Introduction

Formatting Race on Commercial Radio

In July 1992, Seattle rapper Sir Mix-a-Lot topped the *Billboard* "Hot 100" chart with his insatiably catchy hit "Baby Got Back." His ode to ladies who "look like those rap guys' girlfriends" wasn't anywhere near the only rap song that year to do well on the "Hot 100," which recorded the most popular songs in the United States as measured by record sales and radio airplay.[1] By the early 1990s, rap songs frequently and consistently appeared in the chart's upper reaches, indicating the genre's broad popularity. This was an extraordinary transformation: what began in the 1970s as just one element of a minority New York City subculture had become an essential part of the sound of popular music in the United States. And rap's move from the margins to the mainstream, according to Sir Mix-a-Lot, had the potential to reshape racial attitudes. Rap, he thought, had the unique ability to "foster cross-cultural appreciation" by encouraging white audiences to engage with Black culture.[2]

But US listeners tuning in to their local Top 40 radio station to hear the most popular new music might have missed this opportunity. Many Top 40 stations were playing the number one hit every few hours, giving it the airplay appropriate to such an achievement. And, indeed, these stations had contributed to the genre's growth since the late 1980s, when they began regularly adding rap songs to their playlists, thereby introducing rap to new listeners across the country. But there were still some holdouts against rap's radio ascendance: other Top 40 stations refused to play the genre even as they claimed to play all of the hits. Programmers at these stations were so opposed to playing rap that they pressured the nationally syndicated countdown shows to obscure its popularity when counting down the hits.[3] Listeners tuning in to *these* stations and countdowns had an entirely different idea of what music was topping the charts. For them, "Baby Got Back" wasn't on top—it had barely cracked the top twenty.

If you're confused, it's understandable. By 1992, rap was somehow both mainstream and marginal. It was an integral part of musical culture in the United States, selling millions of records, appearing on Top 40 radio playlists, and regularly topping *Billboard*'s charts. But many within the radio industry considered the genre tangential to the popular-music mainstream, and they worked to keep it on the periphery, denying listeners the opportunity to engage with it and denying rappers like Sir Mix-a-Lot the chance to change racial attitudes in the United States. To some, rap was another style of hit music; to others, not so much.

This book interrogates rap's place in the popular-music mainstream in the United States by examining how the commercial radio industry programmed the genre during the 1980s and early 1990s. Above all else, the industry's business model dictated the terms of rap's inclusion within the musical mainstream that Top 40 radio stations broadcast, as these stations negotiated the increasing popularity of the genre against advertisers' demands for more white adult listeners. Many in the radio and advertising industries understood rap to be antithetical to the type of music these profitable audiences wanted to hear. In a country coming to understand its multiculturalism, rap was a sonic symbol of Blackness and a touchstone for white anxiety about the diversification of the mainstream.[4]

Centering the voices of radio programmers fighting over whether to play rap, *How Hip Hop Became Hit Pop* explores how rap songs like "Baby Got Back" came to be played on radio stations aimed at mainstream audiences and argues that this exposure had profound consequences for the genre and the radio industry. Rap changed the radio industry; programmers found space for the genre only once they had reconfigured the industry's race-based organization to make space for multicultural audiences. But the radio industry also changed rap. Artists grappled with pressure to conform to programmers' musical preferences and struggled to maintain the genre's identity as those programmers took control of its mainstreaming. And all of this influenced the racial politics of rap and the cultural identity of the United States more broadly.[5]

Rap music is at the center of this narrative. But this history is really a story about money, about how the business model of the radio industry affected rap's relationship to the mainstream. And it's a story about race, about how the racial prejudice central to radio's business model influenced rap's mainstream potential. But most of all, it's about how these two stories are inseparable: rap's racial politics are inextricably intertwined with its role as a commodity. Offering a sobering account of rap music's history and its political potential, this narrative illuminates the consequences of mainstream exposure and makes clear the political, economic, and social costs of how rap became the most popular genre in the United States.[6]

MAKING RACE AUDIBLE IN THE MUSIC INDUSTRIES

While hip hop scholarship is a gloriously diverse field, most academic and critical work on rap music in the United States focuses on the direct path from musicians to consumers, exploring how artists make music that people engage with. This has resulted in vital and significant work that highlights the music's radical political potential by focusing on artists whose music voices the concerns of marginalized young people of color, whether they are superstars like Public Enemy, Queen Latifah, and Kendrick Lamar or underground voices competing at local cyphers and performing at open mic nights. These accounts present critical reminders of the music's subcultural resistance and associated politics, but often at the expense of acknowledging what could be considered the elephant in the disciplinary room: rap has become the most popular genre in the world, and global superstars including Blondie, New Kids on the Block, the Spice Girls, the Black Eyed Peas, Pitbull, and Ed Sheeran all engage with hip hop's aesthetics if not its more radical politics. This book takes the opposite approach, examining rap's move to the mainstream without highlighting its most politically vocal artists.[7]

The authors who do chronicle rap's growth into the most popular genre in the world typically examine this transition from an insider perspective. Documentaries like *Hip-Hop Evolution* and books such as *The Big Payback* and *Can't Stop Won't Stop* focus on those within the burgeoning rap music industry who advocated for the genre, including hip hop artists, mix-show DJs, rap record-company personnel, and journalists at rap-oriented periodicals such as *The Source*. These works, together with John Klaess's history of rap mix shows in New York City, tell compelling stories of how those devoted to hip hop culture fought for their music by challenging the racism and complacency of the music industries and forcing the mainstream to bend toward hip hop. But the history of rap is far more complicated than this heroic narrative reveals; regardless of how insiders understood the genre, rap music was (and still is) indelibly influenced by mainstream sensibilities as radio programmers and record-label personnel endeavored to sell the genre to an increasingly broad audience. And these industry members, many of whom knew little of the genre's political ambitions and musical nuances, framed it for listeners, often in ways that directly contradicted the aspirations of those insiders invested in hip hop culture.

