

VERBAL ART PERFORMANCE IN RAP MUSIC:
THE CONVERSATION OF THE 80'S

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Rap music is a popular musical genre which makes extensive use of rhyme, nonsense syllables and music. New York's South Bronx and Harlem are credited as its birthplace. This style of rapping can be traced to that of black radio disc jockeys (deejays). One such deejay known for his rapping rhymed lines was Douglas "Jocko" Henderson, "the most popular of radio personalities" (in New York), whose '1280 Rocket' show on WOV anticipated a hip hop (1) fascination with themes from outer space:

From way up here in the stratosphere,
We gotta hollar mighty loud and clear
'ee-tiddy-o and how yo do!
(Hager 1984:45)

Kurtis Blow, the self-proclaimed Godfather of rap music, stated that "the thing that broke rapping out of Harlem and the Bronx and made people take notice was Deejay Hollywood's appearance at the Apollo Theatre" (Billboard 1980, Feb. 16 :57). The style of rapping characteristic of Hollywood is the 'coordinated rap' which basically allows the deejay to talk to his audience in a conversational fashion which further elicits call-response between deejay and audience. The 'coordinated rap' may be considered the foundation from which the present-day rap evolved.

The rap as it is known today is a recent musical genre. Unlike many other black musical forms where music takes precedence, in rap music talking or rapping becomes the highlight of performance. Performance in rap music is based on black speech acts (i.e. the dozens, signifying, sounding), and on rhetorical skills such as braggadocio, metaphor, play on words, mimicry, and folk expressions. A number of folklorists and linguists have devoted much attention to these speech acts and other rhetorical folk idioms, particularly those of the black urban community. (2) In general, rapping is a stylized form of conversational folklore which is defined as a

"fluent, lively way of talking characterized by a high degree of personal narration" (Kochman 1970: 146).

Since the popularization of rap music in 1979, few scholarly studies of this musical genre have been done. The music and rhyme of rap music entail several forms of black speech acts which are used in a subtle and artistic way by the rapper. This paper will discuss aspects of verbal art performance in rap music. It will also discuss black speech acts manifested in the music and examine how these speech acts are manipulated in performance.

Several features of black talk contribute to an artful or stylized effect because they call attention to the conversation as a performance (Abrahams 1970: 136). The artistic usage of language is significant in black communication as exhibited in folk preaching, narrative forms, and black talk. The rap is an urban modification of the latter. Although the term often means ordinary conversation, Kochman's definition suggests that it is an artistic performance.

Many blacks continued to use raps in their daily lives, but it was not until the group Sugarhill Gang popularized rapping in a musical form in the latter part of 1979 that blacks began to consciously take notice of the style outside its cultural context and function. When informant Patricia Greer was asked when she learned about rapping, she replied:

Well rappin' in itself for as just speaking rappin' it must have been at a very early age...somewhere around ten or eleven...because my brother use to get on the phone and talk to girls and "let me rap to you baby"...you know and all of that and that's basically a part of rappin' that I learned; and also, then when the rap first begin to come out that...uh...Sugarhill Gang...the first one that was done to the music of Chic', and that's when I really got into rap. (3)

The artistic performance in rap music derives from the performer's style, the theme, the composition of narrative in rhyming couplets, and the use of speech acts and devices fitting together to make a point. Many of the themes of

rap address social aspects of black urban life: partying, the desire to be the best, and social commentary on issues and problems of the world.

A characteristic context for the performance of rap music is one in which the rapper arouses his audience. He may begin by engaging his audience in call-response and simply introducing himself and his purpose. Two examples demonstrate the rapper's tactics for gaining audience attention and arousal by introducing himself and his purpose.

1. Clap yo' hands everybody
You've got what it takes

'Cuz I'm Kurtis Blow and I wan' chu to know
that these are the breaks.

2. rapper: Don't chu wanna have a party
audience: Yeah! (repeat)
rapper: Then scream.

[See discography notes]

In many instances, a rapper's salutation to the audience is not formulaic, unlike the narrative rhyme section. The introduction is crucial and is spontaneously created by the rapper according to the audience's mood. Audience interplay becomes essential in the presentation of the main text. One may regard the individual competence and the interplay between the participants and communicative resources within the context as an emergent quality of the rap text as composed in performance.

Linguist Geneva Smitherman schematized four broad categories of black discourse: narrative sequencing, call-response, signification/dozens, and tonal semantics (1977: 103). All of these categories are strategically used in rap music.

Narrative sequencing of text concurs with a musical time line which is "regarded as an accompanying rhythm and a means by which rhythmic motion is sustained" (Nketia 1974: 132). In rap music, the bass line functions as a time line. The rhythmic structure and the rhymed couplets weave around a two-bar melodic bass line. The example below demonstrates the rhythmic structure of the rap superimposed on a four-beat bass melodic structure.

