

## Hip Hop Becomes Hit Pop

The video says it all: rap's crossover potential could not be contained. On one side of a wall are a couple of white rock legends from the band Aerosmith on stage performing their 1975 hit "Walk This Way"; on the other side are young Black rappers Run-D.M.C. in the studio recording their 1986 cover of the song. But the separation just can't last. First, Aerosmith's Steven Tyler bashes a hole through the wall to provide some chorus vocals; eventually, the rappers climb through the hole to introduce rap to Aerosmith's white audience. The video ends with Run-D.M.C.'s name in lights descending from the rafters while Tyler and the rap group perform a synchronized dance over the wails of Joe Perry's guitar solo.

This song has often been mythologized as the key to unlocking rap's crossover. Like its video, the song gestures to a multiracial audience by mixing rap with the white-coded genre of rock, employing the widely used crossover technique of combining two styles to appeal to a larger audience.<sup>1</sup> Run-D.M.C. had tried this on a prior single, "Rock Box," but it hadn't ensured crossover success. The group wasn't entirely comfortable with the genre mix and asked the label to make an alternate version of the song because they "didn't want the guitar version playing in the hood."<sup>2</sup> "Walk This Way," however, had two additional advantages: Aerosmith's (albeit fading) star power, and the song's structure. A mostly faithful cover of the original, the Run-D.M.C. version uses pop's most ubiquitous musical form: verse-chorus alternation. These two elements eased the song's crossover; producer Rick Rubin noted that the song "showed people that rap was 'music'" by giving them a "familiar reference."<sup>3</sup> By equating rap with, or substituting rap into, rock's typical role as the music of youth rebellion, Run-D.M.C. repackaged it as something white audiences could understand and "encouraged listeners to hear breakbeats as capturing the same defiant, youthful, and care-free attitude that electric guitars had long symbolized."<sup>4</sup> For all of these reasons, "Walk This Way" has often been credited with crossing rap into the mainstream; it is a song considered so significant, so monumental,

that critic Geoff Edgers claimed without a trace of irony that it “would change not just music but society itself.”<sup>5</sup>

Here’s the problem. While this version of rap’s history helps rationalize Run-D.M.C.’s astounding record sales, it doesn’t explain how rap became part of the mainstream in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Yes, the five years following the release of “Walk This Way” were the same years during which rap crossed over onto Top 40 radio stations. But very little of this rap sounded anything like Run-D.M.C.’s song.<sup>6</sup> While the group’s genre-mixing model pointed a way forward for rap to be played on Top 40 stations, it needed some sonic and demographic refinement. Rap’s crossover on the radio would come from a different source: rather than taking influence from rock, rap turned toward pop.

As the Crossover format grew in popularity in the late 1980s, mostly in urban areas, programmers at Top 40 stations all over the country took notice and began adding many of the rap songs Crossover stations made popular onto their playlists. By the end of the decade, songs with rapped vocals made up about a quarter of Top 40 playlists, and pop artists were incorporating rap’s sonic vocabulary into their music. As alluded to in the last chapter, the Crossover format’s influence on Top 40 stations transformed rap from an underground musical genre heard only on regional late-night mix shows to something heard on almost every Top 40 station in the country. Playing rap on these stations made rap mainstream.

The Top 40 format’s distinct financial pressures informed how these stations programmed rap, considerations that had lasting consequences for the genre’s style, identity, and racial politics. While Crossover stations programmed rap because it appealed widely across a young multicultural audience, Top 40 stations, especially those in less diverse areas, had a unique demographic puzzle to solve. They had to consider the tastes of a different coalition audience: white women (the demographic advertisers prized) and younger listeners. Top 40 programmers needed to balance young listeners’ interest in rap with station concerns that rap was too noisy, offensive, and unmelodic to appeal to white women. They found a solution in pop-influenced rap songs made by artists who made a slight adjustment to the crossover technique Run-D.M.C. used, combining genre-specific sounds to shorten the sonic distance between rap and Top 40’s typical pop. By the new decade, this style of rap was all over the airwaves, from artists as legendary as LL Cool J and Salt-N-Pepa to those as commercially craven as Vanilla Ice and the Party.

Many rappers, however, weren’t interested in making it onto these stations’ playlists. Rap’s crossover into the mainstream prompted some to create and enforce a dichotomy between pop-influenced rap and authentic rap, as well as between pop-influenced rappers and authentic creators of hip hop culture. In distinguishing between the real and the fake, rappers and critics defined authenticity against the sound of rap on Top 40 radio and against the format’s audience.

