If Words Could Speak:
A Musical History of Hip-Hop’s Golden Age

by

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Preface

A New Experience

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Through this thesis I hope to bring you into a listening experience that is instructive and important, while still remaining, at its heart, my own. I came to hip-hop music by way of music and poetry. I’ve been musically inclined for as long as I can remember, and have played clarinet, saxophone and guitar since I realized playing instruments was an option. Poetry has taken a subtler tack in my life, sneaking its rhythms and images into my writing until about five years ago, when it emerged as the basis for slam poems ranging from the humorous to the deeply expressive. But, a year and a half ago, a severe repetitive stress injury abruptly altered my musical activities, forcing me to perform and practice less and less. Hip-hop music was an attractive alternative; it combined my love of poetry with my love of music without requiring physical exertion to appreciate or imitate. The role of the MC, a super-poet who could somehow mold his words into music through their interaction with a looped beat, was particularly appealing to me.

As a student of music theory and as a fan, I wanted to find out what people had to say about this 35-year old American art form. There was a lot out there: sociological studies starting in the 1980s, historical recaps from the ‘90s, journalism and critical reception from every decade of the music’s existence. Works that specifically dealt with the musical qualities of hip-hop, however, seemed to be very few and recent. What was the reason for this, I wondered? Maybe hip-hop wasn’t
taken as a serious, important type of music for a long time. Maybe it was seen as simply containing more engaging material for sociological and historical inquiries than for musical ones. Or maybe, it was deemed, as popular music often is, to have concerns too different from those of traditional music theory. Whatever the reason or reasons may be, they are becoming less and less relevant as writers like Adam Krims, Adam Bradley, Kyle Adams, and Jonah Katz attack the musical meat of hip-hop in an increasingly direct and effective fashion.

My approach to the music shares many aspects in common with theirs, but is unique in three important ways. First, I am interested in the lyrical part of the music, and I put special emphasis on the MC as a creative artist who makes meaning out of sound and sense. Second, unlike other scholars who pick and choose diverse examples to prove points about the way artists make meaning, I take a historical approach. I am interested in the way that different musical trends evolve and change over short periods of time. Finally, I use a number of unique techniques in my analysis that help bring out new dimensions of the poetics of hip-hop. Using them, I intend to show you how I hear meaning being made in the words and sounds of this rich musical form. If those words could only speak, this is what they’d say:
Chapter 1

Hip-Hop Poetics

A New Golden Age

The Golden Age of hip-hop is a time period that refers to any number of years from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s, in which the music was creatively transformed by a number of talented musicians. Specifically, a handful of recording artists working in the New York Metropolitan area significantly developed the lyrical part of the art form in the years between 1983 and 1988, creating poetic innovations that allowed for a much greater range of expression. That is, these MC’s used new types of musical phrases, rhythms, and rhymes to strengthen, add to, and transform the meaning of their words. In so doing, they helped to firmly establish both hip-hop’s place in mainstream culture and the MC’s role as its central artistic voice.

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1 The definition of the Golden Age of hip-hop that I will use is based on that given in The Anthology of Rap (Bradley and DuBois 2010:11-129). The term is related to and simultaneous with the Golden Age of Sampling, but refers to a general spike in musical creativity, not just sampling freedom. Bradley and DuBois mark the beginning of the Golden Age with the debut of Run-DMC and its end with the rise of gangsta rap in mainstream culture. I move the beginning from 1985, when Run-DMC’s breakthrough record was released, to 1983, the year in which their first single was released. The end of the Golden Age is accurately marked by the release of Dr. Dre’s The Chronic in 1992.
2 The term “hip-hop” refers to a culture involving multiple aspects (break-dancing, graffiti, etc.), of which MCing/rapping is one (Bradley and DuBois 2010: xxix). For convenience, I will use “hip-hop,” “hip-hop music,” “rap,” and “rap music” interchangeably to refer to a specific genre of music.
3 I focus on this portion of the Golden Age using three case studies spread over the first four years and a few specific examples from the last two years. Many Golden Age creative developments occurred after this time period as well, but a full analysis of those innovations is a subject for another project.
4 The term “MC” (alternatively “emcee”) refers to an artist who entertains an audience using many techniques (talking, chanting, gesturing, etc.) of which rapping is one. Thus, the term “rapper” is generally thought of as more limited in scope. I don’t distinguish between the two words in this paper.
Rap’s dual rhythms

In combining the basic building blocks of music with those of poetry, hip-hop draws on both a long history of setting words to music and an equally long history of reciting words rhythmically. Both music and poetry have their own ways of transforming the meaning of the words that occur within them. In music, text-setting generally involves the process of imbuing text with melody, harmony and rhythm and placing it within a regular meter (King 2012). In poetry, prosody uses only the rhythm of naturally spoken language in order to confirm and deviate from a meter that is implied by that rhythm itself (Corn 1997:25). Hip-hop, then, does away with music’s melodic and harmonic dimensions and discards poetry’s implied meter, creating a situation in which spoken words and a regular musical backdrop are in a state of constant, direct interaction. Adam Bradley expands:

The beat in rap is poetic meter rendered audible. Rap follows a dual rhythmic relationship whereby the MC is liberated to pursue innovations of syncopation and stress that would sound chaotic without the regularity of the musical rhythm. (2009:7)

Here, Bradley draws a comparison between rap and poetry while at the same pointing out a crucial difference. While both use language as a means of expression, they organize it in markedly different ways. Poetry relies on the natural stress patterns of a language to create its rhythms, whereas hip-hop bends language into a musical framework.
Musical poetics

Thus, the poetics that breathe life into hip-hop lyrics are first and foremost musical poetics. Considerations like rhythm, rhyme, musical form, and instrumentation all fall under this heading, which was suggested by Krims (2000) as a new name for what is now called “music theory”⁵. In this revised situation, “music theory” would refer to all theory about music, whether it be historical, sociological or cultural, and “musical poetics” would refer to analysis of the musical object itself. This term is useful to me for two reasons. First, it suggests that the specific musical qualities of a piece work in the same way as meter, rhythm and rhyme do in poetry. That is, they create some sort of meaning for the listener/reader, which in hip-hop (like in poetry) happens to work in tandem with the meaning of the words. Second, it invites the possibility that the meanings I glean in my analysis might be further interrogated for cultural and social significance. This project thus seeks to use musical poetics to give one small part of a story that has many facets.

The musical poetics I will be dealing with here, then, are of a specific variety. Because of rap’s unique dual rhythmic relationship, certain concerns become more important than others. I will call the array of musical poetic considerations that are important to this music “hip-hop poetics”. A number of different aspects go into these poetics, but the two most central concerns of the lyrical part of the art form are rhythm and rhyme⁶. The first of these (colloquially termed “flow”) describes the placement and relative stress of syllables in relation to the meter/rhythms of the

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⁵ “…specifically, the designing of models of intramusical relations and analysis of particular pieces…” (Krims 2000: 27)

backing track, and the second refers to what those syllables are and how they are related to each other sonically. A third important aspect is the actual sound of the MC’s voice; their vocal timbre, enunciation and precise cadences (as opposed to the more general term “stress” I will use). However, it is beyond my current means to capture analyze such elusive aspects in any systematic way, and I will not attempt it here. To clarify then, here is a depiction of the construct of language (the thing being worked upon) and poetics (the thing transforming it and making meaning).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct: <strong>Language</strong> (also called: Linguistic, Semantic, Text, Words, Lyrics)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Components: Syntax, Words, Wordplay, Literal Meaning, etc.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct: <strong>Poetics</strong> (also called: Musical Poetics, Hip-hop Poetics)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Components: Rhythm, Rhyme, Meter, Stress, Phrase Alignment, (Voice) etc.</td>
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</tbody>
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**Transformed Meaning**

**Rhythm: An overview**

A central concern within hip-hop poetics is rhythm, a term which encompasses not only the rhythm of the lyrical track but also that of the backing track and its relationship with the lyrical track. The backing track not only makes clear the four beats of each measure in hip-hop, but also provides a cyclic rhythmic pattern that the MC can choose to follow, interact with, or ignore. That repeating cycle of four beats constitutes the meter of the song as defined by Lerdahl and Jackendoff (1983).
They are an ever-present framework that even when not emphasized, or even articulated at all, form the backbone over which rhythm occurs. The rhythm of the backing track in hip-hop, however, also repeats regularly, and thus borders on metricality. Mark Butler describes this phenomenon in a discussion of EDM, another cyclically-based musical form:

[There is] … a shift in emphasis, a change in the way rhythm is viewed with respect to meter in electronic dance music. Rhythm begins to seem not so much like a foreground phenomenon embellishing some deep structure, but rather as a structurally significant element in its own right. (Butler in Butler 2006:100)

Thus, both the meter and the rhythm of the backing track become structural elements that the MC’s lyrics change and shift in relation to.

Rhythm is "a perceivable pattern of temporal space between attacks" (Powers 2003:724), and that pattern can come in many different forms. Three generally accepted categories, however, are “even” (or “straight”), “syncopated,” and “diatonic” (Butler 2006: 81). The word “even” describes a rhythm that is in lock-step with the meter. Even rhythms emphasize the beat by articulating metrically strong beats and pulses (82); that is (in 4/4 time), they focus on beats 1 and 3 over beats 2 and 4, on all beats over all other pulses, and on 3 over pulses 2 and 4. Syncopated rhythms, on the other hand, reinforce the beat by pushing and pulling against it (Temperley in Butler 2006:87). They somehow disrupt the metric hierarchy that is followed by straight rhythms, giving increased emphasis to metrically weak beats and
pulses. Most rhythms are neither purely even nor purely syncopated, but instead fall into one general category more than another. Moreover, the standard backbeat on beats 2 and 4 that is native to music with African-American origins (read: rock, funk, hip-hop, etc.) adds some “syncopation” to even the most even rhythms (87). Here are some examples of how the distinction might work:

**Example 1: Even**

![Even rhythm](image1)

This rhythm is purely even; it articulates all the beats and then articulates pulse 3 as opposed to pulse 2 or pulse 4.

**Example 2: Some Syncopation**

![Syncopated rhythm](image2)

This rhythm is still even but has slight syncopation because it articulates pulse 3 of beat 2 instead of beat 2 itself.

**Example 3: Syncopated**

![Syncopated rhythm](image3)

This rhythm is much more syncopated, with beat 3 also being de-emphasized in favor of articulating pulse 3 of beat 2 and pulse 3 of beat 3.

In this paper, syncopated and even rhythms will generally be thought of as expressing tension and resolution, with syncopated rhythms pushing and pulling against the beat and even rhythms resolving them by reinforcing the beat. This
understanding implies an analogy with tonality expressed by Krebs, Cohn\(^7\) and Lerdahl and Jackendoff (1983). Butler (2006:85) builds upon this analogy in defining a third category of rhythm as being diatonic\(^8\), or reminiscent of relationships between scale degrees. This category defines a regular repeating note duration that is contrary to the underlying meter. It thus creates tension in the same way that syncopation does, but also provides a new framework that may border on being its own sort of meter in and of itself. Here is an example of a diatonic rhythm:

\[\text{Example 4: Diatonic}\]

![Example 4: Diatonic](image)

This rhythm groups pulses in note-lengths of 3 for the first three beats, and in note-lengths of 2 for the last beat, creating a 3-3-3-3-2-2 pattern.

The unequal nature of the pattern, which includes notes of two different lengths, makes clear the “diatonic” label. Just like scales seek to put degrees at equal distances from each other but are limited by the divisibility of the octave, diatonic rhythms tend towards durational equality but are limited by measure length.

**Rhythm: Interaction with the backing track**

These three broad categories of rhythm, then, can be used to help describe the rhythms of the MC’s lyrics, the rhythms of the backing track\(^9\), and their interaction.

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\(^7\) See Malin (2010:51-53) for a discussion of the contributions of Krebs and Cohn to theories of metrical dissonance and conflict. Malin suggests using the term “release” in place of “resolution” when speaking of rhythm. I will not use that term here, but such an idea is not antithetical to this study; it implies that rhythms do shift between syncopation and evenness, but that the even rhythm need not explicitly musically related to the preceding syncopated pattern.

\(^8\) Other names for the same or similar phenomena are polyrhythm, asymmetrical rhythm, and hemiola.

\(^9\) This is my own term that I use to refer to all components of the music other than the rapped lyrics of the MC. Other possible terms include “music,” “beat,” “backdrop” or “backtrack”. I want to avoid
with each other. This relationship is a unique one, since the rhythmically cyclic nature of rap music is something almost entirely native to hip-hop. The practice of looping the rhythmic instrumental portions (or “breaks”) of funk and disco songs became popular in the ‘70s, as it allowed space for extended dancing and (eventually) rapping (Fernando 1999:15, Bradley and DuBois 2010:1-4). This cyclic backdrop allows for a special kind of interaction with the MC’s verbal poetics. This relationship, however, is not a static one; it is determined largely by the practices of specific MC-DJ (or producer\textsuperscript{10}) teams, which are in turn affected by the common practices of the times. In early recorded hip-hop (1979-1983), modes of interaction varied; for example, The Sugar Hill Gang rapped over a live band imitating the records of other groups, while Grandmaster Flash cut together especially diverse and numerous segments of such records to back up his MC’s (Greenberg 1999).

Golden Age Hip-Hop, however, saw these relationships solidify into a more uniform practice as multi-layered tracks began to be constructed wholesale out of “samples” from other records. The ability to do this effectively and efficiently was increased through the use of new technologies like drum machines and samplers (Gonzales 1999:103-104). A greater malleability of recorded music allowed for more interaction between MC’s, DJ’s and producers when creating, choosing, and

\textsuperscript{10}There is a definitional difference between these two terms, with a “producer” being responsible for the sound of a record and a “DJ” being someone who plays and mixes records in a live setting. The two often overlap because most DJ’s also produce in some capacity, but the distinction will be useful since many producers do not manipulate records live.
manipulating a backing track. These new creative possibilities allowed groups that included one or two MC’s and one DJ to replace DJ-based collectives as the central units of hip-hop.\(^\text{11}\) Additionally, there was an increase in organic interaction between these teams and the artistic visions of producers like Rick Rubin, Russell Simmons and Marley Marl.\(^\text{12}\) Such a mode of interaction was standard until the mid-1990s, when increased commodification of the MC put pressure on producers and DJ’s to deliver tracks in as-is batches.\(^\text{13}\)

I clarify these distinctions in order to highlight a differences between my understanding of hip-hop poetics and those of other authors. Adam Krims (2000) approaches his analysis as if hip-hop songs are fully formed cohesive statements and not collaborations between multiple contributors. At another extreme, Kyle Adams (2008) proposes that the lyrical track and the backing track have a one-way relationship in hip-hop; that is, the backing track is always created first, and lyrics are written based on the content of that track. Pate (2010) Potter (1995) and Bradley (2009) don’t consider the backing track at all, only discussing the rhythm of the MC’s delivery. The writer that my approach most closely builds upon, then, is Robert Walser (1995), who divides his analysis into two sections: “mapping the groove” and “mapping the rapping,” and proceeds to examine the effect of the backing track, the MC’s lyrics, and the complex interaction between the two. This approach reflects the

\(^{11}\) Examples from the Golden Age include Run-DMC, LL Cool J (and Cut Creator), Eric B. and Rakim, KRS-One (and Scott La Rock), A Tribe Called Quest, etc. DJ-based collectives from the Old School include Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, The Funky 4+1, and Afrikaa Bambaataa and the Soulsonic Force.

\(^{12}\) See chapters 3, 4, and 5 for a discussion of the influence of these producers on Run-DMC, LL Cool J, and Eric B and Rakim.

\(^{13}\) See Schloss (2004) for a discussion of the development and dynamics of the modern producer/DJ’s role in hip-hop music.
conceptual divide between the two parts, but nonetheless respects their importance and interrelationship.

**Rhythm: Stress**

This conceptual divide then, is solidified by the differing content of the two parts. Whereas the backing track uses musical poetics to organize musical material (pitched instruments, drum hits, and cymbals), the lyrical track uses musical poetics to organize language. Thus, an important element of the rhythm of the lyrical track is the attendant stress pattern of the MC’s words. “Stress” here refers to any special emphasis put on a syllable and is analogous to the musical concept of “accent” (Corn 13). The actual characteristics that denote such an emphasis could be amplitude, length, pitch differential, or energy of articulation (14). Linguists locate four different stress levels naturally occurring in the English language (29), but as Corn (25) notes, poetic meter is based on “comparative difference” (italics in original). Thus, we need only consider whether a word is more or less stressed than the words adjacent to it. In poetry, syllables are generally grouped into patterns of two to four syllables called “feet,” each with a specific stress pattern such as weak-strong (iamb), strong-weak-weak (trochee), etc (24-31).

