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## **Hip-Hop in the UK**

US hip-hop found its way into the UK through British sound system culture, which had been well established from the 1950s. Although perhaps unsurprising, considering the influence of sound system culture on DJ Kool Herc's practices during the origins of hip-hop in New York, its impact on UK hip-hop was significant, as it meant the British reggae audience was able to absorb US hip-hop into their own cultural framework. Black British culture, as Hesmondhalgh and Melville note, 'already had a musical, stylistic and social structure –the reggae sound system ... many black British clubbers and consumers picked up on U.S. hip-hop but incorporated it into their pre-existing diet of reggae' (2001, 90).

One of the most successful and influential reggae sound systems in the UK was Saxon International. In the 1980s the MCs of Saxon established a unique 'fast-chat' style which 'involved much more complex lyrics, often spinning narratives spoken in a faster time than standard reggae' (Thomas 2012, 13), leading to singles such as Smiley Culture's 'Police Officer' reaching number 12 in the UK charts in 1984. This proved significant, as it provided a foundation for British hip-hop rappers to move away from imitating American artists and develop a British style.

The prominence of DJs in the British sound system culture also allowed the UK to play a significant role in the early stages of the globalisation of hip-hop. The DMC World Championships, which provided a global stage for hip-hop DJs to showcase and develop their techniques, were set up in the UK in 1985 by Tony Prince (Katz 2012). Having British DJs such as Cut Master Swift win the competition in its early years not only gave UK hip-hop culture an international presence but also impacted on the development of British hip-hop music production practices, with many DJs transitioning to into hip-hop producers. The role of pirate radio in the

development of the British hip-hop scene during the 1980s was also pivotal. One of the most influential shows was that of DJ Tim Westwood on London Weekend Radio, where he played a combination of American hip-hop and mix-tapes sent in by emerging local British hip-hop artists. With UK hip-hop a predominantly underground live scene during this time, the role of pirate radio in promoting events and forging networks across London was hugely significant in the establishment of a London hip-hop network. Commercial radio stations began to react to this with the introduction of Mike Allen's hip-hop show on Capitol radio in 1986 (subsequently taken over by Tim Westwood in 1988). The record label Music of Life, formed in 1986, became the first to release only UK hip hop records, with artists such as Derek B featuring in the UK singles charts in the late 1980s. 1989 saw the launch of *Hip-hop Connection*, a monthly hip-hop magazine that provided a crucial role in supporting the UK hip-hop scene.

Unsurprisingly, most of the British hip-hop releases during this period featured rappers mimicking American accents and using American slang. The emergence of London Posse and Demon Boyz, who were amongst the first UK rappers to use a combination of British and Caribbean dialects, provided an element of authenticity by bridging British and hip-hop culture through the use of sound system culture. Although this approach laid the foundations for an authentic UK hip-hop scene, the development of that scene in the early 1990s was hindered by record labels favouring the emerging British dance genres, and as a consequence many hip-hop artists, such as Hijack, Gunshot and Caveman, enjoyed very short-lived commercial success.

The amalgamation of the hip-hop aesthetic within British sound system culture led to the development of jungle, drum'n'bass and trip-hop, which utilised

sampled breakbeats, musical elements from reggae, dub and dancehall, together with dance music practices in the British rave scene. This diverse musical environment provided a landscape in which UK hip-hop producers would choose between staying within a strictly hip-hop cultural framework of production, or move into these new emerging practices. The dominance of US hip-hop in both global and UK music sales in the late 1990s, coinciding with the UK hip-hop's failure to be widely accepted as authentic by British audiences led some scholars to label jungle and trip-hop as 'UK hip-hop'; Noys for example states:

'[Jungle's] emergence could be partly due to the failure of British hip-hop to produce convincing music in comparison with the work coming from the USA. British hip-hop acts continue to be noticeably imitative or inferior to American acts. Therefore it is possible to argue that Jungle is British hip-hop.' (1995, 323).

This argument is not particularly convincing; hip-hop being only one of many musical influences within jungle, but it does highlight the fact that to be accepted by a British audience, UK hip-hop had to be incorporated into existing British musical aesthetics.

