Practice

If it were merely the case that hip-hop were another musical culture, and that music teachers should try to teach them all, I think it would be hard to convince teachers to spend the time and energy it takes to credibly present hip-hop to their students. Instead, I would like to build a case that hip-hop exemplifies and uniquely embodies important and growing trends all educators should consider. Hip-hop may well be the best way to

explore and understand trends in music, musician, and audience that will have profound educational implications.

These trends cluster around the notion that musical practice has entered an age I describe as 'post-performance' (Thibeault, in press). Simply stated, musical experience through in-person performance by musicians is becoming an increasingly small part of our lives, with most musical experiences had through recordings. These recordings consist of musical materials edited and synthesized to a degree that calls into question their status as a performance. Just as tonality moved from being the only musical reality to an option with the rise of atonal music in the early 20th Century, I believe that performance has moved from being the only way to present music to become one among many options that also include recording, computer synthesis, sampling, remixing, and more. Coming to terms with this reality will help the profession alter and broaden the variety of ways to share music.

Even for devoted performers such as my students, nearly all their musical experience comes through recorded sound. All commercial recordings are heavily edited and consist of the best of multiple takes (yes, even classical recordings), and many more recordings consist of music that is only remotely connected to live performance—whether synthesized, remixed, digitally generated, etc. As Sasha Frere-Jones, music critic of *The New Yorker*, writes, “In reality, the unsullied object is the Sasquatch of music. Even a purely live recording is a distortion and paraphrasing of an acoustic event.” (2008). These ideas, clustered around the implications of recorded music and the reproducibility of music are key in the emerging field of “sound studies” (Sterne, 2003), scholarship around remixing (Lessig, 2008) and the convergence culture made ubiquitous through digital

media (Jenkins, 2006; Manovich, 2002), but they date all the way back to Walter Benjamin's classic essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (Benjamin, 1935/1986), as well as "Art and Civilization", the final chapter of John Dewey's *Art at Experience* (1934/1980).

Some more ideas and resources for teaching with hip-hop

Sampling and remixing not only provide hip-hop an efficient way to create a new track upon which to write new rhymes, they bring along their own aesthetic dimensions.

Sampling allows us to bring musicians from across space and time to be part of our own artistic process, and even if a drummer could perform and record a beat from a James Brown track, as Mark Katz (2004) writes that, "to do so would be to miss the point of hip-hop sampling completely." (p. 145). Juxtaposing, manipulating, and repurposing samples carries a special artistic weight.

Repetition is also a device within hip-hop that scholars have explored. Musicologist Susan McClary connects the repetitive structures of time found in hip-hop with minimalism, suggesting that hip-hop and minimalism should be understood as reactions to the prior dominance of epic narrative music such as the symphonies of Mahler and Beethoven (McClary, 1998). Robert Fink points out that to live in our corporate-manufactured age is to be deeply immersed in a minimalist aesthetic, from rows of desks in schools and Suzuki violin concerts, to endless supermarket aisles filled with repetitious packaging (Fink, 2005). Sampling also invites liberal doses of corporate and popular culture, distant from most music education but common to many arts, with the writer David Foster Wallace saying of popular culture references, "Me and a lot of other young

writers I know, we use these references sort of the way romantic poets use lakes and trees.” (Lipsky, 2010). Digitally produced music, then, captures and embodies something of the way that we live our lives, something of the digital corporate landscape in which we find ourselves immersed. Hip-hop offers opportunities to reconsider what it is to be alive right now, surrounded by repetition, and mass production, and sampled soundbites.

In addition to the broader ideas previously presented, hip-hop culture and music are specifically the subject of much important and valuable scholarly work. Teachers who find themselves without background or interest in hip-hop can easily consult some of the following resources, many of which can be screened and shared in part with students of all ages. For the elementary school practitioner, I know of no better volume than *Hip-Hop Speaks to Children: A Celebration of Poetry with a Beat*, a book/CD collection of poetry edited by Nikki Giovanni (Giovanni, 2008). I have reviewed elsewhere in depth (Thibeault, 2010). The quality of the illustrations are superb and the recorded examples both valid and valuable. The book also conveys a convincing overall frame that places hip-hop as part of the rich vein of 20th-century African-American artistic culture and a direct descendent of the Harlem Renaissance.

Films and books remain wonderful ways to connect with hip-hop culture, and there are plenty of outstanding examples. The early years of hip-hop, when it existed in the South Bronx, are on view in the classic film *Wild Style* (Ahearn, 1982). The culture of hip-hop “writers”, graffiti artists whose work arose during the 1970s in New York, can be seen in action in the wonderful documentary *Style Wars* (Silver, Chalfant, & Public Art Films, 2004), and are beautifully-photographed by the artist Henry Chalfant in his book *Subway Art* (Chalfant & Cooper, 1984). For those interested in exploring the turntable as a

musical instrument, the movie *Scratch* is indispensable (Pray, 2001), along with a wonderful chapter by Mark Katz on DJ Battling (Katz, 2004). Terry Gross recorded a series of interviews with hip-hop pioneers such as Kool Herc and Grandmaster Flash that can be listened to online as part of Fresh Air's 2005 "Hip-Hop Week" (Gross, 2005). Jeff Chang provides an indispensable history, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: a History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (Chang, 2005), a wonderful supplement to the still-invaluable *Rap Attack 3* (Toop, 2000). A selection of essays dealing with hip-hop, *Critical Minded: New Approaches to Hip Hop Studies* contains many valuable readings (Hisama & Rapport, 2005). For those interested in the linguistic aspects of hip-hop, Stanford professor H. Samy Alim has written several valuable books (Alim, 2004, 2006; Spady, Meghelli, & Alim, 2006).

Hip-hop is here to stay and impossible to dismiss as a fad given its nearly 40-year history as well as dominance in both the music industry and public imagination. If more music teachers take time to understand this musical culture and some of the larger trends it exemplifies, they likely will reach more students, especially those who presently choose not to participate in our music programs. Digital media and the musical creations it foments will undoubtedly continue to grow and take on an increasing prominence within the larger culture and our school music programs. It would be welcome if school music programs reflected these developments, creating a new generation of artists as prolific and inventive as Lil Wayne.

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