

Raja Mohan
21M.775
Prof. DeFrantz

From Bronx's Hip-Hop to Bristol's Trip-Hop

As Tricia Rose describes, the birth of hip-hop occurred in Bronx, a marginalized city, characterized by poverty and congestion, serving as a backdrop for an art form that flourished into an international phenomenon. The city inhabited a black culture suffering from post-war economic effects and was cordoned off from other regions of New York City due to modifications in the highway system, making the people victims of “urban renewal.” (30)

Given the opportunity to form new identities in the realm of hip-hop and share their personal accounts and ideologies, similar to traditions in African oral history, these people conceived a movement whose worldwide appeal impacted major events such as the Million Man March. Hip-hop's enormous influence on the world is undeniable.

In the isolated city of Bristol located in England arose a style of music dubbed trip-hop. The origins of trip-hop clearly trace to hip-hop, probably explaining why artists categorized in this genre vehemently oppose to calling their music trip-hop. They argue their music is hip-hop, or perhaps a fresh and original offshoot of hip-hop. Mushroom, a member of the trip-hop band Massive Attack, said, "We called it lover's hip hop. Forget all that trip hop bullshit. There's no difference between what Puffy or Mary J Blige or Common Sense is doing now and what we were doing..." (Bristol Underground Website)

Trip-hop can abstractly be defined as music employing hip-hop, soul, dub grooves, jazz samples, and break beat rhythms. The down-tempo, the defining trait of trip-hop, never exceeds 120 beats per minute. (All Music Website) In general, the songs have very depressing, yet hopeful overtones, with a female singing or male rapping, to a psychedelic, spaced-out beat accompanied by jazz instruments and rare samples. To make this description clearer, one could liken the mood of the music to a person dreaming of a Tahitian beach after contemplating death under the influence of acid. (“Only you” by Portishead on their self-titled album serves as a fitting example.)

Some questions arise when thinking about trip-hop. How did this particular style develop and what is its relation to hip-hop? How is it similar to or different from hip-hop and why did its popularity fade in the late 90’s? This paper will propose answers to these questions and analyze these issues surrounding trip-hop, mainly focusing on three major artists from the genre, Massive Attack, Portishead, and Tricky. A survey of the history of trip-hop exhibits its relation to hip-hop, allowing one to compare and contrast the two different styles of music.

Before trip-hop emerged, films receiving widespread attention such as *Wild Style* introduced youngsters in Bristol and in the world to American hip-hop. Heads in Bristol championed the beliefs of hip-hop to form their own underground community of b-boys, graffiti artists, DJs, and rappers amidst a suburban landscape. (Latimer 1) This group wanted to be as “real” and “fresh” as the heads in America, but they had to use American hip-hop as a basis to create something new and unique to Bristol.

The heads in Bristol did not produce work mimicking American artists probably due to differences in the urban cultures and time periods. When considered historically, the quiescent community in Bristol is marked by racial segregation and miscegenation because of its involvement in the slave trade. (Chang 1) The underground hip-hop community consisted of whites, blacks, and racially mixed people. On the other hand, the artists in the hip-hop centers of America usually came from homogenous, inner-city environments that could have contained poverty or gangster culture.

An interesting contrast can be drawn between the white youth of America and the youth in Bristol because of their different suburban cultures. According to Robin Kelley in the collection of essays *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, white youngsters in America were attracted to the "imaginary alternative" presented by the rappers who believed in rebellion and anarchy. The youth in Bristol concerned themselves with creating hip-hop, either on the streets as a graffiti artist or in the bedroom spinning records. Rather than fantasizing about violence or materialism, the youth were attracted to the artistic side of hip-hop in hopes of recreating their own style to make a name for themselves and Bristol.

Phil Johnson in his book *Straight Outta Bristol* claims, "Cynically, you could look back and say that yes, all the elements for the Bristol sound [trip-hop] were in place long before it emerged; all it had needed really, was the turbocharge of hip-hop, and some kind of massive social upheaval, which it got, big time, in the St Paul's riot of 1980." Similar to the decrepit social conditions of Bronx leading

to the birth of hip-hop, this particular riot could have impacted the music originating in Bristol. Social unrest could have led to discontent shared by trip-hop artists, but the primary issues bothering them were of a different flavor.