The end of the 1990s however saw the beginning of what was to be considered a 'prime time of UK hip hop in terms of the vibrancy of the scene, the regular nights, the number of artists, the close-knit community, and the volume of records being sold' (Speers 2014, 136). London became a significant hub for the scene with the formation of open-mic events at independent shop Deal Real, which 'enabled rap artists from across the United Kingdom to work collaboratively, hone their creative skills, and to cultivate a vibrant hip-hop scene' (Bramwell 2015). This coincided with the emergence of regular club nights such as Kung Fu and was followed in 2002 by the launch of 1Xtra, BBC's digital radio station dedicated entirely to urban music, which included DJ Excalibah's 'Tales from the Legend', a show dedicated to UK hip-

hop. It was during this period that UK hip-hop was able to fully develop its identity, and despite limited commercial success was able to become an accepted musical genre in its own right. Roots Manuva and Ty, both signed to record label Big Dada, received nominations for the Mercury Music prize. Record labels Low Life, with artists such as Braintax, Mystro and Skinnyman, and Wordplay Records, with artists such as Mark B & Blade and Fallacy & Fusion, also emerged as significant contributors to establish the genre.

### **Issues in the Study of Hip-Hop in the UK**

A lack of engagement with the music is recognised as a common trend in global hip-hop studies (Krimms, 2000; Schloss, 2004; Walser, 1995) along with common assertions that ‘the lyrics are superior to the music’ (Söderman & Folkestad, 2004, 1). With regard to hip-hop in the UK, studies have predominantly come to the subject from a cultural studies or sociological, rather than musicological perspective (Bennett, 1999; Bramwell, 2015b; Dedman, 2011; Hesmondhalgh & Melville, 2001; Webb, 2007). The disregard of the hip-hop music in academic research has led to a lack of critical engagement with the compositional processes of hip-hop producers. This is especially true in regard to UK hip-hop, leaving a number of issues unexplored, such as; how the influences of both British and hip-hop cultural aesthetics affect UK hip-hop production; the impact of the (mis)use of technology on production practice; and how the multifaceted notions of authenticity, in regards to both ‘hip-hop’ and ‘Britishness’, manifest themselves in the production of UK hip-hop. These issues form the basis for the remainder of this entry which, following a similar approach to other authors in the field (such as McLeod, 1999; Schloss, 2004; Smith, 2013) uses semi-structured interviews with key UK hip-hop producers alongside

analysis of published interviews from selected hip-hop media publications. Using analyses and discussion of examples of the producer's musical works to support the interview data, the aim is to examine the impact of the amalgamation of British and hip-hop musical aesthetics and its impact on the development of UK hip-hop production practice during what is widely considered its most prolific period (Speers, 2015), between 1998 and 2005.

### The Construction of British Authenticity

Fallacy and Fusion's 'The Groundbreaker' (2002) exemplifies some of the initial struggles in the development of a UK hip-hop sonic identity. The track received mainstream radio play (something of a rarity at the time) and was also notably used as part of DJ Skully's performance at the DMC world championships in 2002 (in which he was the runner-up). The track features the use of brass stabs, sampled from Willie Hutch's '(I'm Gonna) Hold On' (1975), and a sub-bass heavy bass-line drawn heavily from British reggae sound system sonic characteristics; however, it is notable that these feature alongside the use of highly-syncopated drum rhythms that are far more analogous to a jungle and UK garage aesthetic than conventional US hip-hop productions, which are predominantly based on 'breaks' consisting of regular rhythmic patterns, with the snare falling on beats 2 and 4. This 'hybrid' approach was viewed at the time by much of the music press as a reason for the tracks' appeal and success, with some citing it as a blueprint for the future of British hip-hop. This is illustrated by a review in dance music publication *Jockey Slut*, which stated 'if hip hop in the UK has a future to match the United Snakes [sic], this style of urban culture clash holds the key to such a power struggle' (quoted in Low 2002). However, rather than fundamentally appropriate other stylistic approaches into their production

aesthetic to appeal to the masses, some UK hip-hop producers were able to develop a more sophisticated interpretation of hip-hop production practice, developing an authentically ‘British’ sound whilst maintaining an adherence to a hip-hop aesthetic.