♩ = 108 **FREEDOM** Grand Master Flash

rapper
we don't care if your age is Ten or if you are sen-tor cit-a-sen 'euz'

bass

rapper
we got the beat that just will end so you bet-ter get ready to rock my friend

bass

While the systems of black discourse are rather formulaic, rappers are challenged to incorporate them in their performances. What often becomes even more challenging in rap music is the task of synchronizing the rhyme couplets in a narrative form with the rhythmic pulse of the music.

Call-reponse is an interactive network between performer and auditor. The role of such discourse is to unify and establish cohesiveness, as demonstrated in the second example. The execution of a rap depends on this interplay between the participants and communicative resources within context. Audience response helps to prolong performance and helps the rapper to spontaneously execute rap formulas. The more verbal and kinesic the response from the audience, the longer the rapper raps. This displays what Bauman refers to as emergent quality, where text execution and composition are embedded in performance context (1977: 37-45).

The third mode of black discourse employed by the rapper is signification and the dozens. The former refers to a way of talking about someone in an indirect manner. Claudia Mitchell-Kernan notes:

It [indirection] must be employed, first of all, by the participants in a speech act in the recognition that signifying is occurring and that the dictionary-syntactical meaning of the utterance is to be ignored. Secondly, this shared knowledge must be employed in the reinterpretation of the utterance. It is the cleverness used in directing the attention of the hearer and audience to this

shared knowledge upon which a speaker's artistic talent is judged (1972: 174).

Smitherman includes among the stylistic characteristics of signification: indirection, circumlocution, metaphor and imagery, humor, irony, rhythmic fluency, and sound. It is teachy but not preachy, directed at a person or persons usually in the situational context and may involve punning, play on words, and the introduction of the semantically or logically unexpected (1977: 121). Signifying in rap music takes on double-entendre and often the meaning is hidden and two-fold. In the following example, the rapper directly refers to the girls with the "real short hair" as resembling the boys. This signifies that the girls are ugly because they look like the boys or indirectly refers to the girls with the "real short hair" as lesbians.

4. All you chics out there with the real short hair
 You think you hip but you ain't nowhere
- Talkin' loud makin' noise
 Can't hardly tell you from the boys.

Another varied form of black discourse and the most obvious in rap music is the dozens. It is the oldest term for the game of exchanging ritualized insults. The term 'sounding' is by far the most common in New York and is reported as the favorite term in Philadelphia by Abrahams (Labov 1972: 306). Labov further contends that

In New York, the dozens seem to be even more specialized, referring to rhymed couplets...Playing the dozens also refers to any relative. Sounding is also used to include such insults and includes personal insults of a simpler form. The winner in a contest of this sort is the man with the largest store of couplets on hand, the best memory, and perhaps the best delivery (1972: 307-8).

In sounding, one makes a direct statement about someone's relative or love. Often these direct references have a sexual content. In the dozens, however, the direct statement is

specifically about someone's mother. This type of verbal dueling is quite common among black males. Abrahams states that

He [the black male] creates a playground which enables him to attack some other person's mother, in full knowledge that that person must come back and insult his own. Thus someone else is doing the job for him, and between them they are castigating all that is feminine, frail, unmanly (1962: 214).

Gregory Smith reminisces on his childhood experiences when someone "shot the dozens" about someone else's mama:

I've been saying that for years. You know I use to get beat up for saying "ya mama," but now they've made it into a rap record well you know tell the deejay "ya mama;" tell ya mama, "ya mama"...(4)

The following example illustrates how the rhymed dozens are employed by two rappers:

5. Dueler 1 I don't need no friend without a doubt
My little sister can take you out

Dueller 2 Well bring your little sister
Bring the roaches too
They're bigger and tougher
Than both of you

They'll eat 'cha cat and they'll skin
your dog
The only one who could stand them off
was Ya Mama

Example 6 makes use of the discourse of sounding. Here the rapper brags about his superb rapping ability and his ability as a lover. He directly insults his admirer's boyfriend by sounding, referring to the boyfriend as a fairy (a male homosexual).

6. I was comin' home late one dark afternoon
Reporter stop'd me for an interview

She said she's heard stories and she's heard
fables
That I'm the vicious on the mic and the turntable

She said, "Damn flyguy I'm in love with you
The Casanova legend must have been true."

I said, "By the way baby what's yo' name?"
She said, "I go by the name of Lois Lane.

And you can be my boyfriend you surely can
.He's with me...my boyfriend called Superman."

I said, "He's a fairy and he suppose
Flyin' thru the air with pantyhose."

