CHAPTER II

THE PULSE OF THE RHYME FLOW:
HIP-HOP SIGNIFYIN(G) AND THE POLITICS OF RECESSION

Is this real, or a fiction? You'll never know
While you're hooked to the pulse of the rhyme flow.

-- Ice-T, "Pulse of the Rhyme Flow"^1

1. Signifyin(g) and Power

Whatever the role played by samples and breakbeats, for hip-hop's core audience, it's without question the rhymes that come first. Homophony has long posed a particular field of play, whether in the elaborate jokes of the troubadour's *trobar clus* or in the "alternative" words to the Pledge of Allegiance that have brought so much comic relief to those at the back of the classroom, and homophony (again, the play of similarity and difference) forms the basis for hip-hop's verbal Signifyin(g) practices. Whether at the level of names (Souljah, Gang Starr, Spinderella), metonymic shifts (Patrick Swayze plays a ghost in the film *Ghost*, so hip-hop lingo shortens "I'm out of here (like a ghost)" to "Swayze!"), or acronymic codes (NWA, BWP, BDP, HWA, LL Cool J^2), it's this kind of continuous linguistic slippage and play that drives the verbal engines of rap.

This slippage, as Gates was the first to emphasize, lies predominantly at the level of what linguists call the "paradigmatic" or vertical dimension. That is, if the unfolding of language over time is thought of as a horizontal strip, at each syntactical moment a vast range of possibilities is vertically "stacked." One can spin the wheel of grammatically and logically possible terms (e.g. 'The cat sat on the: mat, car, tree, grass, chair') and/or the wheel of sounds ('The cat sat on the mat, the rat, the hat, the bat, the
the trick of Signifyin(g) is to do both at once, to find homonymic connections which serve either to undermine, parody, or connect in a surprising way the underlying connotations of language. For instance, Big Daddy Kane:

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The breaker, the taker, money maker, never a faker
My lyrics are built like Schwarzenegger
So all my competition gets destroyed
You need to put your weak rhymes on steroids
For you ever to press up on the money
And stand to rippin' a show, and flow
Provin' the competition can't go
Because I do all, it's easy for you to fall
I move on rappers like my name was U-Haul³
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The initial sequence here (breaker, taker, maker, faker) works directly via homonymic slippage, and is "capped" (surpassed) by the sudden and yet totally fitting connection to Schwarzenegger (which itself, indirectly, Signifies on "nigger"), and represents perhaps the oldest rapping strategy.⁴ The following lines move from such extended flourishes to a series of metaphoric put-downs, packed with internal rhymes (often involving tricky diphthongs), and concluding with the metonymic "movement" from the act of "moving on" (that is, attacking) to U-Haul, well-known as a lender of moving equipment such as trailers. All the characteristic rhetorical strategies of hip-hop Signfyin(g) -- metonymy, metaphor, and homophonic slippage -- work together here to establish multiple and overlapping streams of association, which everywhere undermine the merely denotative with broad and brash de/re-formations of the connotative.

Thus, on a micro level, Signifyin(g) is a productive agent of difference, an incursion against stability, uniformity, and homogeneity. Yet Signifyin(g) politics also inevitably play on a macro level, particularly since Signifyin(g) has from its earliest origins deployed its linguistic "games" in order to frame and mobilize larger questions of power relations. Signifyin(g) is based on the realization that what Euro-American critics (following Gadamer) call the "aesthetics of reception" are in fact relations of power.
Taking and mis-taking, acts of verbal exchange which are built around the central trope of the Signifyin(g) monkey as trickster figure, are at each turn linked with their material consequences; unlike much of "Western" aesthetics, which presumes the possibility of a "correct" or "accurate" reception, Signifyin(g) accounts for and sets into play the mistaking of meaning.

Gates and others have outlined the fundamental figurations of the Signifying monkey tale, but it's worth repeating them here, if only to set the scene: The monkey and the Lion have a verbal interchange, in which the monkey uses figurative and formulaic language to insinuate that the Elephant (their mutual acquaintance) has been violently attacking the Lion's reputation. The Lion, taking this figurative speech literally, goes to see the Elephant and even the score; the Elephant, after politely informing the Lion that he is mistaken, beats him severely. The Lion, both his pride and his body in shreds, goes back to confront the monkey, who offers a series of additional figurative insults, and (depending on the version) is either beaten by the Lion in turn or escapes through some clever ploy.5

As Gates himself has observed, the situation figured in the signifying monkey tales is continually re-enacted, particularly when one person (usually an adult relative) signifies on a young woman or man without the latter being aware of it. This Signifyin(g) is done as a kind of teaching, an initiation into the world of adult black discourse. Yet there is another, far more dangerous way in which this drama is re-enacted; when 2 Live Crew was brought up on obscenity charges, the evidence against them (as Gates observes) consisted primarily of the literal mis-reading of their Signifyin(g) raps.6 In a less threatening but equally volatile way, when many white listeners unfamiliar with the groundrules of the Signifyin(g) game listen to a rap track, they too tend to mis-take the figural for the literal. When such listeners hear Ice-Cube declare "I'm the kinda nigga that's built to last / You fuck with me, I'll put my foot in yo ass," they may run to bolt the door and draw the curtains. When they hear Ice-T rap
"watch me... don the black ski mask and come to your house / cut off your power, and do you with the lights out" they may feel the urge to reach for the phone and dial 911 (when the operator answers, though, all they'll hear is a recording of Flavor Flav saying "You'd better wake up and smell the real flavor / cos 9-1-1 is a fake lifesaver").

Ignorant of black vernaculars and the Signifyin(g) mode, many such listeners have reacted against what seems to them an obscene and violent discourse, and yet in their discomfort what they also don't hear is the real political polemic which speaks through this mode. Or, in a no less problematic manner, other listeners have taken rap as a safety-sealed packet of titillating hostility, its imagery feeding their stereotypes of black culture as intrinsically violent. Thus the first level of mis-taking is when the Lion takes the monkey "seriously" (the Lion has been signified upon); the second level is when he doesn't take him seriously, failing to realize that the discursive play of Signifyin(g) is also a mode for (among other things) political expression, a "serious" unseriousness.