These patterns arise almost exclusively from the natural stresses of the English language. Hip-hop, however, molds syllables into a musical framework, often increasing and decreasing relative stress based on placement. Syllables that fall

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14 Corn (1997:17) admits there is sometimes a “slight departure from ordinary speech patterns” in traditional accentual-syllabic verse. Moreover, other recently developed metrical systems in poetry depart drastically from the relationship described here. For example, in “sprung verse,” any syllable can be explicitly designated as stressed or unstressed whether or not it would otherwise be emphasized (Hobsbaum 1996:53-70), and in unmetered poetry, syllables need not have any recurring stress pattern whatsoever (Corn 1997:123-142).
on a beat are almost always stressed the most strongly; likewise, syllables occurring in the middle of a beat are less likely to receive strong emphasis. Additionally, words followed by pauses and rhyming words are usually stressed more strongly. Such a malleability of language creates a rich palette of expressive options for the MC, who has three basic options at his or her disposal: (1) align the natural stress patterns of the English language with the beat, (2) strongly stress syllables that would normally be weakly stressed by placing them in metrically strong positions, and (3) deliberately follow the natural stress patterns of English even when they conflict with the metrical hierarchy. Therefore, hip-hop allows for the way that language is pronounced and perceived to be literally transformed simply through interaction with a regular beat.

**Rhyme**

The sounds of syllables within a rapped line are just as important as the pitches of a string of notes in a melody. Both notes and syllables are discrete, articulated sounds, but whereas notes vary in terms of pitch content, syllables vary in terms of vowel and consonant sounds. The pattern of these sounds, then, creates an intricate pattern of attacks, sustains, and releases; some of the most striking of them are as follows:

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**Example 1: Assonance**

Came back from five years laying and stayed the same

-- MF Doom, “Rhymes like Dimes”

Vowel sounds are repeated; in this case the long “a” sound occurs four times.
Example 2: Consonance
Sold out seats to hear Biggie Small's speak
-- The Notorious B.I.G., “Juicy”

Consonant sounds are repeated; here, “s” is used six times in one line

Example 3: Rhyme
People in the world tryin’ to make ends meet

To travel by car, train, bus or feet
--Run-D.M.C., “It’s Like That”

Perfect rhyme occurs here, with the two words having different starting consonants, but identical stressed syllables directly following those consonants (Katz 2010:2-3).

The divide among the above techniques is often blurred. The following examples show some categories that arise from such an effect.

Example 4: Slant rhyme
And we can analyze each complaint

Break it down and explain these mistakes I make
--Atmosphere, “Yesterday”

Rhyme is implied by the placements of these syllables at the end of their respective lines. However, the parts of them that occur after the initial consonant are close but not identical.

Example 5: Multisyllabic/broken rhymes
I'm up in the spot lookin' extra fly

'Fore the day I die, I'ma touch the sky
--Kanye West, “Touch the Sky”
“Multisyllabic rhyme” is any rhyme or near-rhyme involving more than one adjacent syllable. Such a pattern is often spread across multiple words, a phenomenon known as “broken rhyme”.

A “rhyme domain” consists of the initial stressed syllable of a member of a rhyming pair and any following more weakly stressed syllables (Katz 2010). In situations of multisyllabic rhyme, rhyme domains are often “stacked” (like the two domains “extra” and “fly” above) (5). But how do we decide if a given syllable or group of syllables forms a rhyme domain or if they are just examples of assonance or consonance? Unfortunately there is no one right answer: syllables exist on a spectrum from completely different (for example: “skill” and “job”) to completely identical. When two sets of consonants and vowels tend towards similarity, it calls attention to those specific sounds, just as repeated notes and chords do in pitched music.

In fact, rhymes (and other repeated sound patterns) are directly analogous to musical themes. Thematic elements are those which are repeated in different contexts throughout a piece, thus creating connectivity and overall form. The more structurally important elements are generally placed further apart – for example, the restatement of an opening theme or the repetition of an introductory verse. As elements move closer together, however, their structural importance becomes weaker, and they are perceived as subordinate to the larger-scale associations. This theory of musical form and cognition is part of a larger way of thinking put forth by Lerdahl

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15 Because I am conceiving of syllable associations as existing on a spectrum, I will use the terms “rhyme” loosely to describe a number of different associated syllable patterns.
and Jackendoff (1983) and applied to hip-hop rhymes by Jonah Katz (2010).\textsuperscript{16} It is predicated on the notion that the brain places important connections in a structural hierarchy, and helps to explain why different syllable patterns seem to have variable importance.

For example, in the Atmosphere line “And we can analyze each complaint/ Break it down and explain these mistakes I make,” we hear “-plaint” as rhyming most strongly with “make” and not with “break,” “-plain” or “-takes” (which are all at least as close sonically). This is because by being at the end of lines, “-plaint” and “make” are in structurally prominent positions. The other assonant syllables also carry a sense of association with each other and with the end rhymes, but it is clearly a weaker one. Thus, the strength of the rhyme between two words depends both on what syllables they contain and on where they occur in relation to each other. A more complex spectrum emerges when this dimension is taken into account, the weakest possible rhyme consisting of two dissimilar, adjacent syllable patterns, and the strongest one involving two identical patterns occurring in structurally prominent positions.\textsuperscript{17}

By moving around in the space between these two extremes, MC’s create a multi-tiered web of associations and thematic connections that provide structure and meaning. Rhyme associations provide structure by giving lines focus and punch through internal rhyme and by creating large-scale end rhyme associations that connect both adjacent and non-adjacent lines. Rhyming words create meaning

\textsuperscript{16} In the discussion that follows, I use Katz’s technique to analyze a specific example.
\textsuperscript{17} These examples are trivial since neither extreme would actually register as rhyme; to be heard as rhyme a syllable pattern must be somewhere in between the two.
through their “coincidence of sound,” which is “a recommendation to the reader to consider the rhyming words in tandem, to see what meaning emerges from their juxtaposition” (Corn 1997:75). This meaning can be a direct similarity between the two words, or an obvious opposition. In most cases, however, such relationships are not so explicit, with rhyme being used as the connective tissue that binds together words, thoughts and phrases as part of a new kind of musical poetics.

**Rhyme and rhythm: phrase/structure mismatch**

Hip-hop poetics takes language and puts it into a musical structure. Large-scale linguistic form of course still exists, with rappers telling stories, teaching lessons and developing extended arguments and metaphors. Smaller scale interactions between measures, linguistic phrases, and musical phrases, then, combine to support and convey the lyrical thrust of a song as a whole. Whereas poetry organizes language using the unit of a “line,” the four-beat measure is the primary unit of musical structure in hip-hop, with musical and linguistic phrases representing two alternate ways of organizing the genre’s two-tiered source material. Katz (2010:1-2) notes these two possible viewpoints, but associates his musical “rhythmic constituent” solely with musical structure and doesn’t provide for the option of a musical phrase that is separate from a linguistic one.

Porco (2011:67-70), on the other hand, provides a more nuanced view, suggesting three ways of dividing up rapped words into lines of text:¹⁸

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¹⁸ I use the same musical excerpt as Porco, which is from Nas’s “One Love” (1994), but my discussion of these categories departs from his significantly. I change the names of those categories, which are “phrasal unit,” “rhymed unit,” and “musical unit”. My chosen names reflect an argument that the important “phrasal units” here are linguistic ones as opposed to breath-delimited ones, that “rhymes” are actually musical components that delimit musical phrases, and that the “musical unit” divides
**Example 1: Linguistic phrase**

Sometimes I sit back with a Buddha sack mind’s in another world thinkin’/
how can we exist through the facts
written in school textbooks
bibles et cetera
fuck a school lecture
the lies get me vex’da

This grouping separates out distinct clauses and sentences in the lyrics.

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**Example 2: Musical phrase**

Sometimes I sit back with a Buddha sack
mind’s in another world thinkin’ how can we exist through the facts
written in school textbooks bibles et cet’ra
fuck a school lecture
the lies get me vex’da

This example divides lines based on musical phrases that are punctuated with rhyme,¹⁹ which functions as the central thematic connector in hip-hop.

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**Example 3: Musical Measure**

Some-
times I sit back with a Buddha sack minds in an-

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Words based on musical *structure*, not by their musical function as a whole. The usefulness of these definitions will become clear as they are employed in analysis in chapters 2-5. I also change the grouping in example 2 to reflect the internal rhyme chain “cet’ra”-“lecture”-“vex’da”.

¹⁹ As we will see, some MC’s occasionally avoid rhyme at the end of a musical phrase to achieve a specific effect.
Division into these three categories is necessary in a study of hip-hop poetics, because MC’s constantly shift their alignment in order to change the effect of their words. A trivial example of phrases not lining up with measures is the use of pick-ups (the initial word “some” in this example) that occur in the last three-quarters of the beat prior to the measure in which that phrase is mostly contained. More complex misalignments are made, however, in four possible scenarios: (1) linguistic phrases line up with musical phrases but not with measures (“fuck a school lecture” and “the lies get me vex’da”), (2) musical phrases line up with measures but linguistic phrases don’t (“written in school textbooks bibles et cet’ra”), (3) linguistic phrases line up with measures but musical phrases don’t (see discussion of KRS-One in chapter 5), and (4) none of the three divisions line up with each other (extremely rare). In this paper, I will organize lyrics using the musical measure because of its structural significance, but will also clearly show the dynamic interaction of musical and linguistic phrases with each other and with that structure.

The songs

For the purposes of this project I chose five representative songs, three early ones for close study, and two later ones to be briefly analyzed and used to suggest future trends in the art form. These songs were selected based on a variety of criteria.
The artists studied are all widely accepted as skilled lyricists and innovators, and they all have been cited as having a profound influence on their contemporaries and those who came after them. I wanted to capture the music that had the largest immediate impact, so the songs chosen are among the artists’ first mass-produced releases. The specific tracks were selected based on their musical, linguistic, and poetic components in order to capture the artists’ most cutting edge innovations. “Boast” songs, in which the subject matter is largely concerned with the MC’s own persona and his prowess as a rapper, seem to be the generally accepted venue for such stylistic adventurousness. It is logical that an MC would use his most skillful rhythms and rhymes in order to support lyrics that describe the magnitude of that skill.

The form of these songs also help to support their poetically innovative nature. They each contain of a looped backing track (like most hip-hop songs) that varies minimally throughout the song and provides a steady backdrop over which new sonic explorations can occur freely. They also consist entirely of verses and breaks, drawing attention to the MC’s lyrics as the sole generator of interest, and none of them have prominent choruses or hooks (although short tag-lines sometimes serve as “hooks” leading into the breaks). The one song that varies slightly from this model is LL Cool J’s “Rock the Bells,” which contains two different verse models with different instrumental accompaniments. This is a classic feature of LL Cool J’s style, who early on followed producer Rick Rubin’s advice in using traditional song form conventions like A and B sections and choruses (Gueraseva 2005:39).

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20 Bradley and Dubois (2010), Edwards (2009), Toop (2000) and Light (1999) among others have argued for the musical importance of the artists studied.
Large portions of each of the first three songs are transcribed and analyzed in depth, with the last two being transcribed but not close read. The songs that I chose for close study are “Sucker MC’s” by Run-DMC (1983), “Rock the Bells” by LL Cool J (1985), “As the Rhyme Goes On” by Eric B. & Rakim (1987), and the two additional songs I analyze briefly are “I’m Still #1” by Boogie Down Productions (1987) and “Ain’t No Half Steppin’” by Big Daddy Kane (1988). This selection of songs and artists does not come close to approaching the depth and breadth of recorded hip-hop during this time period, but it is nonetheless a representative sample that will help to give a clear picture of the poetic and linguistic innovations that occurred.

Notation

All music notation is necessarily reductive; it highlights some aspects of the way a piece is performed or meant to be performed, and downplays others. In doing so, it often leaves out conventions of the music that are idiomatic or otherwise assumed; for example, tuning and timbre are not specified in Classical sheet music because these aspects are standard within the repertoire. A good notation highlights features that are important to the composer, performer, and listener, while not dealing with those that are insignificant or obvious. In hip-hop, the composer and performer are generally one and the same, so the MC and the listener are the two main people my notations will take into account.

In accommodating the concerns of the listener, I follow Lerdahl and Jackendoff (1983) in positing an “experienced listener” (3-4) who is familiar with the conventions of the idiom. In hip-hop, fans generally divide the music into “rhymes”
(the lyrical track) and “beats” (the backing track). Within the lyrical track, “flow” and “rhyme” are the two main poetic concerns, the first of these referring to the rhythmic arrangement and relative stress of syllables in relation to beats, and the second being a thematic relationship between those syllables. The placement and stress of each syllable is given in the appendix for each song, in addition to a simple transcription of the text. Within the body of the paper, specific measures are pulled out from the transcription and color-coded to highlight rhyme associated syllables with similar rhythms. These interventions help to bring out these two central poetic techniques as I discuss the way they impact the MC’s language.

Moreover, this in-text notation reflects the way many rappers actually write their lyrics out. In addition to writing words out line-by-line, most rappers have some sort of personal system for visually depicting how their lyrics will be delivered (Aesop Rock in Edwards 2009:67). For example, Vinnie Paz of Jedi Mind Tricks uses “little marks and asterisks and shit like that to show like a pause or emphasis on words in certain places” (as cited in Edwards 2009:67). Tajai of Souls of Mischief takes a different tack, using “colors and directional lines, so if you look at two lines, the words that I say that sound the same will be the same color” (as cited in Edwards 2009:98-99). The first of these descriptions takes into account the idea of flow, while the second one is more centered on that of rhyme. Moreover, both of these strategies are very similar to my notation, which bolds and italicizes stressed syllables (following Vinne Paz) and color-codes rhymes (following Tajai). But these are just examples; MC’s that use no such visual cues are still thinking of the central concerns
of what words will be said, what their relative emphasis will be, and how they are related to each other.

The backing track, on the other hand, is transcribed using a grid notation. This choice is meant to reflect the percussive nature of most hip-hop instruments, which do not have a delimited duration so much as they merely naturally decay. It also interacts well with in-line text, which can be placed over the grid for direct pulse-by-pulse comparison.

Thus, my notation combines that of authors on hip-hop with mostly linguistic concerns (Bradley 2009, Pate 2010, Potter 1995) with that of authors with mostly musical concerns (Krims 2000, Walser 1995, Edwards 2009, Adams 2009). It does this by keeping intact the language used in these songs while still depicting exactly where they fall in the measure and how they are related to each other. It also puts the words directly in contact with the meter and rhythm of the backing track, visually showing the way that syllables are manipulated by musical structure and phrasing in a new and vital way. To see how these notations look and work, please consult Appendix I before reading chapters 2-5.

A musical history

In the last 20 years, published histories (Light 1999; Toop 2000; Cepeda 2004; Chang 2005; Bradley and DuBois 2010) and musical analyses (Walser 1995; Krims 2000; Adams 2008; Adams 2009; Edwards 2009) of hip-hop have become much more common. Historical accounts, however, do not go into musical detail, and musical accounts give specific analytical examples but do not show development over time. This work intends to do that, telling a history that is primarily musical in
nature, and only referencing specific events and narrative connections to the extent that they are directly relevant to the sound of the music. This is not to say that such events and connections are unimportant; conversely, I encourage readers to consider my work in tandem with other non-musical historical resources on the subject.

My musical history, then, starts with old school rap, which developed from a party culture that was centered on the DJ, who played funk and disco records and occasionally verbally engaged the crowd (Bradley and Dubois 2010:2). Innovators like Kool Herc (active from 1973) added the role of the MC to this scenario, who “…rapped but not on the beat” (Mel in Bradley and Dubois 2010:3). Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five (active from 1977) was one of the first groups to include MC’s that used a definable musical rhythm to set words to music (Bradley and Dubois 2010:3). Melle Mel says of Kool Herc and his crew the Herculoids:

They used to say things like ‘And yes, y’all, the sound that you hear …’ They were always saying ‘and yes, y’all.’ We really liked that, so we used it. So we would take it and lengthen it, say it to the beat. So it would be, ’A yes, yes y’all, to the beat, y’all, freak, freak, y’all.’” (Mel in Bradley and Dubois 2010:3)

Early hip-hop developed organically out of this party culture, with the extended instrumental breaks that would later be rapped over originally being created for the crowd to dance during (Fernando 1999:15, Bradley and DuBois 2010:1-4).

Therefore, the most common persona in early hip-hop was that of a partier or entertainer who was having a good time and encouraging the crowd to do the same
(Krims 2000:55). But, as time went on, rappers began to build and combine different personas like those of the battle rapper, intelligent artist, gangsta, teacher, and pimp/mack (46-92). Hip-hop poetics played a large role in this development, creating connections and contrasts within the music that allowed for personas to be both organically developed and seamlessly combined.

As Krims (2000:49-50) points out, rap before the late 1980s almost always fell into the rhythmic category of “sung flow.” He notes: “Characteristic of the sung style are rhythmic repetition, on-beat accents (especially strong-beat ones), regular, on-beat pauses, and strict couplet groupings” (50). The backing tracks accompanying these lyrics have been described as “brisk light funk” (Bradley and Dubois 2010:12), “neo disco glam” (Gonzales 1999:103) and “soulful tracks with powerful instrumental breaks” (Bradley and Dubois 2010:2). Debuting in 1983, Run-DMC turned this arrangement on its head, “breaking down conventions in lyricism by abandoning the melodic rhyming made popular by such artists as Melle Mel and Kurtis Blow” (265) and slowing and stripping down the backing track so that it was “not disco derived and even without the rhythmic flourishes of funk” (122).