Although recognised as a potentially problematic term within scholarly discussion of popular music discourse (Weisethaunet and Lindberg 2010), authenticity dominates much of the recent scholarly activity within global hip-hop studies (such as Westinen 2014; Cheyne and Binder 2010). Although, as Terkourafi states, it ‘has always been venerated across art forms, the current preoccupation with authenticity in hip hop is probably unprecedented.’ (2010, 6)

The concept of authenticity is deeply entrenched in hip-hop culture, with an abundance of self-referential song titles and lyrical themes (McLeod 1999; Williams 2014). Scholarly discussion of authenticity in hip-hop defines concepts which can be applied not only in the context of lyrical analysis but also in the production process. In what he categorises as a social-psychological semantic dimension of hip-hop authenticity, McLeod claims that ‘individualism is a key component of the discourse that surrounds the claims of authenticity... aligned with “staying true to yourself” and “representing who you are”’ (1999, 140).

One of the fundamental issues with early UK hip-hop was the use of American accents and language. One rapper who successfully managed to find a British voice during the 1990s and in the process establish himself as one of the most prominent rappers in the UK, was Rodney P. When questioned in 2000 on the differences between UK and American rap Rodney P replied:

‘...the fact that we’re English, how we were brought up and how our background is different...if we’re reflecting that in the music its gonna be different;... For me, my background is West-Indian, I grew up in London; my flex is different; and if I’m representing that, its automatically gonna be different’ (Quoted in 40 Oz Productions 2000) .

This echoes Moore's notion of third person authenticity whereby '[the artists] speak the truth of their own culture' (2002, 209). This need to sound British however was not just important for rappers; many UK hip-hop producers were making a conscious effort to sound different to their US counterparts, in the words of UK rapper Ty in a 1998 interview to 'make a song that represents the UK.' For him, 'the entire musical landscape should reflect the physical landscape that we live in. An audience can then relate' (Quoted in Sullivan 1998).

Claims of authenticity within popular music are often 'constructed in opposition to in-authentic forms' (Wiseman-Trowse 2008, 6) and in the case of UK hip-hop, producers' rejection of other British musical forms, such as jungle and trip-hop, formed part of their construction of hip-hop authenticity. Pat Stash for example affirms that he was influenced by 1990s hip-hop sound and techniques. 'I wanted to be authentically hip hop, which meant I can honestly say that I never wanted to sound like break and jungle producers and saw that as uncool generally' (Interview with Author, June 2013)

Schloss (2004) has noted the development among hip-hop producers in the USA of an approach to authenticity 'characterized by a sort of aesthetic purism' in which 'certain musical gestures are valued for aesthetic reasons, and one's adherence to this aesthetic confers authenticity' (64). It was often these 'musical gestures' that began to differentiate UK producers from those in the USA. One such emerging characteristics involved the incorporation of musical attributes of reggae, dub and dancehall, directly referencing British sound system culture. This process of the 'glocalisation' (Lee 2010) of hip-hop through the incorporation of these stylistic influences can be observed in many UK hip-hop productions released in the early



2000s, which saw the emergence of a sound that a British audience could relate to. In the same way that jungle had proved that ‘identification with national unity can be achieved through the celebration of musical-cultural diversity’ (O’Flynn 2007, 24), UK hip-hop began to reflect the multi-genre musical landscape of multi-cultural Britain within a hip-hop aesthetic framework. In Harry Love’s production on Klashnekoff’s ‘Its Murda’ (2003), the use of sub-bass heavy bass-lines, rim shot and side stick snare samples and gunshot sound effects, all reference sound system sonic aesthetics culminating in a recognisably British sound, especially in comparison with the majority of exported US hip-hop of the period.

The notion of UK hip-hop producers striving to sound different from their US counterparts is supported by interview responses, despite the fact that most UK hip-hop producers were heavily inspired and influenced by US hip-hop producers and often began their early production careers emulating them. While acknowledging the heavy influence of RZA, Premier and other US producers and his attempts to emulate their techniques, Pat Stash for example declares it was always his intention to sound unique and different, to retain a slightly different style, adding ‘for me this was about filters and using different sample sources – particularly UK prog rock and female vocal stuff, some folk etc’ (Interview with Author 2013). This decision to use alternative, often British, musical samples to attempt to differentiate his sound from US hip-hop is reinforced by an earlier comment that ‘hate hearing some sample that I used on a US track’ (quoted in Shukla 2005).