For similar reasons, the authors of the often-cited book Signifying Rappers, for all their canny "insider" posing, misunderstand rap almost as badly as Tipper Gore and her cohorts at the Parents' Music Resource Center. Both take rap lyrics as though they were actual threats; while Tipper Gore is morally outraged, Costello and Wallace are titillated. For them rap is "carnivorous," "big and ill-mannered"; they confess to "caucasian contempt for L.L Cool J's and Slick Rick's bantam-cock songs of Themselves." Their publisher, Ecco Press, supplies a back-cover blurb which hails the book as "the first serious consideration of rap" and touts its authors as "white, educated, middle class... at once marginal and crucial to rap's Us and Them equations." Whose equations? It's a good thing to have suburban white boys around when you need them -- to write a "serious" book, that is. These white boys even confess to being scared, which is to be taken, I suppose, as a sign that rap music has worked its magic on them.

Costello and Wallace also have other axes to grind, however, including a harsh critique of rap's militant black nationalism. They make much ado over Bob Dylan as a
proto-rap pioneer, and taunt Public Enemy for being "unable to locate even one pure black source" (begging Chuck-D's own question in "Fear of a Black Planet": "Who is Pure? What is pure?"). Sampling, though they pretend to be delighted by it, poses a problem for them, a problem of sources; for them the sampled material remains somehow "stolen." They find it "troubling" that the rappers on the "Stop the Violence" EP "made their names signifying violence" -- a statement which would be meaningless if they knew what "signifying" signified. Similarly, in the Village Voice, Marshall Berman (otherwise a thoughtful writer on rap) worries aloud about the "romance of violence"; at a PE show he begins to get nervous when the uniformed S1W (Security of the First World) steps onto stage in their "gangsta/fascist chic."11

2. Hip-Hop and the logic of moral panics

Signifyin(g) violence, whether in Ice-T's gangsta hitman narratives or in the S1W's uniforms (on the cover of Apocalypse '91, they look more like ship's captains for some new cruise line), is a highly self-conscious ploy, the equivalent of the Monkey telling the Lion "Look out sucker, I'm going to kill you." Yet such a statement belies the actual power relations of the Monkey and the Lion; the Monkey is physically the weaker of the two, and must rely on a verbal exchange to gain his victory. Just so, while the S1W may look threatening in their concert-wear grey camouflage fatigues, they are not there to attack anyone, but rather to Signify the global history of Black resistance. Nonetheless, they can be taken as threatening by audiences who find them so, and like the Signifying Monkey, hip-hoppers in a sense presuppose such a mis-taking.

This would seem to place the politics of reception in a paradoxical position; if Signifyin(g) presupposes a mis-taking, then doesn't such mis-taking become, in a sense, "correct"? And more: if the underlying message of hip-hop Signifyin(g) is a serious
unseriousness, a double ploy whose verbal play conceals a linguistic assault, is it not then necessary that there be a degree of actual force behind its narratives of violence? To which I would say, yes, there is a violence -- or rather, there are violences -- underlying hip-hop's linguistic militancy, including both the violence of the racist power structure against black communities, the violence within those communities, and the possibility of a revolutionary violence against these other forms of violence. KRS-One, both the founder of the "Stop the Violence" movement and the poet behind the seminal gangsta rap "9 mm Goes Bang," Signifies on the mis-taking of rap's representations of violence in his cut "Necessary":

When some get together and think of rap, they tend to think of violence
But when they are challenged on some rock group, the result is always silence
Even before the rock and roll era, violence played a big part in music
It's all according to your meaning of violence and how or in which way you use it
No, it's not violent to show in movies the destruction of the human body
But yes, of course it's violent to protect yourself at a party
And, oh no, it's not violent when under the christmas tree is a look-alike gun
But, yes, of course it's violent to have an album like KRS-One
By all means necessary, it's time to end the hypocrisy
What I call violence, I can't do, but your kind of violence is stopping me!

KRS-One's Signifyin(g) works first by foregrounding the interpretive protocols of the Signified listener ("It's all according to your meaning of violence"), and second by alluding to the many "violent" acts and representations that society at large already partakes of by virtue of their "merely" representational status (toy guns, slasher films). All of that violence, he implies, pales before "what I call violence," even as it distracts from the actual violence of racism and censorship ("your kind of violence") which all this ostensible disdain of violence masks. KRS One's rhetoric makes the claim that those who attack hip-hop for "violence" have not yet accounted for the interpretative or cultural contexts in which they already consume violence; behind the moral panics which deploy
the word "violence" to attack rap music is a culture that already sanctions all kinds of violence.

In the regard, Frantz Fanon's political theorizations of violence as a means of resistance to colonial regimes are highly pertinent, not only because they were so central to movements like the Black Panthers but because they still inform black nationalism today (Paris, for one includes an exhortation to 'follow the path' of Fanon in his rap "The Devil Made Me Do It"). For despite the fact that Fanon was writing about colonial Africa, the worsening situation of blacks and hispanics in America's inner cities has to an increasing degree borne comparison with the postcolonial situation. Just as in an colonial city, blacks in America have found themselves in a virtual shantytown, only this time near the center rather than on the periphery of the postmodern city. Again, just as in colonized nations, black Americans have been subject to aerial fly-bys, frequent and arbitrary police raids, lengthy imprisonments, and (at times of open revolt) occupying troops. In this context, Fanon's revolutionary program has taken on a sudden new relevance, as when he describes the colonial landscape:

The colonial world is a world cut in two. The dividing line, the frontiers are shown by barracks and police stations. In the colonies it is always the policeman and the soldier who are the official, instituted go-betweens, the spokesmen of the settler and his rule of oppression . . . in the capitalist countries a multitude of moral teachers, counselors, and "bewilderers" separate the exploited from those in power. In the colonial countries, on the contrary, the policeman and the soldier, by their immediate presence and their frequent and direct action maintain contact with the native and advise him by means of rifle butts and napalm not to budge.