The rhythmic style of Run-DMC would still be considered “sung flow” by Krims’ definition. Nevertheless, their slow, sparse backing tracks put the focus on the relationship between instrumental and musical rhythm in a way that would lead to increasing rhythmic exploration throughout the rest of the 1980s. Run (one of the group’s two MC’s) specifically relied on near constant rhythmic variation in order to generate interest and add meaning to his words. LL Cool J, on the other hand, would experiment with a more static rhythmic structure that is given interest through slight
rhythmic variations and regularly placed internal rhymes. Rakim’s style would build on both of these, creating a fairly regularly rhythmic structure, but using ever-shifting patterns of multisyllabic internal rhymes to enliven the sonic landscape. Additionally, Run and LL Cool J generally strongly stress syllables that are on the beat or followed by a pause, but Rakim begins to force syllables that are naturally stressed weakly to remain so even when in a metrically strong position. Rakim experiments with using his patterns of rhythmic stresses motivically, but this possibility is more fully played out by KRS-One and Big Daddy Kane, who further remove stresses from strong pulses in order to create rhythms that relate to musical meter in new ways.

In addition to serving a rhythmic function, rhyme relations help to draw new connections between different parts of sentences, and to divide those sentences up in fresh ways. LL Cool J starts to separate his musical/linguistic phrases from the musical measure with a hook that goes over the bar-line, and Rakim lets his linguistic thoughts flow freely apart from musical phrase and structure. KRS-One, then, succeeds in more fully dividing his linguistic/musical phrases from his musical measures, and later rappers separate out these components into the other possible configurations. Other poetic devices, like assonance, consonance, interaction with the backing track, and musical form all saw development among these artists as well. Specifically, assonance and consonance were used more and more to create a complex sound world with constant sense of association and difference. The rhythms of the backing track interacted with the lyrics in new ways, and new sounds began to be created, with Marley Marl combining hip-hop’s funk roots with Rick Rubin and
Run-DMC’s sparse, slow, even gritty aesthetic. Additionally, musical form was experimented with, with Run-DMC using small line-by-line shifts, LL Cool J employing popular song form, and Rakim lengthening his verses by two measures each.

Other songs by these artists, in addition to those of creative contemporaries like Biz Markie, Roxanne Shanté, Chuck D. of Public Enemy, Phife Dawg and Q-Tip of A Tribe Called Quest, Kool Moe Dee and MC Lyte among others, show further dimensions of these creative transformations. The case studies herein are by no means intended to give a full picture of the musical developments of hip-hop’s Golden Age. Rather, they tell a part of a larger story through the work of a few artists that helped to solidify the role of the MC within hip-hop and the role of hip-hop within the American public consciousness.
Influences and Collaborators

Run-D.M.C. helped set the stage for the rest of the developments of Golden Age hip-hop with their revolutionary style and sound. Their simple outfits departed from the gawdy, flashy get-ups of old school artists, and served as a marker of new and different things to come (Bradley and DuBois 2010:120-121). Their sound, on the other hand, was itself one of those new and different things. The backing tracks were simple, only containing three or four different instruments. A drum machine replaced live percussion and any melodic instrumentals were drawn from rock music as opposed to the funk and disco preferred by their predecessors. This simplicity of accompaniment put more of an emphasis on the rhythmic explorations of the lyrical track; it also brought out aspects of the interplay between the two parts and allowed for new poetic possibilities.

Despite its musical simplicity, however, the final sound of the backing track for “Sucker MC’s” was the result of the work of multiple contributors. Trevor Gale, the drummer for the band Orange Krush, originally played the beat on a single called “Action” (Ro 2005:52). Larry Smith (referred to by Run as “Larry”), another member of Orange Krush, suggested a pared-down, drum-machine version of the beat
to Run-D.M.C (52). Both Larry Smith and Russell Simmons (Run’s brother and manager/producer) were responsible for mixing and varying the beat over the course of the song (53). DJ Davy DMX (referred to by Run as “Dave”) then added the scratches that are heard at various points (53). Jam Master Jay (Jason Mizell), who would eventually be the group’s full-time DJ, was preferred by Run (Joseph Simmons) and D.M.C. (Darryl McDaniels) but was not a part of the production team at this time (53). The form of the song as a whole consists of Rev-Run constructing a narrative about his rise to fame, then comparing himself to a “sucker MC” and finally, passing the mic off to D.M.C., who gives a brief description of his own personality.

**Overview of Poetics**

I will focus on the first 32 lyrical measures of the song, in which Run introduces dynamic rhythmic constructions in order to add meaning to a story, and then deploys these constructions as he begins to attack the hypothetical sucker MC. Musical structure is very much in line with linguistic and musical phrases in this example; Run’s linguistic phrases line up with his musical phrases and measures, with liberal end-rhymes occurring to punctuate this fact. The musical form is also very regular, but it is changed slightly at one point in order to enhance the meaning of the lyrics. In addition to this small shift then, Rev-Run’s primary methods of making meaning through poetics lie in his lyrics’ rhythmic vitality and end rhyme associations. Rhythmically, Run’s delivery is extremely varied, but he does repeat certain rhythms and types of rhythmic constructions in order to highlight connections between different linguistic phrases and lines. Additionally, his consistent use of end
rhyme serves to tie different parts of the song together, and subtle assonance and internal rhyme help to maintain focus and suggest continuity.

**Rhythmic Patterns in the Backing Track**

The backing track over which these poetics are deployed consists of three different instruments: a bass drum, a snare drum and a hand-clap, in what basically constitutes two different variations. These variations are defined by two hand-clap patterns that sometimes receive bass-and-snare support and sometimes do not. This change gives a sense that the beat “kicks in” and “drops out” at many points, serving to add force and meaning to the lyrical content. Here are the variations with their accompanying bass-and-snare rhythms (beats per minute = 103):

*Pattern 1*

```
Pattern 1

```

*Pattern 2*

```
Pattern 2

```

Throughout the song, these patterns occur in the form (pattern) 1-1-1-2, each of these four-bar forms constituting a verse. The bass and snare drums have almost exactly the same rhythms in the two patterns, with the only difference being in beat 1, where pattern 2 has four sixteenth notes to pattern 1’s two. This difference supports the contrast in hand-clap rhythms, which overall makes pattern 1 more syncopated and pattern 2 more even. The hand-claps in pattern 1 form a 4-over-3 polyrhythm starting
on pulse 3 of beat 1, and the two bass-drum hits on pulses 1 and 2 of that beat help to clarify this. In pattern 2 however, the hand-clap rhythm consists of even sixteenth notes, resolving the syncopated tension of pattern 1. Both the bass drum in beat 1 and the hand-claps in beat 4 articulate a set of four even sixteenth notes, driving conclusively to the following beat. Thus, the rhythm of pattern 2 supports its conclusive function within each verse, where it helps mark the end of short lyrical units.

But first, at the beginning of the track, we are given a measure full of eighth notes in the snare, which serves to provide a precise preview of where the rhythmic pulse falls.

We are then shown rhythmic pattern 1 and 2, this time in the form 1-1-2. We thus get a clear idea of the song’s rhythmic pulse and form before the lyrics begin.

**Lyrical Rhythms in the First Verse**

Once we have an idea of the basic rhythmic framework of the song, Smith and Simmons drop out the bass and snare, leaving only the four disparate hand-claps. It is these hand-claps that accompany Run’s introduction, in which he frames his story with a recollection of the first time that he ever rapped. He brings us into the story with an immediate groove, some slight misdirection, and an adamant lead-in into the heavy beat that backs his rise to stardom:
We can see that Run’s first line lines up well with the accompanying hand-claps; the stressed syllables “-go,” “friend,” and “mine” all get a hand clap, helping to define a sparse a rhythmic structure that would otherwise be ambiguous. The very, next line, however, does the opposite, giving us a nauseous sense of uncertainty; none of the hand-claps line up with a spoken syllable until the final “rhyme,” highlighting that the rhyme he’s completing is one of those “MC rhymes” he’s referring to. He lines the syllables back up with the hand-claps in measure 3 but by then it’s not so clear where the beat is – we start to recognize the evenly-spaced hand-claps as the defining the meter, even though they are three pulses, not four pulses apart:

The only way to get our ears back on track before the beat comes in is with a truly “def” fourth line. Run gives us as much, fitting the syllables of the first half of the line into the rhythmic pattern of the preceding one (“rhyme,” “was,” “a-,” and
“went” line up with the hand-claps of the previous measure), but turning those of the second half into an imitation of the bass-snare pattern; “it … this way” is the same rhythm as the “snare-bass-snare” that is featured in the main beat of the song. He then leaves the four claps at on beat 4 out in the open to give us a sense of suspense before the next four bars begin:

The/

[rhyme] __ was def [__] a- then it went __ this __ way __ __ __

But “it went this way” seems rather ambiguous. Is he about to repeat that first rap, or is it merely the events that ensued after that rap that “went this way”? We ask this question, however, only because of the way the words are arranged over the beat. If this line were written on paper, we would see immediately that it reads “then it went this way,” and we would have our answer. But, by placing “a-then it went this way” in the same musical phrase as “the rhyme was def,” the possible meanings of the statement are doubled. Thus, Run is able to introduce both the “rhyme” itself and the story that he is telling in one clever turn of phrase.

**Rhyme and Rhythm used Thematically**

The story, then, is one that starts out giving little or no agency to Run himself. He slowly transitions from a state in which everything that occurs has an external origin, to one that describes his state of being after he “makes it” as a rapper, and
finally to a state in which he actually describes his own actions. Run uses this structure to build his persona as a lyrically skilled, authentic partier and womanizer. He does this well, taking the time to build his credentials by telling his back story before beginning his move into attack mode. The final stage of this transition is, of course, his full-on assault on the authenticity and ability of the “sucker MC”. (Note that he only finds it fitting to attack his opponent after he has fully established his own persona and verbal prowess.)

First, Run starts his story with a single line that describes an action of his own. This line however, about taking an unspecified “test,” is far from active. It is merely there to set off all of the events that are about to occur. Rhythmically, he gives us fairly separated syllables, laying back and grooving with the bass and snare hits; this helps depict Run’s laid-back attitude towards his examination:

\[
\text{[Took] a [test] ___ to ___ be-[come] an M- \_ \_ [C] \_ \_ \_} \]

But the next line starts with a suspenseful pause on the downbeat and then rushes forward with a string of sixteenth notes. This gives a sense of the excitement that Run might have felt when Orange Krush was amazed by his skills:

\[
\text{[\___] and Or-ange [Krush] be-came a-[mazed]__ at \_ me [\___]} \]

The part of the next line that describes Larry’s approval achieves an amplified version of the same effect by starting the string of sixteenth notes at the end of measure 6 and spilling them over into measure 7:

So Larry/

\[
\text{[put] me in- } \_ [side]
\]

Measure 8 continues the development of these rhythmic concepts, setting “\text{[chauf-feur drove } \_ [off]}” and “\text{[nev]-er came } \_ [\text{back}]” to the same rhythm as “\text{[put] me in- } \_ [side]” from measure 7. This rhythmic parallelism gives us the sense that the second two actions were inevitable after the first one occurred. The drastic superlative statement that they “never came back” thus seems matter-of-fact and even expected, and helps to further downplay Run’s agency in his own rise to fame. Measures 7 and 8 also introduce the end rhyme “\text{-lac}” with “\text{back},” a vowel sound that is mirrored in the end rhymes of measures 11-12, measures 15-16, and measures 17-18. The repetition of this vowel sound in structurally prominent positions creates large scale thematic links within the song. This gives a sense of connectivity between lyrics whose subject matter shifts significantly as the song progresses. It also assures us that although Run’s lifestyle may be changing, his personal style as described through his musical poetics is not.
Large-scale Rhythmic Trends

Furthermore, repetition and variation of rhythmic patterns help create large-scale meaning as well. Scanning the excerpt as a whole, we see a deliberate and effective effort to continually change the rhythm of the rapped syllables. In fact, in all thirty-two lyrical measures there are only two rhythmically identical measures. Moreover, this identity is no accident; those two measures are also the only two measures in which Run specifically addresses the “sucker MC:”

Line 14: [Suck]-er M- __ [C’s] __ __ is [who] I __ please [__]

Line 28: [Suck]-er M- __ [C] __ __ that [just] ain’t __ right [__]

Run uses this rhythmic repetition in order to show that these lines are both expressions of a single attitude that he has about his imaginary opponent. They also help to tie the song together structurally.

Likewise, Run’s persistent rhythmic variation uses repeating patterns as building blocks. He alternates both between sixteenth-note strings of syllables and separated syllables and between syncopated rhythms and straight rhythms. We already saw an example of the first alternation in lines 5 and 6. The opposition between straight and syncopated syllables, then, is utilized most prominently in end rhyme. For example, in beats 3 and 4 of measure 7 a syncopated line-ending is used:

[Ca] __ dil-lac [__]

Then, a straight line-ending is used in beats 3 and 4 of measure 8:
Alternation between these two different end-rhyme settings helps give rhythmic variety to the song. But, it has a poetic function as well; because he uses only two easily discernible categories of rhythmic settings for end rhyme, Run is able to deploy them for maximum effect.

In this excerpt, he generally uses syncopated end rhyme to finish his less contentious lines, but reserves the straight ending for his more flagrant boasts. This fits with the sound of the two types: a syncopated rhyme that occurs in the middle of a beat sounds more casual, whereas a rhyme that falls right on the beat as part of a straight rhythm gives a deliberate force to those words. In line 7, for example, Rev-Run ends the instantly believable statement that he got into a Cadillac with an offhand syncopated rhyme; but in line 8, his outrageous boast that he never returned is driven home by a straight rhyme. Likewise, in measures 9-12 when he moves into the phase of the song describing his new state of being, he uses syncopated rhyme to simply relay the facts of the situation to us. Measures 13-15 continue this trend, but line 16 switches back to using a straight rhythm to set the end rhyme for another especially aggressive boast:

Because there’s/ [no]-thing in the [world] ___ ___ that [Run]-’ll ever [lack]
The rest of the excerpt shows a similar trend; however, an interesting exception exists in the only three lines in which Run mentions “girls” are all set with end rhymes that land right on beat 4:

Line 18: And/
\[ \text{[rock]} \text{ on } \_ \_ \_ \text{ the [mic] and make the [girls] __ wan-na [dance]} \]

Line 22: So if ya/
\[ \text{[see] me cruis-in’ [girls] __ just a-[move] or step a-[side]} \]

Line 26: [Cool]-in’ out __ [girl] __ take you [to] the def __ [pla]-ces

Another interesting feature of these lines is that he always arranges the words so that “girl” or “girls” lands right on a beat. These lines don’t seem especially contentious within the context of the song, so it is probable that Run had another reason for giving special emphasis to them. In fact, the integration of the theme of romantic love into hip-hop personas was just beginning at the time of this recording. It would become a highly organic and natural part of the personas of LL Cool J and Big Daddy Kane, but for Run it was a new concept (Bradley and DuBois 2010:125). Thus, bringing out those lines by strongly emphasizing both their mention of “girls” and their end rhymes helps to highlight this development. But, by specifically separating these lines out, he still fails to really combine his success with women with other aspects of his persona (skilled rapper, partier).

Furthermore, it isn’t only on beats 3 and 4 that Run alternates between syncopated and straight rhythms to create meaning. This alternation, in addition to his alternation between strings of syllables and separated ones, occurs throughout the
song. He generally moves from a more separated, syncopated style to one with more strings of syllables and straight rhythms. His first five lines show him moving our syncopated end-rhyme construction around throughout the measure as in:

Line 1: \([\text{Years}]\) a-go \([\text{__}]\)

Line 2: \([\text{Say}]\) some \(M\) \([\text{__}]\)

But he quickly relegates such rhythms to the ends of measures only, where they help highlight those lines’ semantic thrust as discussed. Eventually in line 16 and lines 18-20, they’re done away with completely. Additionally, strings of syllables become immediately more common in the second and third verses, as Run uses them to describe exciting turns of events in his narrative. But, they also lengthen and shift their position in the measure as the song continues. For example, line 6 contains a string that is 8 syllables long, line 10 pushes the count to 10 syllables, and line 20 contains the longest, a string of 12 syllables. In terms of placement, the syllable strings become progressively more likely to occur in the second half of a measure.

Thus, the rhythmic patterns in these first five verses combine to form lines that drive more and more energetically toward their conclusions, and have more emphatic landings on beats in the middle and (eventually) at the end of those measures. This trend culminates in line 20, which contains 12 subsequent syllables followed by a one-pulse pause and an end rhyme on the beat. By subsuming all of the rhythmic developments made thus far, it provides a sense that a section has concluded and leads into a 4 bar interlude. Moreover, his final two lines here (19 and 20) also subsume all of the dimensions of his persona that he has depicted. He took so long to
introduce the descriptors “fly like a dove” and “Run Love” because they are deliberately open-ended – he doesn’t define them because he doesn’t need to; he has just used language and poetics masterfully to show us what they mean. Thus, the transition from casual introduction to dynamic narrative to emphatic statement is complete.

