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# The Construction of Jazz Rap as High Art in Hip-Hop Music

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For doubters, perhaps rap + jazz will = acceptance.<sup>1</sup>  
—Christopher John Farley,  
in *Time*, July 12, 1993

“**T**he so-called jazz hip hop movement is about bringing jazz back to the streets. It got taken away, made into some elite, sophisticated music. It’s bringing jazz back where it belongs.”<sup>2</sup> The late rapper Guru made this statement in a 1994 interview for *Vibe* magazine, at a time when the “jazz rap” subgenre had become a widely discussed phenomenon in media discourse. Simultaneously, the flowering of eclectic rap groups and subgenres in the hip-hop mainstream—a period some writers refer to as the “golden age” of the

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher John Farley, “Hip-Hop Goes Bebop,” *Time*, July 12, 1993, available at: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,978844,00.html> (accessed August 17, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Danyel Smith, “Gang Starr: Jazzy Situation,” *Vibe*, May 1994, 88.

genre (1986–93)—was coming to an end.<sup>3</sup> During this era, multiple subgenres flaunted a wide variety of lyrical content, imagery, and eclectic musical styles, digitally sampled and borrowed.<sup>4</sup>

This essay focuses on a particular moment in hip-hop music history, roughly 1989–93, which saw the construction of jazz rap as an alternative to other rap subgenres such as “gangsta” and “pop rap.” Most importantly, the status of jazz as a sophisticated art form in the mainstream culture industries in 1980s America played an important role in the cultural reception of jazz rap. Despite Guru’s desire to bring jazz “back to the streets,” the ideological damage had been done, so to speak—jazz aesthetics and imagery contributed to highbrow distinctions within the hip-hop music world.

Functionally speaking, the construction of jazz rap represented the creation of a unique type of high art within the rap music world, the term “high art” being understood specifically as a distinction within the hip-hop domain and not with respect to cultural discourse more generally. When discussing rap music or hip-hop as an art form, writers position certain groups or genres at the top of an authenticity hierarchy, as opposed to the lower “mass culture” of other rap subgenres. Although artists, reviewers, and other commentators may not use the terms “high art” or “mass culture” in the context of rap music, the meaning and purpose of this distinction, which has been used for at least a century in American culture, remain consistent with other cultural realms, past and present.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Considered by historians to begin in the mid- to late-1980s and ending in 1993, this “golden age” began with Run-D.M.C.’s rise to popularity and ended with what Jeff Chang calls “the big crossover” in Dr. Dre’s *The Chronic*. In this era, a diversity of artists and groups such as N.W.A., Ice Cube, Public Enemy, and 2 Live Crew coexisted in the rap mainstream with Jungle Brothers, KRS-One, De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, women such as MC Lyte and Queen Latifah, and pop-rap artists MC Hammer and Vanilla Ice. Writers and critics lament the loss of this “golden age” in light of the post-1992 hegemony of gangsta rap in the mainstream. See Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-hop Generation* (London: Ebury, 2005), 420; and William Jelani Cobb, *To the Break of Dawn: A Freestyle on the Hip-hop Aesthetic* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 47.

<sup>4</sup> A distinction is to be drawn between musical borrowing in general and (digital) sampling, which amounts to a special case of musical borrowing. By the late-1980s or early 90s, sampling had become cheaper and more efficient: many producers switched from the E-Mu SP-1200 to Akai MPC samplers, which were more flexible and allowed for more complex sampling techniques. For more detail on this shift, see *Classic Material: The Hip-Hop Album Guide*, ed. Oliver Wang (Toronto: ECW Press, 2003), 32; see also Joseph G. Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-based Hip-hop* (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 34–35; and Felicia M. Miyakawa, *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop’s Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 107. For a thorough explanation and discussion of digital sampling, see Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology has Changed Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), in particular, chap. 7, “Music in 1s and 0s: The Art and Politics of Digital Sampling,” 137–57; see also Joanna Demers, “Sampling the 1970s in Hip-hop,” *Popular Music* 22, no. 3 (2003): 41–56.

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

Although attempts to place artists and groups within subgenres are inherently problematic, genre systems are nonetheless useful: “simply reference points,”<sup>6</sup> as Krims suggests, a “blunt instrument” that is a “necessary step in grasping representation in rap.”<sup>7</sup> As stereotypes or “ideal types,” the genres in question are constructed and used by the music industry, fans, and the media as structural interpretative frameworks. Examining contemporary music journalism is a particularly useful method by which to gauge this type of reception. Yet surprisingly, journalism (especially on hip-hop) has received less attention than it should in popular-music studies, for arguably it is reception, rather than composer intentionality or a musicologist’s individual interpretation, that proves crucial to the productive discussion of digital sampling and other forms of borrowing in hip-hop and other musical cultures.

With regard to the term “jazz rap”: I use it here for the sake of simplicity, since numerous classifications (e.g., hip-bop or jazz hip-hop) were given to artists and groups at the time. Jazz codes—sounds, lyrical references, and imagery that were identified as jazz—facilitated the establishment of this subgenre and became a focal point for writers and fans. Although groups belonging to the hip-hop “golden age” sampled from a number of styles, jazz was a cultural product familiar to the popular consciousness of various audiences in 1980s America. Furthermore, ideological associations with jazz helped to shape identities for those who sampled and borrowed from jazz styles, and they informed a hierarchy within hip-hop largely based on art-versus-commerce rhetoric.

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### *Jazz and the 1980s*

Mainstream jazz in the 1980s United States centered not so much on new developments as on the revival of older styles; and what seemed to dominate the public jazz discourse in this era was the notion that jazz was serious art music. The 1980s witnessed a widespread expansion in the cultural mainstream of what I call a “jazz art ideology,” many characteristics of which developed during the bebop era of the 1940s and 50s; and they were revived in part because of successful “neoclassical” conservative jazz musicians like Wynton Marsalis.<sup>8</sup> By then, jazz had moved to concert halls, academic institutions, and to within close proximity of the classical

<sup>6</sup> Krims, *Rap Music*, 92.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>8</sup> “Neoclassical” conservative jazz is a term used by Gary Giddins in his introduction, “Jazz Turns Neoclassical,” *Rhythm-a-ning: Jazz Tradition and Innovation in the '80s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), xi–xv. The idea of jazz as an elite art form was admittedly supported by a selected number of critics and writers well before the bebop era, particularly in France, and often centering on the work of Duke Ellington.

section of music stores. Jazz became a symbol for many things: America, democracy, African American culture, and most important to this study, highbrow art music.<sup>9</sup> Stylistically, the jazz revived in the 1980s became what Stuart Nicholson calls “the hard-bop mainstream,”<sup>10</sup> and its promotion by a number of younger musicians helped usher the music into membership in the cultural aristocracy.

The 1980s jazz renaissance occurred in a number of ways, including not only the touring of jazz artists and reissuing of jazz classics, but also the aggressive marketing of a younger generation of jazz musicians. Films like *Bird* (1988) and *Round Midnight* (1986) showed tormented genius musicians, and Spike Lee’s *Mo’ Better Blues* (1990)<sup>11</sup> romanticized the jazz world and put jazz in the cultural consciousness of the hip-hop generation.<sup>12</sup> As for print media, dozens of jazz books and autobiographies were published and reissued to create and accommodate demand during this jazz resurgence.<sup>13</sup> *The Cosby Show*, the most successful American sitcom of the 1980s, presented an upper-middle-class black family, used jazz musicians as guests (including Tito Puente, Dizzy Gillespie, the Count Basie Band, Jimmy Heath, Art Blakey, and Max Roach) and featured jazz-based scoring as music cues between scenes.<sup>14</sup> Although the show had been criticized for avoiding issues of race explicitly, it reinforced jazz’s association with the black middle class by suggesting a highbrow sophistication to be set off against lower-class African American representations in popular culture, notably the “hood” films of the early 1990s.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Robert Walser noted that “by the 1980s, jazz had risen so far up the ladder of cultural prestige that many people forgot it had ever been controversial.” He cited a 1987 resolution by the U.S. Congress that declared jazz had “evolved into a multifaceted art form” and that the youth of America need “to recognize and understand jazz as a significant part of their cultural and intellectual heritage.” (*Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History*, ed. Robert Walser [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999], 332–33).