The irony that this text, originally published in 1963, now seems to be as relevant to Los Angeles as it is to Capetown, that indeed the landscape Fanon describes as "colonial" is perhaps closer to that of South Central than the "capitalist" situation, has not been lost on the latest generation of rappers. The metaphors for the ghetto -- Ice-T's "the killing
fields," Ice Cube's "Concrete Vietnam," Public Enemy's "terrordome" -- all confirm this shift of landscape.\textsuperscript{15}

The attitude towards the police becomes a telling divider in terms of the reception of hip-hop; clearly, from the postcolonial mindset of Paris or Ice Cube, the police are the agents of an oppressive system, and indeed many urban forces such as the LAPD have records of brutality which go back decades.\textsuperscript{16} In the light of numerous recent beatings, which left Rodney King scarred and bruised and Malice Green dead on the streets of Detroit there has been little question among urban blacks that the police remain instruments of oppression. For suburban residents, though, trained from childhood that "the policeman is your friend," and for whom indeed the policeman is their friend, and the friend of their property and privilege, cuts like NWA's "Fuck tha Police" or Ice-T's "Cop Killa" are affronts to a sacred symbol of law and order. As WC and the MAAD Circle put it (in a singsong voiceover on their cut "Behind Closed Doors"):

\begin{center}

The policemen are your friends  
They're here to protect and serve  
But if you're white, then you're alright  
And you won't get kicked to the curb\textsuperscript{17}

\end{center}

Nothing, perhaps, has incited so much negative reaction as hip-hop's anti-police raps, despite the fact that the ongoing brutality and violence perpetrated by the police continues to be a fact of ghetto life.

In a different but closely related way, gangsta raps also partake of this postcolonial resistance. For, while such narratives (and the gang activities that exist in most large cities regardless of their portrayal on records) are often condemned for glorifying violence, they too bring with them an implicit critique of oppression. As Fanon noted years ago,

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The people make use of certain episodes in the life of the community in order to hold themselves ready and keep alive their revolutionary zeal.

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For example, the gangster who holds up the police set on to track him down for days on end, or who dies in single combat after having killed four or five policemen . . . these types light the way for the people, form the blueprints for action and become heroes. Obviously it's a waste of breath to say that such-and-such a hero is a thief, a scoundrel, or a reprobate. If the act for which he is prosecuted by the colonial authorities is an act exclusively directed against a colonialist person or colonialist property, the demarcation line is definite and manifest. The process of identification is automatic. 18

Such an association should come as no surprise to anyone who's listened to Woody Guthrie's "Pretty Boy Floyd," Dylan's "John Wesley Harding," or any of the hundreds of ballads celebrating the goodness of outlaws, and yet inscribed within the politics of moral panic with which middle-class America has been Willie Hortonized, many listeners (among them no doubt the very people who shouted "Fuck the Pigs" in '69) end up identifying with the police and attacking the rappers. When the outlaw is white, it seems, he's a counterculture hero; when he's black, he's reduced to yet another avatar of the stereotypical violent black male. 19

Of course, there is always the other possibility -- that middle- and upper-class listeners, while hitherto trusting mass media's representations of urban criminality, might after listening to such narratives find themselves radicalized. For in much the same way that television coverage of the dogs and fire-hoses turned on black civil-rights protesters in Birmingham mobilized opposition to racism among white viewers, hip-hop's gangsta revolutionary narratives bear with them a powerful political and emotional punch -- provided that one actually gives them a listen. Not surprisingly, alliances have been formed via hip-hop primarily among the younger generation of listeners, who are looking for (sub)cultural modes of identification, and finding them in hip-hop messages and style.

Violence, then, in the context of the debate over hip-hop, is deployed as a mythic sign -- isolated, considered in the abstract, apart from its motivations or ends -- and becomes the keyword of the moral panic that points its finger at rappers. Yet as KRS-One notes, taking his cue from Malcolm X, "We mistake violence for self-defense";
removed from the context of the urban war upon the poor, gangsta raps and style may indeed seem 'fascistic.' Hip-hop, to the extent that it re-inserts these questions into the material, lived existence of the ghetto, works to counter the discourse of moral panic that surrounds the notion of "violence." The justification of violence may be articulated in many ways -- and indeed it is not universal; many rappers, following Martin Luther King Jr., urge only non-violent means of resistance. Yet the point is that hip-hop re-inserts a difference -- between violence and self-defense -- that the spectacular media of moral panic erases, and simply by doing that, it works against the reproduction of oppression.

Another frequent accusation levelled against hip-hop is that of misogyny; indeed this accusation is second only to that of violence, to which in fact is is intimately linked. Certainly there is misogyny in rap lyrics, and certainly some rappers, such as Luther Campbell of 2 Live Crew, Too $hort, and Eazy-E, make calling out "bitches" and "ho's" a central part of their lyrical style. Yet the way this misogyny is attacked, as Jon Michael Spenser has remarked, invokes the oldest racist stereotypes in the book:

A close examination of the reactions rap causes in certain elements of American society reveals a terror that rap may lead to racial insurrection -- not the sort of social unrest witnessed during the sixties, but chaotic gang warfare and rampant rape. The frequent juxtaposition of rap and rape in the media justifies this postulate. Tipper Gore's Washington Post editorial, "Hate, Rape, and Rap," is the first instance of this linkage. It occurs again in a Newsweek editorial titled "America's Slide into the Sewer," in which journalist George F. Will juxtaposes the rap lyrics of 2 Live Crew and the explicit testimony of legal defendants regarding the attack of a jogger in New York's Central Park in April 1990. In another newspapers article it was reported that during sentencing, one of the males convicted in the case 'swaggered through a rambling, rap-styled poem he had composed in jail.'

Again, the same modes of attack that characterize the outcry against "violence" in rap lyrics are evident: the misogyny of the lyrics is removed from the original context of their performance, held forth -- in Will's article, by sheer tactical juxtaposition rather than
logic -- as signs of what will happen if nothing is done about this terrible plague of rap music, and finally deployed as a synecdoche for black males and black culture in general. "Those violent blacks," one imagines some yuppie at breakfast, intoning over espresso and the New York Times, "when will they learn to act responsibly?"

