

Hip-Hop Off The Top

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Introduction

Hip-hop music and culture has five essential elements: graffiti, DJing, beat-boxing, breakdancing (“b-boying”), and MCing. This paper pertains to the two latter elements, as MCing and breakdancing provide exceptional examples of improvisatory thinking and acting. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the act of improvising as to “create and perform (music, drama, or verse) spontaneously or without preparation.” Further, Derek Bailey’s introduction to *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*, provides a useful statement about the always elusive nature of improvisation: “Improvisation is always changing and adjusting, never fixed, too elusive for analysis and precise description” (ix). The creation and performance of music, drama, and verse illustrates a clear relationship between hip-hop and the ever-elusive act of improvising. Improvisation is present not only in hip-hop music and break dancing, but also carries great currency in hip-hop culture and can enhance the status of individual artists, hip-hop groups, and breakdance crews.

“Freestyle”

Rhyming off the top of the dome, rhyming off the top of the head, or spitting frees all describe rhyming without reciting any pre-written material, otherwise known as freestyling. An MC gains respect when he or she can freestyle because it demonstrates an ability to simultaneously compose and execute rhymes. For this reason, when an audience is present, the act of freestyling is in itself a live performance: “the pressure of performing live in front of a potentially hostile audience with no prepared lyrics scares away the fronters and the fakers, and demonstrates who the real MCs are” (Pihel 252).

As in many musical genres, such as free-jazz, being a skilled rap improviser or “freestyler” requires being integrated into the musical culture, constantly practicing the necessary building blocks. Erik Pihel argues that a skilled freestyler should constantly interact with hip-hop cultures, carrying numerous hip-hop cultural references at all times in order to not stumble or fall off a beat and to be relatable to listeners: “The artist must be able to access the culture that has shaped him or her—then recognize it, reshape it, and recreate it at the moment of the performance” (255). One classic example of reshaping hip-hop cultural references can be heard in Nas’ track “New York State Of Mind,” from his 1994 album, *Illmatic*. Before the song’s beat drops, and before Nas begins to rap, the listener hears a sample of dialogue from the 1983 film *Wild Style*, commonly recognized as the first ever hip-hop motion picture. Other samples from *Wild Style* have also been included in numerous hip-hop artists’ albums, including *Midnight Marauders* by A Tribe Called Quest, *Black Sunday* by Cypress Hill, *Resurrection* by Common, *Doomsday* by MF doom, *Check Your Head* by The Beastie Boys, and *Quality Control* by Jurassic 5.

Just as a skilled jazz improviser is fluent in the familiar riffs and chord progressions of her genre, a talented freestyle MC has a wide vocabulary of rhyming words or words that can be persuaded to rhyme. Consider the perspective of MC Supernatural (aka Supernat), widely recognized as one of the best freestyle MCs of all time:

I started reading the dictionary just period, as a tool to help build my vocabulary. Then I got into reading the rhyming dictionary like later on. You

know, just trying to find all the words in the world that could possibly rhyme or you could fit in a sentence, and I'd say I've been reading it for about 15 years. (qtd. in Fitzgerald)

MC Supernatural has been able to achieve his status through hard work and dedication to exploring the English language. Furthermore, Supernat is enveloped in a freestyle way of thinking: "Everything I read helps me with my freestyles, anything I read. All information, news, current events, whatever. Whatever's around me, my surroundings, everything is a freestyle [. . .] to me" (qtd. in Fitzgerald). Like a good improviser, MC Supernatural is able to produce or make (something) from whatever is available to him.

One can easily imagine how an individual's freestyles would improve by simply reciting different rhymes as often as possible: composing and learning new songs adds to one's available knowledge when improvising. The more words MCs write rhythms for, or orally rhyme, the larger their rhyme vocabulary. Similarly, listening to hip-hop music and spitting other MC's verses will also add to the rhymes accessible during a freestyle.