To understand how rap became mainstream, it's necessary to look to those who construct the mainstream. This entails turning toward the spaces between creators and consumers, to see how the genre sifted through the various layers of the music industries and how its position within these industries influenced its racial politics.[8]

For most of the last century, the recording industry has been organized according to two intertwined principles: the assumption and subsequent demand that

Black and white artists make different styles of music, and the simplification that consumers and performers of a genre share similar racial, ethnic, or class identities. This organizational structure influences how music is produced, promoted, and consumed. Record companies separate music made by and for people whom they consider outside the mainstream into Black, Latin, country, or other departmental divisions, and these departments encourage artists to design their musical wares for what they consider to be the same sorts of nonmainstream audiences.[9] While this structuring is most often described using the language of genre, it is primarily about identity. "No other industry in America," reported the NAACP in 1987, "so openly classifies its operations on a racial basis."[10]

The organization of the music industries affects how music sounds its politics of race, how it can, in musicologist Loren Kajikawa's theorization, "make race audible."[11] In their work on racial identity in the United States, sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant write that racial categories are formed through "historically situated *projects* in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized," projects that become ways of making sense of people in the world through repetition and reproduction.[12] The record industry is one such racial project; its organization of musical activities produces and reproduces understandings of race.[13] While racial categories in the real world are far more complex than a simple Black/white binary, the music industries primarily operate along this axis of racial categorization, demonstrating what scholar Jennifer Lynn Stoever describes as the "deliberately reductionist racial project constructing white power and privilege against the alterity and abjection of the imagined polarity of 'blackness.'"[14] Even as artists' own work expresses their complex identities, the recording industry tidily boxes them into this reductive racialized framework to more efficiently sell their music.

Cultural intermediaries such as radio programmers, promoters, disk-jockey pool organizers, and record store owners also affect popular music's meaning.[15] As artists work, the eventual placement of their music by intermediaries on Spotify playlists, festival bills, and record-store shelves is taken into consideration. These intermediaries don't just put music into consumers' ears; they also influence its production and consumption. Creating additional layers of (mostly race-based) organizational frameworks for songs to navigate on their way to consumers, cultural intermediaries "reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines," contributing to the process of racial formation.[16]

The commercial radio industry in the United States introduces an additional wrinkle. To an average listener, a radio station is another intermediary, responsible for introducing music to the public. But a radio station is also a cultural producer, selling the attention of a specific audience (most often defined by race, gender, and age) to companies that place ads on the station.[17] Music, in this business model, is merely an "evocative and economical" tool that stations use to cultivate specific audiences.[18] Relying on understandings of musical taste that link musical

TABLE 1 Five most important radio formats in the 1980s

Format name	Intended audience	Music
Album-Oriented Rock (Rock, AOR)	White men over 18	New and older rock
Country	White listeners of a wide age range	New and older country
Adult Contemporary (AC)	White women, 24–39	Soft pop and rock, some oldies
Top 40 (Contemporary Hits Radio, CHR)	White listeners, 12–34	New pop or pop-adjacent music, the "Top 40"
Black-Oriented (Urban, Black, Urban Contemporary)	Black listeners over 16	R&B, soul, jazz, funk

consumption with sociocultural differentiation, radio programming uses musical taste as a proxy for demographic difference to create sellable audience segments out of the diverse US public.[19]

Since the 1970s, the radio industry has used the "programming weapon" of music to divide local audiences in similar ways across the country, creating a national organizational structure defined by formats.[20] The term *format* has two meanings: the industry's grouping together stations that play similar music to attract similar types of listeners and an individual station's programming, including music, advertising, and DJ patter.[21] During the 1980s, five music formats emerged as the most important to the radio and record industries, as shown in table 1.[22] These formats neatly aligned with record-company divisions and altered these companies' musical products; the radio industry exerted influence over the sound and popularity of musical genres because record companies—cognizant of radio's promotional role—paid close attention to what found space on playlists.[23] But formats are also bound by the economics of the radio industry, as the demographic preferences of companies advertising on the radio determine a format's viability. In the 1980s and 1990s, most of these companies targeted white adult audiences and, in particular, prized white women under the age of fifty, who they thought controlled household spending and were willing to experiment with new products. A format's advertising rate—and thus its profitability—depended on its playlist attracting advertiser-friendly adults, rather than the young audiences that were the primary consumers of records.[24]

By drawing a direct line from playlists to audiences, radio programming systematizes the ambiguous relationship between musical sound and people. In so doing, the radio industry participates in the construction of racial identity in the United States; it produces and reproduces correspondences between songs and racially defined audiences.[25] Prior to the development of the contemporary format structure, radio played an important role in the creation of what Stoever terms the "sonic color line," the expectation that certain racialized people produce certain

types of sounds.[26] In the first half of the twentieth century, nationally broadcast shows like *Amos 'n' Andy* and local shows alike helped produce a sonic Black/white binary, reinforcing white identity among assimilating European immigrants by rendering Blackness in opposition to this melting-pot white identity.[27]

But contemporary formatting more thoroughly connects identity to sound. Radio programmers—those who determine a station's playlist—act as both producers and pedagogues of identity, creating and teaching what Omi and Winant term racial "common sense" for understanding who listens to what.[28] Designed to deliver specific demographics, station playlists offer a window into racial attitudes, delineating whom the music and advertising industries deem certain styles of music to be for. And although the radio industry is often incapable of accurately measuring audiences' complex identities, playlists also articulate the intersection of race with other social identities such as gender, sexuality, and class.[29] Paying attention to the logic of radio programming thus lends insight into the relationship between musical style and audiences, illuminating how genres come to be understood as for some people and not for others. In rap's case, looking at its inclusion on radio playlists reveals the genre's transforming audience and its shifting relationship to the popular-music mainstream throughout the late 1980s and into the early 1990s.