But this is not merely negative press, it is more: the criticism of "violence" and misogyny in rap lyrics is a tactical move characteristic of what critics such as Simon Watney (following Stanley Cohen and Stuart Hall) describe as "moral panics." In a thoroughly spectacular society, "moral panics" are both the most effective and insidious form of ideological broadcasting:

It is the central ideological business of the communications industry to retail ready-made pictures of "human" identity, and thus recruit individual consumers to identify with them in a fantasy of collective mutual complementarity. Whole sections of society, however, cannot be contained within this project, since they refuse to dissolve into the larger mutualities required of them. Hence the position, in particular, though in different ways, of both blacks and gay men, who are made to stand outside the "general public," inevitably appearing as threats to its internal cohesion. This cohesion is not "natural," but a result of the media industry's modes of address -- targeting an imaginary national family unit which is both white and heterosexual. All apparent threats to this key object of individual identification will be subject to the kids of treatment which Cohen and his followers describe as moral panics.22

"Moral panics," Watney furthermore demonstrates, are not discrete and occasional instances of media hype, but rather part of an ongoing ideological process; indeed the lack of something to panic about immediately ups the ante and virtually requires that some cause for alarm be mobilized, lest the status quo suddenly be called into question. Ultimately, however chimerical or demonstrably inaccurate the symbolic terrors which are used to incite such panics may be, it hardly makes a difference; what matters is that the system has once again conquered. We who live in a nation that fights a war on the poor in the name of the moral-panic-driven "war on drugs" can hardly afford to laugh at
similar ploys abroad, as when Saddam Hussein declares defeat "victory" or the United Nations bombs Somalia in the name of "peace."

Nonetheless, none of the mechanisms of moral panic should obscure the fact that there is violence -- both pointed and pointless -- as well as misogyny, homophobia, and ethnic hatred in many rap lyrics. Given the conflicting and interrelated discourses of race, gender, sexuality, and class, it could hardly be otherwise; in fact precisely to the extent that hip-hop brings with it an accurate "sample" of everyday events and conflicts in the 'hood, it brings with it the "whole kit and kaboodle" of hatreds, rivalries, and resentments. Yet as Sonja Peterson-Lewis has argued, neither the appeal to "representationalism" nor a gesture (such as Henry Louis Gates's in his op-ed piece on 2 Live Crew) towards the tradition of Signifyin(g) and sexual boasting, necessarily render hip-hop misogyny beyond the pale of criticism. The situation, as in other cultural contexts, is more an unresolved struggle rather than a fait accompli; power relationships are at stake in hip-hop, between black and white, male and female, "straight" and "gay," "underclass" and "bourgeoisie," and so forth, but there is no stable dominance.

Specifically, this conflictedness is embedded directly within hip-hop, on account of the dialectical structure of Signifyin(g) itself, which is always liable to a rebuttal or "payback." Misogynistic raps have been under attack from the start; the most well-known example being UTFO's diss of a fictional girl by the name of Roxanne in their 1984 cut "Roxanne, Roxanne." This cut spawned no fewer than two dozen response raps, including the recording debut of the Big Mama, Roxanne Shanté. In fact, UFTO cashed in on their own payback by hiring a young girl they named "The Real Roxanne" to come into the studio and diss them. Not all of the responses were feminist manifestos, but collectively they demonstrated that an attack on a woman -- on any woman -- in rhyme was going to be answered in rhyme. Notable "paybacks" since then have included MC Choice's "The Big Payback" (in which she takes the members of NWA down to size, though via the problematic strategy of questioning their masculinity with homophobic
epithets), and Roxanne Shanté's own version of "Fatal Attraction," in which she turns the narrative tables and castrates her faithless Wall Street lover, putting his 'jimmy' in a 'pickle jar.'

Feminist raps, however, have not only been reactive, but active, and despite the reputation of hip-hop as a black male genre, sistas have been at it from the start. Grandmaster Flash recalls that, 'back in the day,' there were even more female crews than male, though far fewer of them were able to break into the recording side; pre-1984 women rappers include Naomi Peterson, the Mercedes Ladies, Sha Rock (the "+1" of "Funky Four+1"), Sequence, and Big Lady K.25 Roxanne Shanté was already well established as a rapper in the mid '80's, though the first woman rapper to garner much media attention was the less hardcore (but still lyrically skilled) Queen Latifah. "Ladies First," which she cut with British rapper Monie Love, is perhaps the best-known feminist-style rap, with a video that showed Latifah planning global strategy while pictures of Winnie Mandela and Sojourn Truth flashed in the background; with a voice as boomin' as any man's, Latifah boldly proclaimed: "A woman can bear you, break you, take you, now it's time to relate to / a woman dope enough to make you holler and scream."26 Shanté offered her own manifesto with "The Year of the Independent Woman," where she criticizes women who make their identities dependent on men:

How many runny-nosed kids can you have?  
How many nights can you work on the ave?  
Your so-called man has a car and a Visa  
He's livin' large while you're livin' on pizza  
Unemployed while you're waitin' for the perfect mate  
Let's get one thing straight, cause it's gettin' late  
What you're waitin' for, it's never really comin'  
No one hears the sorry tunes that you're hummin'  
I'm here to bring you the news  
That if you're singin' the blues everyday  
It will not change the views that people have of you. 27
Shanté addresses this rap directly to her homegirls, even as she Signifies on racist stereotypes, such as the welfare mother with "runny-nosed kids." Rather than offering condescending advice, she offers a critique of the sexist double standards which allow men, though "livin' large," to remain uncommitted to the women in their lives. Yet this critique is followed by a call to solidarity: "Lend me your ears, dry up your tears, and let's here three cheers for the year of the independent woman."28

Similar strategies have been followed by many other women rappers, as in Salt-n-Pepa's "Tramp" (quoted in chapter 1), Yo Yo's "Girl, Don't Be No Fool," MC Lyte's "When in Love," and Nikki-D's "18 and Loves to Go."29 These raps share an interior focus, a kind of homegirl-to-homegirl mode of address, that enables them to be critical yet encouraging; their didacticism is pointed but supportive. Such a mode of address, however, is not the only one women rappers employ; in the past few years, over fifty female MC's have emerged, and their raps run the gamut of hip-hop styles. Most recently, a number of women, such as the Bo$$ and Bigga Sistas, have broken out with a hardcore "gangsta" style as rough or rougher than that of any of their male peers. Following hip-hop's re-appropriation of "nigga," many of these women style themselves "bitches," taking on and seeking to re-define the very epithet with which misogynistic rappers such as Too Short and Luther Campbell sought to degrade them.