**Blurring form**

Lines 21-32 then, contain boasts and attacks on the “sucker MC” that Run now has the credentials to attempt based on the preceding exposition of his persona. He continues to use rhythmic variety and end-rhyme placement to create meaning, but he adds a new and unexpected effect as well. Instead of starting the seventh verse with a line (number 25) set over rhythmic pattern 1, the backing track drops out completely and Run uses straight, separated syllables to deliver a boast:

\[
\text{It’s on a/ [___] __ } \text{first} __ \text{[come] __ [first] __ serve __ [ba]-sis}
\]

He then continues rhyming end-words in couplets, but the backing track structure has shifted. There are still three repetitions of rhythmic pattern 1 in lines 26-28 and the conclusive rhythmic pattern 2 doesn’t occur until line 29, which contains the beginning of a new rhyming couplet. This blurring of structure is further enhanced by the repetition of line 28’s end-rhyme (“light/right”) in the beginning of line 29 (“bit-[in’]“), and the choice of a rhyme for lines 29-30 “life/wife/knife” that shares its vowel sound with the previous end-rhyme.
Thus, through both metric structure and thematic (rhyme) content, line 29 is tied to the preceding measures, and through thematic (rhyme) structure and content, it is tied to the succeeding ones. Here, Run finds a way to let his semantic thought continue by varying his musical poetics. From lines 27-32, he is developing a complex image of the Sucker MC, and it is imperative that there not be a break in this development. He instead delays the break until after line 32, which without that break would be upsettingly inexpressive:

And/ [ev]-‘ry-bo-dy [know] __ what you’ve [___] been __ through [___]

This line is semantically unclear; someone “going through” something implies an air of sympathy, which does not seem to be part of Run’s attitude here. Moreover, the line’s syncopated ending takes away force from the line by not resolving on any beat. Instead, the entire measure that follows serves this conclusive purpose – it consists of the left-over iteration of rhythmic pattern 2 with bass and snare support. Even though “ev’rybody” might not actually know the meaning of Run’s statement, we all know what the verse-ending pattern hand-claps and drums means, and Run relies on this meaning to punctuate and conclude his denigration of the Sucker MC.

This use of shifting song structure in order to enhance poetics is a distinct shift from earlier artists and is developed further by those who followed. It is also a departure from the form that punchlines generally take in hip-hop of this time period. We usually hear linguistic thoughts coming in groups of two (even when these groups are arranged to form a larger narrative), in which the first line is a set-up and the second is a punchline. This doesn’t mean that they are specifically in the form of
riddles or jokes, but rather that the first line in the pair is weaker and more open-ended, and the second line is strong and conclusive. For example, in lines 21 and 22:

Line 21: I got a/
[big] __ long __ [Cad]-dy not __ [like] a Sev-ille[___] and writ-ten
1 2 3 4

Line 22: [right] on the side [___] __ it reads [dressed]__ to kill [___]
1 2 3 4

Run first sets us up by saying what kind of car he has, and then concludes by telling us why the vehicle is especially significant to his persona. The rhyme relation between set-up and punchline further strengthens this relationship; the second rhyming word provides a satisfying conclusion to the first word’s thematic set-up.

The ambiguity of structure presented in the last two verses, however, makes this relationship less clear and serves to delay the effect of the punchline until line 32 and its ensuing rhythmic conclusion.

Overview

Thus, in conjunction with the team responsible for the backing track, Run uses musical poetics to transform, add to, and strengthen the meaning of the lyrics that he delivers. He uses varying synchronicity with the backing track, end-rhyme settings, alternating rhythmic patterns, thematic rhyme extensions, and some structural displacement in order to do so. Furthermore, all of these techniques are brought to the forefront through the use of a sparse, regularly repeating backing track. Run-D.M.C., then, drew attention to new ways of making meaning through poetics that would be expanded upon in the years following their debut.
LL Cool J (James Todd Smith), like Run-DMC, was managed by Russell Simmons and Rush Productions. He was one of the first artists to officially appear on Def Jam, a label started by Simmons and Rick Rubin with the goal of popularizing the new sound of what would later be termed Golden Age hip-hop. Thus, many elements of his songs’ production resemble that of Run-DMC. Moreover, LL’s rapping style was also highly influenced by his experience observing that group (Gueraseva 2005:56,65); he even had regular personal sparring sessions with Run in which they would attempt to one-up each other lyrically (56). Both LL Cool J’s simple, looped backing track with minimal rock instrumentals and his tendency to use straight rhythms and rhyming couplets follow Run-DMC’s example.

In songs like “Rock the Bells,” however, LL expands upon these features to create new levels of meaning. His use of extreme rhythmic regularity highlights those constructions that vary from it, and his use of chain rhymes, internal rhyme and slant rhyme create new associations between new parts of sentences. Phrases and sentences still line up with measures, but he stretches these alignments with phrases that divide the measure in half and a hook that runs over the bar-line. Thus, he begins
to use musical poetics to enhance language in new ways that would be impossible in traditional poetry.

**Form of the music and text**

Moreover, the song’s backing track provides important poetic input through its unique form and sound. Rick Rubin greatly affected these considerations through his advice and through direct manipulation in the recording studio. LL’s DJ Cut Creator (Jay Philpot) adds prominent scratches that generally emphasize lyrical phrases by doubling their rhythm. These important contributions, in addition to the relative loudness of the backing track, both serve as poetic strategies that support LL’s numerous lines about the centrality of Cut Creator’s role. Additionally, the form of the backing track contains variations in structure that create distinct sections within it. Rather than creating variety by simply displacing the backing track by a measure (like Run-DMC do; see Chapter 2: Blurring form), LL Cool J and Rubin completely change it for a series of 4-measure sections that contain only distorted guitar chords and cymbal patterns. These sections (which I will call “short verses”) alternate with 8-measure “long verses” that are backed by a snare, bass and cymbal beat. Between each of these short and long verses is a 4-measure break also backed by the beat of the long verse. Within this framework, short verses serve a special rhetorical function; the first one introduces LL Cool J, and the succeeding short verses summarize the development of his persona as the song continues. They also contain the most direct comparisons that he draws between himself and his

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21 Although Rick Rubin had a large influence on these sounds as well, specific mention of this is absent from LL Cool J’s lyrics, which imply that he, Cut Creator, and E-Love are the only ones involved in the creation of the sound of the record.
competitors. These short verses stand out from the rest of the song due to their unique instrumentation and their straight, separated rhythmic qualities. The statements in these verses are meant to be matter-of-fact, descriptive and forceful.

The form of the text consists of multiple stages beginning with an exposition of LL’s persona and an introduction to Cut Creator and E-Love (LL Cool J’s friend and collaborator Damien Earl Matthews). The song then continues to use this persona to compliment Cut Creator and E-Love and insult others (like “washed up rappers” and “nappy headed girls”), and finally to ridicule specific pop musicians that LL would like to differentiate himself from (Michael Jackson, Prince, Madonna, etc.). Unlike Run, LL Cool J asserts his dominance over his competition from the beginning of the song. He still does it progressively, though, at first reserving his attacks only for short verses, but expanding them into the long verses as he continues. This shift parallels the breaking down of the boundaries of short verses that occurs as their instrumentation (distorted guitar) is gradually combined with the other components of the backing track (cymbal, bass, snare, etc.). It also accompanies a shift in the vehemence and personal nature of the attacks, which progress from being aimed at “anybody” in the first short verse to “rappers” in the second short verse, to specific people by the end of the song. These progressively more aggressive attacks serve to carefully solidify his own position and identity.

In this chapter, I will focus on the first 24 lyrical lines, in which LL Cool J introduces his persona and competition with a short verse (measures 1-4), further develops his persona with two long verses (measures 5-20), and finally sums up what he has just said with a short verse (measures 21-24).
Rhythm and metaphor in verse 1

LL’s first verse is a primer for those who don’t know who he is or what it means to rock the bells. The phrase “rock the bells” itself admits multiple meanings, but LL creates his own system of navigation through these meanings over the course of the song. Interpretations of the title by journalists and fans range from it signifying a “death knell” for popular music’s old guard (Charnas 2012:par. 6), to a bell starting a metaphorical “boxing match” with Run-D.M.C. (Juon 2002:par. 5), to a system of spreading messages using a rudimentary alert system (lilpie 2008).

These interpretations all have a few features in common: they involve an aggressive action that has a profound effect on others surrounding the active person. As the song progresses, LL is able to use musical poetics to make it clear what this action and effect are. For example, his first four bars introduce two aspects of his persona (lyrical skill and hardness) and subtly shift them so that they function as an impetus for rocking the bells. He eases this transition using rhyme and rhythm; in an early example of chain rhyme, LL ties the verse together using the same end rhyme for four lines a row (and includes three identical internal rhymes). Rhythmically, line 1 contains all straight, even eighth notes and lands on beat 4 with a distorted guitar chord. In setting syllables this way, LL also transforms his own name, putting a greater stress on the second “L” and the final “J” by placing them on beats. This is the only time in the song that he uses his full name (elsewhere he calls himself “LL” or “Cool J”), so the way that he sets it here is especially significant:
The straightforward rhythm of this line (that stresses every syllable) and the jagged setting of his name emphasizes LL Cool J’s hardness, which at this point refers to his toughness and street smarts. He also associates “LL” with “hell” through a rhyme relation, drawing attention to their connection with each other.

Line 2 introduces another aspect of his persona: his lyrical skills as a rapper. LL uses a 10-syllable string of sixteenth notes to set this line, adding force to the line by demonstrating the skills he would make use of in battle:

\[ \text{Bat-tle an-y-[bod]-y I don’t [care] who you __ [tell]} \]

He then uses the same rhythm that he used to set “hard as hell” in order to set his next two statements. He effectively splits the line into two equal halves by using two rhymes that are both associated with the prevailing end rhyme. This is an early example of a linguistic/musical phrase that doesn’t line up with the measure. There are two phrases within this one measure, both punctuated by a rhyme and a guitar chord. This structure suggests a parallel between his lyrical success, others’ failure (which he is discussing here in line 3) and his hardness (from line 1):
Finally, LL uses these associations to combine his lyrical abilities with his hardness. His success, others’ failure, and hardness all add up to an ability to crack the shells of those he defeats; his hardness has thus been transformed from an attitude to a physical quality. He then uses this new sense of the word in order to emphasize the physicality of the phrase “rock the bells”; he uses his metaphorical hardness to literally rock the bells. The significance of this line is further highlighted by the use of a guitar rhythm found nowhere else in the song (in any instrument) and the straight setting of “rock the bells,” which is also not repeated. Moreover, the phrase’s extension into the next line is another early example of phrase-structure mismatch, with the linguistic/musical phrase continuing past the bar-line to place “bells” on beat 1 of the break:

Rhythms of the backing track: the break

This break is the first time that we hear the main looped track that is used in the song. It contains a syncopated bass and snare rhythm that owes a lot to Orange

22 This rhythm is identical to the main hand-clap rhythm used in “Sucker MC’s,” a fact that is likely no coincidence. Like Run-D.M.C.’s unaccompanied hand-claps, it also occurs behind an introductory statement. Moreover, friendly competition between the two artists is well-documented; thus, the rhythmic quote may be meant as a taunt, especially since it is speculated that the sound of “Rock the Bells” was changed in production in order to avoid similarity to a Run-D.M.C. song (Juon 2002:par. 5).
Krush’s “Action” beat (the snare rhythm is the same and the bass drum’s first and third hits are the same). It is the first (pattern 1) of a two measure pattern though, the second of which contains a distinct variation.

**Pattern 2**

![Pattern 2 Diagram]

This second rhythm (rhythmic pattern 2) generates greater rhythmic interest in the first three quarters of the measure, using more syncopated hits in order to create a more conclusive landing on beat 4. Also, whereas rhythmic pattern 1 suggests a continuation by articulating a bass hit on the second pulse of beat 4, rhythmic pattern 2 does not compromise the conclusive effect of beat 4’s snare hit. This relationship mimics and supports that of the set-up and punchline format that LL Cool J uses in his long verses.

But there are other rhythmic lines that also occur in the backing track during the break. A cymbal pulses steady sixteenth notes as it does throughout most of the song and some sort of pitched drum (I’ll refer to it as a tom-tom) plays a descending melodic and rhythmic line. There is a non-rhythmic part present as well; a sample of a group of people casually cheering and whistling, along with the tom-tom part, are what set the break apart from the rest of the song. These unique parts of the break, then, comprise a specific response to the mini-hook “rock the bells,” which always directly precedes the break and lands with “bells” on its first beat. The tom-tom beat
and the crowd’s cheering are thus equated with “the bells”; they are the effect that LL Cool J’s actions have on the people surrounding him.

“Rock the bells” as a central theme

The landing of the word “bells” on beat 1 of the break, then, imitates the striking of a metaphorical bell. This impact causes people to cheer and play drums23 in only a mildly energetic way, mimicking the way that the sound of a bell might decay after it has been struck. Furthermore, although the response is always the same, the way that the bell is struck is not. The first statement of “rock the bells” is the only one that is set with a straight rhythm; after that it is set with a syncopated rhythm. The three stressed syllables of the initial setting introduce the concept by using a forceful, even striking effect. The other settings (Fig. 4.1: lines 12, 20, 24), however, place “rock” and “the” on the second and fourth pulses of beat 4, thus creating an uneven tension that is resolved on beat 1 of the next measure. These settings also differ in that they aren’t part of a preceding linguistic phrase; they instead function as small phrases unto themselves. This new form allows the hook to function as a short addendum to the verses as opposed to being the end of a logical flow of development as it is in the first verse. Its syncopated rhythm (which occurs nowhere else in the song) and separate phrase structure differentiate it from the rest of the verse and allow it to generally refer to the ideas that have been put forth in the lines preceding it. Thus, each new verse adds to a sense of what it means to rock the bells, and each hook sums that up and demonstrates it by setting off the break.

23 The tom-tom sound may even be heard as the sound of someone playing on cans of various sizes, an interpretation that would probably place this cheering group of people outside.
The mini-hook “rock the bells,” however, is not simply tacked on to the end of each verse; the lines preceding it generally have internal or slant rhyme relations with it, creating a sense of connection without the explicit weight of end rhyming couplets. Run employs a similar technique when he uses a repeated long “i” sound to blur form and extend his semantic thought (see Chapter 2: Blurring form). For LL Cool J, however, these subtle connections are not a special case: in verse 2, “bells” is a slant rhyme with “hail/nail” (lines 11 and 12), in verse 3, it is an internal rhyme with “bells/well” (lines 19 and 20), and in verse 4 it is a repetition of the end rhyme that occurs just before it (“bells/well” in lines 23 and 24).

**Internal rhyme in verse 1**

In fact, LL uses internal rhyme in almost every line of the song, placing rhyming pairs of words on beats 1 and 2 of most measures. These rhymes are structurally weaker than end-rhyming couplets, but they are nonetheless central to LL Cool J’s poetics. Whereas Rev-Run in “Sucker MC’s,” uses constantly shifting rhythms to generate interest and make meaning, LL Cool J uses rhyme associations and slight deviations in rhythm to do the same. This is achieved through the creation of a rhythmic backbone in each measure consisting of two internally rhyming words (beats 1 and 2) and one end-rhyming word (pulse 3 of beat 3). The end-rhyming pairs serve to connect two lines together in the form set-up/punchline, the exception being in lines 5-8 when four consecutive end rhymes are used to express a more extended thought.

The internal rhymes, on the other hand, don’t define the relationship of two lines, but rather, define the connection between two words. The two words are
generally of the same part of speech and have similar meanings in the context of the sentence; that is, they are not both semantically necessary. We don’t need to know that people were waiting and debating for LL’s new song (Fig. 4.1: line 5) or that the precise way they were starving was “like Marvin” (Fig. 4.1: line 6). The second word appears to have been added for the aesthetic effect of rhyme; thus, we come to expect the second word in a rhyming pair to be semantically equivalent to (or supportive of) the first. This provides a comic effect, then, when in line 7 LL raps:

\[
\text{if ya/ } \boxed{\text{cried}} \text{ and thought I } \boxed{\text{died}} \text{ you def-in-[ite]-ly was wrong } [\_
\]

Our expectation for a semantically unimportant rhyming word is upset when he rhymes “cried” with “died”. “Died” is much stronger than “cried” and provides a shock that draws our attention to the absurdity of the idea that someone would cry over LL Cool J’s death just because he hadn’t put a song out recently.

A different effect is achieved using the same technique in the next line (measure 8):

\[
\text{it took a/ } \boxed{\text{thought}} \text{ plus I } \boxed{\text{brought}} \text{ Cut Cre-[a]-tor along } [\_\]
\]

Neither of the rhyming words are semantically trivial, but they aren’t jarringly dissimilar either. The rhyme instead serves to genuinely associate the words “thought” and “brought,” suggesting that they are two equal and connected components of the force that ultimately rocks the bells. Using musical poetics, LL puts his mental activity on the same level of importance as his decision to bring Cut Creator with him, thus further strengthening his numerous linguistic assertions of the
DJ’s importance. An end rhyme association that also strengthens this idea occurs in lines 11 and 12, in which LL suggests a direct comparison between his “rain and hail” and Cut Creator’s “fingernail”. This comparison is especially strong because the phrases are almost multi-rhymes of three syllables, a length unusual for LL Cool J and unheard-of before him.