DEFINING THE MAINSTREAM

While the more literal meaning of *mainstream* brings to mind the combination of disparate strands into a major tributary, the mainstream is not a natural representation of popularity or consensus. Rather, it is a profoundly ideological term, delineating which people, ideas, and behaviors fit within a historically contingent set of norms and which fall outside into more "marginal" categories.[30] Whether referring to political viewpoints or belief systems, media sources or artistic movements, the term is about belonging, about who and what has been deemed part of the ideological center. The media is a central actor in framing discourse about belonging, helping consumers make sense of what is part of mainstream behavior and what deviates from these norms.[31] The cultural mainstream of the United States throughout most of the twentieth century was white; within this mainstream, "the interests and values of white people [were] positioned as unmarked universals by which difference, deficit, truth, and justice [were] determined."[32] But the boundaries of all mainstreams are constantly in flux, as new ideas and movements push their way in and force those in power to adjust their conception of the ideological center.[33]

Within the realm of popular music, the ideology of the mainstream finds grounding in the music industries' business practices.[34] Recent academic work on the popular-music mainstream expands beyond the oppositional understanding prevalent within the cultural studies tradition, where the concept of

the mainstream gained salience in distinction from a subculture or a marginal genre. Scholars including Alison Huber and Jason Toynbee have lent shape to the concept of the popular-music mainstream, arguing that mainstreaming is a process rather than a fixed characteristic of a type of music.[35] The boundaries of the mainstream, Huber argues, indicate power relations within the music industries in ways that replicate systemic inequalities. She writes, "a musical mainstream consists of music that is culturally dominant because of practices that coalesce to produce that dominance; there is no inherently 'mainstream music.'"[36] But the music industries—those in the best position to produce cultural dominance—turn this process into a product, profiting from the construction of a center through the creation, marketing, and sale of particular styles.

As with other mainstreams, the media shapes the popular-music mainstream's contours. No segment of the music industries more conspicuously defines the boundaries of what counts as mainstream popular music than the commercial radio industry, which unceremoniously decides which artists have the correct demographic appeal to become superstars.[37] Radio formats throughout the twentieth century, scholar Eric Weisbard contends, have constructed multiple, overlapping mainstreams flowing alongside each other so that hits can cross over from one "rival mainstream" to another.[38] But in the 1980s and early 1990s, these rivalries were lopsided, as one mainstream carried the most weight within the music industries: the Top 40 format.[39] During these years, the Top 40 format was one of the clearest examples of the popular-music mainstream, dictating the terms of inclusion into this ideological center.[40]

Since its establishment in the 1950s, the Top 40 format has primarily played the music that is charting well on the *Billboard* "Hot 100" (in the twentieth century, the chart was calculated by combining reported airplay on Top 40 stations with sales figures).[41] As a chart measuring the most popular songs in the country, the "Hot 100" is made up of songs in a variety of genres, and the relative popularity of any one of these genres changes from month to month or year to year. The Top 40 format's dependence on the "Hot 100" has often led to stylistically heterogeneous playlists throughout its history: in the 1970s, it wouldn't have been surprising to hear Captain and Tennille's syrupy yacht-rock classic "Love Will Keep Us Together" alongside the perhaps rightfully uncommon occurrence of a piccolo melody in the disco anthem "The Hustle" by Van McCoy & the Soul City Symphony.[42]

But by the 1980s, this musical variety was mostly passé, as financial realities prompted Top 40 programmers to tighten their playlists to appeal beyond the format's longstanding teen base to white adult female listeners. Even as they claimed to play all the hits, Top 40 programmers in the 1980s centered their stations' playlists around the historically white genre of pop and carefully managed the inclusion of other genres.[43] Most Black artists had to find their way onto these playlists through a circuitous process known as *crossing over*, developing their act in their record company's Black division and proving themselves on Black-Oriented

stations before being considered by the Top 40 format.[44] In an attempt to adhere to the sound of pop music played on the Top 40 format, most artists hoping to cross over reduced other genre-specific stylistic characteristics.[45] Attuned to these crossover nuances, record-company employees and radio programmers routinely thought about songs in relation to format expectations, describing songs in ways that referenced their ability to fit within a format, such as "urbanish but not too urban."[46]

Defined by its intended consumption by particular listeners as well as its stylistic proximity to other music played on Top 40 stations, mainstream popular music in the 1980s and early 1990s resembled a genre. As a general concept, mainstream popular music doesn't necessarily suggest a specific sound or genre; rather, it is music aimed at a particular idea of what a mainstream audience is. But as Weisbard contends, radio formats since the 1970s have adopted the logic of genres (matching a "set of songs and a set of ideals") in place of the logic of formats (matching a playlist to an audience of people).[47] In her work on genre, philosopher Robin James reduces Weisbard's distinction between formats and genre to "formats categorize people; genres categorize music." But on the radio, music implies people and vice versa. The more that programmers buy into the connection between playlists and audiences—which they have done increasingly since the 1980s to pacify advertisers looking for more targeted audiences—the less difference there is between a format and a genre.[48] Indicating both a set of listeners and a set of musical expectations, Top 40 playlists in the 1980s and early 1990s were, like genres, "musico-discursive *process[es]*" that stabilized as listeners, programmers, and musicians created expectations for what the format should sound like.[49]