Hardcore women rappers can be further broken down into two overlapping schools, which could be called the "sex" school and the "gangsta" school. The "sex" school, whose leading proponents are HWA, ("Hoes wit' Attitude"), BWP (Bytches Wit' Problems) and MC Choice, stake their claim for power on a graphic, woman-in-charge sexuality; they make a mockery of inflated claims of male sexual prowess (BWP's "Two Minute Brother") and demand equal time for oral sex (Choice's "Cat Got Your Tongue" or the Yeastie Girls' "You Suck").30 Many women of this school like to go toe-to-toe with the male counterparts, as when Nikki-D battles with Apache to see "Who Freaked Who." The sexual antagonism of these raps can get hot and heavy; while Apache insists
"I fuckin' freaked you," Nikki-D declares that by the time she's done with Apache he'll "need a tourniquet for [his] nuts." Not all "sex" raps, however, assert a more dominant role for women; some, such as HWA (Hoes Wit' Attitude)'s "Funk Me Baby" are simply up-front advertisements for sexual services, but despite this, the overall effect of these rappers is to set a new standard of (hetero)sexual assertiveness for women.

The other, "gangsta" school of women rappers is relatively new; while Antoinette tried to make it big with "The Gangstress" back in '87, it wasn't until the early '90s that the "gangsta bitches" broke onto the streets and into the charts. Bo$$'s 1993 debut, *Born Gangstaz*, charts new lyrical and musical territory; over heavy, p-funk beats she weaves narratives of street-smart revenge, coupled by skits, such as "Thelma and Louise," which show her and her homegirls blowing away at egotistical men with semi-automatic gunfire over the noise of breaking glass and squealing tires. Significantly, 1992-93 has seen a number of women rappers move closer to a gangsta style; both Yo-Yo and MC Lyte have moved to distance themselves from their softer, more R&B moments and emphasize a no-nonsense "ruffneck" attitude.

Gangsta rap, in general, has expanded its influence in the early '90's, no doubt in part due to the very criticism that the mass media have heaped on the genre. For, while gangsta style has always been part of the hip-hop mix, its singling out by the machineries of moral panic as a synecdoche for hip-hop as a whole has made even rappers who generally eschew the style feel a sense of solidarity and respect. White audiences have surely played a part in this, as the sales records of NWA emigrés like Dr. Dre and Ice Cube demonstrate, despite the fact that much of the "message" in gangsta raps is aimed directly at the hood; it's an irony of hip-hop's reception that the more it turns inward, the more it addresses itself (as 2PAC says) 'strictly to my niggaz,' the more certain white listeners want to hear it. The broad appeal of these narratives, increasingly, is the ground where battles of the (il)legitimacy of hip-hop are fought, since by one criteria, the most
"authentic" raps (if being hardcore 'gangsta' "no radio" produces "authenticity") are regarded by rap's critics as the greatest signs of its inauthenticity.

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Hip-hop's dialectical politics of gender, despite the fact that they constitute a site of struggle over (and potential resistance against) both racism and sexism, are themselves often framed within an insistent and at times hostile politics of sexuality. Anti-gay lyrics are commonplace (e.g. Flavor Flav's "Letter to the New York Post" or Ice Cube's "No Vaseline"), and outright threats, such as Brand Nubian's threat to "shoot a faggot in the back for actin' like that" or Shabba Ranks's suggestion that gays be crucified, form one extreme of this larger hostility. Yet however repugnant these lyrics, they must, like Professor Griff's anti-Semitic diatribes, be seen as specific enunciations framed by specific discourses on sexuality, race, and identity; to do less is to embrace the "moral panic" logic, which would have an entire musical tradition held up to scorn on the basis of such lyrics. That this is untenable is further underlined by performers such as Ice-T or the Disposable Heroes of HipHoprisy who have taken a stand for gay rights, and by the increasing visibility of gays and lesbians within the hip-hop scene.

The politics of sexuality in hip-hop are as spectacular as those of violence; while assertive, aggressive sexuality is a key ingredient of hip-hop attitude, it has so far almost always been heterosexuality. Yet beneath the posturing of macho males and rough-and-rugged females lie significant anxieties about both their personal sexuality and the mass political mobilizations of gays and lesbians. Women rappers who have taken an aggressive and highly sexualized stance have faced condemnation both as second-rate imitations of men and as butchy lesbians, and indeed many of them have taken pains to assert their heterosexual status. Male rappers, while they have been able to make copious claims for their sexual prowess without having their heterosexuality called into question,
have nonetheless shown considerable hostility over their direct and indirect relations with gay males, who have always been a central part of the dance club scene, and whose increasing industry visibility has led to confrontations such as the one over the editorship of Quincy Jones's pilot hip-hop magazine, Vibe.

Vibe was originally a joint venture between Jones and veteran hip-hop super-agent Russell Simmons, but Simmons pulled out of the project, in large part due to disagreements over staffing. Simmons's biggest complaint was that the person hired as editor-in-chief, Jonathan Van Meter, was white and gay. "I don't think it makes me homophobic to say that," Simmons was quoted by the New York Times as saying. "I just think the most homophobic group invading popular culture in the last 50 years is probably rappers. I would like to see some straight black man involved in the editing of this magazine, someone whose experiences are similar to that of the rappers." Simmons's logic aside (what other prejudices would be needed to make an ideal editor?), he plays identity politics with a vengeance, and he's not alone. In the spectacularized identity politics of race, real (but impersonal) hazards (such as the domination of the hip-hop recording industry by major multinational record conglomerates, which Simmons helped to engineer) often go unexamined, even as personified antagonisms with other minority groups (Koreans, gays, Jews) stir disproportionate anxiety and hostility.

Underlying this spectacularization, inevitably, are the mass politics of group identities, in which constituencies have coalesced around cultural positions such as "gay," "Latino," "working class," or "woman"; the economic decline of the late 80's and early 90's has placed these groups in competition for a shrinking pool of political and economic resources which, whatever it has done for the system as a whole, has tended to undermine solidarity among these groups.

A telling moment occurred on a 60 Minutes slot about the new curriculum for New York City schools, which included materials with favorable representations of gay families; one black woman educator interviewed was adamant that gays were not entitled
to group status or group protection; such recognition, she seemed to imply, could only come at the expense of a loss in the recognition already gained by African-Americans. This perception stems not only from actual competition for resources and recognition, but also from specific histories of oppression, which compete on a *symbolic* level. For instance, a measured insistence on the incommensurability of histories of oppression has long been articulated by many Jews, who object to appropriations of the word "holocaust" to situations such as Chuck-D’s calling black experience in America the "holocaust still goin' on." What is at stake in such instances is the *singularity* of oppression, a move against the appropriation and/or metaphorization of acts of oppression. Yet this move belies the fact that almost all mass movements against oppression have drawn from the historical reservoir of the experiences of other groups; the American revolution (to take only one example) was still resonating in the mind of Ho Chi Minh when he wrote his well-known letters to President Truman asking for U.S. aid in throwing off the yoke of French colonialism. However much a group would like to *own* its histories, they are inevitably going to have unexpected lines of influence; if the Jewish captivity in Egypt becomes a metaphor for slaves in the United States, what is to prevent the alienation of young urban blacks from striking a chord in the minds of alienated suburban white kids? If no lines of commensurability can be established, the possibility of alliance is destroyed; an absolute insistence on historical difference, in the end, is potentially as counter-revolutionary as an insistence on uncritical assimilation into a homogenous mass. It's a mark of postmodernity that, even as the full "ownership" of one's own oppression becomes impossible, its appropriation becomes a site of struggle.