A good example of the skill, ingenuity, and creativity necessary to overcome obstacles in a freestyle is MC Supernatural's performance during the 2008 Magic Convention. Supernat is surrounded by a large crowd of fans who are bobbing their heads to the DJ's beat when Supernat says, "Hold em up and I'll show you how to put words together [snaps his fingers] outta thin air," encouraging audience members to pass him objects to rap about ("MC Supernatural Freestyle at the 2008 Magic Convention": <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6TAAx01TMi8>). When the first object, a necklace with the Skullcandy Headphones company logo as the pendant, is handed to him, he begins his freestyle:

He had this, it was handy
This is here, it was made by skull candy
You can put it on your neck, this is not foolery,
Top it off, yeah they made their own jewellery

When the next object, a blackberry phone, is handed to Supernat, he continues by saying

It's very necessary to have vocabulary
I sit and write freestyles on my blackberry

A few minutes later, Supernat motions for a police officer in the audience to come forward and give him what Supernat thinks is a flashlight. Since a freestyler has no way of editing his/her rhymes and cannot hide any mistakes, an important aspect of freestyling is the ability to overcome sudden difficulties that unexpectedly appear. This is demonstrated through the following verse when Supernat expects to rhyme about a flashlight, but suddenly realizes he was handed a baton:

I spit the lyrics and we rock so raw,
What you got mister man, the officer of law
Yo he blast right, roll brothers that crash right
I thought that he took it, I thought it was a flashlight
But this ain't a flashlight, yo he get tight,
he flick it out like that, when its time for a fight
Hey, grabbin the beats its brotha Dublay,
It's a baton, this shit here can break your legs

As Supernatural continues his freestyle, an audience member hands him a pack of cigarettes, to which he replies,

Anywhere I go, brotha, we configure it
 It's killin you, when you start smoking on the cigarettes
 Hey, grabbin the beats, break it and deliver that
 This is a gang and it rolls in a twenty pack

These are just a few examples of the objects Supernatural incorporates into this particular freestyle, as the entire performance lasts just under six and a half minutes. When observing a freestyle closely, it is common to hear either one word or a particular phrase a number of times. These words or phrases allow the MC a fraction of time to think ahead and plan what to say next. In hip-hop jargon, this is commonly known as “filler,” because it fills the gaps in-between rhymes. For instance, in the Supernatural freestyle previously described, Supernat repeats the word “hey” as a “filler” a total of 15 times throughout his six and a half minute freestyle. “Filler” can also be utilized to maintain rhythm by filling any gaps in the rhyme.

The freestyle MC must have a strong sense of rhythm and time since she or he is expected to rhyme spontaneously either to a DJ's beat or to another individual beat-boxing, or a cappella. This rhythmic ability involves squeezing in exactly the right amount of words, or stretching certain words out in order to successfully rhyme to any given beat. Pihel explains that there is no specific set meter that rappers follow; rather, the beat provides the rhythm for an MC to rap over: “In other words, freestyles can be broken down into rhythmic units rather than metrical units” (256). Each and every MC has their own personal sound and rhythm when rapping to an instrumental, or in hip-hop jargon “riding a beat,” commonly described as the MCs “flow.” A clear illustration of how individual MCs possess entirely different flows, resulting in their own distinct sound, can be seen in an old school hip-hop concert that took place on the Arsenio Hall Show. This concert featured some of the most well respected old school hip-hop legends—MC Lyte, A Tribe Called Quest, Naughty By Nature, CL Smooth, Guru from Gangstarr, Wu-Tang Clan, and KRS-One—all taking turns rapping over the same beat. Although this concert was not a freestyle, it shows how an MC's personal flow changes the experience of listening to the same instrumental piece (“Old School Rap All-Stars on Arsenio Hall”:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JP-WTLO_hZ8).

The Cipher

A cipher is a whole bunch of MCs that want to freestyle, and they just show their skills, and I think that's where the energy comes in. Your energy comes from the cipher.
 (Hillarrius, qtd. in Newman 414).

This quote comes from Hilarrius, an artist interviewed for Michael Newman's article “Rap as Literacy: A Genre Analysis Of Hip-Hop Ciphers.” A rap cipher can be understood as essentially more than one MC feeding off of one another's lyrics and energy while freestyling. Described by Michael Newman as “round-robin rapping” (404), the rap cipher commonly takes the form of a circle or semi-circle.