An overriding device used in connection with sounding is the use of the intrusive "I" and the use of braggadocio. These operate as a safeguard to the rapper and reinforce his super-bad identity. Examples 7 and 8 demonstrate these two devices.

7. I'm imp the dimp
the ladies' pimp

The women fight
for my delight

But I'm the Grandmaster with the three M.C.'s
That shocks the house with the young ladies.

8. I don't mean to brag I don't mean to boast
but they call my name from coast to coast

From the coast of California to the shore of
Maine
Everybody love the way I play my game

Say I got more rhymes in the back of mind...

I say I got style and I got class
I don't talk my stuff too fast

Say I'm bold as ice
and twice as nice...

The fourth and final characteristic of black discourse which occurs in rap music is tonal semantics. Tonal semantics has many varied representations in black speech. They include song/speech, repetition and alliteration, intona-

tonal contouring, and rhyme. Paralinguistic features include pitch, tempo, and vocal quality (Trager 1964: 276). Example 9 demonstrates one tonal feature, alliterative word play:

9. Hip, hop, the hipit the hipi-dipi
hip hip hoppit you don't stop

Bang bang the boogie to the boogie
say up jump the boogie to the bang bang boogie

Paralinguistic features in rap music signal or cue the audience to changes in meaning, while stress and vocal inflection both serve as intonational devices to convey specific meanings. Rappers employ one, two, or a combination of both paralinguistic and semantic features. People find it fascinating how rappers are able to incorporate two or more of these features creatively into their music. Informant Patricia Greer describes intonational devices, like vocal inflections, speech-song (*sprechstimme*) and speech rhythm as used in rap music. She says:

...it sort of fascinated me that somebody would be able to talk like that and sing sort of like in the words...*sprechstimme*? You know singing half song and half spoken...I think it takes a skill more or less of having rhythm. You have to have rhythm in order to do the rap. (3)

Kinesic cues further intensify the rapper's performance. As the rapper cites his rap, he often struts across the stage and incorporates dance movements. Most rappers prefer to use a deejay spinning and mixing records as accompaniment to rap music. One group, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, incorporates this in their performance: Grandmaster Flash plays the part of the deejay, spinning and mixing records, while Melle Mel of the Furious Five is the rapper. This concept evolved from the origin of rap music in the performances of black disc jockeys and has provided the foundation for its performance practice.

The majority of rappers wear street clothes which typify black ghetto fashions: high top tennis shoes, black leather jackets, pre-washed blue jeans, spiked wrist bands, bandannas,

pierced-ear ring(s), and gloves with cut-out fingertips. The group Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five favor leather from tip to toe and have Flash spelled out in lightning-bolt letters on the back of their jackets (Koepp 1983: 73). When there is a group of rappers on stage, each rapper wears a ghetto-fashion which accents his or her personal identity.

In the Bronx and Harlem, rap music has its counterpart known as break dancing. Today, these urban phenomena have become widespread. "In different ways, street dancing, verbal rapping, and DJ mixing on the airwaves have all developed from the traditional forms and aesthetics of African-American artistic performance...as it is performed by urban black youths, [it] demonstrates how traditional African-American performing arts continue to evolve and influence mainstream popular entertainment" (Friedland 1984: 43-45). The impact of the rap music phenomenon deserves much attention and further inquiry especially in terms of its influence on popular culture.

NOTES

1. The term hip hop is a recent one. According to Hager it refers to "Funky music suitable for rapping; a collective term used to describe rap/graffiti/breaking/scratchin'. The term was invented by Starski, who used to chant: "To the hiphop, hiphop, don't stop that body rock."
2. The study of black speech acts and style is quite extensive. See for example, Abrahams (1962, 1964, 1970); Labov (1970); Mitchell-Kernan (1972); Smitherman (1977).
3. Interviewed in Bloomington, In., April 1983, by Cheryl Keyes.
4. Ibid.

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DISCOGRAPHY

- Example 1. Kurtis Blow, **The Breaks**, Mercury MDS 4010, 1980.
- Example 2. Sugarhill Gang, "Showdown," **8th Wonder**, Sugarhill SH 249, 1981.
- Example 3. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, **Freedom**, Sugarhill SH 549, 1979.
- Example 4. Blowfly (Clarence Reid), **Rap Dirty**, T.K. Disco 438, 1980.
- Example 5. Wuf Ticket, **Ya Mama**, Prelude PRL D644, 1982.
- Example 6. Sugarhill Gang, **Rapper's Delight**, Sugarhill SH 542, 1979.
- Example 7. Ibid.
- Example 8. Sequence, **Funk You Up**, Sugarhill SH 455, 1981.
- Example 9. Sugarhill Gang, **Rapper's Delight**, Sugarhill SH 542, 1979.