The Jews, whose experiences of diaspora, oppression, ghettoization, genocide, anxiety over assimilation, and the dream of a promised land are in each case the paradigmatic instance of such events, in many ways prepared the symbolic ground which other groups have followed. The civil rights movement of the late 50's and early 60's, in which many Jews fought against racism alongside blacks, took up many of these
discourses, which certainly resonated with with the black historical experience; the roots of this resonance go back over two centuries via the Spirituals' metaphors of "Let My People Go" and calling the Ohio River the "River Jordan"). The campus anti-war movement of the mid-to-late 60's and the women's liberation movement of the early '70's both took their cue (and many of their organizing tactics) from the civil rights struggle. Lesbians and gays, in this sense, have formed as a kind of symbolic "third wave"; while their struggles have a long and bitter history, they did not burst through into the politics of the spectacle until the bubble of enforced invisibility was pricked by the moral panic over AIDS. Before the mid-80's, lesbian and gay activists received scant support from the women's movement, and little attention from 'civil rights' activists; even though that has changed, the alliances formed have often been uneasy, particularly since both 60's civil rights activists and '70's feminists tended to draw on humanist paradigms which assumed heterosexuality as the "norm."

Yet alongside these spectacular politics, a more specific factor in the homophobia of many rappers is undoubtedly the linkage of black resistance to black male virility. This symbolic connection, whose threads go back at least to black nationalisms of the 1930's and 40's, is that the black male has been, as it were, castrated by the white system of power, "his" women reduced to concubines for the white man. To reclaim his "manhood," so the story goes, the black male must re-assert dominance by reclaiming the black woman, and even (by the lights of Elridge Cleaver) raping white women to pay back the slaveholders for their collective crimes. Black maleness, then, along with Black male heterosexuality, become in this story the core of black resistance and militancy -- whence the politicized misogyny of 60's black nationalists such as Stokely Carmichael, who declared that the only position for women in the Black Power movement was "prone."

This narrative is not often explicitly articulated by rappers, but it is clearly one of the texts that underlies many sexist and homophobic rap lyrics. Ice Cube, in an interview
with Angela Davis, was generally in agreement with her on many issues, but on one point he was adamant:

Ice Cube: The black man is down.
Angela Davis: The back woman's down too.
Ice Cube: But the black woman can't look up to the black man until we get up.
Angela Davis: Well why should the black woman look up to the black man? Why can't we look at each other as equals?
Ice Cube: If we look at each other as equals, what you're going to have is a divide.35

In a related way, Queen Latifah, for all her royal attitude, seems to defer to men when she boasts in "Ladies First" that "We are the ones who give birth to the new generation of prophets"36 -- after all, given a choice, wouldn't it be more empowering to actually be a prophet than to give birth to one? Even raps that set themselves up as extolling the virtues of the black woman, such as the Poor Righteous Teachers’ "Shakiyla," have a condescending tone, and their praise of women focuses on their physical beauty and childbearing capabilities.37

This unequal deployment of power along gender lines is analogous in many ways to the attitudes towards homosexuality expressed in many hip-hop lyrics: a lesbian, by not being available to the supermale black liberator, insults his ego and threatens the revolution;38 a gay man can't perform the "revolutionary" reclamation of hetero "manhood," which makes him a potential traitor to "male" solidarity. Indeed one of the prominent street meanings of "faggot" (like "bitch") is simply "traitor," which is used both with or without explicit reference to sexuality. Revolutionary rhetoric aside, such a mentality is already hardwired into the unwritten codes of conduct of urban gangs; as Ice-T put it in a recent interview, "The tough guy survives, so you're taught to prey on
anything that's weaker. So you can't expect a lot of these hip-hop kids, who have grown up in the projects, to understand being gay. 39 Of course this assumes that gay men are necessarily less "tough" -- and that there are no gay kids in the projects -- both dubious claims, and yet they do reflect one aspect of the gangsta mentality that Ice-T describes, part of a symbolic logic of machismo that has a long and complex cultural history.

A third potential source for friction between blacks and gays lies in the politics of dance halls and clubs. The gay club scene has been crucial in the establishment of the modern dance music industry at least since the early days of disco; indeed, at various points in time the sentiment "disco sucks" was used as a veiled expression of homophobia. In a similar way, the techno-funk, Euro-disco, and technorave scenes have evolved in large part through their presence in gay dance clubs in the U.S. and Europe. Hip-hop, taking disco as one of its first sites of incursion, and actively producing trends in dance music such as "electro funk," has moved between solidarity and a kind of tense cohabitation with gay audiences and DJ's. For black gay men, the contradiction of an ostensibly "liberatory" music whose lyrics so often celebrate gay-bashing has bitter ironies, and yet paradoxically this music is extremely influential in the club scene. When the Euro-house group Snap! cancelled a Boston gig after they learned the venue was a gay club, there was outrage in the local gay community, both on account of the jarring discovery that a highly popular dance track ("I've Got the Power") was produced by rabid homophobes and because it meant that they wouldn't be hearing the band.

The situation is changing, however; while Ice-T may be alone among hardcore rappers in actively denouncing homophobia, a number of newer hip-hop groups have taken up the cause of gay rights. Prominent among them has been the Disposable Heroes of HipHoprisy, who released the first anti-gay-bashing rap, "The Language of Violence," in 1992; other bands on the hip-hop/industrial dance fringe, such as Consolidated, have made strong stands for gay rights both on and off the mic. Just as many male rappers, albeit after some heavy lyrical pressure, have worked towards strong and positive "pro-
female" raps (Public Enemy's "Revolutionary Generation," Paris's "Ebony" and "Asaataa's Song"), it's conceivable that more rappers who have rapped out homophobic rhymes will follow Ice-T's lead. The fight against HIV and AIDS, which have disproportionately affected both gay and urban black communities, may serve as a common ground; even Ice Cube has denounced HIV (though only as a tool of genocide against blacks).  