Top 40 radio's business model of playing music for a mostly white audience determined the popular-music mainstream's racial identity. Neither the Top 40 format nor the mainstream music it played were explicitly characterized as white.[50] The format has historically been a primary channel through which Black artists have been marketed toward white audiences, and today all of the music these stations play takes influence from Black American musical traditions regardless of a performer's racial identity. But whiteness is rarely so overtly stated; instead, it is apparent within the industry structure. Like the more general concept of the mainstream, the Top 40 format implied mass popularity and yet its playlists were bound by ideological constraints concerning the profitability of its audiences. By claiming that it played the top hits (regardless of whether it did), this format constructed consensus, turning the musical tastes of its mostly white audience into the sound of the popular-music mainstream.[51] In order to be played on Top 40 stations, Black artists needed to make music that Top 40's mostly white programmers would think had appeal among their mostly white audiences, indicating that many Top 40 programmers and record companies considered the mainstream potential of Black artists to be conditional.[52] The crossover process turns mainstream inclusion into what T. Carlis Roberts describes as "an arena of racial confrontation and

negotiation," where entry onto playlists indicates what sorts of Black identities and sounds are considered part of the popular-music mainstream.[53]

MAKING THE MAINSTREAM MULTICULTURAL

For rap to cross over into the popular-music mainstream, it had to convince white programmers of its multiracial appeal. Black artists performing in other genres throughout the 1980s were doing just that, prompting Top 40 programmers to expand the boundaries of the popular-music mainstream. At the dawn of the 1980s, Top 40 radio playlists were mostly white; concerned about disco's declining popularity and the moral panic regarding disco's non-white and nonheteronormative identity, programmers added fewer songs by non-white performers to their playlists.[54] But by the mid-1980s, their discriminatory programming practices had loosened to embrace Black superstars like Michael Jackson, Lionel Richie, and Whitney Houston, all of whom were pressured by their record labels to make crossover music aimed at wider (and whiter) audiences.[55] In 1985, *Billboard*'s Paul Grein reported that the year's charts featured an increased number of crossover artists: Prince and Billy Ocean both cracked the top ten in the year-end tallies for three different radio formats; Kool & the Gang appeared in the top twenty in four different formats; Stevie Wonder's "Part-Time Lover" reached number one on four different charts during the course of the year; and Sade appeared on year-end charts in five different formats.[56] A year later, Grein heralded what he saw as the "breakdown of the color line between pop and black radio," as six out of the top seven pop hits were by Black artists.[57] Further down the chart, almost a third of the top 100 pop singles that year were by Black musicians. White artists too participated in this crossover moment by appropriating Black musical styles in a "reverse crossover"; three of the top ten songs on the "Hot Black Singles" chart in 1986 featured white performers.

Many people working in the music industries praised the abundance of crossover music. Some commentators thought that the increased mainstream acceptance of Black artists might prompt record companies to more equitably distribute resources and compensate artists.[58] Critic Greg Tate, for example, hoped that what he called "the age of Radio Utopia" would push record companies to grant Black musicians more artistic latitude.[59] But for others, the diversification of radio playlists indicated changing racial attitudes: Benny Medina of Warner Bros. connected the increase in Black artists on Top 40 stations to an "intermingling of the races" outside the music business, and *Billboard* columnist David Nathan wrote that the popularity of crossover music was "reflective of important social developments [such as] the effects of integration in high schools."[60] Musical taste perhaps signified something more than sonic preference.

These interpretations of the diversification of the popular-music mainstream aligned with contemporary attention to the diversity of the United States' cultural

mainstream. Increased immigration from Asian and Latin American countries following the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 as well as the (slow and unequal) desegregation of public spaces in the post–civil rights era made the United States a more noticeably diverse place, and racial and ethnic diversity was to continue increasing.[61] Radically minded artists, activists, and educators throughout the 1960s and 1970s advocated for a new understanding of cultural affinity in the United States, one which cast aside the assimilationist impulses of the melting-pot ideal of monoculturalism and advocated for the redistribution of the nation's resources. Multiculturalism, as the movement came to be known, demanded recognition of the diverse ethnic and racial groups in the US and advocated for reinventing public school curricula, highlighting minority artists' work, and creating ethnic studies departments at colleges and universities.[62] But by the 1980s, what had once been associated with more radical politics was simply a new way of making sense of the United States' population.[63] The country was no longer a melting pot but instead—according to one market professional—a salad bowl, where all of the different "pieces comingle in one setting, juxtaposed yet distinct." Together, this multicultural medley could "yiel[d] complex, but harmonized flavors—each ingredient contributing its unique essence to the mix."[64]

This move toward a multicultural understanding of the cultural mainstream was visible in popular and consumer culture more broadly: on nationally broadcast network television shows starring non-white actors, at local community events celebrating a myriad of cultural traditions, and in stores selling tortillas and collard greens in one aisle and children's toys with a diverse range of skin tones in another.[65] As historian Lizabeth Cohen notes, the roles of citizen and consumer were linked in the United States throughout the twentieth century, meaning that the increased recognition of the diversity of the US population went hand in hand with selling to these various segments.[66] Many companies in the 1970s and 1980s began using marketing techniques targeted toward Black and Hispanic consumers that highlighted and recognized racial, ethnic, and cultural differences.[67] What the industry referred to as *multicultural marketing* understood race and ethnicity as foundational to how minorities consumed, and these practices incorporated more diverse actors and more targeted approaches. Dockers, for example, began casting Black and white models in its ads, and Avon started translating its lipstick commercials into Spanish.[68]