<sup>10</sup> For a more complete description, see Stuart Nicholson, *Jazz: The 1980s Resurgence* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), vi.

<sup>11</sup> A popular single from the soundtrack of *Mo’ Better Blues* was “Jazz Thing” by the hip-hop group Gang Starr (MC Guru and DJ Premier). The song tells a selective history of jazz, uses a number of jazz samples from across jazz’s history, and includes characteristic turntable scratching styles from DJ Premier. The single and accompanying music video uses stock footage from older jazz performances, such as those from Duke Ellington and Charlie Parker. “Jazz Thing” brought the group national attention, though Gang Starr as a group subsequently tried to distance themselves from any jazz-rap categorization.

<sup>12</sup> Other jazz films of the 1980s worth mentioning are the Chet Baker documentary *Let’s Get Lost* (1989), dir. Bruce Weber, and the Thelonious Monk biopic *Straight, No Chaser* (1989), dir. Clint Eastwood. Additionally, a number of jazz musicians were writing film scores at the time (e.g., Terence Blanchard, Mark Isham, Lennie Niehaus).

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Harlos, “Jazz Autobiography: Theory, Practice, Politics,” in *Representing Jazz*, ed. Krin Gabbard (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 132–33.

<sup>14</sup> The show ran from 1984 to 1992 and was the number 1 show in America for five consecutive years.

<sup>15</sup> These films include *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), dir. John Singleton, *South Central* (1992), dir. Steve Anderson, *Juice* (1992), dir. Ernest R. Dickerson, and *Menace II Society*

Television commercials were also associating jazz with affluence. Chase Manhattan Bank, American Express, the Nissan Infiniti luxury car, and Diet Coke all used jazz in their television advertising.<sup>16</sup> In 1988, Yves Saint Laurent designed their fragrance “JAZZ For Men,” which ran ads in *Rolling Stone* magazine and elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> Another advertisement in a 1991 *Rolling Stone* featured British jazz saxophonist Courtney Pine modeling GAP turtleneck sweaters.<sup>18</sup> Partially inspired by Wynton Marsalis’s taste for fine suits (and that of the other young musicians who followed his lead), marketers connected jazz with high fashion. The clean-cut images portrayed by these jazz musicians suggested a cultural elite, a higher-class ethos sharply contrasted to the working-class images of many rock and heavy metal performers.

There was a further institutionalization of jazz in education: middle schools and high schools added jazz bands to their lists of ensembles, universities offered classes and degrees in jazz, and parameters of the music were codified for the purposes of teaching improvisation.<sup>19</sup> As Grover Sales commented in his aptly titled *Jazz: America’s Classical Music* (first published in 1984), “Monk, Mingus, Dolphy and the Miles Davis Sextet with Coltrane and Evans will fuel musicians of the future, just as Bach and Haydn prepare conservatory graduates.”<sup>20</sup>

Wynton Marsalis, more than any other individual, played a key role in the mass-scale legitimization of jazz in the 1980s. A trumpet player and composer from New Orleans, he was the first recording artist to hold a record contract in jazz and classical music simultaneously (at age nineteen, with Columbia Records), and the first artist to win Grammys in jazz and classical in the same year (1983; he repeated the feat in 1984). He cofounded Jazz at Lincoln Center in 1987, firmly placing

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(1993), dir. Albert and Allen Hughes. Juxtapositions of the black middle class and a lower class were not new. For example, this distinction was made during the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. For more on the black middle class, see William Julius Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); Mary Patillo, *Black Picket Fences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); and Karyn Lacy, *Blue-Chip Black* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> See Krin Gabbard, intro. “The Jazz Canon and Its Consequences,” in *Jazz among the Discourses*, ed. Gabbard (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 1–2; see also Gabbard, *Jammin’ at the Margins* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996), 102; and Richard Cook, *Blue Note Records: The Biography* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2001), 182.

<sup>17</sup> One example can be found in *Rolling Stone*, no. 565, November 16, 1989, 1.

<sup>18</sup> *Rolling Stone*, no. 600, March 21, 1991, 2. This was part of a larger GAP campaign entitled “Individuals of Style,” which featured Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Maceo Parker, Courtney Pine, and others. See John McDonough, “Jazz Sells,” *Downbeat*, October 1991, 34.

<sup>19</sup> This includes methods taught by Jamey Aebersold, Jerry Coker, and David Baker. For a more detailed account of these developments in jazz education, see David Ake, *Jazz Cultures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 112–45 (chap. 5: “Jazz ‘Traning: John Coltrane and the Conservatory”).

<sup>20</sup> Grover Sales, *Jazz: America’s Classical Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 219.

jazz in the concert hall on a regular basis. Described by Francis Davis as “rebell[ing] against non-conformity,”<sup>21</sup> Marsalis championed the great composers of acoustic jazz while dismissing any nonacoustic endeavor as a debased derivative of a pure art form. He was even more abruptly dismissive of pop music and hip-hop. Influenced heavily by jazz ideologies of Stanley Crouch and Albert Murray, Marsalis became, to quote Richard Cook, a “jazz media darling in an age when there simply weren’t any others.”<sup>22</sup> Accepting interviews for magazines, television, and newspapers as well as hosting jazz programs on National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting System, Marsalis became the rare case of a cultural producer (musician/composer) who was also a cultural intermediary—a public intellectual whose influence created boundaries, definitions, and tastes for the public.<sup>23</sup> Reaffirming the notion that jazz was “America’s classical music,” he was (and still is) a gatekeeper of the “jazz tradition.”

Although no time and place is ever truly homogeneous ideologically, the belief that jazz was a “serious music” became pervasive in media discourse of the 1980s as jazz became associated with affluence, sophistication, and a highbrow aesthetic that resisted being considered a “popular music.”<sup>24</sup> Sonorities identified as jazz occupied the mainstream cultural consciousness, and the political legitimacy of jazz would affect the reception of those who borrowed from the imagery and music of the genre.

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### *Jazz Rap*

Whereas musicians of the 1980s jazz mainstream tended to cultivate older styles idiomatically intact, hip-hop artists were envisioning music of the past differently, first through the technology of the turntable,

<sup>21</sup> Francis Davis, *In the Moment: Jazz in the 1980s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 29–41 (“The Right Stuff”). See also Stuart Nicholson, *Is Jazz Dead? (Or has it moved to a new address)* (London: Routledge, 2005), 23–52 (“Between Image and Artistry: The Wynton Marsalis Phenomenon”).

<sup>22</sup> Cook, *Blue Note Records*, 212–13.

<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the most exemplary document of his views at the time can be found in an article Marsalis wrote for the *New York Times* (July 31, 1988) entitled “What Jazz Is—and Isn’t,” subsequently anthologized in Walser, *Keeping Time*, 334–39. For more on cultural intermediaries, see Keith Negus, “The Work of Cultural Intermediaries and the Enduring Distance Between Production and Consumption,” *Cultural Studies* 16, no. 4 (2002): 501–15.

<sup>24</sup> There were multiple forms of jazz in the 1980s, with a number of ideological connotations. Two worth mentioning are the more avant-garde streams of jazz, exemplified by John Zorn and Anthony Braxton, and smooth jazz, which was a lighter version of fusion from the 1970s. Smooth jazz artists such as Kenny G and David Sanborn are often the focus of criticism from jazz purists, but their albums were commercially successful in the 1980s and helped to form their own significant jazz subgenre.



then with samplers and other studio technology to create something new. Both hip-hop and jazz had their origins as dance music; they were largely the product of African American urban creativity and innovation, and they shared rhythmic similarities: hip-hop and hard-bop jazz of the 1950s and 60s were stylistically defined by a dominance of the beat. Bebop jazz was a source of inspiration for many 1950s hipsters and beat poets, and poetry was often recited with jazz accompaniment (almost as a proto-rap form). Improvisation (more specifically, the ability to improvise in the generic idiom) was linked to authenticity in both jazz and hip-hop.<sup>25</sup> For mainstream jazz, in addition to the technical mastery of one's craft, it was what one did with the past that made one authentic, and battles (or "cutting contests") were not uncommon in the early days of jazz as a way to gain respect (and gigs) in the musical community; in certain subgenres of hip-hop, one's ability to freestyle (improvise raps on the spot) and to "battle" rap are sure signs of authenticity in certain "underground" rap and DJ circles.

