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Leaders of the New School: A Comparative Analysis of Selected African American Rap Artists

Andrew P. Smallwood

University of Nebraska at Omaha

“This is a presentation examining the cultural influence of rap groups Gang Starr, The Roots, and Rakim to examine their message directed at African American youth culture . . . It is through examining the messages in Rap music that we can educate Black youth about Black culture and Black life at the dawn of the 21st century.”

This is a presentation examining the cultural influence of rap groups Gang Starr, The Roots and Rakim to examine their message directed at African American youth culture. As part of a larger study related to jazz influenced rap artists, the selection of these musical groups provide an examination of African American artists that draw from Black cultural expression found in jazz music and urban life. The presentation provides a brief overview of the historical evolution of the Rap music genre emerging from the Black urban experience during the mid 1970s in New York City. I briefly discuss the influence of different musical genres on rap music focusing on the relationship of jazz to hip hop culture and Rap music. I then examine the frequent themes found in the lyrical content of these three groups over several albums and discuss the Rap music as an educational tool for African American college age youth.

African American culture has produced a variety of gifted artists who have used their intelligence and creativity to explore and express various facets of Black life. During the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 30s we find the beginning of a movement toward Black creative expression in art, literature and music that draws from the collective traditions and experience of African American people. The influence of culture on African American artistic expression is important, for art serves to continue the historical and cultural traditions and history while reflecting on the present experiences of Black people. The celebration of Black culture through artistic expression is revisited in the 1960s with the Black Arts Movement where images and sounds reflecting the African American experience abound.

It is the relationship of culture and musical expression that serves as the context for examination of a select group of rap artists and their exploration of African American life through their music.

As part of a larger study examining jazz and rap musical genre, this presentation will explore jazz influenced rap groups: Gang Starr, Rakim and The Roots.

Gang Starr with lead performer Guru, made their recording debut on the movie soundtrack of Spike Lee's *Mo' Better Blues* in 1990. The song titled "Jazz Thing" was a tribute to the numerous accomplishments of African American jazz artists. Lead

performer Guru has worked on several projects with jazz trumpeter Donald Byrd, fusing elements of jazz with hip hop music bringing together artists from both genres of music.

Rakim, originally part of the rap group Eric B. and Rakim, is a New York based rap artist whose debut album "Eric B. For President" firmly established the group as a presence in rap music circles. Rakim grew up playing the saxophone on Long Island, New York where he credits a significant influence of jazz and classic R&B from the 1960s and 1970s. With his latest album titled "The Eighteenth Letter: The Book of Life", Rakim has received praise and critical acclaim for lyrical construction and vocal fluidity.

By comparison, The Roots are a relatively new group, having released their first album, titled "Illadelph Halflife," in 1996. Based in Philadelphia, Pa., the influence of jazz music is evident in their music as they are credited with working with jazz vibraphonist Roy Ayers and being inspired by jazz saxophonist Grover Washington.

This presentation explores the seminal songs from all three artists to examine their message directed at Black youth. This will provide an understanding of how these Black artists attempt to examine the Black experience through their music to the youth culture of today. As each of these artists have identified a significant influence from Black culture and jazz music, I then examine how they, as artists, use this to examine Black life. It is through examining the messages in Rap music that we can identify their use to educate Black youth about Black culture and Black life at the dawn of the 21st century.

PRESENTER

Andrew P. Smallwood is an instructor in the Black Studies Department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Currently he is a doctoral candidate, A.B.D. from the Northern Illinois University in the Department of Leadership and Educational Policy Studies where he was a recipient of the Carter G. Woodson University Fellowship. His doctoral research examines the cultural legacy and philosophy of Malcolm X for African Americans.