## TOP 40'S AGE-DIVERSE AUDIENCE

While the Top 40 format is defined by playing current hits, its playlists—like all commercial radio playlists—are delimited by economic constraints.<sup>7</sup> In the 1980s and early 1990s, one of the format's long-standing financial problems was how to monetize its age-diverse audience, because younger listeners were rarely of interest to companies that advertised on the radio.<sup>8</sup> Station management, who needed to generate advertiser-friendly audiences, often pressured programmers to deliver older demographics; programmers, who thought that teen listeners were important for the vitality of the format, worked diligently to balance the tastes of both age groups.<sup>9</sup>

In the 1980s, Top 40 stations were often conceptualized as stations for white teens and tweens, and white women in their twenties and thirties—young listeners gave the stations hipness and energy, and “moms” paid the bills.<sup>10</sup> And more often than not, the stations' playlists prioritized the tastes of listeners footing the bills. This was a recent change; according to *Billboard* chart editor Michael Ellis, Top 40 stations in the 1960s played all of the contemporary hits. This shifted during the 1980s to the point that the format “target[ed] an audience (usually 18–34-year-old females) and only [sought] to satisfy that group.”<sup>11</sup> The mostly male programmers at these stations worked to make sense of their listeners' perspectives: to better understand the station's prototypical listener “Katie,” Pittsburgh station WMXP, for example, developed a fake budget and spending habits for her; another programming consultant stayed familiar with his target audience by watching TV and reading magazines that he imagined “Darlene” might like.<sup>12</sup> Minority audiences were tolerated but rarely catered to; similarly, male listeners weren't sought after.<sup>13</sup>

The format's target audience aligned with a more common perception about the feminization of Top 40 stations and the pop music they played. At the most general level, mass culture is often conceptualized as feminine in opposition to serious, rational high culture.<sup>14</sup> But pop music—the bread and butter of Top 40 playlists—is further relegated to the purview of feminized white audiences. Scholar Diane Railton argues that “rock culture” in the late 1960s and early 1970s intentionally distanced itself from the youth-oriented pop music of the early 1960s “by masculinising itself, and by introducing a particular way of enjoying music that eschewed the feminine, emotional and physical response of early 1960s pop fans in favour of cool, laid-back and thoughtful appreciation of the music.”<sup>15</sup> As rock culture distilled throughout the 1970s into Album-Oriented Rock stations, its new format distanced itself from the hit parade played on Top 40 radio and those stations' younger audiences, whose tastes were rendered feminine in opposition to the tastes of older teens who had graduated onto what were considered more masculine genres.<sup>16</sup>

To appeal to these feminized audiences, Top 40 stations in the 1980s played pop music and well-produced songs of other genres that didn't sound too much

like they belonged on another format. These stations tried to find a Goldilocks middle ground between the soft-pop hits that programmers agreed white women liked and what consultant George Burns considered more masculine music: “grittier, harder-sounding music” that programmers thought might be better suited for other formats.<sup>17</sup> What exactly constituted hardness depended on genre norms—another consultant considered markers of hardness to be “rock, twang, rap, etc., depending on format”—as well as promotion—Burns claimed that “asking for album cuts” was also “a very male thing.”<sup>18</sup> On the other side of the spectrum, programmers were careful not to play too much soft music lest they sound too similar to an Adult Contemporary station. A ballad with some sort of catchy beat was ideal, as this type of song captured the upbeat nature of hit radio. Sacramento programmer Chris Collins, for example, liked Freddie Jackson’s “Have You Ever Loved Somebody,” claiming that “this record is the epitome” of what he played on his station aimed at women over eighteen because “it’s not too hard, not too soft. It’s a bouncy ballad with a very fine production—just a perfect record for us.”<sup>19</sup> Also considered to be good bets with Top 40’s adult listeners were songs that reworked older styles, such as the Beach Boys’ “California Dreamin’” and the Mary Jane Girls’ remake of “Walk like a Man” by the Four Seasons; songs with extramusical associations; and songs by good-looking men such as “handsome soap star” Jack Wagner’s “Too Young,” which *Billboard* reported was “doing particularly well with the ladies” on one Boston station in 1985.<sup>20</sup> While these purported connections between audience and musical style were, of course, oversimplified, they were an essential part of how programmers made their livings.

Top 40 programmers also carefully considered the racial identities of the musicians they played. In the mid-1980s, the format played many contemporary songs by Black musicians that were popular on Black-Oriented stations but balanced its mix to limit these crossover songs. Stations tried to avoid playing too many songs by Black artists—lest they be confused with Crossover or Urban stations—or playing songs that sounded “too Black,” as they worried these would not appeal to their white audience members. Playing too much of either had financial ramifications, as advertising rates within the industry were tied to audience demographics. These assessments were, of course, fluid: the amount of crossover music by Black artists that Top 40 stations played increased substantially throughout the 1980s, and programmers’ assessment of whether a song was “too Black” was both malleable and culturally contingent.<sup>21</sup>

Together, these programming philosophies led Top 40 programmers to tread a cautious middle ground between the pop hits they thought white women liked and crossover music from other formats. Most of these programmers in the mid-1980s didn’t consider rap songs to be viable additions to their playlists; the genre—at least according to programmers’ sense of white women’s musical preferences—was too hard, too Black, and had little chance of appealing to

adults. If a rap song were to be included in the Top 40 mix, it would need the balanced, Goldilocks sound that programmers believed white women would like. Were this to happen, nothing would be able to stop the genre: airplay on Top 40 stations, which simultaneously play and manufacture the hits, turns niche into mainstream and upstarts into stars.