RAP'S DISTANCE FROM THE MAINSTREAM

As some non-white Americans were welcomed into marketplaces, enacting multicultural inclusion through consumption, others, including those involved in hip hop's creation, were systematically excluded from this possibility.[69] A devastating combination of racial segregation in housing, employer abandonment of major urban areas, and rampant workplace discrimination led to racialized poverty in urban areas in the post-war period, including in the South Bronx, where hip hop

was about to be born. The federal government further exacerbated these inequities by cutting entitlement programs aimed at helping these communities, meaning that those without the means to move out of cities—including the young people of color who began tagging, breaking, rapping, and DJing in the South Bronx—were left without jobs and social services in neighborhoods that had little hope of increased government investment.[70]

The South Bronx in the 1970s was about as far from the mainstream as one positioned within this ideological center could imagine. As the government demolished and failed to adequately rebuild the neighborhood, and as city officials abdicated their responsibility to local citizens through planned or unplanned shrinkage policies, the South Bronx became what critic Nelson George describes as "America's dark side," the national representation of urban decay in movies like *Fort Apache: The Bronx* and Tom Wolfe's novel *Bonfire of the Vanities*.[71] By the mid-1970s, many outside the neighborhood saw it as a "spectacular set of ruins, a mythical wasteland, an infectious disease," as Jeff Chang writes.[72] A 1981 *CBS News Sunday Morning* special report, for instance, described the neighborhood using a Kurt Vonnegut quote about World War II ruins in Dresden: "It was like the moon now, nothing but minerals."[73] And as politicians and pundits debated solutions, they called attention to perceived differences between upwardly mobile people who resided elsewhere and the people of color who lived in similar neighborhoods; for example, *Time* magazine cast economically disadvantaged people living in urban areas like the South Bronx as "the unreachables" in a 1977 story about this "group of people who are more intractable, more socially alien and more hostile than almost anyone had imagined."[74] Sociologist Herman Gray argues that the media particularly cast socioeconomically disadvantaged Black men outside of the multicultural normative public such that they acted as the "symbolic basis for fueling and sustaining panics about crime, the nuclear family, and middle-class security."[75] Reagan-era discourse shifted public perception of inequality to questions of personal responsibility, rendering young people of color such as those participating in hip hop culture as menaces to "law and order," framing typical of the times that disguised race-baiting as moral panic.[76]

When rap music expanded out of the South Bronx, it assumed many of these racialized outsider associations. Multiple studies have demonstrated that, as it was introduced to those outside of the New York area through print media, rap "was constructed such that [it] was aligned with, or homologous to, the social category of race" and was characterized as "the expression of an essential racial difference: an authentic expression of 'blackness' and particularly of urban underclass 'blackness.'"[77] This connection has, if anything, strengthened in the intervening years, such that the genre—regardless of an individual performer's racial identity—is inextricably linked to its Blackness.[78]

The music industries were hesitant to incorporate the genre into their diversifying mainstream. In part, this was due to its racial identity. While rap's audience and its creators were never exclusively Black—since the genre's beginnings,

rap songs have been produced and consumed by a racially and ethnically diverse public—the genre was created, marketed, and bought by people who understood rap to be the sound of urban Black teenage life.[79] Rap's racial identity influenced its placement within the segregated record industry; rappers were most often signed to small Black-music–focused record labels, and as major labels gained interest in rap they either directly signed rappers into their Black divisions or signed distribution deals rather than get involved with artist development and promotion.[80] Either way, this separated rap from the white mainstream divisions at record labels.[81]

But rap's perceived distance from the mainstream went further than the music industries' understanding of who the music was made by and for—after all, Top 40 stations regularly played Black artists. Rap music was developed in spaces outside of the typical purview of the profit-seeking music industries, its very essence crafted from the materials and creative possibilities of the South Bronx. The music industries didn't instantly recognize the potential of a genre consumed by economically disadvantaged Black and Latinx teens in community rooms and at block parties.[82] Hip hop's musical components repurposed old records in ways that seemed impossible for the record industry to profit from. Even its most famous early practitioners (including Lovebug Starski and Grandmaster Flash) were so convinced that what they were doing could not sell records that they initially turned down record contracts.[83]

Sonically, rap was also considered outside of the mainstream. Many journalists throughout the 1980s described the genre as breaking with preestablished ideas of what constituted music, characterizing it as lacking melody and instead emphasizing rhythm. It was, according to reporter Hugh Downs in an early *20/20* episode on the genre, "all beat and all talk."[84] Rap, wrote critic John Rockwell, "has its limits, in that it eschews the melodic element that has been essential to most popular music."[85] Others noted that rap sounded unwelcomely noisy: *Los Angeles Times* writer Robert Hilburn described it as "a jittery sonic assault," and Jon Pareles of the *New York Times* acknowledged that many people found rap confusing, like "rude, jumbled noise."[86] One letter to the editor of the *Los Angeles Times* made this quite clear, stating unequivocally, "The fact of the matter is quite simple, really. This is not music in any definition of the word. This is garbage, it's boring and insulting to anyone of any intelligence at all!"[87] Even other contemporary artists criticized the musicality of the genre, including Black artists like Chaka Khan, who featured rapper Melle Mel on her 1984 hit "I Feel for You." She'd previously been "creating masterpieces, mixing jazz and rock and funk." Adding rap was "really *the pits*. The lowest thing you can do from an artist's standpoint."[88]