During a cipher, one MC could be rapping about a certain topic and finish a sentence with a particular word. Another MC might then interrupt and begin his or her verse working off of the last word or topic from the previous MC. This pattern can go on continuously, as long as there is an MC ready to step in and continue the cipher. One might ask, “How does each MC know when to step in or interrupt another MC's verse?” From personally observing and participating in numerous rap ciphers, I have come to understand that there is a kind of etiquette

present: one allows another MC to interrupt if she or he thinks of an idea or rhyme related to the previous MC's sentence. However, these interruptions usually do not happen very quickly in order to allow each individual MC to have his or her time freestyling in the spotlight. There can also be a pre-arranged understanding of when each MC should take his or her turn. For instance, the MCs may decide to have 8 bars each to rap over and then pass the hypothetical microphone to the next MC. A recent cipher which aired on BET, featuring Black Thought from the Legendary Roots Crew, Mos Def, Eminem, and DJ Premier, is one example demonstrating how a pre-written cipher functions ("Eminem, Mos Def and Black Thought-cypher": <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOmssZ9LBF8>).

The Battle

The freestyle battle has its origins in the African American oral tradition of signifying. Signifying is a ritual that can consist of two or more individuals insulting one another in an attempt to ruin the opponent's reputation: "These contests to see who can come up with the most clever and biting insults are fiercely competitive, since one's reputation in the community is at stake" (Pihel 253). These signifying rituals involve a lot of improvisation in order to quickly reply to an opponent's insults. With more experience, the exceptionally skilled signifiers develop many witty replies for a variety of contexts. There is also commonly a crowd present that will laugh at or criticize participants depending on how clever or predictable their insults are. Roger D. Abrahams, in *Deep Down in the Jungle*, provides a useful explanation of signifying:

Signifying seems to be a Negro term, in use if not in origin. It can mean any of a number of things; in the case of the toast about the signifying monkey, it certainly refers to the trickster's ability to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, needle, and lie. It can mean in other instances the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point. It can mean making fun of a person or a situation. Also it can denote speaking with the hands and eyes, and in this respect encompasses a whole complex of expressions and gestures. Thus it is signifying to stir up a fight between neighbors by telling stories; it is signifying to make fun of a policeman by parodying his motions behind his back; it is signifying to ask for a piece of cake by saying "my brother needs a piece of cake." (51)

The rap battle has strong parallels to certain aspects of signifying. Just as one goal of signifying is to ruin your opponent's reputation, the goal of the MC battle is to verbally rip apart your opponent and destroy his or her reputation. Freestyler Juice explains the objective of a rap battle: "It's to systematically destroy a cat's character, you know what I'm saying, and it's to do that with every line" (qtd. in Fitzgerald). There is also normally a crowd present during a rap battle that reacts to each MC's insults either positively or negatively with cheers, laughs, hoots, boos, or worst of all, silence! Crowd reaction usually determines who is the winner of a rap battle; however, there are sometimes judges who are responsible for making this decision, and although it is rare, judges may occasionally disagree with the crowd.

A traditional rap battle consists of two MCs who have three 1-minute rounds each to insult or "diss" their opponent through their raps; however, 2 on 2 rap battles also exist where MCs work together as teams. Depending on the type of rap battle, these raps can either be pre-written or freestyle. The battle is considered freestyle only if both MCs have nothing pre-

written about their opponents and improvise all their rhymes spontaneously. If an MC is caught rehearsing previously written material or “biting” (hip-hop jargon for stealing) another MC’s rhymes, they will lose both the battle and the respect of their fellow rappers.

Battles where MCs are expected to come prepared with previously written verses are an entirely different story. MCs may observe their upcoming opponent in previous battles and interviews, seeking material that could be used as an insult in the battle to come. Although these rap battles involve pre-written verses, it is common for improvisation to still be present. If one MC insults another during his verse, and the opposing MC is able to take that original insult and freestyle a clever response, he can score extra points with judges or achieve a greater crowd response. This concept is known as a “flip” or “flipping the script.” Flipping the script is often more prevalent during a freestyle battle, since the MCs have nothing else to work with but their vocabulary, as opposed to MCs in a pre-written battle who have entire verses memorized. An example of flipping the script can be seen during a pre-written battle between Toronto’s MC FeelGood and Nova Scotia’s MC Cronic, both involved in the Toronto rap battle league King Of The Dot. At the end of Cronic’s second verse, he states that “Who ever said you rhyme tight / they ain’t got their mind right / this bitch couldn’t shine bright standing in my lime light.” MC FeelGood then begins his second verse with a flip to Cronic’s diss: “I couldn’t shine in his limelight in this battle, cause the whole rooms covered by his shadow,” remarking about Cronic’s larger physical stature. At this point, the entire room bursts into cheers and hoots as they recognize a clever flip (“KOTD – Rap Battle – FeelGood vs Cronic”:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2hs45C3bao>).