Rap groups such as De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, Gang Starr, and Digable Planets emerged from the late 1980s and early 90s with categorizations for their music, including jazz rap, jazz-hop, jazz hip-hop, hip-bop, new jazz swing, alternative rap, and others.<sup>26</sup> Most overtly, the shared African American musical lineage of jazz and hip-hop became a focus in the reception of jazz rap in interviews and other journalism. From a practical standpoint, the artists' parents and siblings often had record collections that were readily available and could be used to sample.<sup>27</sup> In fact, some rap artists had jazz musician parents, most

<sup>25</sup> Reginald Thomas, "The Rhythm of Rhyme: A Look at Rap Music as an Art Form from a Jazz Perspective," in *African American Jazz and Rap: Social and Philosophical Examinations of Black Expressive Behavior*, ed. James L. Conyers (London: McFarland, 2001), 165–66. For examples of underground rap scenes, see Marcyliena Morgan, *The Real Hip-hop* (Durham: Duke University, 2009), and Anthony Kwame Harrison, *Hip Hop Underground* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009). Cinematic examples of such battles can be found in the Eminem quasi-biopic *8 Mile* (2003), dir. Curtis Hansen.

<sup>26</sup> The term "new jazz swing" can be found in Portia K. Maultsby, "Africanisms in African American Music," in *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Joseph Holloway, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 327. Jazz rap or alternative rap had also been deemed (and dismissed as) "college boy" rap, no doubt influenced by the high-brow topics of groups like Digable Planets and jazz's associations with college-educated, middle-class audiences. Many groups, such as A Tribe Called Quest, did become popular on college campuses before expanding to a wider audience. College radio stations also had successful underground hip-hop communities that would also organize events on campus. See Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 422; Shawn Taylor, *People's Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 66; Krims, *Rap Music*, 65.

<sup>27</sup> One example of a producer influenced by his parents' jazz tastes is DJ Premier; Ty Williams "Rap Session—Hip-Bop: The Rap/Jazz Connection," *The Source*, September 1992, 21. See also David Toop, *The Rap Attack 2* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1992), 189; and Brian Coleman, *Check the Technique: Liner Notes for Hip-hop Junkies* (New York: Villard, 2007), 164–65, 235.



recognizably rapper Nas, whose father Olu Dara occasionally performs on his son's albums. Rapper Rakim (of Eric B and Rakim) was a saxophone player whose mother was a professional jazz and opera singer.<sup>28</sup> The father of turntablist Grandmaster D.ST (later DXT) managed jazz musicians like Clifford Brown and Max Roach.<sup>29</sup> As Butterfly of Dignable Planets raps, "my father taught me jazz, all the peoples and the anthem / Ate peanuts with the Dizz and vibe with Lionel Hampton."<sup>30</sup> If jazz and hip-hop are most often treated as separate musical and cultural institutions, then the linking of the two acted as a symbolic exchange, an alliance that increased the social capital of both.<sup>31</sup>

Many groups that sampled jazz were part of a loose collective called the Native Tongues: Jungle Brothers, De La Soul, and A Tribe Called Quest, all formed in New York in 1988, rapping politically and socially conscious lyrics while promoting Afro-humanistic identities. Although they were inspired by Afrika Bambaataa's Zulu Nation, it was the New York City scene generally that most directly influenced both their jazz awareness and their knowledge of early hip-hop. Taylor notes that A Tribe Called Quest in particular "steered away from the ubiquitous funk and old-school soul samples of their fellow Tongue members and embraced rock and roll and jazz. . . . They were socially relevant, proudly black and whimsical, quirky and confident, a near perfect amalgamation of the other two groups."<sup>32</sup>

The lyrics and imagery of these groups often displayed an ethos most appropriately identified as bohemian,<sup>33</sup> and their references spanned numerous countercultures, from hippies to Five Percenter culture, beatniks, and blaxploitation films. In the case of Dignable Planets, overt references to bebop and hard bop musicians stood side by side with their rendering of existential and Marxist philosophies. Album titles such as Dignable Planets's *Reachin': A Refutation of Time and Space* and A Tribe Called Quest's *People's Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm*

<sup>28</sup> Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 258.

<sup>29</sup> Grandmaster D.ST was featured on the 1983 Herbie Hancock single "Rock It" and this was one of the earliest high-profile collaborations between jazz and hip-hop artists. S.H. Fernando, Jr., *The New Beats: Exploring the Music, Attitudes, and Culture of Hip-Hop* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 140.

<sup>30</sup> Butterfly, "Examination of What" (track 14) on Dignable Planets, *Reachin' (A New Refutation of Time and Space)*, (1:45).

<sup>31</sup> Bourdieu makes the distinction between social capital and cultural capital in "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (London: Greenwood Press, 1986), 243-48.

<sup>32</sup> Taylor, *People's Instinctive Travels*, 9-10.

<sup>33</sup> Krims, *Rap Music*, 65-70. Bohemianism is certainly a feature of the language and style of the 1950s "hipsters" who also looked to jazz as part of an early cold war sensibility of hipness. See Phil Ford, "Hip Sensibility in an Age of Mass Counterculture," *Jazz Perspectives* 2, no. 2 (2008): 121-63. And as Ford reminds us, "Elitism is essential to hipness," not only in contemporary jazz but also in cold war hip sensibilities more generally (142).

project the complexity of their subject matter through an insider language difficult to decipher (similar to arcane bebop song titles such as “Epistrophy” and “Ornithology”). Both the obscurity of their lyrics and their incorporation of jazz sonorities signaled a higher artistic plane—a notion of rap as high art and expander of consciousness.

### *Jazz Codes*

Musical elements that have been identified as jazz codes include a walking acoustic bass, saxophones, trumpet with Harmon mute,<sup>34</sup> and jazz guitar, to name a few.<sup>35</sup> As Steve Redhead and John Street have written, authenticity “is rarely understood as a question of what artists ‘really’ think or do, but of how they and their music and image are interpreted and symbolized,”<sup>36</sup> and the same could be said of genre identifications. For my purposes, the interpretation of jazz codes is an issue of audience reception rather than intention or the identification of sources for a jazz sample. Thus when Wynton Marsalis complained in the late 1980s that “people don’t know what I’m doing, basically, because they don’t understand music. All they’re doing is reacting to what they think it remotely sounds like,”<sup>37</sup> he acknowledged that authorial intent (or performer intent) may differ greatly from audience interpretation. For example, an acoustic bass may signify a “live” jazz aesthetic, even though it may be achieved through digital sampling. If a rap group samples from a 1970s funk horn line, it may be identified in its old context as funk; but in the newer context, the instrumentation of sax and trumpet may be interpreted as jazz.

A jazz code falls under what Philip Tagg calls a genre synecdoche—an instrument or musical structure that is shorthand for an entire style or genre.<sup>38</sup> In jazz rap, this may be achieved by the timbre of a particular

<sup>34</sup> The Harmon mute, specifically designed for brass instruments, is made of metal with a ring of cork around the outside so that air can escape only through the mute. It creates a quiet but sharp and metallic sound and was often used to change timbre of the trumpet or trombone in jazz big band music. It can be played with or without a metal “stem” that drastically changes the sound when inserted in the mute. Its sound was specially associated with Miles Davis, who used the mute (without stem) frequently during his long career.

<sup>35</sup> This approach to jazz codes is particularly indebted to the semiotic methodologies of John Fiske and Philip Tagg.

<sup>36</sup> Steve Redhead and John Street, “Have I the Right? Legitimacy, Authenticity and Community in Folk’s Politics,” *Popular Music* 8, no. 2 (1989): 180. Redhead and Street interpret Sting’s collaboration with jazz musicians for his first solo album *The Dream of the Blue Turtles* (1985) as a gesture of political legitimacy.

<sup>37</sup> Rai Zabor and Vic Garbarini, “Wynton vs. Herbie: The Purist and the Cross-breeder Duke It Out,” in *Keeping Time*, 342.