For the radio programmers who created the popular-music mainstream, all of these characterizations of rap—regardless of their accuracy—were concerning. Programmers didn't think that rap had the same crossover potential as the other music by Black artists they played on their diversifying playlists because it represented a type of Blackness that wasn't marketable; the race, age, and socioeconomic

class of rap's audience was a hard sell to advertisers just beginning to incorporate multicultural marketing practices.[89] Some programmers expressed concern about the genre's "obscene language" and "negative stereotypes" that might cause "instant tune-out" from members of their audience—largely unsubstantiated complaints that likely masked unease about the race of the performers—continuing a long tradition of claiming fears about moral decay as an excuse to not program music by Black artists.[90] And as Top 40 programmers coalesced their sound around the genre of pop to pacify white adult female listeners, they complained about the sonic distance between rap and other music on their playlists. White programmer Neil McIntyre thought that rap records in the late 1980s sounded "less like music" and more "like Jack Kerouac poetry."[91] The genre was "very hard to program," reported another white programmer, because it didn't "sound like anything else and [was] difficult to line up next to a ballad, a [Top] 40 hit, even Van Halen."[92] And one Black Boston programmer said that rap's general emphasis on the rhythm rather than on the melody "was the first real substantial break in the music chain. It didn't really follow the link through blues to rock 'n' roll to R&B. Rap completely threw out the melody at first, and it jolted people."[93]

These individual opinions are hardly historically accurate descriptions of 1980s rap, but they informed how radio programmers thought about the genre.[94] Comments about the difficulty of programming rap and tips about what songs were easier to play appeared frequently in radio trade journals throughout the 1980s and beyond. The genre's mainstream trajectory would be dependent on changing programmers' minds; it would require convincing them that what they considered to be financially unviable Black noise was actually mainstream popular music.

So while this is story about rap music, it features an unusual cast. At the center of this story are not MCs, DJs, producers, or label owners, although these characters all play important roles. Instead, the real power over rap's inclusion in the mainstream was found in the back offices of commercial Top 40 radio stations, where programmers debated whether including rap's Black sound on their playlists would alienate listeners or, worse, the companies who paid for advertising spots on their stations. To make sense of rap's relationship to mainstream popular music in the United States during this period and beyond, it's necessary to acknowledge the economic constraints of that mainstream and to recognize how these financial realities informed radio stations' playlists.

SELLING HIP HOP AS HIT POP

In many ways this book tells the story of how it was possible for me—a white girl growing up without a TV in a mostly white town in a mostly white state—to find rap by turning on my radio. Growing up in Eugene, Oregon, I heard rap on my local Top 40 station, which in 1987 offered to give away tickets to a Beastie Boys show to anyone over 55 who would actually admit that they wanted to see

the group's frat-party antics.[95] By 1990, Eugene's Top 40 station was playing rap songs by MC Hammer and Snap! alongside poppier hits by Phil Collins and Taylor Dayne, like most other Top 40 stations in the country.[96] Rap was just like pop, another component of the mainstream this station broadcast.

The station's attitude toward rap didn't change as the '90s progressed. The most common musical question I was asked in the hallways of Roosevelt Middle School when I started 6th grade in 1997 was not whether I preferred Nas's or OutKast's recent second albums but whether I was more into Blackstreet or the Backstreet Boys. Despite the artists' similar names, the latest singles by these two groups had little in common. Blackstreet's "No Diggity" started with a rapped verse by gangsta-rap luminary Dr. Dre (who reportedly first offered the beat for the song to Tupac) and featured lyrics from the all-Black group about being infatuated with a sex worker. The only remotely sexual thing about the Backstreet Boys' bubblegum pop concoction "Quit Playing Games (With My Heart)" was that the white group members took their shirts off in the rain-soaked music video, which discouraged MTV from playing it.[97] These groups ostensibly operated in two different genres: one was the latest creation of new jack swing innovator, producer, and singer Teddy Riley; the other was a Max Martin–produced pop boy-band sensation on their way to selling twelve million copies of their record. But they were comparable in our small world, because our Top 40 station KDUK played both during the bus ride to school. Hearing these groups on the same station taught me that they were intended for the same audience: rap, at least in the form of Blackstreet, was part of hit pop.

As middle school turned to high school, I continued to hear rap and pop nestled together on KDUK's top ten countdown. Listening to KDUK taught me to love Lil Jon & the East Side Boyz and Snoop Dogg just as it taught me to love Kelly Clarkson and Ashlee Simpson, erasing any distinctions between these artists as the station seamlessly transitioned from one to another. Hearing rap on KDUK didn't teach me anything about the genre; in fact, the station ignored rap's racial politics as it smoothly segued between hits. And if I've learned anything from writing this book, it's that my experience was in no way unique, that millions of others in the United States likely found rap through pop. Rap wasn't sold to us as the political expression of marginalized Black Americans but instead as the sound of belonging to a hip, commodified, young America.

Focusing on Top 40 stations like KDUK and their role in making rap mainstream highlights a form of media overlooked in hip hop scholarship. Influenced by artists' denunciations of radio stations refusing to play rap, scholars and journalists have often given MTV credit for launching rap into the mainstream, as its show *Yo! MTV Raps* introduced the genre to white suburban male audiences in the United States during the late 1980s.[98] While the show was a remarkable success, it did not by itself make rap mainstream. Instead, it relegated rap to a specialty show on a specialty subscription channel that was aimed primarily at white suburban

men in their late teens and early twenties.[99] Even as they broadcast the show, the channel's programming staff considered much of the rap they played on *Yo! MTV Raps* unfit for inclusion on their regular playlists, and limited the show to, at most, fourteen hours a week.[100] But over on Top 40 stations, it was possible to hear rap broadcast for free at all times of day, whether it was Technotronic on the drive home from school, Young MC on a Saturday morning, or Salt-N-Pepa during the evening hours.