3. The politics of the spectacular

Despite the deep imbrication of hip-hop music within urban black cultures, the fact that so many hip-hop consumers are at a great geographical and cultural distance from the cities whence this urban knowledge-dropping emanates means that there will always be those who take hip-hop literally with no attention to its ironies and nuances, and the reaction of these people will itself be deployed by the architects and purveyors of moral panic as evidence that what they fear is real. Similarly, despite whatever voices "come correct" about issues such as black-on-black crime, sexism, homophobia, the fact that the vast majority of hip-hop does not consist of gay bashing, mindless misogyny, or random violence will never prevent raps that do from being taken as hip-hop's essence. The system of moral panics requires that the offending parts be taken as a paranoid symptom of the feared whole; a case in point is David Samuels' much-hyped piece in the New Republic.  

The cover photo for the issue featuring Samuels' article depicts a young white male wearing headphones, over which is printed the scandalous banner, "The Real Face of Rap." The accompanying article by David Samuels is itself sub-headed "The 'black music' that isn't either." Why isn't it black? Because its industry leaders, like Rick Rubin (one of the founders of Def Jam records) or the editor of the rap magazine The Source are
white (and, Samuels rather pointedly adds, "Jewish") entrepreneurs, while its most popular artists are themselves are not ghetto kids but rather "a tightly knit group of mostly young, middle-class New Yorkers." The fact that the large mass of its audience is white is also problematic for Samuels, though by this token blues and jazz might not qualify either as "black." And why isn't it music? Because its white "mainstream" audience had pressured it into conforming to their stereotypes, making it in the process "like rock'n'roll, a celebration of posturing over rhythm."

Certainly, there is no doubt that many white listeners find the representations of violence provided by N.W.A. and Schoolly-D fit right in with their stereotypes. Whatever the extent to which this violence is taken as Signified and not literal, it's still "safe" in the sense that white listeners can hear it in the comfort and safety of their suburban homes. As PE producer Hank Shocklee, quoted by Samuels, remarks, "It's like going to an amusement park and going on a roller-coaster ride -- records are safe, they're controlled fear, and you always have the choice of turning it off. That's why nobody ever takes a train up to 125th street and gets out and starts walking around. Because then you're not in control anymore . . . " Yet the safe distance of this audience does not necessarily preclude the possibility that their hearing Ice-T describe the ghetto as an "economic prison" in "Escape from the Killing Fields" can't raise white listeners' awareness of the fear and desperation experienced by young black kids in South Central L.A..

All this comes round again to the Signifyin(g) problematic, which is that there are no guarantees when it comes to the reception of language. Alongside the literal mistaking of the Signifying Monkey's figurative language, another parable could be formed by the figurative mistaking of literal language; when the Black Panther slogan "stick 'em up motherfucker, we've come for what's ours" is sampled on Paris's album The Devil Made me Do It, it no doubt may be received by many listeners as merely another titillating sample of that good old "authentic" black proclivity towards violence. Even if
the political messages of rap are taken seriously, there is a further danger that white listeners will do no more than listen, cashing in on the "feel-good" politics of simply buying a rap record. As Gates has observed, it can amount to little more than "buying Navajo blankets at a reservation road-stop."45

Yet these inescapable problematics hardly need to be taken, as Samuels takes them, as proof that rap is therefore inevitably a "corrupting" re-vending of racist stereotypes.46 For one, while "gangsta" rap artists continue to provide a large portion of rap's sales volume, they are not representative of an increasingly heterogenous hip-hop culture. Whether in the form of the coolly spiritual, half-sung meditations of P.M. Dawn, the jazz-with-a-hip-hop-attitude of Greg Osby, or the laid-back scattershot play of groups such as De LA Soul or K.M.D., the current spectrum of hip-hop culture cuts across all kinds of racial, ideological, and religious lines. To continue to regard groups like 2 Live Crew as typical representatives of rap (and on that basis to condemn rap in general) is itself to perpetuate racist stereotypes.

In addition to the question of rap's homogeneity, Samuels appropriates Gates in order to question the "authenticity" of rap as a cultural medium. Taking up the problematics of reception, he argues that rap's mostly-white audience has "shaped" rap music to its own stereotypes. Rap's authenticity thus is reduced to that of the "Navajo blanket" -- it may indeed have "come from" an authentic culture, but only as the commodification of a sort of synecdochal text (hip-hop's violent metaphors becomes to "Blacks" what blankets are to "Indians") whose consumption marks not cultural understanding but rather a studied avoidance of understanding. The "lack of authenticity" comes not only from this exchange, but because Vanilla Ice can be sold at the same roadside stand, much as machine-woven imitations of Navajo blankets are sold at souvenir shops. Yet this ignores the dual ambivalence of any cultural product; in actual practice, many of the "threads" from which rap's blanket are woven come from experiences and words that are certainly "authentic" to those that lived them; others,
though "machine-woven" from a miscellany of cultural fragments (black and white), are marked not by their origin (the "author" in authenticity) but pointedly by their appropriation. More than perhaps any other musical form, rap problematizes the discourse of authenticity, even as it makes the vexed question of its own reception the pivot of its own Signifyin(g) practice. The rap music that was purchased as entertainment may educate nonetheless; that the two cannot even be separated is implicitly indicated in BDP's album entitled Edutainment.

Samuels argues that 's rap's historical moment "has come and gone," but I would argue on the contrary that it is still yet to come. Like blues, jazz, or any other full-fledged musical discourse, hip-hop can no longer be characterized merely by citing the products of some of its performers. As of the present moment, there are hundreds of rappers who have had nationally distributed recordings; of these, over fifty are women, and there is an increasing number of hispanic and white rappers as well. Hip-hop already has a fourteen-year recording history, and its roots go back at least two decades before that. And, while many of the older acts like 2 Live Crew or N.W.A. may be stagnating, new groups are constantly emerging; in the fall 1991 record season alone, over twenty new acts have released their first albums. If there's any parallel, it might be with the status of Rock in, say, 1964 -- at the end of a decade of sometimes faddish popularity, and (perhaps) at the beginning of a decade of massive popular success. Rock, of course, has been so thoroughly commodified that it's practically a corporate product; already it's seeking refuge in museums and Halls of Fame, whereas hip-hop is threatening precisely because it can't be contained.