<sup>38</sup> Philip Tagg, *Introductory Notes to the Semiotics of Music*, version 3 (1999), 26–27, available at: <http://www.tagg.org/xpdfs/semiotug.pdf> (accessed August 22, 2009).

instrument (e.g., saxophone) and the jazz performance approach to an instrument (e.g., “walking” acoustic bass lines). The parameters of timbre, instrumentation, and performance approaches are arguably more important to jazz identity than syntactical processes (melody, harmony, and other musical features that can be represented in score notation). Jazz as a performance approach produces a particular jazz *feel* (notably “swung” eighth notes and expressive sub-syntactical microrhythmic variations)<sup>39</sup> along with the associations of particular instruments and their timbres. (Admittedly, this is better represented through recorded excerpts than through the “categorical perception”<sup>40</sup> of a musical score, though I provide some transcriptions for illustrative purposes below.)<sup>41</sup> Technically speaking, it is the sub-syntactical level of expressive timing (that which contributes to Keil’s “engendered feeling”) that characterizes a swing feel. As Matthew Butterfield argues, the groove in jazz arises not from syntactical processes, but from expressive microtiming at the sub-syntactical level.<sup>42</sup> These are the parameters that contribute to the identification of jazz codes.

Codes, like music genres, simplify in order to clarify and categorize a heterogeneous reality. The audience then interprets meanings with regard to these codes, actively constructing from a text (in this case, a recording) and changing the text in the process. Rather than simply a transmission from media to individual, there is a conversation between the two. The attempt to fix such unfixed texts through genre categorization is one of the two strategies the music industry has for controlling unreliable demand (creating stars is the other).<sup>43</sup> The texts in question are nonetheless sites of constant shifts and change, so that interpretation is largely dependent on the perspective of listeners or interpretive communities. For jazz rap, the socially situated interpretations point to the 1980s mainstream jazz art ideology. What follows are examples of “jazz codes” in the lyrics, imagery, and “beats” of two canonical jazz

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<sup>39</sup> Matthew W. Butterfield, “The Power of Anacrusis: Engendered Feeling in Groove-Based Musics,” *Music Theory Online* 12, no. 4 (2006).

<sup>40</sup> “Categorical perception” is a term that Eric Clarke uses to describe the way we perceive music in certain durational categories (e.g., quarter note, eighth note, half note, etc.). See Eric F. Clarke, “Rhythm and Timing in Music,” in *The Psychology of Music*, ed. Diana Deutsch, 2nd ed. (Burlington: Burlington Academic Press, 1999), 490.

<sup>41</sup> Most hip-hop studies take a sociological or historical approach rather than a musicological one. In fact, the use of musical notation is, more often than not, seen as exclusionary and elitist by many who do academic work on hip-hop music and culture. My intention in including music examples is primarily to emphasize the importance of the musical detail on hip-hop recordings, notably what may be described as an intramusical discourse, an element whose agency all too often goes unexplored in hip-hop scholarship.

<sup>42</sup> Butterfield, “The Power of Anacrusis,” 4.

<sup>43</sup> Simon Frith, “The Music Industry,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, ed. Simon Frith, John Street, Will Straw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 35.

rap groups: A Tribe Called Quest and Dignable Planets. (Here I will use the hip-hop terminology “flow” to designate the delivery of rap lyrics and “beat” to refer to its sonic complement: not only its percussive elements, but all sounds on the recording that do not include the rapper’s “flow.”)

In A Tribe Called Quest’s second album, *The Low End Theory* (1991), where jazz bassist Ron Carter is featured on “Verses from the Abstract,” jazz codes can be recognized throughout; the sounds of acoustic bass, saxophone, and vibraphone are the most prominent of these.<sup>44</sup> Q-Tip and Phife’s lyrics (on *The Low End Theory*) feature criticism of the music industry and the more commercially successful pop, R&B, and “new jack swing” artists.<sup>45</sup> Q-Tip pointedly sets himself apart from pop rappers in “Check the Rhime”:

Industry rule number four thousand and eighty,  
Record company people are shady.  
So kids watch your back ’cause I think they smoke crack,  
I don’t doubt it. Look at how they act.  
Off to better things like a hip-hop forum.  
Pass me the rock and I’ll storm with the crew and . . .  
Proper. What you say Hammer? Proper.<sup>46</sup>  
Rap is not pop, if you call it that then stop (2:54–3:14).

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Example 1 shows the “Check the Rhime” saxophone phrase from the chorus.<sup>47</sup> Acting as a jazz code, the sampled saxophone phrase provides a sonic alternative to R&B and pop rap, a musical complement to the lyrical meaning. Phife invokes a similar distancing from pop on their second single, titled “Jazz (We’ve Got),” when he claims that their songs are “strictly hardcore tracks, not a new jack swing” (2:02). The

<sup>44</sup> A Tribe Called Quest was formed in Queens in 1988. The members of the group were producer/DJ Ali Shaheed Muhammad, MC/producer Q-Tip (Jonathan Davis), and MCs Phife (Malik Taylor) and Jarobi (only on the first album). Their debut album *People’s Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm* (1990) also featured a number of jazz samples. For analyses of unity between beat and flow in ATCQ’s “Scenario,” “Can I Kick It,” and “Push It Along,” see Kyle Adams, “Aspects of the Music/Text Relationship in Rap,” *Music Theory Online* 14, no. 2 (2008).

<sup>45</sup> New jack swing was a style from the late-1980s and early-1990s that fused hip-hop and R&B into a hybrid pop style. Notable producers included Teddy Riley, Jimmy Jam, and Terry Lewis. The song “Show Business” discusses the difficulties of working in the rap music industry, structuring the common artist/group vs. music industry paradigm.

<sup>46</sup> The use of the word “proper” in this instance is a reference to the catchphrase used by MC Hammer in a 1991 Pepsi commercial, which introduced him as “MC Hammer: rap star and Pepsi drinker.”

<sup>47</sup> This phrase is sampled from “Love Your Life” by the Average White Band, *Soul Searching* (1976) (also sampled by Fatboy Slim for “Love Life”). The song also samples “Hydra” by Grover Washington Jr. from *Feels So Good* (1975) and the bass line from Minnie Riperton’s “Baby This Love I Have” and Steve Miller Band’s “Fly Like an Eagle.”

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EXAMPLE 1. “Check the Rhime” (0:05)

Alto and Tenor  
Saxophones

$\text{♩} = 98$

EXAMPLE 2a. “Excursions” (0:00)

Acoustic  
Bass

$\text{♩} = 84$

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chorus of “Jazz” contains a sample of Lucky Thompson playing the first four measures of the jazz standard “On Green Dolphin Street.” The song opens with the group chanting “We’ve got the jazz” repeatedly with a jazz drummer (on brushes) and an acoustic bass pedal point.

Another example of what may be understood as an instance of a pop/rap binary comes from “Excursions,” the first track in the *Low End Theory*. After a four-measure bass intro (with no drums), Q-Tip raps the following verse (to the solo acoustic bass accompaniment):

Back in the days when I was a teenager  
Before I had status and before I had a pager  
You could find the Abstract [Q-Tip] listening to hip-hop  
My pops used to say it reminded him of bebop  
I said, well daddy don’t you know that things go in cycles  
The way that Bobby Brown is just ampin’ like Michael.

These opening lyrics acknowledge the African American lineage from bebop to hip-hop, yet a distinction is drawn between black “pop music” such as that of Michael Jackson and Bobby Brown on one hand, hip-hop and bebop on the other. “Excursions” opens with an acoustic bass figure that loops throughout the song (ex. 2a).<sup>48</sup>

<sup>48</sup> This bass riff is from “A Chant for Bu” by Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers. The original is in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time, and producer Q-Tip was able to copy-and-paste the first two eighth notes of the measure to create a beat in common time: “I took the original bass line, which was in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time, and I put a beat onto the last measure to make it  $\frac{4}{4}$ . I made the drums underneath smack, so it had that big sound. And I put a reverse [Roland TR-] 808

## EXAMPLE 2b. “Excursions” (1:40)

The musical score consists of two systems of three staves each. The first system includes a Trumpet in Bb staff (top), a Tenor Saxophone staff (middle), and an Acoustic Bass staff (bottom). The second system continues the same three parts. The Acoustic Bass part features a consistent rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with a 'x' mark under the first note of each measure, indicating a drum machine sample. The Tenor Saxophone part features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The Trumpet part features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, including a triplet of eighth notes in the second measure of the second system.

