



Is Hip Hop Dead?: The Past, Present, and Future of America's Most Wanted Music

By Mickey Hess

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Hip hop is remarkably self-critical as a genre. In lyrics, rappers continue to debate the definition of hip hop and question where the line between underground artist and mainstream crossover is drawn, who owns the culture and who runs the industry, and most importantly, how to remain true to the culture's roots while also seeking fame and fortune. The tension between the desires to preserve hip hop's original culture and to create commercially successful music promotes a lyrical war of words between mainstream and underground artists that keeps hip hop very much alive today. In response to criticisms that hip hop has suffered or died in its transition to the mainstream, this book seeks to highlight and examine the ongoing dialogue among rap artists whose work describes their own careers.

Proclamations of hip hop's death have flooded the airwaves. The issue may have reached its boiling point in Nas's 2006 album *Hip Hop is Dead*. Nas's album is driven by nostalgia for a mythically pure moment in hip hop's history, when the music was motivated by artistic passion, instead of base commercialism. In the course of this same album, however, Nas himself brags about making money for his particular record label. These and similar contradictions are emblematic of the complex forces underlying the dialogue that keeps hip hop a vital element of our culture. *Is Hip Hop Dead?* seeks to illuminate the origins of hip hop nostalgia and examine how artists maintain control of their music and culture in the face of corporate record companies, government censorship, and the standardization of the rap image.

Many hip hop artists, both mainstream and underground, use their lyrics to engage in a complex dialogue about rhyme skills versus record sales, and commercialism versus culture. This ongoing dialogue invigorates hip hop and provides a common ground upon which we can reconsider many of the developments in the industry over the past 20 years. Building from black traditions that value knowledge gained from personal experience, rappers emphasize the importance of street knowledge and its role in forging a career in

the music business. Lyrics adopt models of the self-made man narrative, yet reject the trajectories of white Americans like Benjamin Franklin who espoused values of prudence, diligence, and delayed gratification. Hip hop's narratives instead promote a more immediately viable gratification through crime and extend this criminal mentality to their work in the music business. Through the lens of hip hop, and the threats to hip hop culture, author Mickey Hess is able to confront a range of important issues, including race, class, criminality, authenticity, the media, and personal identity.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Hess believes that the foundations of the lyrics of the music, which initially told stories about the artists as well as about their culture and environments, are disappearing. He offers a social and historical timeline of the music genre....The author reviews artists' biographies, marketing- and media- driven personas, and the scenarios that glorify violence and misogyny via offensive lyrics and videos. Capitalism and commercialism have affected the fabric of the music, but it is not dead yet. Notes and a historical biography supplement the text. Recommended for college collections and anyone studying the history of rap music." - **MultiCultural Review**

"Any college-level library strong in contemporary music culture needs *Is Hip Hop Dead?*, sure to be a popular library lead." - **Midwest Book Review**

"When rapper Nas released his 2006 album *Hip Hop is Dead*, he became yet one more voice warning that excessive commercialism had killed off the vitality of the music. Hess (English, Rider U.) explores the relative validity of these fears through analysis of issues of authenticity as expressed in the lyrics of rap artists. Over the course of the discussion, he discusses how the artists represent their career paths and their roles in the music industry, complications of hip hop's basis in autobiography in the lyrical personas of such artists as Digital Underground and MF DOOM, the ways white artists such as an Eminem frame their autobiographies within the model of hip hop authenticity, and the role of parody in confronting racial stereotypes related to social privilege." - **Reference & Research Book News**

About the Author

Mickey Hess is Assistant Professor of English at Rider University, and the editor of Greenwood Press's *Icons of Hip Hop: An Encyclopedia of the Movement, Music, and Culture*.

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