Additionally, just as the substitution of different words in a rhyme pattern can be used as a poetic technique, the breaking of the pattern itself also highlights and transforms meaning. In line 9 for example, LL steps away from his structure in order to achieve a more serious tone:

\[
\text{evened/ [up] } \quad E-\quad [\text{Love}] \downarrow \quad \text{down with the [Cool] J } \quad \text{force } \quad [\_]
\]

E-Love was a childhood friend that LL retained as a collaborator through his early commercial recording experiences. His relationship with all of the new people involved in LL Cool J’s music and life (i.e. the “Cool J Force”), is obviously very important to LL. Therefore, LL signifies this statement’s difference from the others (which are more playful, less serious, and more focused on building a persona) by doing away with the prevailing pattern.

Later, he again disrupts our expectation of rhyme in line 12:

\[
\text{Cut Cre-[a]-tor scratch the [rec]-ord with his [fing]-er } \quad \text{\_ nail } \quad [\_]
\]

but here his decision not to use rhyme only helps to draw focus from the lyrical track and onto Cut Creator’s scratches. The sound of these scratches substitutes for the sonic interest that the rhyme would have provided and also supports LL Cool J’s
simultaneous boast about his DJ’s scratching skills. At the beginning of the next long verse, when LL avoids internal rhyme for the last time (in this excerpt), he again highlights a special meaning. He brings out the line’s unique function, which is that of a summary of the previous verse. He raps:

\[
\text{The/}[\text{king}]\text{ of crowd } \underline{\text{__}} [\text{rock}-\text{ers}} \text{ final-}[\text{ly}] \text{ is } \underline{\text{back}} [\underline{\text{__}}]
\]

which does not contain new information, but rather sums up what he has just told us in lines 5-12. It also confirms a link between rocking the bells and rocking a crowd, tying in the persona of an entertainer/performer into our concept of the character LL is building.

**Rhythmic variation in verse 3**

The poetic possibilities of rhyme then, are made extremely rich by LL Cool J’s regular structure. Likewise, the slightness of his rhythmic variations make them all the more effective. For example, the lines that he sets as continuous strings of 12 syllables (lines 7, 10, 15, 16, 17 and 20) are his most playful, and help bring out another aspect of his persona, that of a joker. When LL chooses not to articulate some of these 12 possible pulses then, there is a noticeable effect. A pause serves to emphasize a stressed syllable that occurred just before it, and/or to disrupt or delay the flow of words. An example of the first case occurs in line 14, when LL raps:

\[
\text{My/}[\text{voice}] \text{ is } \underline{\text{your}} [\text{choice}] \underline{\text{as the}} [\text{hot}-\text{test}] \text{ wax } [\underline{\text{__}}]
\]
He pauses after “my,” “your,” and “choice,” bringing out the three key words in the sentence that highlight its main idea: you (“your”) choose (“choice”) me (“my”). An example of the second case comes at the end of this verse (line 19):

```
Cut Cre-[a]-tor on the [fad]-er __ my [right] hand __ man [__]
```

Here, the pause after “fader” adds meaning by clearly delineating the two clauses as a comma would in written poetry. Some less trivial examples also occur at the beginning of the first long verse (lines 5 and 6), where LL mirrors the anticipation and delay inherent in “waitin’,” “debatin’,” and “starvin’,” with a pair of well-placed pauses.

**Lines 21-24: Rhythm and metaphor**

These rhythmic strategies continue into the second short verse, in which he combines the straight, separated rhythms from his first short verse with the style he has developed in the intervening long verses. This change is reflected in the backing track, which combines the first verse’s distorted guitar sound (shifted rhythmically in order to punctuate different words) with the cymbal pattern from the long verses. These musical aspects support the linguistic content, which sums up the development of LL’s persona so far. His statement that:

```plaintext
Some/  [girls]-’ll like this [jam] __ __ and [some] girls __ won’t __ __ ’cause I
```

```plaintext
[make] a __ lot __ of [mon]-ey __ and __ your [boy]-friend __ don’t [__] __ __ __
```

highlights his persona as both a joker and a battle rapper who puts down his competitors. It also integrates the theme of romantic love seamlessly into these other personas, using sexuality as a basis for ridicule. Instead of emphasizing the lines that deal with relationships with women as Rev-Run does, LL Cool J is able to create a more organic persona by mentioning them in an offhand way. Individually, these references are not very striking, but when taken together (and in combination with his name, which stands for Ladies Love Cool James), they provide an underlying sense of romantic interest. Another example of this effect is occurs in line 16, when he raps:

\[ I'm \text{[rhy]}-\text{in'} \text{ and de-[sign]-in'}\] 
\[ \text{with your [girl] on my lap [\text{[}\text{]]}] } \]

again using a romantic innuendo to attack an opponent and reinforce his own skills.

The third line of the second short verse sums up another aspect of LL’s persona, reminding us that he is a hard, tough individual and that this allows him to rock the bells:

\[ L/ \]

The guitar chords on beats 1 and 3 also help to divide the measure into two halves that match the two spoken clauses. This rhythm in the guitar is twice as fast as in the line before and is doubled again in the line after:
By speeding up this rhythm LL is able to impart more and more intensity to his verbal statements, culminating in a vehement insult that marks the beginning of a trend towards increased aggression which continues through the rest of the song.

Overview

Thus, LL Cool J uses new rhyme relations, song form, and a regular rhythmic backdrop with slight variations in order to help introduce many facets of a holistic persona that he is able to deploy to compliment his friends and attack his enemies. Many aspects of his persona have already been explored in depth by other rap artists; the battle rapper, the joker, the crowd pleaser. Other themes, such as toughness (or “hardness”) and romantic love, had generally played a smaller role in the development of rappers’ personas, and were never so seamlessly integrated prior to the work of LL Cool J (Philpott in Guereseva 2005:38, Bradley and DuBois 2010:125). It had always been important to address one’s authenticity, but LL Cool J’s assertions of physical toughness expressed a certain type of authenticity that would be further developed by the gangster rap aesthetic (see Chapter 6 on the work of Boogie Down Productions).

Moreover, LL’s creation of a persona is made explicit and comprehensible through his use of the mini-hook “rock the bells” to summarize his unique qualities. By claiming that he is rocking the bells, he is able to define what it means to rock (his
own actions), and what “the bells” means (the response of the crowd). Thus, we get a more and more complete picture of what it means to rock the bells as the song continues. Ultimately, “rock the bells” means whatever LL Cool J wants it to mean. He even suggests that no matter what the name of the song was, he would still succeed in using rhyme, rhythm and form to provide dynamic interest and meaning.

As he raps at the end of the second long verse:

\[
\text{We rock the/ [bells] so ver-y [well] 'cause that's the [name] of this jam [__]} \]

Influences and Collaborators

Rakim is often cited as a revolutionary MC who changed the face of hip-hop. He used more complicated rhyme schemes, extended metaphors, phrase/structure mismatch and irregular verse lengths to create a new kind of persona for the hip-hop world: that of an intelligent artist. These developments, however, were not the result of the work of a lone genius. Rakim’s innovations built on the work of artists like Run-D.M.C. and LL Cool J in a logical way, deploying and extending earlier innovations in new and exciting ways. Rakim himself cites Old School artists like Melle Mel, Kool Moe Dee and Grandmaster Caz as influences (Coleman 2007:202), and some qualities of his flow reflect this. For instance, he raps using swung sixteenth notes as opposed to the straight ones of Run and LL. Nevertheless, these influences seem to be mostly based on lyrical content and process as opposed to musical qualities. Rakim says:

I knew that Melle Mel and Caz and Moe always put something into their work, and every time I sat down to write a rhyme I always wanted to make

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sense and show that I went to school and I took language and social studies and that I knew how to write a book report. That’s the way I took my rhymes, because of those guys.” (as cited in Coleman 2007:202)

Thus, the development of Rakim’s sophisticated, educated persona was very much indebted to the qualities he observed in these earlier rappers. The specific rhythms of Rakim’s flow depart from those of Old School artists however, most noticeably due to an increased saturation of syllables. He says: “My style of writing, I love putting a lot of words in the bars, and it’s just something I started doing” (as cited in Bradley 2009:41). This dense rhythmic surface is reminiscent of LL Cool J’s, but expands on it through shifting internal rhyme patterns. Moreover, Rakim’s sparse, relatively slow backing tracks and his use of rhythm, musical form, and especially rhyme to create deliberate meaning place him firmly in the New School with the likes of Run and LL.

According to Rakim, the sound of the backing tracks on the first album featuring Eric Barrier as a collaborator (Paid in Full, released in 1987) was actually mostly attributable to DJ Marley Marl, who oversaw the album and provided a great deal of input (Coleman 2007:204). Marley Marl was the leader of the Juice Crew, a Queens-based group of rappers and producers that included Biz Markie, Roxanne Shante, and later Big Daddy Kane, among others. Marley Marl pioneered a hip-hop sound that was different from but still closely related to that of Rick Rubin and Russell Simmons; he effectively toned down the funk and disco influences of Old School rap and fit them into a sparse, slow rhythmic framework that often included harsh, gritty sound effects (Gonzales 1999:103). Another key difference of Marl’s style was his use of layered samples, and specifically sampled drums as opposed to a
drum machine (103). Additionally, Rakim claims that he himself made a number of the tracks on this first album, and that Eric B. spent a large portion of his time dealing with business concerns as opposed to musical ones (Coleman 2007:205). Thus, the backing track for “As the Rhyme Goes On,” the song that I have chosen for close-reading, is the work of some sort of organic collaboration of Rakim, Eric B. and Marley Marl. There is no doubt that they all had the ability to provide input into the final sound of the track.

**Overview of poetics**

As an example of this collaboration, Rakim notes that the song used to be done at a faster tempo (Coleman 2007:208), but that he slowed it down on the record, probably to allow for a greater number of syllables in each measure (205). He describes the song as “just an old freestyle that I used to rock” (Rakim in Coleman 2007:208), suggesting that the content of the song is loosely structured. As opposed to the modern meaning of the word “freestyle,” which suggests spontaneous composition, at the time the word merely suggested the content was free of form; it wasn’t a story, a lesson, an argument or a diss, for example. Rakim, however, takes this notion to a new level, creating continuous linguistic constructions that flow over and violate musical form, and building extended mixed metaphors that persist and evolve indefinitely. In place of large-scale delineated sections, then, is a gradual development that occurs over the course of the track. Rakim starts out personifying his lyrics by calling them “the rhyme,” moves into an explanation of the dynamic relationship between the rhyme, himself, and his audience, and finally brings the focus onto a comparison of his own actions with those of other MC’s. In this way, he
follows Run and LL by establishing his persona first before shifting into attack mode. He also follows the title of the song by creating constructions using rhythm and rhyme that metaphorically get “rougher” as the song continues.

I will analyze the first 28 lyrical measures of the song, in which Rakim uses rhythmic variation and development in combination with shifting patterns of multisyllabic rhyme and assonance to introduce a complex relationship between his lyrics, himself, and his audience. This relationship serves to form a new kind of hip-hop persona which seamlessly combines the old school notion of rapper as entertainer and partier with Rakim’s chosen aesthetic of intelligent artistry. Musical structure and phrases have diverged from linguistic phrases in this example; musical phrases still line up with measures and are punctuated by end rhyme, but linguistic phrases do not, generally running over bar-lines and being punctuated by either end rhyme or internal rhyme. Rhyme relations give structure to lyrics that would otherwise flow on indefinitely in extended run-on sentences, suggesting points of thematic importance that impart meaning and coherence. Additionally, a musical form consisting of a regularly repeating 6-bar unit helps to give structure to free-form lyrics. It also goes against a general preference in hip-hop for verse lengths in multiples 4, creating a sense that Rakim is constantly flowing over the limits of four-bar verses in order to fully drive home his points.

**Instrumental intro**

The backing track in “As the Rhyme Goes On” contains more different sounds than those in “Sucker MC’s” or “Rock the Bells”. The album *Paid in Full* marked a new era in hip-hop production by constructing tracks out of many layered samples as
opposed to using drum machines in combination one or two recycled recordings. Nonetheless, the resulting tracks still come across aurally as simple grooves. There are also more subtle variations in the backing track as the song goes on, with some expected sounds dropping out and other new ones being added. Like the other two songs studied so far, however, “As the Rhyme Goes On” has a beat that only appears in two or three basic variations. We are introduced to one of these by the opening cymbal pattern:

Cymbal 3 is a closed hi-hat, cymbal 2 is an open hi-hat, and cymbal 1 is an accented open hi-hat. The pattern that these sounds combine to create is at this point metrically unclear; there are no demarcated musical or linguistic phrases to help us discern where each measure starts and ends. The other two components present during these introductory 4 measures (which all have this same rhythmic pattern) enhance this feeling of ambiguity. A noise that pans back and forth between the left and right speakers creates an eerie spatialization which is mirrored in the stereo motion of cymbal 1 and its accompanying scratches. Additionally, a voice shouting “pump it up, homeboy” suggests that this introductory section is a warm-up for something more exciting yet to come.
Assonance in the first verse

Rakim, then, clarifies the backing track rhythm in his first four rapped bars. Like Rev-Run and LL Cool J, Rakim opts to introduce the concept of the song with a short four measure verse that prepares us for subsequent developments. Rakim’s first verse consists of two pairs of rhyming couplets, a basic rhyme pattern that serves both to provide a simple base from which to develop new ideas and to highlight a contrast with his overall style. Nevertheless, he is able to create thematic associations within his lines by saturating them with assonance. His first line:

\[
\text{[Know]-} \text{ledge} \quad \text{will} \quad \text{be-} \text{gin} \quad \text{un-} \text{til} \quad \text{I [fin]-ish this [song]}\]

begins and ends with a short “o” syllable falling on a beat, which helps to support the connection Rakim is drawing between knowledge and his song. The rest of the measure contains five eighth note pulses, all of which are articulated using a short “i” sound. This phonetic regularity helps to further emphasize the syllables “know-” and “song,” and also creates a tightly wound first line that makes Rakim sound keen and able from the very start. He uses the same technique again in line 3, rapping:

\[
\text{You/ [sweat] as you step [___] about [to] get [___] hype [___]}\]

He connects all of the verbs in the phrase by choosing words (“sweat,” “step,” and “get”) that have the same vowel sound and by placing one on or near each of the first three beats of the measure. This connection succeeds in combining the meanings of each individual word into a general sense of stressful motion toward the word “hype,”
which falls right before beat 4 and describes the purpose of all of this stress, which is
to get excited for what’s about to happen. This line also expresses its tension
rhythmically, placing “step” right before beat 2 instead of on it, and putting an
unexpected stress on “to” by placing it on beat 3.

**Rhythm in the first verse**

In fact, Rakim uses rhythm as a central poetic technique even as he radically
expands the expressive power of assonance. Here is line 1 again with the
accompanying cymbal rhythm below it:

\[
[\text{Know}-\text{ledge will be-}[\text{gin}] \text{ un-} \text{til I } [\text{fin}]\text{-ish this __ [song]}
\]

The line fits well over the introductory cymbal rhythm, with its first two beats being
rhythmically identical to it, and its third beat providing a straight counterpoint to the
syncopated rhythm of cymbal 2. It thus eases us into the lyrical portion of the song
and introduces the general function of the cymbal 2 rhythm, which is to provide a
sense of syncopation but not to be directly followed by the rapped syllables.
Moreover, it contains a string of sixteenth notes eleven syllables long, showing that
Rakim doesn’t build up strings of syllables like Run-D.M.C. and LL Cool J, but
rather uses them as a starting point.

Rakim’s second line, then, explains how he will display and convey
knowledge throughout the song, again over the opening cymbal pattern:
‘Cause the/ [rhyme] __ gets __ [rough]-er as the [rhyme] __ goes __ [on]

By setting “rhyme gets rough-” and “rhyme goes on” with identical straight, separated rhythms he both emphasizes them and affirms that the two clauses are highly related. They repeat the title of the song and serve as its main idea, which is that Rakim’s lyrical techniques get increasingly complex as he continues to rap. It is significant that this line itself is the least “rough” in the entire song, consisting of straight rhythms, beats containing naturally stressed syllables, and no internal rhymes or assonance. Rakim thus creates a straightforward starting point from which to launch his transition to lyrical complexity.

But first, he offers to his audience the option of getting “hype” (line 3) using the tense, syncopated rhythm mentioned earlier, only to conclude the verse with this line:

Or/

[should] you just __ [list] en to the [man] __ on the [mic] __ __ __

This measure resolves the tension of the previous one, placing stressed syllables on all of the beats, which are further emphasized by accented drum hits. This one snare hit followed by three bass drum hits comprise a rhythm (pattern 3) that is featured in the last measure of each verse, and help to make the lines they accompany sound direct and conclusive. Thus, although line 4 is syntactically a question, it is
transformed into a declarative statement by its forceful rhythmic setting. We are therefore encouraged not to get over-excited, but rather to listen to Rakim as he imparts knowledge through increasingly complex verbal poetics. In acknowledging both possibilities, however, he admits the significance of entertainment and partying within hip-hop but asserts that ultimately, the MC’s personal creativity and intellect should be more important.