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The acoustic timbre sampled here signifies a musical authenticity that finds its roots in both folk music and jazz; and on the chorus, samples from a recording of “Time” on the 1971 album *This Is Madness* from The Last Poets represents a borrowing of both lineage and the cultural prestige of poetry (ex. 2b).

Just as Wynton Marsalis and other neoclassical, conservative jazz musicians in the 1980s distanced themselves from pop music, A Tribe Called Quest was distancing rap from pop.<sup>49</sup> In order to classify A Tribe Called Quest as “true” hip-hop, Q-Tip distinguished himself from pop rappers like MC Hammer. Both beat and flow work together to generate a sense of authentic or noncommercial (i.e., countercultural) identity. A Tribe Called Quest drew on a long-standing art-versus-commerce myth by evoking a sense of authenticity that aligned jazz, so-called alternative rap, and other musics. Similarly, criticizing the popular music industry positioned ATCQ on the outside, again distancing them from associations of corruption and decay often attributed to mass music.

[drum machine] behind it, right before the beat actually kicks in. I loved that Last Poets sample on there, too.” Quoted in Brian Coleman, *Check the Technique*, 443.

<sup>49</sup> Of course, this distancing from pop had been a phenomenon before the 1980s: bebop musicians distanced themselves from “commercial” swing music of the 1930s and 40s, and rock and punk musicians have often defined themselves against pop in lyrics and interviews. Even earlier, Louis Armstrong received criticism for surviving the Great Depression by having a singing career on Broadway.

Economic denial is a familiar story, a quality of bourgeois production found in jazz, rap, and many other forms of popular music and art as a mark of their authenticity.<sup>50</sup> ATCQ's recordings thus stage an awareness of mainstream commercialism as *other* by suggesting that artists such as MC Hammer and Bobby Brown are operating under a false consciousness compared with their informed, less mainstream rap counterparts, even if this is not explicitly the case. Such dichotomies are reminiscent of what Phil Ford calls the "asymmetrical consciousness" of the hipster and the square ("The hipster sees through the square but not *vice versa*").<sup>51</sup>

Of all the jazz rap groups from this period, Dignable Planets arguably flaunted jazz connections and references most overtly by mentioning jazz musicians in many of their lyrics and using numerous jazz samples.<sup>52</sup> Their bohemian image, which had been largely borrowed from the concept of the 1950s hipster, was evident in their use of such jazz-related words as "cool," "cat," "hip," and "dig." Jazz was also used as a marketing tool for the group. An ad for their debut album in *The Source* magazine (April 1993) contained the headline "jazz, jive, poetry, & style." The same issue contained a Dignable Planets interview with pictures of the members in a jazz club setting, both male members being shown with a trumpet. And their first music video, for "Rebirth of Slick (Cool Like Dat)," featured the group performing in a jazz club setting in New York City. Jazz became the vehicle by which to market Dignable Planets and the framework to use for reviews, interviews, and other journalism.<sup>53</sup>

The complex collage of terminology and cultural references in their lyrics borrowed from multiple countercultures: 1950s hipsters and beat poets, spoken word poetry, hippies, Five Percenter Culture, "old school" hip-hop (Fab 5 Freddy, Crazy Legs of the Rock Steady Crew, Sugarhill Re-

<sup>50</sup> The idea of being "uncommercial" or not "selling out" was a characteristic of authenticity found in a number of music genres. It extends at least as far back as the Romantic notions of transcendence and timelessness in nineteenth-century music. Bourdieu has written about the idea of economic disinterestedness as a bourgeois production illusion; see Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," 242.

<sup>51</sup> Ford, "Hip Sensibility in an Age of Mass Counterculture," 123.

<sup>52</sup> Formed in 1989, Dignable Planets included members Butterfly (Ishmael Butler, from Brooklyn), Doodlebug (Craig Irving, from Philadelphia), and Ladybug (Mary Ann Viera, from Maryland).

<sup>53</sup> "Rebirth of Slick (Cool Like Dat)" was released in November 1992 in anticipation of the February 1993 album release of *Reachin' (A New Refutation of Time and Space)*. "Rebirth of Slick" received heavy radio airplay by January, the accompanying music video was prevalent on both MTV and BET, and it had sold 400,000 copies by early February. This single is by far the most well known from the group; it reached number 1 on the Billboard Hot Rap chart and number 15 on the Billboard Hot 100 Singles chart, and the album reached number 15 on the Billboard Top 200. "Rebirth of Slick (Cool Like Dat)" also received a Grammy in 1994 for Rap Performance by a Duo or Group.



## EXAMPLE 3. “Jazz Club Motive” from “It’s Good to Be Here” (3:35)

Key signature: F# (one sharp). Time signature: 4/4. Tempo: ♩ = 112. Performance instructions: swing feel, vamp.

Staves: Keyboard w/Piano Sound, Bass, Ride Cymbal, Finger Snaps.

cords), and other poets (The Last Poets, Nikki Giovanni, Maya Angelou). There were jazz references (Charles Mingus, Charlie Parker, Hank Mobley, Dizzy Gillespie, Max Roach), allusions to 1970s blaxploitation films (e.g., *Cleopatra Jones*), and other signifiers of African American identity (e.g., Afros and other hair references such as “don’t cover up your nappy, be happy with your kinkin” from “Examination of What”). As in so many American countercultures, particularly those in the 1950s and 60s, references to drugs (usually marijuana, as “nickel bags”) complemented an antiauthoritarian atmosphere (speaking against Uncle Sam, the “pigs,” and “fascist” conservatives). Lyrical references to Sartre, Camus, and politically tinged lyrics about abortion (in the song “La Femme Fetal”) were frequently mentioned in reviews of the album.

The sonic and visual imagery of the jazz club played a significant role in their music as well as in their media image. At the end of the first track of *Reachin’*, “It’s Good to Be Here” (which included jazz guitar, trumpet, and acoustic bass), an announcer (3:25) begins to introduce the group to the backdrop of a jazz piano vamp, with bass and finger snapping on the backbeat (beats 2 and 4 in 4/4 time, ex. 3):

Good evening insects, humans too  
 The Cocoon Club<sup>54</sup> is pleased to present to you tonight a new band  
 Straight from sector six and the colorful ghettos of outer space  
 They are some weird mother fuckers but they do jazz it up  
 So let’s bring them out here, yeah.

<sup>54</sup> The “cocoon club” is perhaps a reference to the famous Cotton Club of Harlem as well as a continuation of the insect metaphors in their lyrics and stage names.

Following these words from the announcer, Butterfly introduces the group and then says “the mind is time / the mind is space / a horn rush, a bass flush / the mind’s the taste / so sit back, enjoy the set, yeah,” later repeating this line during a fadeout. The music video for “Rebirth of Slick” features the members taking the New York subway to a local jazz club where they perform with a Japanese rhythm section to a diverse, yet small, audience. (The entire video is shot in black-and-white.) The irony of this is obvious—promoting a live aesthetic of a jazz club for a recording that had been constructed through digital sampling. The presence of jazz instruments nonetheless suggests “liveness.”<sup>55</sup> Because of the cultural associations with acoustic jazz (in this case, acoustic bass, piano, and drums playing a jazz vamp), these jazz instruments would be heard as live, thereby suggesting the authenticity of unmediated expression and creativity. No doubt the narration of the “announcer” plays a crucial role in creating a jazz club soundscape as well. A similar effect occurs at the end of “Swoon Units,” where a jazz club “sound stage” is created by means of a jazz rhythm section and the sound of audience talking (as Butterfly says he is “hippin up the nerds”). At the end of the album, each member of the band provides a final stanza with the earlier jazz club motive sonic background. These three separate jazz club interludes on the album use the same musical material, thereby solidifying the interpretation of various jazz tropes as central themes or as fundamental to the group’s image and style.<sup>56</sup>

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Their debut single “Rebirth of Slick (Cool Like Dat)” is exemplary in the use of jazz codes within hip-hop beats. As shown in table 1, the instrumental introduction is sixteen measures long (4 + 4 + 4 + 4); the first four measures include the solo walking acoustic bass phrase that repeats throughout the song (as bass figure 1; see ex. 4a).<sup>57</sup>

The second four measures consist of bass figure 1 accompanied by finger snapping on beats 2 and 4. The third set of four measures adds drums, and the fourth adds a horn line with saxophone and trumpet. Verses include acoustic bass and drums, with a variation on the bass line (bass figure 2) in every concluding four-measure unit. On the chorus,

<sup>55</sup> The most extensive study of “liveness” is Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>56</sup> “Last of the Spiddyocks,” a track with numerous jazz musician references and features a Harmon muted trumpet in the beat, ends with audience applause—another signifier of liveness.

