

Since its creation in the mid-1970s, rap and hip-hop music has had a deep cultural impact to the people who both listen to and perform it. The genre has bloomed and evolved into one of the most arguably successful music genres of all time and has birthed some of the most influential and wealthy artists of the recent decades. These artists, such as Kanye West, Jay-Z, LL Cool J, Run DMC, and others have had profound impacts on the culture of the music industry, the rap genre, street culture, and the fashion industry. Rap has always had a deep appreciation of the fashion industry which has, in turn, created its own version of the fashion industry (which was labelled as “urban clothing” and included brands such as Cross Colors and Karl Kani), as well as completely reimagining how fashion can and should be done (such as Kanye West’s massively popular brand with Adidas, Yeezy). From the early b-boy days in the boroughs of New York City to today’s hyper-minimalist and exclusive brands such as the aforementioned Yeezy and Pharrell Williams’ Human Race line with Adidas, rap’s appreciation and collaboration with the fashion industry goes beyond simply wearing clothes; fashion and rap is a culture all to its own and is itself deeply influenced by class, wealth, and how rappers wish to present their image to the world and to their audiences.

Rap music was born in the South Bronx in New York as a part of hip-hop and was from the offset about the “pleasures and problems of black urban life in contemporary America” (Rose 1994; 22). Rap music has almost always talked about this lifestyle from the perspective of those who have lived it; those who have been marginalized by society and those who have gotten caught up in gang and street culture. The music reflects who they are as people and their experiences in this lifestyle as well as the desire for social standing in a meaningful way,

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how to avoid gang pressures and still achieve respect from their peers, how to deal with the loss of friends to gang violence and drug overdoses, and their sexual escapades (Rose 1994; 22). In other words, at its core, rap has always been about the culture of the streets, and the music that the artists perform and the clothes that they wear reflect this.

According to Allen Leon Talley, former editor of Vogue Magazine, in terms of how hip-hop and urban hip-hop and fashion have fused together, the earliest example of this would be Little Richard. To Talley, Little Richard could be seen as the “extravagant, outlandish black version of Liberace without the sequins” (Jenkins 2015; 00:06:57) Little Richard was extravagant in performance and in his appearance, but what is important about Little Richard is the fact that he was and still is an icon of freedom. According to Talley, “what he said to his lyrics can make you feel free. It gives you a sense of freedom” (Jenkins 2015; 00:07:21-00:07:30). Freedom, and especially the freedom to express oneself and how one feels they should be seen has been a driving force of fashion for the hip-hop industry. Fashion to these people goes beyond just trying to look good and feel good while wearing their clothes and their colors, but it goes into the freedom of expression and the freedom to be.

The first real fashion movements that existed in hip-hop were two movements that were happening at around the same time and helped to give people a voice and a means of expression. The first movement gave birth to rap and the second made use of rap for expression: gang-inspired wear and the b-boy/b-girl style. Gang-inspired style started in the 1970s in the Bronx as a result of actual gangs that existed there at the same time. During the 1970s, the Bronx had a population of around 1 million people (the same as Houston or San

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Diego) and was home to widespread poverty and lack of infrastructure (in some cases, entire apartments were only inhabited by two or three people where fifty could live and the people there found themselves lacking heat and hot water) Arson was a constant problem in the Bronx, and police brutality was at a high (Jenkins 2015; 00:08:50-00:09:01). All of these factors lead to the creation of street gangs in New York.

These people wore outfits that were partially inspired by the movie *Easy Rider*: motorcycle jackets with jean jackets over, decorated with large patches on the back that indicated what gang a person belongs to (also called their colors), and black jeans beneath that (Jenkins 2015; 00:09:35-00:09:50). These men wanted to look like warriors and their clothes reflected that desire. They wanted to present an image that they would tell the public that they would be fighting against their enemies at any cost; for these men, those enemies were other gangs and the police. Violence between gangs existed because the men wanted to gain respect and credit amongst their fellow gang members but existed towards the police because of their racism and brutality (Jenkins 2015; 00:11:18). However, violence between these gangs came to a stand-still following the death of a young peacemaker by the name of "Black Benjie".