Hip-hop's influences have been as diverse as its roots; from the early '80's, when hip-hop crews shared the stage with punks like the Clash at New York Clubs, through rock and metal collaborations such as those between Run-D.M.C. and Aerosmith or Public Enemy and Anthrax (not to mention the Beastie Boys), on into Teddy Riley's patented "New Jack Swing" (to which, with customary pithiness, Ice Cube declares "You
can New Jack Swing on my nuts!"") and Mary J. Blige's soul-to-hip-hop collaborations, the "mix of black and white," stylistically and culturally, has grown so complex that it can no longer be reduced to simple racial dichotomies. Even as the five percenters and Afrocentric rappers push for more "blackness" their own sonic past and future remains interwoven with a tangle of cultural cross-references.


2 The initials of Niggas With Attitude, Bytches With Problems, Boogie Down Productions, Hoes With Attitude, and Ladies Love Cool James.

3 From the cut "Here Comer Kane, Scoob, Scrap" on Kane's 1993 album, Looks Like A Job For . . .

4 Such sequences were most memorably associated with H. "Rap" Brown, one of whose famous boasting/toasting raps began:

   Man, you must don't know who I am
   I'm sweet peeter jeeter the womb beater
   The baby maker the cradle shaker
   The deerslayer the buckbinder the women finder
   Known from the Gold Coast to the rocky shores of Maine
   Rap is my name and love is my game

   (Quoted in Gates, Signifying Monkey, 72-3).

5 For an explicit hip-hop version of this narrative, see Schoolly-D, "Signifying Rapper," on Smoke Some Kill (Jive/RCA 11014-J).


7 From Straight Outta Compton


10 Signifying Rappers, 86, 30.


12 "Necessary," from Boogie Down Productions, By All Means Necessary.
13 Paris, "The Devil Made Me Do It," on The Devil Made Me Do It (Tommy Boy Records TBCD XXXX, © 1990 Tommy Boy Music Inc.).

14 Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, tr. by Constance Farrington (NY: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991 (1968)).

15 Ice-T, "Escape from the Killing Fields" (on O.G.:Original Gangster, Sire/Warner Bros. CD 9 26492-2; Public Enemy, "Welcome to the Terrordome" (on Fear of a Black Planet, Def Jam/Columbia CD CK 45413); Ice Cube, "How to Survive in South Central" (on Music from the Movie Boyz-n-the-Hood, Qwest/Warner Bros. CD 9 26643-2.

16 See Mike Davis, City of Quartz, pp. xx-xx.

17"Behind Closed Doors," © 1991 Base Pipe Music/337 Music (ASCAP); on WC and the M.A.A.D. Circle, Ain't a Damn Thang Changed, Priority Records CDL 57156. WC's lyrics hark back to Josh White's old standard "Get Back Brother," whose chorus was "If you're white you're alright / If you're brown, well, stick around / but if you're black, whoa brother -- get back get back get back."

18 Wretched of the Earth, 69.

19 This stereotype itself has been satirized and Signified upon in tracks such as Ice-T's "Straight Up Nigga" and "The Stereotype." For a pithy account of the way this same stereotype is deployed to delegitimize hip-hop, see Jon Michael Spenser, "Introduction" to The Emergency of Black and the Emergence of Rap (Black Sacred Music vol. 5 no. 1 (Spring 1991)), 1-2.


24 "Roxanne, Roxanne" (Full Force/UTFO), Select Records # 62254, © 1984 Select Records; available on Hip-Hop From the Top (Rhino), which also includes the "Real" Roxanne's payback.

25 Toop, Rap Attack 2, ________.


29 Add discography for these titles.

30 Give discography here.


33 From "Can't Truss It," on Apocalypse '91: The Empire Strikes Black.

34 Ho Chi Minh modeled his own Vietnamese declaration of independence on that of the U.S., and in 1945 wrote a series of letters to President Truman and his Secretary of State, speaking of America's "noble ideals" and urging both cultural exchange and military support. Unfortunately, he had not counted on the virulent anti-communism which possessed the U.S. government in the postwar years; his letters were not even given the courtesy of an answer. See Gareth Porter, ed., Vietnam: The Definitive Documentation of Human Decisions (Stanfordville, NY: Earl M. Coleman Enterprises, 1979), vol. I: 83-86, 95.

35 "Nappy Happy: A Conversation with Ice Cube and Angela Davis," Transition 58 (1992), 182.

36 "Ladies First," on All Hail The Queen.

37 Poor Righteous Teachers, "Shakiyla," on Holy Intellect.

38 For one particularly telling rap, see the predictably super-macho Egyptian Lover's double-entendre "Alezby Inn," on West Coast Rap vol. 3.


40 See "I Wanna Kill Sam," quoted in chapter 4 below.

41 The degree to which the New Republic has been able to capitalize on this article is suggested by the fact that in two separate mass mailings in the past year, I have been
solicited with an envelope that proclaims that if I subscribe I will find out 'why rap music is really white.'

42 Samuels, p. 25.

43 Samuels, p. 26

44 qtd. in Samuels, p. 29.

45 qtd. in Samuels, p. 29.

46 Samuels, p. 29

47 Hispanics have been involved in the hip-hop scene from the start, and were always a strong contingent among east coast b-boys and b-girls (dancers). Kid Frost, who started his career in 1985, is the godfather of Hispanic rappers, and helped form the LA-based Latin Alliance which includes a large number of DJ's and rappers, among them Mellow Man Ace. And, despite Vanilla Ice and his Elvisian ambitions, a number of white rappers have earned the respect of hip-hop audiences; MC Serch and Prime Minister Pete Nice (both formerly of 3rd Bass) are perhaps the best established.

48 The list includes P.M. Dawn, Black Sheep, Nikki D (not new, but releasing her first full-length album), Nu Nizzag on the Blokkk, Queen Mother Rage, BFM: City O Dope, 2PAC, Sister Souljah, Ex-Girlfriend, AMG, Ed O.G., Downtown Science, Greyson & Jasun, Groove Garden, Sid & B-Tonn, Resident Alien, Powerule, Sway & King Tech, and Beware of Bass.