<sup>57</sup> The bass line also features as a leitmotiv in “Appointment at the Fat Clinic” (track 11) and “Escapism (Gettin’ Free)” (track 10), not as central to the basic beat as in “Rebirth of Slick,” but as a small moment within the other two songs. This bass line, now associated with Diggable Planets’ moment of success, has been sampled by later rap artists (e.g., E-40 for “Yay Area”).

TABLE 1  
 “Rebirth of Slick,” opening measures

Instrumental introduction	measures
Solo acoustic bass (bass figure 1)	1–4
Bass figure 1 with finger snaps	5–9
Bass figure 1 with finger snaps and drums	10–14
Bass figure 1 with snaps, drums, and horn line	15–19

EXAMPLE 4a. “Rebirth of Slick (Cool like Dat)”

EXAMPLE 4a shows three staves of bass notation in 4/4 time. The first staff, labeled "Bass figure 1", starts with a tempo marking of ♩ = 98 and contains a sequence of eighth and quarter notes with various accidentals. The second staff, labeled "Bass figure 2 (last 4 bars of each verse)", contains a similar sequence of notes. The third staff, labeled "7", shows a one-bar rhythm section break with a whole rest, followed by the text "One-bar rhythm section break going into chorus".

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EXAMPLE 4b. “Rebirth of Slick” chorus (0:29)

EXAMPLE 4b shows the chorus for four instruments in 4/4 time. The Trumpet part is in the treble clef, playing eighth-note patterns. The Tenor Saxophone & Trombone part is also in the treble clef, playing a similar eighth-note pattern. The Acoustic Bass part is in the bass clef, playing a sequence of eighth and quarter notes. The Finger Snaps part is shown as a series of vertical stems with 'x' marks, indicating the timing of the snaps.

the words “I’m cool like that” repeat every two beats with the horn line from the intro (with the bass and drums, ex. 4b).

The particular sonic texture from the chorus (horns, bass, and drums) becomes the central jazz trope in the song. The drum sounds (not given in the transcription) include a modified beat from The Hon-ryppers’ “Impeach the President” (1973), which is an often-sampled

funk song. The track is still identifiable as jazz through the use of bass and horns, although it does not use jazz-style drum sounds (a point of comparison would be the drum sounds on A Tribe Called Quest's "Jazz").<sup>58</sup>

Doodlebug's third verse of "Rebirth of Slick" demonstrates the abstract, specialist language of their lyrics:

We get you free 'cause the clips be fat boss  
 Them dug the jams that commence to goin' off  
 She sweats the beats and ask me could she puff it  
 Me I got crew kid, seven and a crescent  
 Us cause a buzz when the nickel bag a dealt  
 Him that's my man with the asteroid belt  
 They catch a fizz from the Mr. Doodlebig  
 He rocks a tee from the Crooklyn nine pigs  
 Rebirth of slick like my gangster stroll  
 The lyrics just like loot come in stacks and rolls  
 You used to find the bug in a box with fade  
 Now he boogies up your stage plaits twist the braids.

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Both A Tribe Called Quest and Digable Planets used complex lyrics that may appear incomprehensible to a square outsider. As Kyle Adams has argued, the lack of narrative unity or cohesion in the lyrical content of groups like A Tribe Called Quest can be explained through a rapper's desire to match the sounds and rhythm of their "flow" to a precomposed "beat."<sup>59</sup> Even if this is the case, connections to 1950s hipster terminology signify a loosely unified countercultural or "hip" ethos between beat and flow.<sup>60</sup> Groups like A Tribe Called Quest and Digable Planets were negotiating a complexity of topics and ideas musically and lyrically, and a closer reading of the two groups would show striking differences in a number of ways.<sup>61</sup> But in the media reception of many of these groups, jazz became a readily identifiable unifying force.

<sup>58</sup> The timbres of funk drum sounds are a firmly ingrained sonic signifier of hip-hop, beats that allow a surprising amount of flexibility for the sound of the overall product, depending on the other sounds sampled or borrowed. The bass line and horn figures derive from Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers' "Stretchin'" from the album *Reflections in Blue* (1978).

<sup>59</sup> See Adams, "Aspects of the Music/Text Relationship in Rap."

<sup>60</sup> I do not mean to imply here that finding unity should be the goal in music analysis of any kind, as smaller units of meaning can also warrant investigation in the close reading of music recordings. See Justin A. Williams, "Beats and Flows: A Response to Kyle Adams," *Music Theory Online* 15, no. 2 (2009).

<sup>61</sup> Though I focus on jazz references in these groups, it is worth acknowledging the high degree of unconcealed intertextuality in hip-hop music and culture more generally, and I would go as far to say that it forms the fundamental aspect of hip-hop aesthetics.

*Media Reception*

Jazz rap groups like A Tribe Called Quest were often defined by their sounds in ways that their counterparts in other rap subgenres could not be. To quote Crane, “Cultural information that is already familiar because of its associations with previous items of culture is more readily assimilated into the core,”<sup>62</sup> the “already familiar” being jazz codes and their attached high art ideologies. The “core,” in this case, is the mainstream discourse as framed by various media; and print media such as *Rolling Stone*, *The Source*, *Vibe*, and *Rap Pages* contextualized the jazz samples in terms of class, intelligence, and artistic achievement.

One *Rolling Stone* review described the sounds of ATCQ’s first album as “funkified quiet-storm pseudo-jazz you might expect young Afrocentric upwardly mobiles to indulge in when they crack open that bottle of Amaretto and cuddle up in front of the gas fireplace: plenty of sweet silky saxophones.”<sup>63</sup> John Bush wrote “Without question the most intelligent, artistic rap group during the 1990s, A Tribe Called Quest jump-started and perfected the hip-hop alternative to hardcore and gangsta rap.”<sup>64</sup> One writer expressed that the *Low End Theory* “demonstrated that hip-hop was an aesthetic every bit as deep, serious and worth cherishing as any in a century plus of African-American music . . . giving a rap the same aesthetic weight as a Coltrane solo.”<sup>65</sup> Journalist Brian Coleman wrote of the group “Every time they hit the studio they added a serious, studious, jazz edge to their supremely innovative productions.”<sup>66</sup> Other adjectives used suggested that they were “more cerebral”<sup>67</sup> than other styles, had a “more intellectual bent,”<sup>68</sup> and were “more reflective.”<sup>69</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Diana Crane, *The Production of Culture: Media and the Urban Arts* (London: Sage, 1992), 10.

<sup>63</sup> Chuck Eddy, “Review of *People’s Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm*,” *Rolling Stone*, no. 576, April 19, 1990, 15.

<sup>64</sup> John Bush, “A Tribe Called Quest,” *allmusic.com*, available at: <http://allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=1:dcfixq95ld6e> (accessed June 1, 2007).

<sup>65</sup> Peter Shapiro, *The Rough Guide to Hip-Hop*, 2nd ed. (London: Rough Guides, 2005), 363, 365.

<sup>66</sup> Coleman, *Check the Technique*, 435.

<sup>67</sup> Big B, “Record Report—Arrested Development,” *The Source*, May 1992, no. 32, 56. See also “Jazz Rap,” in *The All Music Guide to Hip Hop: The Definitive Guide to Rap and Hip Hop*, ed. Vladimir Bogdanov (San Francisco: Backbeat, 2003), ix.

<sup>68</sup> “Given its more intellectual bent, it’s not surprising that jazz-rap never really caught on as a street favorite, but then it wasn’t meant to.” “Jazz Rap,” in *The All Music Guide to Hip Hop*, ix.