Following Benjie's death, the gangs of the Bronx came together, formed a truce and used a new medium to solve their conflicts: they would go head-to-head in rap battles. These artists also began rapping about life in the low-income neighborhoods, which simultaneously brought attention to the issues that exist in the low-income neighborhoods, while at the same time fulfilling national misconceptions about the dangers of life in these neighborhoods (Rose 1994; 31). Following this change, the fashion of this group changed as well. While the dark Lee jeans

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stayed, group names were now printed on sweatshirts and t-shirts (Jenkins 2015; 00:12:07-00:12:40).

This change gave rise to the b-boy/b-girl style. B-boy and b-girl is a term that describes both a fashion style and a person who is known for dancing during the “break” of a song. This style of clothing carried over to performances and reflected the culture of the streets, but there was no one definitive style. For example, someone from Brooklyn would wear Clarks, shark skin pants, a Kangol crease hat and Cazal glasses without the lenses. A person from Harlem would wear a velour sweat suit with shoes whose brand matches the sweat suit. Finally, a person from the Bronx had pieces of both Harlem and Brooklyn (Jenkins 2015; 00:17:38-00:18:22). There was a disconnect between the artists people who wore this fashion and the artists who actually performed; meaning that while this style of clothing might have reflected the culture on the streets, when rappers first became a sensation, they didn’t dress in b-boy style. Instead, they dressed in the same outfits as rock stars and other superstars would of that time; this stemmed both from the idea of funkadelic music and notions of a what a black superstar *should* be, but also because people weren’t sure what hip-hop could be or what direction it was going (Leon, Longeville 2006; 00:10:05-00:10:30). The first group that both performed and constantly actually wore this style both on the streets and on stage was the rap group Run DMC.

Run DMC looked at what was going on with other popular rap artists of the time and questioned why they chose to dress the way that they did. They questioned why black artists chose to dress like the way white people thought a black superstar should look, and they chose to stay true to the streets and true to hip-hop and chose to reflect that in their wear (Leon,

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Longeville 2006; 00:10:31). Run DMC chose to wear black leather blazers, black Kangol or bowler hats (similar to ones that could be seen in *The Godfather*), and Adidas Superstar sneakers (both with fat laces and without laces at all). Because they chose to dress like they would on the streets, Run DMC gained a large following, and their first album topped the charts on both Black charts and pop charts; coincidentally, their “sophisticated b-boy look” also inspired their fans to dress like them from head to toe and the group helped to single-handedly bring back the Adidas Superstar sneaker in popularity (Leon, Longeville 2006; 00:12:50-00:13:07). Run DMC also helped to inspire their young fans in other ways as well.

Run DMC reaffirmed in the minds of people living in the low-income neighborhoods and streets of the United States that clothing is a remarkably important part of how one presents him/herself. They also helped to establish the importance of the sneaker in the minds of people across the United States who listened to their music. Sneakers have always been one of the staple parts of a rapper’s outfit, but Run DMC helped to re-establish the Adidas Superstar as one of the most important sneakers on the streets. Some other popular styles included the Puma Suede, Adidas high-tops, Clarks, and Converse Chuck Taylor All-Stars. These sneakers were chosen for their visual appeal, because they were easy to breakdance in, and because they were an economic choice for young teens growing up in the neighborhoods (Leon, Longeville 2006; 00:02:17-00:02:26, 00:03:53-00:04:16, 00:08:08-00:08:45). The popular look for these sneakers (save for the Converse and Clarks) was to remove the laces, wet them, add starch, and then iron them flat until they were flat. Without the fat laces, shoes were seen as

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‘plain’ and were generally unappealing (Leon, Longeville 2006; 00:05:44-00:06:15). That is, until Run DMC became popular.