The music in trip-hop suggests some sort of impending doom as well as nostalgia for a romanticized past. (“Revolution Evolution Love” by Tricky is an example.) Possibly, the artists were disillusioned with the negative consequences of globalization whereby more regions in the world became technologically driven resulting in more impersonal and materialistic cultures. Radiohead’s award-winning album *OK Computer*, although an experimental rock album, symbolizes this theme of disillusionment. The early American hip-hop artists probably did not embody such feelings since globalization was not a rising trend in the 70’s.

The intermittent sampling of sounds and noises from instruments as well as the lack of rhythm at certain points in trip-hop songs captures this frustration. The lyrics and style of singing express the artists’ sense of alienation and loneliness in a fleeting modern world. These feelings resonate in every seminal trip-hop album. Like hip-hop, trip-hop artists responded to the current social conditions and their experiences in Bristol to create an original style. In an environment with feelings of displacement similar to the hip-hop centers of America, Wild Bunch, a precursor to the major trip-hop bands, made headway in the British hip-hop scene.

The members of Wild Bunch were Andrew “Mushroom” Vowles, Grant “Daddy G” Marshall, and Nellee Hooper, who were all actively involved in the

underground hip-hop community of Bristol. This group was well known for rockin' club parties where they would showcase "mad" beats incorporating dub, soul, funk, hip-hop, and jazz. Mushroom and Daddy G produced graffiti art also. After the group broke up in the early 90s, Robert "3D" Del Naja joined Mushroom and Daddy G to form the most prominent trip-hop band, Massive Attack. Nellee Hooper started the band Soul II Soul. (Inkblot Magazine Website)

Before becoming a vocalist for Massive Attack, 3D was an avid graffiti artist and was even arrested once. 3D and his longtime friend Goldie, drum n' bass artist with b-boy flair heavily influenced by the Bristol scene, were featured in the book of photos *Spraycan Art* by Henry Chalfant in 1987. (Chang 1) 3D produced artwork for Massive Attack's albums and has donated his artwork to various organizations. Aside from producing music, the major artists in Bristol dabbled with the other elements of hip-hop, proving their allegiance to hip-hop and demand to not be categorized otherwise.

Massive Attack, with occasional appearances by fellow trip-hop artist Tricky and singer Shara Nelson, produced four full-length albums (*Blue Lines*, *Protection*, *Mezzanine*, *100th Window*) all receiving critical acclaim. They also acquired international appeal and commercial success. For instance, the song "Angel" appeared on the Snatch Soundtrack and "Inertia Creeps" was featured in the background of a Victoria's Secret commercial.

Miguel Rossi describes the group as, ""Massive Attack are cool without being aloof. So many bands these days concentrate more on 'appearing' cool - they're all facade. Massive Attack have earned their coolness through honesty.

The music they create is a reflection of who they are as genuine artists." (Chang 1)

The vocals of Massive Attack's work are derived from rapping in hip-hop. For example, the song "Karmacoma" exemplifies the muted and nonsensical rapping found in trip-hop as well as the unearthly beats. The band conveys their message directly and honestly although it is difficult to understand the lyrics unless one is from the Bristol music scene or knows the band members. What do "Karmacoma, jamaica n' roma" and "don't wanna on top of your list, monopoly and properly kissed" mean? There are many obscure references signifying the exclusivity reminiscent of the cypher in hip-hop. However, the band remains honest and appears "real" because rather than producing club hits that could be commercial successes, they produce abstract music because of their passion for it. (McReady 1) Unfortunately, Massive Attack's short-lived popularity has waned over the past few years and Tricky and Shara Nelson left to pursue solo projects.

Massive Attack's engineer, Geoff Barrow, was a very skilled DJ and producer who joined forces with singer Beth Gibbons and jazz guitarist Adrian Utley to form the group Portishead. The group produced two full-length albums titled *Dummy* and *Portishead*. The hit song "Sour Times" from *Dummy* received extensive airplay in the UK and America.