<sup>69</sup> “Among the leading proponents of this more reflective style (including De La Soul and the Jungle Brothers), A Tribe Called Quest was arguably the most accomplished.” Considine and Randall, “A Tribe Called Quest,” from *The New Rolling Stone Album Guide*, 2004, on *Rollingstone.com*, available at: <http://www.rollingstone.com/artists/atribecalledquest/biography> (accessed June 1, 2007).

Such descriptions implied the elevation of this music to the status of a (bourgeois) high art comparable to jazz.

For Digable Planets, media reception of *Reachin'* also focused on jazz as a high cultural facet of their music. Lyrical references to jazz and musical borrowing of jazz codes featured prominently in reviews. Digable Planets were described as "accessible without succumbing to a pop mentality."<sup>70</sup> Kevin Powell wrote in his review that Digable Planets "is everything hip-hop should be: artistically sound, unabashedly conscious and downright cool. And Digable Planets is the kind of rap act every fan should cram to understand."<sup>71</sup> Both reviews noted an element of intellectualism in their music, the former explicitly citing jazz and existentialist references. Another reviewer wrote that in *Reachin'* "sampled snatches of music from jazzmen Sonny Rollins and Art Blakey conjure the feel of smoky bebop clubs and two-drink minimums. . . . These jazzy undercurrents give the album a laid-back quality that refutes the riotous stereotype of rap."<sup>72</sup>

The frequent juxtaposition of jazz rap with rapper/producer Dr. Dre is particularly pertinent in the context of Digable Planets since both had albums and singles released at about the same time.<sup>73</sup> Dr. Dre's album *The Chronic* is often seen as the yardstick historically and generically when gangsta rap begins to dominate the rap mainstream and crosses over into pop music realms.<sup>74</sup> ATCQ had also been compared directly with Dr. Dre, as Kevin Powell wrote that A Tribe Called Quest and De La Soul provided "nuthin' but 'P' things: poetry, positive vibes, and a sense of purpose."<sup>75</sup> This was a reference to Dr. Dre's "Nuthin' But a 'G' Thang," the first single from *The Chronic*. Thus when the media reviewed Digable Planets or other jazz rap artists and albums, they contrasted jazz rap with Dr. Dre (and his label Death Row Records), viewing the latter as representative of a gangsta rap mainstream. The distinctions drawn encompassed sonorities used, lifestyles promoted, and ideologies implied. One article states:

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<sup>70</sup> Editors of *The Source*, "Pop Life," *The Source*, January 1994, 26.

<sup>71</sup> Kevin Powell, "Review of *Reachin' (A Refutation of Time and Space)*" (4 stars), *Rolling Stone*, no. 650, February 18, 1993, 61. Powell is most likely referencing the MC Lyte song "I Cram to Understand You," as intertextual references were often as important to hip-hop journalism as it was to the music.

<sup>72</sup> Farley, "Hip-hop Goes Bebop."

<sup>73</sup> Both Digable Planets ("Rebirth of Slick (Cool Like Dat)") and Dr. Dre ("Nuthin' But a 'G' Thang") had a single and music video permeating media space at the same time. See *Billboard*, February 6, 1993. Both singles were nominated for the Best Rap Performance by a Duo or Group Grammy Award, with Digable Planets winning the award.

<sup>74</sup> See Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 420; and Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "g" Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 161.

<sup>75</sup> Kevin Powell, "Review of *Midnight Marauders* and *Buhloone Mindstate*," *Vibe*, November 1993, 103.

In the early 1990s, while Suge Knight's Death Row records dominated hip-hop with artists like Dr. Dre and Tupac, Dignable Planets chose the same high road that De La Soul and A Tribe Called Quest had already taken—they all but ignored gangsta culture. MCs Doodlebug, Butterfly, and the sweet-voiced Ladybug combined a positive vibe with jazz samples to create ultra-laid-back joints that provoked head bobbing rather than drive-bys. Their debut, *Reachin'*, invaded college boom boxes and birthed the Top 20 hit and Grammy winner "Rebirth of Slick (Cool Like Dat)."<sup>76</sup>

Placing De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, and Dignable Planets on a "high road" in opposition to Death Row artists like Dr. Dre and Tupac Shakur juxtaposes the two with respect to subgenre and implies both Dignable Planets' perceived audience and their listening space ("college boom boxes"). Although both Dr. Dre and Dignable Planets were considered rap music, for many the two represented opposite ends of a rap spectrum. Such positioning, constructed by those who worked within these imagined juxtapositions—including artists, media, fans, and the industry—served to legitimate the artists' own practices.<sup>77</sup>

### *Jazz Codes and Meaning*

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Jazz is of course by no means univocal. It is important to note that the jazz art ideology identified here is far from the only existing identity for jazz in the 1980s and other eras. For example, in 1950s *film noir*, "crime jazz" often accompanied the corrupted, dark side of the city; jazz projected sex, drugs, and other vices of a depraved urban landscape (e.g., *The Sweet Smell of Success*, *The Man with the Golden Arm*). As bebop musicians were crafting an elite, virtuosic music appreciated by hipster-intellectuals, jazz-influenced film scores used instruments such as a scooping jazz saxophone to represent the sexuality of a *femme fatale*. This is still evident in recent parodies of *film noir*, for example on the television cartoon series *The Simpsons*.<sup>78</sup> And although this essay is primarily concerned with the use of jazz in the hip-hop world, there were

<sup>76</sup> David Malley, "Dignable Planets," *Rolling Stone Album Guide*, 2004, available at: <http://www.rollingstone.com/artists/dignableplanets/biography> (accessed June 1, 2007).

<sup>77</sup> Many other hip-hop groups, such as Organized Konfusion, Stetsasonic, Main Source, Black Moon, Freestyle Fellowship, The Roots, Quasimoto, and Souls of Mischief have incorporated jazz codes that have contributed to their alternative rap categorizations. Although the media gave much less attention to jazz rap after the mid-1990s, the link between jazz and hip-hop continues into the twenty-first century with artists including U.S. trumpeter/rapper Russell Gunn, U.S. pianist Robert Glasper, and U.K. saxophonist/rapper Soweto Kinch.

<sup>78</sup> These musical tropes were still used in the 1980s; one example was the use of the saxophone in the action series *MacGyver* for a sexually charged fantasy sequence between MacGyver and a woman.



instances in which influence flowed in the other direction as well: artists closer to the jazz world who collaborated with musicians and ideas from hip-hop scenes in the 1980s and 90s.<sup>79</sup>

Were such practices defensible artistically? At worst, the less conservative jazz musician who used elements from hip-hop or the hip-hop producer who digitally sampled from jazz records might be accused of gravitating to whatever was commercially popular and profitable at the time. Record labels, by the same token, could be criticized for fostering hip-hop and jazz collaboration in order to rebrand an old genre and thus sell back catalogues. At best, jazz musicians who borrowed and collaborated with hip-hop could be said to improve the genre, staying close to their musical lineage while trying something new in the spirit of jazz as a verb rather than a noun. Thus whereas jazz codes added a degree of sophistication and cultural elevation to rap, hip-hop codes, such as turntable scratches and hiss from sampled vinyl, could be heard on a number of jazz recordings as “subcultural capital” said to signify hipness or coolness.<sup>80</sup>

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The examples cited above help show how jazz can symbolize a variety of meanings, depending on context and interpretive community, for example high culture, the “street,” sexuality, hipness, elite tastes, or urban corruption. However, it was jazz, constructed and distributed as high art in the 1980s mainstream culture industries, that proved to be the most pervasive ideology in contemporary cultural interpretations. As Robert Fink has written, there is now a redefinition of art music that includes jazz (and rock); new composers borrow from rock and jazz, so that “postminimalism’s embrace of alternative rock/jazz culture is arty composers turning not away from artiness, but *toward* it.”<sup>81</sup>

In many of these cases, the interpretation of jazz codes tends toward the general rather than the specific, so that the precise meanings

<sup>79</sup> For example, three years after Gang Starr’s successful “Jazz Thing” (where rapper Guru stated, “The 90s will be the decade of a jazz thing”), Guru made a hip-hop album entitled *Jazzmatazz Vol. 1* (1993) in collaboration with various jazz musicians including Branford Marsalis, Donald Byrd, and Courtney Pine, and he later produced three subsequent volumes of the series (vol. 2, 1995, vol. 3, 2004, vol. 4, 2007). At this time, jazz musicians such as Herbie Hancock, Branford Marsalis, Quincy Jones, Wallace Roney, and Greg Osby were making hip-hop influenced albums. Additionally, Blue Note Records allowed the group US3 (led by British producers Geoff Wilkinson and Mel Simpson) to sample extensively from their catalogue free of charge, producing *Hand on the Torch* (1993), which became the top-selling album on Blue Note Records at the time, and the first to reach platinum sales in the United States. Their single “Cantaloup (Flip Fantasia)” received widespread radio play and added to the jazz and hip-hop fusion trends at the time. For information on the use of electronics, turntables, and sampling technology in more recent jazz, see chap. 6, “Future Jazz,” in Nicholson, *Is Jazz Dead?*

<sup>80</sup> “Subcultural capital” is theorized in Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 10–14.