Tuning in to how commercial radio stations contributed to rap's growth during this era focuses on how the genre became popular with listeners beyond its assumed core audience of young men of color and MTV's core audience of young white men. In particular, it highlights the critical role female and Latinx listeners played in making rap mainstream. While few of the main characters in this narrative are female or Latinx—most of them are white men—this story is about catering to female and Latinx musical tastes, or at least what the white men programming radio stations thought these tastes were. Histories of rap typically disregard or simply overlook the tastes of these audiences; indeed, Black masculinity is characterized as such an essential part of rap's identity that scholars and journalists alike have bestowed canonical status upon a group like Public Enemy, whose "formula," according to group member Chuck D, was to make "records that girls hated."[101] But in order for rap to become mainstream, artists had to make music that appealed beyond Chuck D's intended audience.

In telling the story of how rap came to be heard on a white-oriented Top 40 radio station in Eugene, Oregon, this book highlights yet another instance of what Jason Tanz has described as "white people entertaining themselves with, and identifying with, expressions of black people's struggles and triumphs."[102] I draw attention to this ceaselessly repeating American cultural tradition not to diminish the genre's Black identity, nor to discount the potential of its racial politics, but rather to offer an honest portrayal of how rap's politics of race were sold. Rap can be revolutionary: by acting as a megaphone for marginalized artists to articulate their inimitable identities, it does the sociocultural work that Black popular music in the United States at its best accomplishes.[103] But like all other popular music genres, it does all this while selling records, subsidizing the extractive music industries that were built on the unpaid labor of colonized people worldwide and Black musicians in the United States.[104] While the mainstreaming of rap has put money into the hands of Black musicians and businesspeople, Greg Tate notes that it has failed to change the material realities of most Black Americans and has not "fully dismantled the prevalent, delimiting mythologies about Black intelligence, morality, and hierarchical place in America."[105]

Attending to this perspective does not negate rap's radical potential but rather allows for a more honest and sympathetic appraisal of the genre. For even as rap music voices resistance, as historian Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar writes, it can also "affir[m] the racial status quo."[106] Pointing out how rap was forced to accommodate the

rampant anti-Blackness embedded within the commercial radio industry's business model holds the music industries accountable for their racism and gives us an opportunity to more clearly comprehend the considerable pressure put on artists. Not overselling musicians' power to operate outside of the constraints of capitalism and what journalist Norman Kelley deems the music industries' "structure of stealing" requires us to more kindly evaluate the work that artists do.[107] And in tackling the forces of capitalism head-on, this book helps clarify how the popular-music mainstream came to incorporate rap's Black aesthetics without making space for the Black people associated with the genre, and how the genre became the most popular one in the world without enacting substantive change toward making that world more equitable. For all the important work popular music does in our contemporary world, it's still just another way for companies to profit.

METHODS

The story told in the following pages comes from archival research based mostly in radio trade journals, including *Billboard*, *Radio & Records*, the *Gavin Report*, *Black Radio Exclusive*, and *Jack the Rapper*. Playlists, charts, editorials, commentary, and programmer interviews found in the pages of these trade journals, as media scholar Kim Simpson demonstrates, "provide a useful opportunity to map out one angle, at least, of the rather messy business of cultural change."[108] But these sources are biased. Playlist reporting in the pre-SoundScan era was incorrect, due to record companies regularly paying programmers to list a song on their playlist regardless of actual airplay, a notorious practice known as *payola*. Incorrect reporting coupled with radio trade journals' opaque chart-compiling methods meant that their charts often failed to accurately depict the popularity of a given song. Programmer interviews, editorials, and commentary are also biased. Some programmers, influenced by payola, lied about what they were playing and why; editorials offer a narrow account rather than registering general attitudes; and plenty of commentary is based on the faulty information found in published playlists and charts. And programmers were rarely experts on the genres they played, meaning that their statements about audience tastes and the music they broadcast must be understood within the context of their stations' financial imperatives.

These notes on the inaccuracy of trade journals, ironically, highlight the utility of these primary sources. Even if they didn't always accurately represent what was happening in radio-station offices, they set industry expectations, impacted how programmers did their jobs, and articulated ways of understanding the complexity of the United States' radio audience. It isn't just that, as scholars Anthony Kwame Harrison and Craig E. Arthur argue, trade journals provide *researchers* with a vital source of information; rather, they provide that same information to other programmers figuring out how to engage with contemporary music.[109] Trade journals record and reinforce a way of thinking about what is happening on the

radio, creating a basis for industry discourse and influencing programming decisions, despite their prejudiced perspectives and general unreliability.[110]

To provide a large-scale quantitative sense of how radio playlists shifted to incorporate rap during the period in question, a remarkable team of undergraduate research assistants and I categorized the songs listed on several *Billboard* charts according to general stylistic parameters; our results can be found throughout the book. These song categorizations are simplistic at best; because rap is a diverse musical genre, and because radio programmers in the 1980s and early 1990s often didn't know much about it, accurately measuring the increase in the number of songs that programmers would have classified as rap is an impossible task. As a historically informed simplification of this task, we analyzed songs for the inclusion of rapped vocals, defined as more than a second of rhymed, mostly nonrepeating spoken vocals aligned with the beat of the song.[111] Throughout I refer to songs fulfilling these criteria as "songs with rapped vocals" rather than "rap songs" to indicate the overly capacious definition of rap used by radio programmers and music-industry publications, which typically described songs with these sorts of vocals as rap or rap-adjacent.