Abstracting the multi-layered qualities of hip-hop while producing music akin to jazz and movie soundtracks, Portishead composed airy ballads and melancholic songs driven by the sweet voice of Gibbons. The music of Portishead downplays the sense of self and focuses more on emotional feelings

and the words whereas rapping relies on boasting and making explicit references. (Pemberton 1) The sound and intentions are far removed from America hip-hop, but it shows the possibilities of hip-hop. Without the existence of hip-hop, Portishead may not have used bass heavy beats proving the importance of hip-hop in the Bristol sound.

Tricky, one of the mellow but deeply troubled rappers who accompanied some of Massive Attack's tracks, worked as a solo artist. He produced *Maxinquaye*, *Pre-Millennium Tension*, and *Angels with Dirty Faces*. He even produced an album in collaboration with the Gravediggaz.

The flows of Tricky are different from American hip-hop artists because he raps over the beat in a calm tone as though he is performing spoken word. He is known to abstract guitar riffs of hip-hop songs and transform them into new sounds that are totally unrecognizable. In the same vein as Portishead, he has taken hip-hop one step further and employed certain elements to create something altogether new. Kodwo Eshun characterizes this transformation in "Transmaterializing the Breakbeat" by saying: "All these soundworlds begin as accidents discovered by making...all at once there's a sudden multiplication of dimensions of matter, your record collection becomes an immense time machine yet builds itself through you." Moreover, one would not expect somebody with a thick British accent to rap in the same manner as an American hip-hop artist, especially to express his wistfulness or depression. Tricky's approach of streamlining rap, removing the hype and transforming the beat to convey his message seems more apt.

After these three groups and few other important acts produced work in the 90's, many similar groups lacking depth and originality appeared. Trip-hop did not last very long as a result. This subcategory of hip-hop did not conform to mainstream standards or commercialize itself enough. In America today, hip-hop is well established commercially in various industries such as the music business and fashion. Record companies actively seek new groups they would like to market. In addition, many artists who have achieved mainstream success and acquired fame such as Jay-Z will continue to create music. Since hip-hop is a thriving market, new artists who are marketed heavily or Jay-Z will be able to sell millions of albums throughout the US.

The interest in hip-hop clothing or its lifestyle will not disappear soon either. The constant coverage of hip-hop news and trends in visual media will make hip-hop seem "cool" to the mainstream. Although hip-hop is an amorphous realm that is constantly changing, it has some permanence due to various markets that depend on its existence. Hip-hop has catered to the mainstream even though it began as an underground culture thereby solidifying its stronghold on American popular culture.

Trip-hop's inability to attract larger audiences prevented it from becoming a major commercial success. The music evokes moods like abstract art and it has to grow on the listener. Although it can be used as background music for commercials or movies, the songs are not catchy and cannot be danced to. The groups did not alter their sound or compromise their beliefs to cater to the mainstream. They resisted similar to underground hip-hop artists such as

Hanifah Walida. The purpose was not to turn hip-hop into a grand success, but to produce good music.

The histories of hip-hop and trip-hop share some common themes and interesting parallels although the stories are different. The three main artists from Bristol produced an original sound due to different social conditions and various influences, with hip-hop being one. Afrika Bambaata rightfully claimed that hip-hop has become so many things these days and one of them is trip-hop. Although the popularity of trip-hop faded like many sub-categories of hip-hop, the major albums still exist and so do underground followings. Maybe trip-hop's ominous tone predicted its own fading away in this harsh, plastic world.

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Hip Hop was started in the streets of the South Bronx when DJs would plug in turntables to street lamps and have "block parties." Kool Herc started in the streets before moving inside to the rec center on Sedgewick. At the block parties is where Herc first displayed the Jamaican "toasting" whereby DJs would "chant" over a record. This technique would later become known as "rapping." Also, Hip Hop pertains to the overall culture (style, attitude, graffiti, dancing) not just rap. #fyi. Regrettably the culture has changed considerably since its inception an