<sup>81</sup> Robert Fink, “Elvis Everywhere,” *American Music* 16, no. 2 (1998): 146.

of songs can be less important than what the genre has been imagined to represent. In an attempt to decode meaning, journalists often categorize jazz rap artists in terms of preestablished frames. A muted trumpet or a walking acoustic bass are recognizable signifiers—sonic elements that have become emblematic of jazz, as interpreted by certain sociohistorically situated interpretive communities. As in earlier jazz albums and concerts that used string sections as a sign of class (e.g., Paul Whiteman’s symphonic jazz of the 1920s, “concert jazz” made famous by Duke Ellington, or *Charlie Parker with Strings* from 1950), acoustic bass and horns have become a sign of class in rap music.<sup>82</sup> Jazz in the 1980s became associated with the middle class, and its ideological associations were brought to groups who sampled jazz. Jazz rap became identified as a counterculture (although the artists themselves do not use the term), an “alternative” within the rap world, partly defined by jazz signifiers that reinforced preexisting cultural meanings.

As Gary Tomlinson has noted with respect to authentic meaning in music, “all meanings, authentic or not, arise from the personal ways in which individuals, performers and audience, incorporate the work in their own signifying contexts. . . . The authentic meanings of a work arise from our relating it to an array of things outside itself that we believe gave it meaning in its original context.”<sup>83</sup> His comments point to the importance of locating a context for the act of relating musical codes “to an array of things outside itself,” a crucial component in the study of musical borrowing and intertextuality of any era, and certainly applicable to the understanding of jazz rap and the “signifying context” for various interpretations of the genre.

Jazz codes arising from that context could easily be identified and distinguished from other rap music sonorities that had largely become the norm. For example, the sound of an acoustic bass—“Can I Kick It?,” “Rebirth of Slick (Cool Like Dat),” “Excursions”—is strikingly different to that of the funk bass or synthesized bass of many rap styles, for example, Dr. Dre’s “G-funk” style. And the use of a jazz guitar—“Bonita Applebum,” “Push It Along,” and “It’s Good to be Here”—is conspicuously opposed to the use of rock or metal guitars for Rick Rubin’s production work with the Beastie Boys and Run D.M.C.: the former implies

<sup>82</sup> The use of classical idioms and instruments to elevate jazz and African American culture has a long history, best described in John Howland, *Ellington Uptown: Duke Ellington, James P. Johnson, and the Birth of Concert Jazz* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009). In light of these traditions, it is interesting to note that on a general level, jazz has a similar function for hip-hop as classical forms had for concert jazz. The current case may emphasize the African American cultural linkage, whereas the former emphasized the hybridity between European (white) styles and African American ones.

<sup>83</sup> Gary Tomlinson, “Authentic Meaning in Music,” in *Authenticity and Early Music*, ed. Nicholas Kenyon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 123.

a George Benson sound, whereas the latter points more to Eddie van Halen or Jimi Hendrix. Likewise, a muted trumpet or certain horn lines may suggest jazz, but in other styles of rap, instrumental horn lines may be synthesized; more often, drum sounds from funk music will be sampled with the accompanying horn sounds (e.g., trumpet, trombone, saxophone) omitted from the sample.

To take the bifurcation of styles a step further: if early 1990s gangsta rap suggests a listening space of a car or West Coast block party, then jazz rap may evoke more bourgeois environments, such as the modern-day jazz club or a hi-fi stereo system in one's living room. Jazz rap implied a more introspective or private experience, to be listened to on a Walkman as opposed to a dance club (e.g., early 90s pop rap of MC Hammer or Vanilla Ice).<sup>84</sup> Musical codes can sometimes imply particular spaces (such as a jazz club), based on a number of factors, including cultural and stylistic associations as well as dominant images from our media-saturated society. If jazz is said to create a certain "vibe" or "atmosphere,"<sup>85</sup> then this is further proof that jazz, and other musics, have the ability to imply certain spaces in their recordings. In short, sounds are situated spatially as well as socially and historically.<sup>86</sup>

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As Stuart Hall has written, one of the ideological functions of the media is to distinguish between the center and the periphery—that is, between the realm of a legitimizing "mainstream" and that of an "alternative."<sup>87</sup> But in a subculture, legitimacy is reversed, the center being understood as inauthentic, whereas the periphery exudes authenticity. Having a niche, perceived to be followed by few, helps to solidify the subcultural identity of the periphery. For example, bebop, with its niche authenticity as opposed to swing music, was one particular subculture. The same niche authenticity can be said to exist in folk music, art films, so-called indie labels, "alternative" musics, and "conscious" or "backpack" rappers. In an "age of mass counterculture" (to borrow Ford's phrase), the constructions of these subgeneric categories are important

<sup>84</sup> Matt Diehl has described East Coast rap as "interior," for contemplative Walkman listening on the subway as opposed to the West Coast automobile-centric listening of "pop rap." Matt Diehl, "Pop Rap," in *The Vibe History of Hip Hop*, ed. Alan Light (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), 129.

<sup>85</sup> For an example of sampling to create atmosphere in Brand Nubian, see Miyakawa, *Five Percenter Rap*, 111–14.

<sup>86</sup> For attention to this third dimension from a geographical perspective, see Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

<sup>87</sup> Stuart Hall, "Culture, Media, and the Ideological Effect," in *Mass Communication and Society*, ed. James Curran, Michael Gurevitch, and Janet Woolcott (London: Open University Press, 1977).

and ever-present, offering membership in an elite society that attempts to appear more closed and marginalized than it actually is.<sup>88</sup>

Despite protestations from the artists themselves, groups such as A Tribe Called Quest, De La Soul, Digable Planets, and Gang Starr were largely defined by the styles from which they sampled and borrowed. A walking acoustic bass, a muted trumpet, or saxophones are sonic elements that have become emblematic of jazz, and jazz codes enact commentary with these attached, historically situated ideologies. Rap music's borrowing from jazz was a key gesture in the defining of jazz rap as a sophisticated alternative in hip-hop's ongoing struggle for cultural legitimacy.

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### ABSTRACT

Multiple factors contributed to the elevation of jazz as “high art” in mainstream media reception by the 1980s. The stage was thus set for hip-hop groups in the late-1980s and early 90s (such as Gang Starr, A Tribe Called Quest, and Digable Planets) to engage in a relationship with jazz as art and heritage. “Jazz codes” in the music, said to signify sophistication, helped create a rap-music subgenre commonly branded “jazz rap.” Connections may be identified between the status of jazz, as linked to a high art ideology in the 1980s, and the media reception of jazz rap as an elite rap subgenre (in opposition to “gangsta” rap and other subgenres). Contemplation of this development leads to larger questions about the creation of hierarchies, value judgments, and the phenomenon of elite status within music genres.

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Keywords: A Tribe Called Quest, Digable Planets, hip-hop, jazz, popular music

<sup>88</sup> This is aligned with Ford's writing on 1950s hip sensibilities: “The ethic of exclusion, of trials and secret knowledge—in short, an ethic of elitism.” Ford, “Hip Sensibility in an Age of Mass Counterculture,” 140.