**Rhythms of the backing track**

In his successive verses then, Rakim continues to attempt to strike a balance within his persona between entertainment and intelligent artistry as he begins to use multisyllabic rhyme formations to transform the meaning of his words. The backing track over which this occurs consists of two alternating variations followed by pattern 3 in each verse’s final measure. These patterns are constructed out of a variety of samples, the most prominent of which is from Fausto Papetti’s song “Love’s Theme” (Rose 1994; Kitwana 2002; George 2005). Here are the three patterns:

**Pattern 1**

![Pattern 1](image1)

**Pattern 2**

![Pattern 2](image2)
Pattern 3

Pattern 1 is very similar to the introductory cymbal rhythm, but opts to move the cymbal 2 rhythm to the bass drum. It also provides metric definition by putting a bass drum hit on beat 1, a snare hit on beat 2, and even eighth notes in the bass guitar.

Rhythmic pattern 2, on the other hand, returns to cymbal 2 its original syncopated rhythm and gives new syncopated rhythms to the bass drum and bass guitar.

It doesn’t serve to conclude the first one or support a set-up/punchline format. It instead has more syncopation, leaning forward into the next measure, which again contains rhythmic pattern 1. The rhythmic patterns that support each verse then, appear in the order 1-2-1-2-1-3, with rhythmic patterns 1 and 2 providing a continuous state and rhythmic pattern 3 giving conclusive force. This sequence supports the free-form nature of the lyrics but also imparts structure through the emphasis that it gives to the final measure of each verse, which can be thought of as the punchline to the five preceding ones.

Multisyllabic rhymes as punctuation in verse 2

Another feature that provides the lyrics with structure is Rakim’s innovative use of multisyllabic rhymes. Unlike LL Cool J, Rakim places his internal rhymes in a myriad of different positions within the measure. Thus, the associated syllables come from many different parts of the phrases of which they are a part and generally have
different functions within them. For this reason, a direct semantic link between two members of a rhyming pair is much less likely to be present. Instead, rhyming pairs of words for Rakim function as a unique form of musical punctuation, imparting structure to an otherwise ambiguous text. For example, from a purely linguistic standpoint the second verse reads like a run-on sentence:

You’re physically in this with me but who could ya tell if it’s meant to be hip-hop if you’re not mentally as well ready to absorb the rhyme that I just poured into the mic so unite and this won’t be so bored if ya just keep kickin’ listen to the mix and think you’ll sink into the rhyme like quicksand.

Each clause is connected to the next one using a conjunction or a conditional, making their overall interrelationship unclear. Examples of questions this depiction brings up include: Does the adverb “mentally” modify “in this with me” or “ready to absorb”? Is the consequence of the conditional phrase “if ya just keep kickin’” “this won’t be so bored” or “you’ll sink into the rhyme”? Is the verb “think” being used intransitively as part of the preceding clause or transitively as part of the clause that comes after it? Furthermore, the next verse starts with the fragment “holds and controls you,” which implies a further continuation in which we assume “the rhyme” is the subject of this new clause.

Rakim doesn’t solve these grammatical questions in any conclusive sense, but rather renders them unimportant by emphasizing and connecting certain words using rhyme associations. Not only are the words separated out into musical phrases
punctuated by end rhyme, but they are also punctuated within those phrases as well. This new feature supports the meaning of the text in lines 5 and 6:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{You’re [phys]-ic-ly} & \text{ in [this] with me but [how] could ya tell [___] if it’s} \\
\text{[meant] to be } & \text{ hip-[hop] if you’re not [ment]-al-ly as [well]}
\end{align*}
\]

The rhyming pair “physic’llly/this with me” occurs on beats 1 and 2, which is the same basic pattern used by LL Cool J in “Rock the Bells”. The second line, however, uses a similar 3-pulse rhyming pair (“meant to be”/”mentally”) but places its members on beats 1 and 3 respectively. Rakim thus uses broken rhyme to associate groups of three words with one word and uses rhythmic development to move the emphasized syllables around in the measure. This is an explicit contrast from his first verse, in which the only rhyme was monosyllabic end rhyme. Rakim refers to that traditional style of hip-hop rhyming when he tells us that we’re “physic’llly in this” with him, but marks the difference between that aesthetic and his own. That difference is an augmented level of mental engagement that he both tells us about with his words and shows us through a sudden increase in the complexity of his rhyme relations.

He also engages the internal rhyme techniques used by Run-D.M.C. when he associates a syllable on beat 2 of measure 7 with that measure’s end rhyme:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{[Read]-y to ab-[sorb] the rhyme that [I] just ___ poured [___]}
\end{align*}
\]
and those of LL Cool J when he places end-rhyme-independent monosyllabic rhymes on beats 1 and 2 of measure 8:

\[
\text{In-to the/} \quad \text{[nite]} \quad \text{so u-[nite] and this won’t} \quad \text{[be]} \quad \text{so} \quad \text{[bored]} \quad [\_]
\]

In measure 9 he again uses a rhyming pair in which each member has a rhyme domain that is three pulses long. This time however, he only articulates the first two pulses:

\[
\text{If you/} \quad \text{[just]} \quad \text{keep} \quad \text{[kick]-in’} \quad \text{[list]-[en]} \quad \text{to the} \quad \text{[mix]} \quad \text{[and]} \quad [\_]
\]

Thus, Rakim transforms his original pattern both by dropping a syllable and by placing the rhyming words on beat 2 and on the fourth pulse of that beat. This shift also deliberately places the stressed syllable “list” right before beat 3, thus forcing the unstressed syllable “-en” to fall right on the beat. This creates a forward momentum through the verbs “kickin’” and “listen,” suggesting that they are meant to be active in nature.

Another stress pattern that doesn’t line up with the accompanying musical meter occurs in measure 17, when Rakim says:

\[
\text{and/} \quad \text{[so] on} \quad \text{[I’m]-a} \quad \text{[go] on} \quad [\_]
\]

By shifting stressed syllables so they fall before the beat, Rakim again creates a sense of motion. Although Rev-Run and LL Cool J often force stresses onto syllables by placing syllables that would be otherwise unstressed on the beat, Rakim’s poetics
involves something different. He forces syllables to remain unstressed even when they occur on a beat by creating rhyme domains that begin on pulses other than the first one. He thereby brings out the stressed syllable that begins that rhyme domain and de-emphasizes the syllables around it, allowing them to remain unstressed. Rakim’s shifting multisyllabic rhyme relations thus create ever-changing rhythmic structures that pop out aurally from the surrounding lyrics. They draw associations between groups of syllables that are not necessarily semantically related, but that are nonetheless given a sense of linguistic structure through their connection.

**Expression through rhythmic settings**

Rakim further expands on the poetic techniques of Run-D.M.C. and LL Cool J by rhythmically setting his lyrics in ways that are much more deliberately expressive. He borders on comparability with the technique of text-painting,25 literally mirroring the meaning of his words with their rhythmic settings. A trivial example of this is his extension of the four-bar verse into a six-bar one in line 9 (“if you/ just keep kickin’”), mirroring this musical continuation with a verbal one. Line 10 provides a more direct example:

```
[Think] __ you’ll __ [sink] in-to the [rhyme] __ like __ [quick] __ sand __
```

“Think,” “sink,” “rhyme” and “quick(sand)” are all synchronized with the snare and bass drum hits that occur on each beat of pattern 3, creating a sense that each syllable is literally sinking into the beat on which it lands. The line is also set to the same

---

25 A direct equivalence with text-painting is misleading, since the relationship between music and text in hip-hop is markedly different from that in Western art music. For examples of the way that music and text are related in Western art song, see *Studies in Music with Text* (Lewin 2006).
rhythm as line 2, in which Rakim first introduced the concept of the song – we are thus reminded that the qualities of the rhyme being described are a function of its increasing roughness.

In the third and fourth verses, then, Rakim continues to use highly expressive rhythmic formations to depict how he and the audience are interacting with the rhyme he has been describing. For example, in measures 13 and 14 he raps:

The only/
[time] I __ stop [ ] is when __ [some]body drop [ ] and then __
1 2 3 4
[bring] ‘em to the [front] ‘cause my __[rhyme’s] the ox-[____]-y-gen __
1 2 3 4

His association of “stop is when” with “drop and then” is clear but initially inconclusive. The use of the word “oxygen” to end line 14, then, concludes the thought and reveals the reason for the syllabic content of the first rhyming pair. It also suggests a feeling of regained breath after a moment of ambiguity and confusion, presenting Rakim’s rhyme as something that can be used in order to revive audience members.

Rakim continues to use the trope of his own “stop[ping]” to remove his physical presence from the creation of the rhyme. As he says in measures 18 and 19:

[Ev]-en if I [stop] __ __ [ ] the rhyme re[ mains] to be __
1 2 3 4
[Ris]-in’ to the [top] __ __ and [I] came __ to [drop] it __ __
1 2 3 4

Rakim strengthens the effect of the word “stop” by following it with an extended pause. He then depicts the meaning of “risin’ to the top” by ending the clause with a
stressed (and thus inflected upward) syllable followed by a short pause. He demonstrates “drop it” by placing “drop” on the beat and “it” right after it, creating a stressed-unstressed pattern that suggests downward motion. This contrast between the motion of the rhyme and the motion of Rakim’s actions helps to create an image of the two as separate entities. His aura of intelligent artistry is thus defined more specifically; “the rhyme” is an abstract aesthetic that exists outside of Rakim, and he is able to tap into it through mental work. This process is depicted verbally and rhythmically in the next measure (measure 20):

\[
\begin{align*}
&[\text{1}] \textit{catch it} \text{ and } [\text{2}] \textit{quiz it} \text{ } \text{ } \text{ } \text{ } [\text{3}] \text{ it’s } \textit{my } \text{ } \text{ } \text{ } \text{ } [\text{4}] \text{ top}-ic
\end{align*}
\]

By starting the phrase “catch it and quiz it” on the second pulse of beat 1, Rakim separates it from the prevailing metric structure, creating a sense that the words are floating in space. This image supports the idea of Rakim capturing and analyzing those words. It also provides a set-up for the punchline of “it’s my topic,” an innovative construction in that both set-up and punchline occur within the same measure.

**Phrase/structure mismatch**

Another innovation that Rakim demonstrates in the beginning of verse 4 is that of phrase/structure mismatch, with the linguistic phrase from line 18 flowing into line 19. Rakim’s linguistic phrases generally suggest a certain level of disconnect with musical phrases and measures due to their tendency to flow into one another syntactically, but this example is more explicit (“the rhyme remains to be/ risin’ to the
top”). The implication is that increasing the complexity of end rhyme is more important for Rakim than maintaining a one-to-one correspondence between linguistic and musical phrases. Measure 18, which associates “rhyme remains to be” with “simultan’ously” (from measure 17), relies on the force of this five-syllable rhyme for its musical interest. Such constructions enhance this interest while taking some emphasis away from the semantic meaning of the words. They are interesting in large part only because they expertly use the English language to create strikingly similar sonic patterns. Moreover, Rakim’s free-form linguistic phrasal constructions make the precise semantic meaning of his words even less of a central concern.

Meta-rapping and the Focus on Artistry

It appears then, that Rakim’s intent is less to something with his words, and more to show us something using musical poetics. Putting the focus on the sounds and images of his music strongly supports both Rakim’s persona and the concept of the song. He demonstrates that he is an inspired artist who spends his time perfecting his craft by displaying the products of that work. And he shows us that the rhyme gets rougher as it goes on by emphasizing the sonic qualities of that rhyme. The final verse then, continues to bring out sounds and images as Rakim more fully describes his relationship to his audience and his competition. He starts off by saying:

Then look a/
\[\text{round}\] and see how \[\text{packed}\] the party \[\text{starts} \text{to get} \[\_] \_ I draw a
\[\text{crowd}\] \_ \_ \_ \[\_] \_ like a \[\text{arch-i-tec}\]t [\_]

1 2 3 4
1 2 3 4
“Starts to get” and “architect” are associated with each other, drawing attention to their similar sonic properties. At the same time, the image suggested by the simile “I draw a crowd like a architect” is emphasized both by the appeal of its wordplay and through its rhythmic setting, which generates interest by delaying the line’s conclusion with a 5-pulse pause.

Rakim continues to bring out interesting images in measures 25-28, personifying different geographic areas that have a positive response to his music (25 and 26), then explaining the state of the dance floor and his opinion of “other MC’s” (27 and 28):

Here, Rakim finally starts to move away from discussions that have “the rhyme” as a central topic. He has thoroughly demonstrated his creative relationship with it and the large amount of influence it exerts over his audience. With that premise established, Rakim is able to make assertions about his power and skill that would have seemed ridiculous had they come earlier in the song.
Overview

Rakim uses musical poetics to develop a hip-hop persona that adds in an aura of intelligent artistry without disrupting other common characteristics like entertainment and competition. He does this using shifting multisyllabic rhyme patterns that lend structure and coherence, rhythmic settings that mirror the corresponding text, a backing track and song form that support the lyrical content, and rhyme patterns and linguistic phrases that draw attention to sounds and images. Moreover, all of these techniques are employed in increasingly complex variations as the song continues, confirming Rakim’s artistic abilities by fulfilling his promise that “the rhyme gets rougher as the rhyme goes on”.
Chapter 5:

Crossing the Boundaries

KRS-One, Big Daddy Kane and Beyond

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Rev-Run, LL Cool J and Rakim all added their voices to the fledgling musical genre of hip-hop in a way that is widely acknowledged and celebrated. The poetic innovations of the artists that followed them built off of their work and that of their contemporaries. Additionally, the size and diversity of the genre of hip-hop ballooned in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, making a focused study of those years such as the one that I have conducted much less practical. Rappers took the poetics of the artists discussed herein in many different directions, especially building on techniques used by Rakim, the last rapper in the poetic progression I have described. Masta Ace, a contemporary and Juice Crew MC, remembers that he “just really go the ball rolling in terms of creativity as a lyricist. There was no limit to what you could do and figure out how to do it with words” (Bradley and DuBois 2010:123). Masta Ace is saying that Rakim suggested a number of novel musical poetic possibilities that could transform, strengthen, and add to the meaning of the text in a myriad of new ways. Artists like KRS-One, Big Daddy Kane, Nas, Lil Wayne, Eminem and Atmosphere tapped into some of these possibilities in the years following Rakim’s debut.

26 See Adam Krims’ chapter on “A genre system for rap music” (Krims 2000:46-92) for a discussion of the variation and regionalization of personas and musical styles in hip-hop since 1988.
Innovations include musical phrases that follow linguistic phrases in not lining up with measures, irregular verse lengths, more advanced motivic development, transformative rhymes, “additive” rhymes, expanded slant rhymes, extended chain rhymes and rhyme avoidance.

**Phrase/Structure Mismatch**

An early innovator in these fields was KRS-One of Boogie Down Productions, who released his first album *Criminal Minded* in 1987, a year after Eric B. and Rakim’s first single came out. He says of Eric B. and Rakim’s album *Paid in Full* and his own album that “they’re really the same album. It was all one album,” showing he sees his work as artistically inseparable from that of Rakim. Boogie Down Productions’ second album *By All Means Necessary* includes the track “I’m Still #1,” which showcases a number of important developments. It has an irregular song form, its four verses being of lengths 8, 6, 8 and 12 respectively. KRS-One’s words are thus arranged more organically, with verses lasting as long as his thoughts happen to extend. This variation in length expands on the variations used by Rev-Run, LL Cool J and Rakim, who changed verse size in a more predictable way.

The song features a hook similar to LL Cool J’s in “Rock the Bells,” tacking the phrase “I’m Still #1” onto the end of each verse and landing with “1” on beat 1 of the break. He also follows Rakim in letting his linguistic phrases flow on independent of musical phrase and structure, as in lines 6 and 7: 

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27 Line 6 contains an end rhyme association with the line before it, and line 7 contains an end rhyme association with the line after it.
My/ [al]-bum was raw [__] be-cause no [__]one would __ [ev]-er


But sometimes he continues his musical phrases over the bar-line as well, delaying the rhyme until the linguistic phrase has ended as he does in lines 15 and 16:

[I’m] __ the o-[rig] -in- al __ [teach]-er of __ [this] type a __

[style] __ __ __ [rock]-in’ off __ [beat] __ with a __ smile __

Constructions like this one create a new kind of interrelationship between two phrases in which the first is a declarative statement, and the second functions as an addendum that somehow clarifies or adds to the first one. Thus, KRS-One departs from the traditional set-up/punchline format in order to suggest new dimensions of his words’ literal meanings.