#### LADIES LOVE COOL RAP

In 1987, Top 40 programmers noticed that Crossover stations had started playing a rap song that adhered quite closely to the sound of their format, something similar to the stated ideal of “a bouncy ballad with a very fine production” that was “not too hard, not too soft.” The song, “I Need Love,” from LL Cool J’s second studio album *Bigger and Deffer*, was a stylistic descendant of Whodini’s “Friends,” mixing together rapped vocals with ballad instrumentals.<sup>22</sup> In the song, LL Cool J—short for Ladies Love Cool James—raps slowly with careful enunciation on top of a supple melodic accompaniment played on the Yamaha DX7, the synthesizer of choice for 1980s pop ballads by Whitney Houston, Chicago, and Phil Collins, among others. A clear bell-tone melody rings out above sustained chords as LL Cool J waxes about his need for a woman he can treat like a goddess, and another distinct synthesizer melody appears between his rapped verses. With harmonies that gesture to a Top 40 sound by mimicking the four-measure phrase length of a conventional pop song, along with melodies played on a recognizable pop synthesizer, “I Need Love” combines rapping with the musical language of pop.

This style is rarely replicated elsewhere on the album. Most of the other songs have loud, sharply accented drum-machine beats with an occasional melody or bass line repeated in short segments.<sup>23</sup> But this “stark as a moonscape” style of rap, in the words of one music critic, hadn’t succeeded in getting LL Cool J onto *Billboard*’s “Hot 100” in the past.<sup>24</sup> Many radio stations had treated his similarly “percussive, minimalist-style” 1985 album *Radio* “with trepidation.”<sup>25</sup> But the bass drum and snare on “I Need Love” are quieter and higher in pitch than on the record’s other tracks, toning down the “rhythm that’ll rock the walls” that LL Cool J promises on the third track of the album.<sup>26</sup>

“I Need Love” gestures toward a different demographic than LL Cool J’s other songs. Trying to prove the accuracy of his full name, LL Cool J shows his softer side in this track by combining rap with a ballad rather than combining rap with hard rock as Run-D.M.C. had. Rap and hard rock were both genres primarily listened to by teens and young adults; their combination was intended for the same age demographic.<sup>27</sup> Ballads, on the other hand, appealed to a broader age range, including radio’s coveted adult-female listeners, and had historically proved to be successful crossover vehicles. One indication of how well LL Cool J’s new targeting worked could be seen on his 1987 tour, when the young men in the audience were noticeably “put off” by “I Need Love.”<sup>28</sup> LL Cool J, however, celebrated his wide

appeal, claiming that rap was “no longer a minority music; it’s a majority music now.”<sup>29</sup>

By combining the edgy sounds of rap—popular with young demographics—with the supple sounds of a pop ballad—a style that programmers believed appealed to women—melodic rap songs like “I Need Love” created what one programmer described as a “more sophisticated” version of rap that proved popular on Top 40, Crossover, and Urban formats.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Top 40 programmers found LL Cool J’s song so compelling that they began playing it before his record label Def Jam released it as a single, likely because they found that it appealed to their adult listeners.<sup>31</sup> The general manager of a Jackson, Mississippi station described it as one of a few rap songs that “adults will enjoy—or tolerate—for a short time.”<sup>32</sup> Noting that the song had “more than a teen appeal,” one Black-Oriented programmer predicted that it would “generate lots of adult interest.”<sup>33</sup> Steve Crumbley of Norfolk, Virginia’s Urban station verified this claim, reporting that this was the first rap song that his adult listeners actually requested.<sup>34</sup> Adult ladies, it seemed, loved this style of Cool James, and the song reached number 13 on *Billboard*’s “Hot 100 Airplay” chart.