Incorporating one’s surroundings into a rap can also legitimize one’s rhymes as freestyle and get the crowd more involved. For instance, in the legendary freestyle battle between MC Supernatural and MC Juice, Supernat walks over to a poster on the wall promoting Juice and rips it down in front of the crowd while simultaneously saying, “I could switchya / one time brother feel the mixture/ I’mma come over here and rip down this nigga’s picture” (qtd. in Fitzgerald). He then proceeds to rip the poster in half while saying, “Yo I’m slippin / Juice you ain’t shit / and your name I’m rippin,” followed by an uproar from the audience. MCs are also usually very animated and attempt to get the crowd involved during a freestyle battle, as presentation also plays a significant role. Before Supernatural even begins his verse during this battle, he starts stomping across the stage like a monster in an attempt to sway the crowd.

Improvisation in Breakdancing

A lot of dancers stay exactly the way they are, they’re not allowed to evolve or use something else. Breaking is just unique the way it’s all put together. It’s like the ultimate dance, because you could take from everywhere, but you just had to put b-boy flavour on whatever you took from. (Ken Swift, member of the legendary original “Rocksteady Crew,” qtd. in Lee)

Breakdancing involves much improvisation through the borrowing and manipulation of other dance forms, gymnastics, and moves from kung fu films. In Benson Lee’s spectacular documentary *Planet B-boy*, about a high profile breakdance battle that takes place annually in Germany, Ken Swift explains how when breakdancing was emerging, the rules of hip-hop were themselves being improvised: “See with hip hop, the rules were being made on the spot. We can call a move whatever we want to call it on the spot. For an individual that’s empowering, that’s something that. . . wow, you definitely wanna be a part of that.” Some of the first dance moves invented by breakers became known as “top rockin,” because they were done upright. Top rockin’s structure fuses numerous dance forms together, including up rocking, tap dance, lindy

hop, James Brown's "good foot," salsa, Afro-Cuban, and various African and Native American dances (Pabon 20). Soon enough, top rockers began to expand their repertoire to include dance moves on the ground. These ground moves became known as "footwork" or "floor rock" and also included "freezes," which involve freezing in one position by supporting yourself with your arms, forearms, and/or neck. An example of a "freeze" move is the "chair freeze," where "the dancer's hand, forearm, and elbow support the body while allowing free range movement with the legs and hips" (Pabon 21). These ground moves then led to dancers spinning on their backs, knees, hands, butts, and heads.

The common name for a breakdancer is a "b-boy" or "b-girl," short for beat boy or beat girl, and describes the way that breakers dance to a specific beat. Jorge Pabon, while describing the history of hip-hop dance, explains that "Dancing on beat is most important. Riding the rhythm makes the difference between dance and unstructured movement. The formula is simple: submission to the music, allowing it to guide and direct, equals dancing" (25). Pabon also explains how improvisation among b-boys and b-girls is far more prevalent in a breakdance cipher than during a staged performance:

In a cipher, the circular dance space forms naturally once the dancing begins, the dancers can direct their performance in various directions, uninhibited and free from all counts and cues. This freedom is the key to creativity since the dancer is constantly challenged with variation in music, and an undefined dance space, and potential opponents in the audience. (24)

Similar to the rap cipher, the breakdance cipher involves a large circle with breakers dancing in the middle, feeding off of each other's moves and energy. However, the breakdance cipher tends to involve more provocation than the rap cipher and usually develops a somewhat competitive environment as dancers attempt to upstage one another and impress the crowd with every new entrance into the cipher. In contrast,

What were once improvisational forms of expression with spontaneous vocabulary became choreography in a staged setting. A stage performance creates boundaries and can restrict the free-flowing process of improvisation. The dancers are challenged in a different way. Nailing cues and choreography become the objectives. (24)