Also, going hand-in-hand with phrases that continue past bar-lines, linguistic/musical phrases in KRS-One’s work often divide measures up into smaller sections, like in measures 10 and 11 of “I’m Still #1”:

Rid-/

[ic]-u-lous __ [bass] __ __ __ [ag] -gra-va- ting [treb]-le __

[reb]-el __ __ [ren]-eg-ade __ [must] __ stay __ [paid] __ __
Here, KRS-One punctuates short linguistic clauses with rhymes and separates them from each other with pauses, effectively dividing measure 10 into two parts and line 11 into three. Nas, a rapper whose classic debut album *Illmatic* was released in 1994, expanded on such techniques by making both multisyllabic rhyme and phrase/structure mismatch sound more conversational. In the fifth and sixth measures of his song “N.Y. State of Mind” he raps:

\[ \text{Bul-let holes [ ] left in my [peep] holes [ ] I’m [suit]ed up in [street] clothes [ ] [ ] hand me a [nine] and I’ll de-[feat] foes [ ] } \]

Nas’s linguistic thought is not disrupted in any way as he moves from measure to measure, treating his musical-linguistic phrases as if they are completely independent from musical measures. The rhymes also sound natural; they are creative and multisyllabic, but at the same time are common turns of phrase that someone might use in a conversational sentence.

**Rhyme Avoidance**

Another technique used by KRS-One and expanded upon by Nas is that of periodically avoiding rhyme completely. In “I’m Still #1” KRS-One starts his second verse by asking a question that contains no rhyme associations:

\[ \text{[What] do ya think [ ] makes [ ] up [ ] a K R [ ] [S] [ ] [ ] con- } \]

\[ \text{[ci] -sive [te-a-[ ]-ching [ ] or [ver]-y clear [ ] [spea]-king } \]
This lack of association makes the line sound more forceful; it emphasizes it and make it seem like the question is being asked in earnest and is not just a rhetorical feature of the song. Nas uses the same technique to demarcate and bring out his compliment of frequent collaborator Swizz Beats in the song “The G.O.D.” from his 2002 album *God’s Son*:

A pro/

[du]-cer like *Swizz* [__] *Beats* on [fi] -re __ __ [so] is the con-

[trol] __ room __ [__] soon as my [voc]-als are down [__]

A more common way of avoiding rhyme however, is to approximate slant rhyme using assonance and consonance in the place where a rhyme would usually fall. This allows for word-associations to be drastically de-emphasized; such an effect is achieved in Atmosphere’s *Became* (2011) as he strikes a conversational tone in order to convey a story:

[__] A late __ [start] __ __ but [we] can still __ [catch] up __ you

[need] to *wake* up [__] __ we should *eat* and then __ [pack] up

Another effect of this technique is that it allows a greater variety of words and combinations of words to be associated with each other, as in this innovative connection made by Eminem in his 2002 song “Cleanin’ Out My Closet”:
Rhyme Saturation, Additive Rhyme and Chain Rhyme

In addition, beyond avoiding and stretching the limits of rhyme associations themselves, hip-hop artists have also increased the number of internal rhymes within a measure and the number of consecutive lines with the same end rhyme (chain rhyme). Big Daddy Kane, another member of Marley Marl’s Juice Crew, put more rhyming words in a single line than anyone before him (Masta Ace in Bradley and DuBois 2010: 124). For example, the song “Ain’t No Half Steppin’” from his 1988 album Long Live the Kane contains the lines:

The/ [best] _ oh yes [__] I guess _ [sug] gest _ the [rest] _ should fess

[___] don’t mess _ [or] test _ _ [your] _ high _ [ness]
This construction, however, is not merely put forth fully formed, but is built up to using a series of motivic developments. Big Daddy Kane places unstressed-stressed syllable pairs in every possible position relative to the beat before he employs them all in a row within a single measure. He thus expands on the motivic development that Rakim uses to alter the rhythms of his internal rhyme patterns. For Big Daddy Kane, these rhythms occur within rhyme patterns and outside of them, creating a set of prevailing rhythms that are deployed to synthesize a deliberate display of skill.

Another new rhyme pattern that built on Rakim’s innovations is additive rhyme:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{[\_\_] Talk-in’ to plants \_ \_ chop-[pin’] \_ \_ her hair off [\_] \_ \_ and} \\
\text{[there’s] on-ly two [days] left \_ of \_ spring \_ \_ break \_ \_ [how] long \_ do} \\
\text{[these] \_ things \_ \_ \_ take \_ \_ to \_ wear \_ [off]} \\
\end{array}
\]


Here, Eminem creates a sonic pattern (“things take to wear off”) that consists of two parts, both of which are associated with different preceding syllables pairs (“spring break” and “hair off”). Such constructions pull words together that would otherwise be unconnected, creating a situation in which the chosen components of the additive rhyme are unexpected and surprising. Also, chains of end-rhyming words in hip-hop have expanded exponentially, as in Lil’ Wayne’s 18-line rhyme chain in “Live from the 504”. The first and last lines of the succession are reproduced here:
[___] I gets ___ [hot]-ter by the [tock] be-fore I [sizz]-le to death . . .

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 \\
\text{[___]} & \text{hot} & \text{[tock]} & \text{[sizz]-le to death} \end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
\ldots & \ldots & \ldots & \ldots \\
\text{And we/ [aim]-in’ right ___ [at] your fuck-in’ [coll]-ar bi-atch} & \text{[___]} \\
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 \\
\end{array}
\]

Despite being connected by chain rhyme, however, these lines don’t seem to actually rhyme with each other. This is because over the course of his chain, Lil’ Wayne has transformed the end-rhyming syllables, changing them slow enough so that each line is perceived as rhyming with the one directly before it (“sizzle to death” to “gimme a sec” to “enemy at” to “(Bi)enemy back” to “energy back” to “sympathy at,” etc.). This technique of transformative rhyme allows for a greater variety of words to be associated with each other in succession and also demonstrates an artist’s technical lyrical skill.

**Other Musical Aspects**

Thus, artists following the ones dealt with in depth in this paper built upon their innovations in order to develop new poetic techniques that provide sonic interest and help to transform the literal meaning of the words. I have not delved into the rhythmic qualities, song forms, backing tracks or personas of rappers who made their recorded debuts after 1988 (limiting these discussion to KRS-One and Big Daddy Kane), but have merely given examples of techniques (mostly rhyme-related) that are transferrable across the many genres of hip-hop that have developed in the past 25 years. Adam Krims (2000:46-92) provides a model of how these divergent styles

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28 The genres used in the following discussion are terms that Krims uses to attempt to categorize hip-hop music. The genres are party rap, mack rap, bohemian rap and reality (or gangsta) rap, and they each represent a certain group of personas coupled with a general musical aesthetic.
could be characterized and delineated, but supporting musical close-analysis has not been attempted.

Nevertheless, it is possible to create a general narrative describing how the rhythms, forms, backing tracks and personas of the artists studied herein fit into the modern genre system. For example, LL Cool J’s persona of street-smart toughness can be traced through KRS-One’s album *Criminal Minded* into the work of NWA, Ice-T and other artists that fall into the gangsta-rap genre. Rakim’s aura of intelligent artistry can be traced both through the deliberately creative bohemian rap genre typified by the Native Tongues groups and through rappers who developed personas as teachers (like Chuck D. of Public Enemy and KRS-One from *By All Means Necessary* on). Run-D.M.C.’s and LL Cool J’s interest in romantic love is played out in the work of big Daddy Kane and later artists who popularized the persona of the pimp in what Krims calls mack rap.

When it comes to instrumental accompaniment, the rock-influenced components of Def Jam’s sound world don’t survive in Krims’s genre system, but Rick Rubin’s taste for rough-sounding tracks lives on in the gritty sounds of many gangsta rap artists. The sounds that Marley Marl and Eric B. and Rakim used on *Paid in Full* however, have had a strong lasting impact. They pioneered an aesthetic that layered many samples on top of each other but nonetheless sounded highly rhythmic and cohesive, setting an example that hip-hop as a whole would follow. They also drew heavily on James Brown samples, starting a popular trend in rap music, especially in the bohemian genre, that continues to this day (Shapiro 2005:126-127). The musical form with which these backing tracks are structured is not dealt with by
Krims, but a general tendency toward standardization that is contrary to expansions in other dimensions seems to exist. Hip-hop has never broken out of its tendency to use 4-beat measures, and the amount of times those measures repeat also seems to have gotten more predictable. Rapped sections in groups of sixteen bars are pervasive if not a widespread standard, and alternation between these sections and a four-to-eight bar sung hook is expected.

Lyrical rhythms, on the other hand, have become the most diversified of any of these aspects. The rappers studied in this paper exist at a crossroads of what Adam Krims calls the “sung flow” of Old School rappers and the more complex “speech-effusive” and “percussion-effusive” styles that developed later. Both of these styles involve departing from Run, LL and Rakim’s tendency to divide each beat into four even pulses. Instead, speech-effusive rapping privileges the natural rhythms of spoken language over these divisions, and percussion-effusive rapping privileges maximized rhythmic interest over such a simple framework. Run’s rhythms are still firmly in the category of sung flow, but LL begins to test the boundaries by saturating almost all of the pulses in each beat with syllables. Rakim, then, suggests both the speech-effusive direction through his use of free-flowing phrase constructions, and the percussion-effusive direction through the compelling rhythms of his shifting rhymed motives. Moreover, Rakim’s technique of forcing unstressed syllables onto strong beats has helped both to allow for natural speech rhythms and to create more interesting percussive effects (for examples, see the two lyrical excerpts above from Eminem, whose style combines both speech-effusive and percussion-effusive techniques).
Overview

Thus, Run LL and Rakim’s direct influences can be traced through those that came right after them, like KRS-One and Big Daddy Kane. Additionally, specific examples of developments in rhyme and assonance can be given, and a general sense of other musical aspects is also possible. These explanations, however, do not come anywhere near describing the different directions such poetics have taken; in fact, many artists have pushed back against the trend toward increased complexity within rhyme associations, and have used only unique rhythmic styles and compelling backing tracks to generate interest and make meaning. Nevertheless, the arsenal of musical poetic techniques developed by Golden Age hip-hop artists undoubtedly had a profound effect on the MC’s and DJ’s that would bring carry the genre through the ‘80s and into the ‘90s and 2000s.
Chapter 6

Conclusions and New Directions

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A child is born with no state of mind
Blind to the ways of mankind


People still takin’ rappin’ for a joke
A passing hope or a phase with a rope

--KRS-One, “I’m Still #1” (1987)

As a new music comes into being, its status as ‘new’ also leads to questions of whether songs in the new manner are essentially ‘novelty’ songs. Anyone who was around to listen to rap in the early 1980s will remember the frequent claims that the music was a fad, a gimmick, a cheap trend destined to die a quick death.

--Adam Bradley and Andrew Dubois, The Anthology of Rap (2010)

Hip-hop was born as the centerpiece of house and dance hall parties in Harlem and the Bronx in New York City. Its recorded debut in 1979 opened up the music to a vast new audience, but merely transferring the live material to a recorded medium would not be enough. Old School rappers like Eddie Cheba asked “how you don’ put hip-hop onto a record? ‘Cause it was a whole gig you know? How you gon’ put three
hour on a record?” (as cited in Bradley and Dubois 2010:4). Early recorded hip-hop used the same types of music (funk, disco) in their backing tracks in addition to including songs that stretched past the 10-minute mark, involving multiple breaks and sections of crowd exhortation.29

Golden Age hip-hop, on the other hand, began to formulate the musical material of rap music in such a way as to accept and exploit the recorded format. For example, Run-DMC’s songs lasted 3 or 4 minutes each, LL Cool J used recognizable popular song forms, and all the rappers discussed herein avoided putting direct audience interaction onto their recordings. Moreover, starker, slower backing tracks put more of a focus on the verbal stylings of the MC, who took the poetics of the music to another level. The public began to realize that hip-hop was not a mere fad or gimmick, and more and more money was funneled into what was becoming a highly commercial and successful business enterprise. In fact, Eric B. and Rakim introduced what would become one of the central tropes of hip-hop with the title of their debut album Paid in Full.

This theme would combine with the “reality rap” of NWA and KRS-One’s Criminal Minded to create a specific manifestation of gangsta rap30 that would propel hip-hop into the mainstream in the early 1990s. Although the artists involved in this transition diverge widely in terms of musical style and poetic content, their success and chosen personas were both based on developments that were made by the artists discussed in this paper. Run-DMC, LL Cool J, Rakim, KRS-One, Big Daddy Kane

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29 See, for example, the recorded work of The Sugarhill Gang, Kurtis Blow, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, and Eddie Cheba.

30 Dr. Dre, Big L, The Notorious B.I.G., Mobb Deep, Eminem, Nas and 50 Cent among others typify the gangsta rap persona that became widely popular during this time period.
and their contemporaries are the artists that made sure hip-hop was here to stay as a commercially recorded form of music. They created a situation in which hip-hop was seen as a legitimate style of music, and allowed it to take the direction that it would within American culture and society as a whole.

A study of this direction, however, is a matter for other projects,\textsuperscript{31} which in the future I hope take the musical dimension more and more seriously. The current project itself is also necessarily incomplete, and future studies should be done to expand the history I have given both temporally and synchronically. Additionally, the targeted analytical studies done by other authors like Walser (1995), Krims (2000) and Adams (2007, 2008) should be incorporated into this history and taken alongside the work that I have done. Moreover, a unified notation for transcription of hip-hop songs should be posited and accepted. So far, every author on the subject has notated their transcriptions in a different way, thus making it difficult to get a unified view when looking at their various studies. Because of this lack of standardization, I developed my own notation that I found most useful and reflective of the concerns of the music. I would, however, consider revamping my notation in order to fit it into an accepted standard.

The exponentially expanding diversity and regionalization of hip-hop from the late 1980s onwards is indeed a great obstacle in the way of musical close-readings like mine, but it is nonetheless a rich area for possible study. Although it would be challenging to gain a holistic picture of hip-hop in this time period, different paths of musical development could be interrogated for their poetic qualities. For example,

\textsuperscript{31} Rose (1994), Kitwana (2005) and George (2005) among others take this approach.
the musical poetics of the development of unique hip-hop subgenres like crunk, G-funk, hyphy or bounce music are all potential areas of exploration. Modes of analysis are likely to change when the concerns of the subgenre studied are different from those of the rappers already studied. Therefore, a holistic picture of which components of hip-hop poetics are important across different genres, time periods, artists and regions is also in order.

In this paper I have put forth a short musical narrative that shows an important slice of hip-hop history at an extremely critical point in the music’s development. I have focused on the pared-down rhythmic stylings of Run-DMC, the experiments in rhyme, rhythmic structure and musical form of LL Cool J, and the increasingly effusive flows of Rakim, KRS-One and Big Daddy Kane. Each of these artists found new ways to transform language through musical poetics, establishing recorded hip-hop as a sophisticated, dynamic and indelible art form.
Appendix I: Key to the Transcriptions

Note: The transcriptions show some aspects of the music and downplay others. In order to hear the exact sounds and rhythms of the music, please listen to the audio examples as you read.

Basic Framework:

• Lyrics are organized into measures, which each consist of four beats
• Each beat consists of four pulses

Transcriptions of the Lyrical Track:

• Beats 1-4 each have [brackets] around them with the beat number underneath.
• Strongly stressed syllables are in bold and italics, and weakly stressed syllables are in normal typeface.
• Unarticulated pulses are indicated using an underscore (“__”).

In the Appendices

(1) [___] __ __ __ [___] __ __ __ [___] __ __ __ [___] __ Two__/  
(2) [years] __ a- go [___] __ __ a [friend] __ a mine [___] __ __ asked  
(3) [___] me __ to [say] __ some M [___] C __ rhymes [___] __ __

Lyrical measure number is indicated with a number in parentheses as in: (1).

Instrumental measures are indicated as (i1), (i2)… etc. (for intro measure 1, intro measure 2, etc.) and (b1), (b2) … etc. (for break measure 1, break measure 2, etc.).

Lyrical measure numbers proceed independent of instrumental measures.
In-Text: Rhyme

Two__/  
[years] __ a-go [__] __ a [friend] __ a mine [__] __ asked  
[__] me __ to [say] __ some M [__] C __ rhymes [__] __  

Words with the same or similar vowel sounds are highlighted with the same color in order to illustrate an association being discussed in the analysis.

In-Text: Rhythm

Two__/  
[years] __ a-go [__] __ a [friend] __ a mine [__] __ asked  
[__] me __ to [say] __ some M [__] C __ rhymes [__] __  

Groups of syllables with the same rhythm and stress pattern are highlighted with gray in order to illustrate a point being made in the analysis.

Transcriptions of the backing track:

• Measures alternate between having white and gray backgrounds

• Beats 1-4 are outlined with dark borders.

• Instrument is designated by codes on the left side of the notation:
  
  o cl: hand-clap  
  o sn: snare  
  o b: bass  
  o bg: bass guitar  
  o gt: guitar  
  o cy: cymbal  
  o c1: cymbal 1
- c2: cymbal 2
- c3: cymbal 3
- sc: scratch
- tt: tom-tom

- Pulses articulated by each instrument have a unique color.

**In the Appendices:**

Pattern 1B

Patterns are labeled on a measure-by-measure basis, and the sequence in which those patterns occur over the course of the song is indicated.