Baby J also discusses attempting to emulate DJ Premier’s productions, highlighting his initial lack of knowledge of the technology and looping techniques leading to an unintended, unique approach to production consisting of the manipulation of small snippets of sounds, stating ‘...that was how my first album 'The

'Birth' was made, I don't think there's any just loops in there; it's all layers of little sample stabs played in' (Interview with Author, July 2013).

Furthermore, Baby J recognises the influence his British musical diet had on the sound of his productions, stating the inclusion of 'old soul, reggae and random records from the 60s to the mid 70s' in his productions led to them sound 'different to the US model... as US artists would point out, but it wasn't intentional.' (Interview with Author, July 2013)

The misuse of technology is a well-established concept within hip-hop production, such as Rose's concept of 'recording in the red' (1994, 75).

This type of practice is commonly associated with East Coast producers, many of whom are cited as influential figures by UK hip-hop producers. This is highlighted by Baby J's comments on the influence of RZA (Wu-Tang Clan) and Hank Shocklee (Public Enemy) in his production aesthetic, stating:

'What inspired me was the way they celebrated the imperfections in music, stuff that was out of tune, wrong, distorted etc...and use this to create something that sounded like it just didn't fit in music...I would also spend a lot of time dirtying sounds, by outputting the drum track through broken speakers and recording it back in or adding distortion and cutting of the tops of frequencies or dropping the sample rate' (Interview with Author, July 2013).

An example of this type of approach to production by Baby J can be observed in 'Pressure' featuring Yogi (1998), with the heavily processed drums and melodic sample echoing the sonic qualities of RZA and Hank Shocklee's productions.

### **Construction of a British sound**

To both Baby J and Pat Stash there are two main categories of UK hip-hop.

'To me there has always been 2 sounds to UK hip-hop. There's the London sound (Skitz, Jehst, Ty, Harry Love etc.) and the midlands sound (me, CIPHER, Joe Buddah, Urban etc). Our sound was heavily influenced by east coast

production and I don't think we strived to sound any different to the US model...The London sound to me was influenced by the clubs, there was a reference to DnB, garage, dancehall etc. ' (Baby J; Interview with Author, July 2013)

'I think there were two main sounds and others that fell in between. Sample-based and heavily American-underground influenced...using MPC/SP12000 [and] Synth heavy, West Indian and UK Dance Music influenced ... I think to talk about a particularly 'UK style' of rap production in that period would be referencing people who really incorporated both sides' (Pat Stash; Interview with Author, June 2013)

These statements both recognise contrasting approaches in the construction of authentic UK hip-hop. One approach, predominately utilising vinyl samples and digital hardware samplers, strictly adheres to the established US hip-hop production framework, whilst the alternative approach intentionally incorporates stylistic elements from other British music genres, often including the use of synthesisers and Digital Audio Workstations, as opposed to hardware samplers, consciously striving to construct an authentically 'British' approach to production. However it is perhaps those who incorporate a blend of both approaches, as recognised by Pat Stash, that are truly able to construct authentic UK hip-hop authenticity. This approach relates to Alim's concept of members of the global hip-hop nation 'negotiating their identities and memberships in the simultaneously localizing and globalizing imagined world of Hip Hop' (2009, 107). It is therefore perhaps not surprising that producers who utilise sonic characteristics from existing British music genres, incorporating them within a hip-hop production aesthetic are more likely to be accepted by British audiences than those who solely implement traditional American hip-hop approaches to production, which can be easily dismissed as inauthentic, as well as struggling to have any commercial impact in a market saturated with US artists.

## **Conclusion**

The rise of mp3 and Internet file sharing in the mid 2000s coincided with the arrival of grime, which ‘emerged from a scene in which aspiring MCs, DJs and Producers...had little attachment to the vinyl cherished in UK hip-hop culture’ (Bramwell 2015, 260). The negative impact on the UK hip-hop scene was significant. Low Life record label closed in 2007, Kung Fu club night in 2008 and *Hip-Hop Connection* magazine in 2009. Despite this, many UK hip-hop producers and artists continue their practice in the underground scene in the mid-2010s, and indeed since 2010 the scene has undergone somewhat of a resurgence, with labels such as High Focus signing a roster of artists who ‘perform extremely regularly and tour all the small towns around the UK, gathering a loyal fan base’ (Speers 2014, 140).

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