Run DMC wore their Adidas sneakers without the laces in them, similar to how the shoes would be worn in prison; this in turn angered some members of the black community (and especially a man by the name of Dr. Jerold Deas) who thought that if members of the black community wore their sneakers as “felon sneakers” as they came to be called, then they would not become productive members of society, would fall into poverty, and would eventually turn to a life of crime (Leon, Longeville 2006; 00:11:35-00:12:17, 00:13:40-00:14:40). Naturally, Run DMC responded to the stereotyping by proving that sneakers do not define a person’s background or outcome with the release of the song “My Adidas” in 1986. The song features the group bragging about the places they have been and the escapades they have done while on tour wearing Adidas sneakers (Leon, Longeville 2006: 00:15:05-00:15:59). The song became massively popular, rising to number 10 with a bullet (meaning it would rise in popularity) on the Black music charts and 27 with a bullet on the pop charts upon its release. In fact, the song became so popular that the manager of Run DMC, Lyor Cohen, invited the executives of Adidas to a Run DMC concert in Madison Square Garden where, during the song “My Adidas”, one of the members of the group would ask the crowd members wearing Adidas sneakers to raise them above their heads; some 20,000 people reportedly held the sneakers above their heads, and Adidas realized just how popular and strong a music influence could be for their brand. As a result of the song and because of the popularity of the shoe that it garnered, Adidas officially collaborated with the artists and released the Run DMC line in 1986 (Leon, Longeville 2006;

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00:15:05-00:23:09). This success in collaboration between a rap artist and the brand that they loved helped to pave the way for other artists to achieve label deals, such as Fresh Gordon signing with FILA, Heavy D and the Boyz becoming representatives for Nike, LL Cool J signing with Troop, and, many years later, these collaborations helped to pave the way for Kanye West's massively popular Yeezy line and Pharrel Williams' Human Race line (Leon, Longeville 2006; 00:24:12-00:24:31). Of course, the collaboration of rappers with big-name brands weren't the only brands representing street culture available.

For example, the earliest known example of a popular and well-selling street wear brand was Cross Colours. It was founded by Carl Jones, a black fashion executive, in California in the year 1989. Jones created the designs of the first lines of Cross Colours based directly off of what "urban" (black or latino) customers and people were wearing while out and about and off of rap culture that he felt was coming out of New York City. Jones admits to creating the brand specifically for people who grew in and around street culture. The brand garnered fame and attention after being first featured on the show *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, followed by *Living Colors*, and it wasn't long until Jones heard from other brands and began to see that his designs where the silhouette of the clothes are oversized while maintaining the same ratios of average sizes (meaning, for example, a medium fits like a medium but its silhouette is that of a large) had influenced other brands across the country. In its first four years alone, Cross Colours went from being valued at nothing to being valued at \$100 million, which would help the label to influence other fashion brands as well, such as Karl Kani, Billionaire Boys Club, Ecko Unlimited, and others (Jenkins 2015; 00:40:34-00:46:00). What Cross Colours showed about fashion and

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the rap industry was that above all else, people wanted to be represented; people wanted to see their culture represented in a way that was not stereotypical or vilifying or portrayed as a bad thing, but people wanted to see themselves represented in popular culture.

The fashion industry and the rap industry has collaborated and fed off of each other in this very way. On one side, the rap industry allows for the representation of culture through music, through poetry, and through the fame, wealth, and influence that it brings. At the same time, the fashion industry allows these rappers to represent not only how they identify themselves personally, but how they identify themselves in terms of their culture and in terms of their background. Rap and fashion have had a symbiotic relationship in which one feeds off of the other; in some ways, such as with Run DMC, fashion is what helps to fuel the fame and fanbase that an artist has, which in turn helps to bring attention to the brand itself. In other cases, it's the rap music that actually brings about the fashion, as with the b-boy style and with Cross Colours. Fashion is incredibly important in the life of rappers and in the lives of the fans of rappers because it gives them some sort of identity that not only shows who they are, but it also unifies them as a group. For the rap industry, fashion has, is, and always will be about presenting an image that both defies social ideas of who a person can be while simultaneously showing that anyone from any background can achieve some sort of status. Fashion is the half of the driving force of the rap industry, with the other half being the actual rappers and lyrics, and it helps to unify people and cross cultural barriers and challenge societal norms; fashion drives rappers to strive towards success while giving the fans some way to connect with each other and their favorite artists. The connection that fashion has with the rap industry will only

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deepen and become more complex as new artists and designers bring their own unique perspectives to the public. It is impossible to separate fashion and rap, and it is also impossible to ignore its effect on the listeners and creators of the medium. Fashion is both the holy grail that rappers strive towards while also being the greatest reflector of class, wealth, and power; to rappers, there is no greater power than when they walk on stage fresh dripped.

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