**In-Text: Lyrics and backing track**

*Two__/*

The lyrical transcription is sometimes arranged to correspond with the grid of the backing track notation. Rhythmic and sonic similarities may still be noted.
Appendix II: Run-DMC, “Sucker MC’s”

Backing Track Rhythmic Patterns

Intro Pattern

Pattern 1A

Pattern A

Pattern 1B

Pattern 2B
Embellishments

Cymbal

Scratch 1

Scratch 2
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(measure #) Lyrical Track</th>
<th>--SECTION--</th>
<th>Backing Track</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>--INTRO--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i1) [<em><strong>] __ __ [</strong></em>] __ __ [<em><strong>] __ __ [</strong></em>] __ __ [<em><strong>] __ __ [</strong></em>] __ __ Intro</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i2) [<em><strong>] __ __ [</strong></em>] __ __ [<em><strong>] __ __ [</strong></em>] __ __ [<em><strong>] __ __ [</strong></em>] __ __ 1A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i3) [<em><strong>] __ __ [</strong></em>] __ __ [<em><strong>] __ __ [</strong></em>] __ __ [<em><strong>] __ __ [</strong></em>] __ __ 1A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i4) [<em><strong>] __ __ [</strong></em>] __ __ [<em><strong>] __ __ [</strong></em>] __ __ [<em><strong>] __ __ [</strong></em>] __ __ [___] __ Two</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--VERSE 1--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) [years] __ a-go [<em><strong>] __ __ a [friend] __ a mine [</strong></em>] __ __ asked 1B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) [<em><strong>] me __ to [say] __ some M [</strong></em>] C __ rhymes [___] so I __ 1B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) [said] __ this rhyme [<em><strong>] I'm __ a-[bou] __ to say [</strong></em>] __ __ the 1B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) [rhyme] __ was def [___] ah then it [went] __ this __ [way] 2B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--VERSE 2--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) [took] a__ test [___] to __ be-[come] an M- __ [C] 1A w/ Cymbal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) [<em><strong>] and O-range [Krush] be-came a-[mazed] __ at me [</strong></em>] so Lar-ry 1A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) [put] me in- __ [side] __ __ his [Cad] <strong>-il-lac [</strong>_] __ __ the 1A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8) [chauf]-feur drove __ [off] __ and we [nev]-er came __ [back] 2A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
--VERSE 3--

(9) [Dave] __ cut the [rec]-ord down __ [to] __ the bone [__] __ ___ and 1A w/ Cymbal

(10) [now] they got me [rock]-in’ on the [mic] __ -ro-phone [__] and then we 1A

(11) [talk]-in’ aut-o-[graph] __ __ and [here’s] __ the laugh [__] __ cham-__ 1A

(12) [pagne] __ ca-vi-[ar] __ __ and [bub]-ble __ bath [__] but see ah 2A

--VERSE 4--

(13) [__] ah that's the [life] __ __ ah [that] I __ lead [__] and you __ 1B

(14) [suck]-er M __ [C's] __ __ is [who] I __ please [__] so take __ 1A

(15) [that] and move __ [back] __ catch a [heart] __ at-tack [__] be-cause there’s 1B

(16) [noth]-in’ in the [world] __ __ that [Run]-’ll ev-er [lack] I cold __ 2B

--VERSE 5--

(17) [chill] at __ a [par]-ty in a [b]-boy __ stance [__] __ __ and 1A w/ Cymbal

(18) [rock] on __ the [mic] and make the [girls] __ wan-na [dance] 1A

(19) [fly] __ like a [Dove] __ __ that [come] from up a-[bove] __ __ I’m 1B w/ Scratch 1

(20) [rock]-in’ on the [mic] and you can [call] me Run __ [Love] __ __ 2B w/ Scratch 2
---BREAK---

(b1) [__]  __  __ [__]  __  __ [__]  __  __ [__]  __  __  __

(b2) [__]  __  __ [__]  __  __ [__]  __  __ [__]  __  __  __

(b3) [__]  __  __ [__]  __  __ [__]  __  __ [__]  __  __  __

(b4) [__]  __  __ [__]  __  __ [__]  __  __ [__]  __  __  __

---VERSE 6---

(21) [big]  __ long  __ [Cad]-dy not  __ [like] a Se-ville  __ and writ-ten

(22) [right] on the side  __ it reads  __ [dressed]  __ to kill  __ so if ya

(23) [see] me cruis-in’ [girls]  __ just ah [move] or step a-[side]  __ there

(24) [ain’t] e-nough  __ [room] to fit ya [all]  __ in my [ride] it’s on a

---VERSE 7---

(25) [__]  __ first  __ [come]  __  __ [first]  __ serve  __ [ba]-sis  __ __

(26) [cool]-in’ out  __ [girl]  __ take you  __ [to] the def  __ [pla]-ces  __

(27) [one] of a kind  __ and for your [peop]-le’s de-[light] and for your

(28) [suck]-er M  __ [C]  __ who [just] ain’t  __ right  __ be-cause you’re

(29) [bit]-in’ all your [life]  __  __ you’re [cheat]-in’ on your [wife]  __  __ you’re
--VERSE 8--

(30) [walk]-in’ **round** [town] like a [hood]-lum with a [knife] you’re

(31) [hang]in’ on the [ave] and [chill]-in’ with the [crew] and

(32) [ev]-’ry-body [know] what you’ve [been] through

(b1) [__] __ __ [__] __ __ [__] __ __ [__] __ __ [__] __ __
Appendix III

LL Cool J, “Rock the Bells”

Backing Track Rhythmic Patterns

Short Verse 1A

Short Verse 1B

Short Verse 1C

Short Verse 1D

Pattern 1

Pattern 2A
(measure #) Lyrical Track --SECTION-- Backing Track

--VERSE 1--

L_/ /

(1) [L]__Cool__[J]__is__[hard]__as__[hell]__ ___ ___

Short Verse 1A

(2) [bat]-tle an-y-[bod]-y I don't [care] who you __[tell]__ ___ ___

Short Verse 1B

(3) [J]__ex-__[cel]__ ___ __[they]__all__[fail]__ ___ ___

Short Verse 1C

(4) [gon]-na crack__[shells]__Doub-le[L]__must__[rock]__the

Short Verse 1D

--BREAK 1--

(b1) [bells]__ ___ __[ ]__ ___ __[ ]__ ___ __[ ]__ ___ ___

1 w/ Tom-tom 1

(b2) [__]__ ___ __[ ]__ ___ __[ ]__ ___ __[ ]__ ___ ___

1 w/ Tom-tom 1

(b3) [__]__ ___ __[ ]__ ___ __[ ]__ ___ __[ ]__ ___ ___

1 w/ Tom-tom 1

(b4) [__]__ ___ __[ ]__ ___ __[ ]__ ___ __[ ]__you’ve been__

2 w/ Tom-tom 2

--VERSE 2--

(5) [wait]-in' and de-[bat]-in’ for [oh] so long [__] __just __

1

(6) [star]-vin' like__[Mar-]vin for a [Cool] J__song__[__]__ if ya

2A

(7) [cried] and thought I [died] you def-in-[ite]-ly was wrong [__] it took a

1

(8) [thought] __ plus I [brought] Cut Cre-[a]-tor a-long [__] ev-en-ed

2B
(9) [up] __ E __ [Love] down with the [Cool] __ force [___] spe-cial-

(10) [iz]-in' in the [rhy]-in' for the [rec]-ord of course [___] I’m a

(11) [tow]-er full of [pow]-er with __ [rain] and __ hail [___] __ Cut Cre-

(12) [a]-tor scratch the [rec]-ord with his [fin]-ger- __ nail [___] rock __ the

---BREAK 2---

(b1) [bells] __ __ [___] __ __ [___] __ __ [___] __ __ [___] __ __ [___] __ __

(b2) [___] __ __ [___] __ __ [___] __ __ [___] __ __ [___] __ __ [___] __ __

(b3) [___] __ __ [___] __ __ [___] __ __ [___] __ __ [___] __ __

(b4) [___] __ __ [___] __ __ [___] __ __ [___] __ __ [___] __ __ [___] __ __ the

--VERSE 3--

(13) [king] of crowd __ [rock]-ers fi-nal-[ly] is __ back [___] __ my __

(14) [voice] is your __ [choice] __ as the [hot]-test __ wax [___] you ask who

(15) [is] it just a [wiz]-ard who ain’t [tak]-in’ no crap [___] __ I’m __

(16) [rhy]-in’ and de-[sign]-in’ with your [girl] on my lap [___] the bass is
(17) [kick]in' al-ways [stick]in' cause you [like] it that way [__] you take a

(18) [step] be-cause it's [def] and plus it's [by] __ Cool J [__] __ Cut Cre-

(19) [a]-tor on the [fa]-der __ my [right] hand __ man [__] we rock the

(20) [bells] so ver-y [well] 'cause that's the [name] a this jam [__] rock __ the

--BREAK 3--

(b1) [bells] __ __ [__] __ __ [__] __ __ [__] __ __ __ 1 w/ Tom-tom 1

(b2) [__] __ __ [__] __ __ [__] __ __ [__] __ __ __ 1 w/ Tom-tom 1

(b3) [__] __ __ [__] __ __ [__] __ __ [__] __ __ __ 1 w/ Tom-tom 1

(b4) [__] __ __ [__] __ __ [__] __ __ [__] __ __ __ some 2 w/ Tom-tom 2

--VERSE 4--

(21) [girls]-'ll like this [jam] __ __ and [some] girls __ won't [__] __ 'cause I

(22) [make] a lot a [mon]-ey and your [boy]-friend don't [__] __ L __

(23) [L] __ went to [hell] __ gon-na [rock] __ the [bells] __ all you

(24) [washed] __ up __ [rap]-pers wan-na [do] this __ well [__] rock __ the

(b1) [bells] __ __ [__] __ __ [__] __ __ [__] __ __ __ 1 w/ Tom-tom 1
Appendix IV

Eric B and Rakim, “As the Rhyme Goes On”

Backing Track Rhythmic Patterns

Intro 1

Intro 2

Pattern 1
Pattern 2

Pattern 3
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(measure #)</th>
<th>Lyrical Track</th>
<th>--SECTION--</th>
<th>Backing Track</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>--INTRO--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Intro 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i1) [___]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Intro 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i2) [___]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Intro 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i3) [___]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Intro 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i4) [___]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Intro 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--VERSE 1--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) [Know-]</td>
<td>ledge will be-[gin]</td>
<td>un-til I [fin]-ish this [song]</td>
<td>'cause the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) [rhyme]</td>
<td>gets [rough]-er as the [rhyme]</td>
<td>goes [on]</td>
<td>you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) [sweat]</td>
<td>as you step [<em><strong>] a-bout [to] get [hype] [</strong></em>]</td>
<td>or</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) [should]you just [lis]-ten to the [man] [<em><strong>] on the [mic] [</strong></em>] you’re</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--VERSE 2--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) [phys]-ic-’lly in [this] with me but [how] could you tell [___] if it’s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) [meant]</td>
<td>to be hip [hop] if you're not [men]-tal-ly as [well] [___]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) [read]-y to ab-[sorb] the rhyme that [I] just [poured] [___] in-to the</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8) [mic]</td>
<td>so u-[nite] and this won't [be] so [bored] [___] if ya</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(9) [just] __ keep __ [kick]-in' __ list-[en] __ to the [mix] __ and __

(10) [think] __ you'll __ [sink] in-to the [rhyme] __ like __ [quick] __ sand __

---VERSE 3---

(11) [holds] __ and con-[trols] __ you __ ['til] I __ leave [__] ya fall __

(12) [deep]-er in the [style] __ __ it's [hard] __ to breathe [__] the on-ly __

(13) [time] I __ stop [__] is when __ [some]-bod-y drop [__] and then __

(14) [bring] 'em to the [front] 'cause my __ [rhyme’s] the __ ox-[__]-y-gen __

(15) [__] then wave your [hands] __ when you're [read]-y I'll __ [send] you __ in-

(16) [to] your fav’rite [dance] but let the [rhyme] __ con-tin-[__]ue __ and __

---VERSE 4---

(17) [so] on __ and [I'm]-a go on [__] __ si-mul-[tan]’ous-ly __

(18) [ev]-en if I [stop] __ __ [__] __ the rhyme re-[mains] to be __ __

(19) [ris]-in’ to the [top] __ __ and [I] came __ to [drop] it __ __

(20) [__] catch it and [quiz] it __ __ [__] it’s my __ [top]-ic un-i-

(21) [ver]-su-al ’cause [I] move ev-ry-[bod]-y to come [__] by ex-er-

(22) [cis]-in’ your mind [__] and co-in-[cide] __ as one [__] then look a-
(23) [round] and see how [packed] the par-ty [starts] ___ to get [___] I draw a

(24) [crowd] ___ ___ [___] ___ like a [ar] ___-chi-tect [___] the five ___

(25) [bor]-oughs re-act [___] and all the [is]-lands at-tract [___] and ev’ry

(26) [state] ___ can’t ___ [wait] ___ ___ [___] so they at-[tack] ___ off a

(27) [spot] on the floor ___ ___ squeeze ___ [in] cuz it's ___ [packed] ___ it’-d

(28) [be] more ___ room [___] if M ___ [C's] ___ played the [back]
Appendix V

KRS-One, “I’m Still #1”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(measure #) Lyrical Track</th>
<th>--SECTION--</th>
<th>Backing Track</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>--VERSE 1--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1) [Peop]-le still tak-[in]' __ rap- [ ] pin’ for a [joke] __ a

(2) [pass]-ing __ hope [ ] __ or a [phase] __ with a [rope] __ some-

(3) [times] I __ choke [ ] and __ try [ ] to be- __ [lieve] __ when

(4) [I] __ get __ [chall]- lenged by a [mil]-lion M- __ [C’s] __ I

(5) [try] to __ tell [ ] them __ we’re [all] in this to-[gath]-er __ my

(6) [al]-bum was raw [ ] be-caus[e [no] one would __ [ev]-er __

(7) [think] __ like __ [I] think __ and [do] what __ I [ ] do __

(8) [ ] I stole the [show] and then I [leave] without a [clue] __ __

---

| --VERSE 2--                      |

(9) [what] do ya think [ ] makes __ up [ ] a K R [S] __ con-

(10) [cis]-ive tea-[ ]-ching __ or [ver]-y clear __ [spea]-king __ ri-

(11) [dic]-u- lous [bass] __ __ [ag]-grav-a- ting [treb]- le __

(12) [reb]-el __ __ [ren]-eg- ade __ [must] __ stay __ [paid] __ __
(13) [not] __ by fi-[nan]-cial __ aid [__] __ but a [rate] __ of __

(14) [hits] __ __ __ [caus]-in’ me to [take] __ long __ [trips] __ __ __

--VERSE 3--

(15) [I'm] __ the or-[ig]-in-al __ [teach]-er of __ [this] type a __

(16) [style] __ __ __ [rock]-in' off __ [beat] __ with a [smile] __ or __

(17) [smirk] __ or __ [chuck]-le __ yet [some] are not __ [up] __ to __

(18) [B] D __ P [__] pos- __ se [__] so I __ [love] __ to __

(19) [step] __ in the [jam] __ and __ [slam] __ __ __ [I'm] __ not __

(20) [sup]-er-man [__] be-cause __ [an]-y-bod-y [can] __ or __

(21) [should] __ be a-[__]ble __ to [rock] off turn- __ [tab]-les __ __

(22) [grab] __ the mic [__] __ plug it [in] __ and be-[gin]
Big Daddy Kane, “Ain’t No Half-Steppin” (Verse 2)

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<th>(measure #) Lyrical Track</th>
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My/
(1) [rhymes] are so __ [dope] and __ the [rap]-pers be __ [hop]-in’ __ to

(2) [sound] like __ me [__] so __ soon [__] I’ll have to [o]-pen __ a

(3) [school] of M __ [C]-in’ __ for [those] who wan-na [be] in __ my

(4) [field] __ in court [__] __ then a-[gain] on sec-ond [thought] __ __ to

(5) [have] MC’s __ [com]-in’ __ [sound]-in’ __ [sim]-il-ar __ __

(6) [__] it's quite con-[fus]-ing __ for [you] to __ re-[mem]-ber the __ o-

(7) [rig]-in-a-tor [__] __ and boy [__] do I __ [hate] a __ __

(8) [per]-pe-tra-tor [__] __ but [I’m] much __ __ [great]-er __ the

--VERSE 2--

(9) [best] __ oh yes [__] I guess __ [sug]-gest __ the [rest] __ should fess

(10) [__] don’t mess __ [or] test __ __ [your] __ high- __ [ness ] __ __ un-

(11) [less] __ you just [__] ad-dress __ [with] best __ fin-[esse] __ and bless

(12) [__] the par-a-[graph] __ __ __ [I] __ man-i-[fest] __ __ __
(13) [rap] __ prime __ [min]-is-ter __ [sin] some say __ [sin]-is-ter __

(14) [non] __ stop-pin’ the groove [when] un-til [when] it’s __ the

(15) [cli]-max __ and [I] max __ re-[lax] __ and chill [chill] __ have a

(16) [break] __ from a [act]in’ __ ill [ill]
Recordings


References