Beyond this, we categorized styles according to how the songs would likely have been classified by the overlapping, racially-defined organizational frameworks of the radio and recording industries: ballads, for slow-tempo songs; rock, for up-tempo songs sung or performed by white performers that prominently featured electric guitars; freestyle, for songs in the genre defined by upbeat, electronic, bubbly dance beats and for songs by groups associated with the freestyle club scene; R&B, for up-tempo songs sung or performed by Black performers; country, for songs that had clear crossover trajectories from Country stations; and pop for everything else. Songs of course fell between categories or into more than one, but in an attempt to mimic the sorts of programming categories that radio stations used we prioritized membership into these categories in the order listed here, as that most closely represents how Top 40 programmers described the composition of their playlists during this period.

WHAT'S TO COME

Chapter 1 opens with a comment typically attributed to legendary Black programmer Frankie Crocker, that rap was "too Black" to be played on his Black-Oriented New York radio station. Rap's racial identity proved to be a problem for rappers hoping to be played on commercial radio stations, but this was not the only reason they had trouble attaining that airplay in the early 1980s. This chapter begins by narrating a short critical history of the Black-Oriented radio format and analyzing how pressure from advertisers for radio stations to deliver wealthier demographics limited rap's airtime on these stations. It then turns to the record industry, evaluating how race-based expectations for Black musicians and biases against

Black audiences influenced rap's potential during its first half-decade on record. Together, these industry pressures made rap a rarity on Black-Oriented stations in the first half of the 1980s. Until a substantial shift occurred in the structure of the radio industry, their reluctance to play the genre kept rap from crossing over to other formats.

Chapters 2 and 3 explore the two sides of hip hop becoming hit pop. Chapter 2 highlights a structural change in the radio industry, one that upended the usual pathway through which music by Black artists made its way to the mainstream. This story begins in Los Angeles in 1986, when white programmer Jeff Wyatt began working at Power 106, a station that would inspire the radio industry to reconfigure its approach to programming for diverse audiences. Making waves in the radio industry by refusing to have his station pigeonholed into the segregated structure of contemporary radio formats, Wyatt programmed up-tempo music for a coalition of white, Black, and Hispanic listeners. This station, and the others that were developed in urban areas across the nation in the wake of its success, challenged conventional radio formatting. Coalescing into the format known during the late 1980s as Crossover, these stations intentionally targeted a multicultural public, playing styles of music that appealed across racial lines. This included songs with rapped vocals, which Crossover programmers noted had equal appeal across their diverse audience.

The Crossover format was the first in the commercial radio industry to regularly play a substantial amount of rap. But the racial politics of these stations were complex, as they decentered individual minority groups' interests in the name of color-blindness and inclusion. While Crossover stations embraced the sounds of young people of color, this format failed to disrupt the pervasive structural racism of the radio and recording industries; after all, the business model of Crossover stations depended upon its very existence. As Crossover stations made space for rap on the radio, they wrested control of rap out of the hands of Black-Oriented stations and became the new gatekeepers of its Black sounds.

The flourishing Crossover format, and the rap hits it played, did not go unnoticed at Top 40 stations across the country, which swiftly followed its lead and started playing rap as well. By the early 1990s, listeners across the country—not just in New York and Los Angeles, but in Topeka, Missoula, and yes, Eugene—heard rap as part of the everyday sound of Top 40 stations. Chapter 3 tunes in to the rap songs that these stations played, reconstructing how once-hesitant programmers introduced rap to their audiences. For rap to be played on Top 40 stations, it needed to demonstrate its appeal to the format's most desired demographic: white women over the age of twenty-five. Top 40 programmers in the mid-1980s worried that rap was too noisy and unmelodic to appeal to this demographic, to whom they were feeding a steady diet of Whitney Houston's melismatic vocals and the rich, synthesized chordal textures of Madonna's anthemic dance numbers. But within a few years, Top 40 programmers, influenced by Crossover stations, began

playing rap songs that shortened the sonic distance between rap and pop by fore-grounding melodies and conforming to preestablished pop styles such as ballads. By the beginning of the new decade, rap was all over Top 40 radio; songs with rapped vocals by artists like LL Cool J, MC Hammer, Young MC, Technotronic, and Vanilla Ice made up about a quarter of Top 40 playlists. The popularity of rap on the radio had substantial consequences for the genre, and I end this chapter by considering how rap's mainstreaming affected its politics of race.

As rap's Black sound became a central component of the Top 40 format—as it became part of the popular-music mainstream—the mainstream shifted in reaction to its inclusion. Chapter 4 analyzes the development of two rap-free Top 40 subformats at the turn of the decade. The first of these subformats, aimed at rock fans, barely lasted a year. The second, a still-existent format called Adult Top 40, offered older audiences the chance to rewind to the days before rap was popular and before Crossover stations incorporated the musical tastes of a multicultural public in the mainstream. Influenced by research firms whose consultants' models showed a US public irreconcilably divided over rap's appeal, programmers of both subformats resegregated the nation's airwaves, redrawing the boundaries of the mainstream to exclude rap and articulating a distinct shift in racial attitudes. As stations within the Top 40 format divided the US public into insular segments defined by their attitudes toward rap music and its multicultural audience, the ideological mainstream of the format crumbled.

To conclude, I turn to the present. More than forty years after its debut on record, rap has grown into the most popular genre in the United States, if not the world. Radio, on the other hand, has significantly decreased in popularity, as many listeners have switched to on-demand streaming services to curate their music. And yet, these streaming services rely on a similar business model to that of commercial radio: both use music to define listeners that they sell to advertisers. The book concludes by expanding its central ideas into the contemporary moment, interrogating how the way popular music is sold influences the social and cultural work that this music can do.