It should be noted, however, that just like freestyle rapping, breakdancing involves skill, knowledge, and building blocks that come from years of dedicated practice. At the start of *Planet B-boy*, the first voice you hear is Ken Swift exclaiming that "I think the biggest misconception about breakdancers, or b-boys, with the people out here in the world, is that they're not dancing—that everything they're doing is just happening at the moment, and they don't know what they're doing—they're just doing it, they're just going crazy." I personally believe that part of this misconception derives from a general lack of understanding of hip-hop culture, a result of the impact of mainstream gangster rap on the general public. This misunderstanding leads people to conclude that anything involved with rap and hip-hop lacks talent and reflects mainstream rap's tendency to support the sexual subordination and commercial consumption of women. In reality, being a skilled b-boy or b-girl involves immense dedication and practice, a strong sense of rhythm, and a thorough knowledge of different dance styles and martial arts techniques.

The Breakdance Battle

A breakdance battle consists of two opposing breakdance crews testing one another's skills. Using mockery, trash talk, and upstaging, b-boys and b-girls try to establish that their crew contains the more talented, fearless, and radical breakers. Some battles can mimic an actual fight scene and have been described as having the intensity of a physical brawl (Lee).

Breakdancing draws many influences from different martial arts moves: it is very common to see breakdance moves that resemble Capoeira, introduced by African slaves in Brazil as a form of self-defense disguised as dance (Pabon 20). In "The Art of Battling," Joe Schloss argues that without the b-boy battle, breakdancing itself would not exist: "Every aspect of the dance was created for competition, and every move is judged according to its effectiveness as a weapon" (27).

Consider my interview with Toronto b-boy Nathan Zenberg, A.K.A. Zen, a skilled and accomplished breakdancer who represented Canada at a 2007 breakdance competition in Korea:

LR: How much improvisation is going on when you are involved in a heated competitive breakdance cipher?

NZ: There is a large amount of improvisation in my breaking. We call it freestyling. In a cipher, there is even more freestyling going on than when you are on stage or doing a show. The cipher is a breeding ground of creativity, the rawest expression of the b-boy. When I am breaking in a cipher, I am always freestyling: my moves come naturally from the music, but also seem to shape and form the music itself through my movements.

LR: Would you say improvisation is essential to be a very skilled b-boy? If so, what kind of improvisation makes you a better breakdancer?

NZ: Yes, I would say that freestyling is essential to being a good b-boy. Dance should be an expression of self, and I feel that this can only be done through the act of freestyle. There are certain b-boys who have an arsenal of planned sets at their disposal. They can do them at anytime, weave them together, and possibly add freestyle elements into the mix. There is a very thin line between freestyle and sets because sometimes if a b-boy flows his sets together with freestyled transitions doing intricate movements, it is hard to tell if he is freestyling or not. I always wonder how some of these b-boys can do the same sets over and over again at competitions throughout the years. It seems robotic and doesn't represent the creative art form that I think b-boying should be. Especially if it is not on beat!

Although some moves or routines may be previously discussed or even practiced among a breakdance crew before a battle, improvisation is always present, as each crew attempts to outshine any adversary who enters the cipher. The manager of the French b-boy crew Phase T, who finished third in the battle profiled in *Planet B-boy*, explains that different members of a breakdance crew have specific skills that must be utilized at particular moments: "A b-boy crew can be like a soccer team, where each player has a specific role. There's a dancer who is good with power moves. There's a dancer who focuses on style. If you see an offensive player coming, you need a strong defender to stop him. It's the same with dance" (qtd. in Lee). Having

personally witnessed many breakdance battles, I believe the analogy made here between a b-boy crew and a soccer team is a great illustration of how a crew strategizes during a battle. For instance, if a b-boy from one crew comes bursting into the cipher and begins spinning on his head, it is common to see the other crew send their best head spinner out next to add another element (perhaps holding onto his toes) as a way of upstaging the previous dancer.

Conclusion

Hip-hop culture and hip-hop music would not exist without the presence of improvisation. MCing and breakdancing illustrate how improvisation is crucial to becoming a gifted and respected hip-hop artist. The creation of hip-hop culture itself involved heavy use of improvised creativity, and as hip-hop culture spreads globally, improvisatory techniques will continue to evolve and change according to hip-hop's surroundings. Whether by participating in a freestyle rap cipher using the previous MC's lyrics as a starting point or feeding off of another dancer's ferocity during a heated breakdance battle, the use of improvisation is essential to producing and maintaining the high energy central to hip-hop.

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