Following this single, Def Jam continued promoting LL Cool J’s music to a crossover audience. His next album featured no fewer than three ballads, and another single from the album, “I’m That Type of Guy,” was advertised to radio programmers as a crossover single; in one ad, a Phoenix programmer described the song as “clean family fun for all ages.”<sup>35</sup> And LL Cool J himself bragged that his “records [were] universal,” that his music wasn’t “only for the black kids.”<sup>36</sup>

But like the male audience members put off by the female-friendly crossover moves of “I Need Love,” many of LL Cool J’s original fans rejected his mainstream leanings. In 1989, Dante Ross, the rap A&R person at Elektra, claimed that while LL Cool J “means something to young girls and a younger audience,” he didn’t “mean anything to the hardcore audience anymore,” largely *because* he released “I Need Love.”<sup>37</sup> At least according to Ross, rap’s “hardcore audience” did not include young fans and, especially, young female fans, an exception that will be discussed later in this chapter. But LL Cool J’s reputation problems likely exceeded his association with female audiences; that same year, at a rally protesting the murder of Black teenager Yusef Hawkins by a mob of white teenagers in New York City, the mostly Black crowd booed LL Cool J as he went on stage, indicating a disconnect between the immediate concerns of the audience and their impression of his political and cultural commitments. As he put it, “That crowd wanted me to be on the pro-black, red-black-and-green kick.” While some may have considered his crossover techniques a concession to white industry norms, for LL Cool J the demand to perform a specific type of Black identity was also a concession. “I wasn’t prepared to compromise myself,” he said. “I love my culture—I love being black—but it’s not something I want to talk about all day.”<sup>38</sup>

### “NOTHING BUT A POP TUNE”

In 1989, a strikingly handsome duo from Germany promoted their unique brand of female-oriented rap to radio stations across the United States with their single “Girl You Know It’s True.” Much like “I Need Love,” this song combined the sounds of rap with those of pop, resulting in a style that Top 40 audiences across the nation embraced. “Girl You Know It’s True” was the up-tempo version of LL Cool J’s pop-rap mixture; in the verses, easy-to-understand raps lay atop boppy synthesizer melodies that would be at home on a Taylor Dayne or Whitney Houston single. The choruses, which were backed by the “Ashley’s Roachclip” breakbeat recently used in Eric B. & Rakim’s “Paid in Full,” improved on LL Cool J’s crossover formula in one important way: they featured singing so catchy that critic Tom Breihan likened the song to “the daffy energy of prime Duran Duran” in a retrospective.<sup>39</sup>

This song’s combination of traditional pop elements—such as sung vocals over synthesizer-driven, multi-measure chord progressions—with rap’s rhymes, chopped vocal samples, and beats proved to be tremendously popular. According to Janine McAdams of *Billboard*, the duo “evinced screams from young suburban white girls that recalled the passion of the Beatles days.”<sup>40</sup> But they were also popular with older audiences. The success of “the first adult rap group,” as one program director described them, demonstrated to concerned programmers that rap could appeal to an age-varied audience.<sup>41</sup> One or more of the duo’s songs were in the top forty of the “Hot 100” for nearly sixty weeks, thanks to heavy airplay on Top 40 radio stations across the country, and two of their songs with rapped vocals topped the chart.<sup>42</sup> The only catch, it turned out, was that the duo did not actually rap or sing—Milli Vanilli were just beautiful front men for their producer’s sonic vision.

Much like the music of LL Cool J, Milli Vanilli’s songs sonically held Top 40 listeners’ hands, guiding them through what programmers considered the foreign terrain of rap by providing something familiar to latch onto while they listened to rapped vocals. But unlike LL Cool J, Milli Vanilli didn’t come from rap’s traditional birthplace, geographically, or culturally. Even if they had been the ones rapping, they had no relationship with the genre’s New York City origins and no connection to the hip hop elements of MCing and DJing, although one of the pair competed in breakdancing competitions.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, their distance from hip hop culture was great enough that their popularity sparked a conversation about what exactly rap was.

As the popularity of rap continued to grow and as pop artists continued incorporating rap into their musical language, it became increasingly difficult for industry publications to distinguish between rap and other genres. In March 1989, this issue came to a head when *Billboard* premiered a new chart, “Hot Rap Singles,” which tracked the sales of rap singles—as defined by store employees—at seventy-seven record shops across the country.<sup>44</sup> The chart immediately caused controversy.



On the first rap chart, *Billboard* recorded Milli Vanilli's "Girl You Know It's True" at number five, ahead of songs by Eric B. & Rakim, Ice-T, and N.W.A.<sup>45</sup> A letter to the editor two weeks later complained about this song appearing on the same chart as these rappers; Tom Phillips of Delaware argued that despite using rapped vocals and a commonly sampled breakbeat, "Girl You Know It's True" was "not rap." The song was "nothing but a pop tune." Phillips suggested that *Billboard* "reconsider what [they] call rap" and proposed that *Billboard* should define inclusion on this chart by "what the inner-city kids call rap."<sup>46</sup>

Chart editor Terri Rossi responded to this letter, claiming that the line between rap and pop "is a subjective matter."<sup>47</sup> Rap, for Rossi, was not easily characterized. She wrote that the issue centered around whether the presence of rapped vocals defines a rap song: "Is a rap record a record in which the vocal performance is spoken rhythmically, or is it a record that contains a rap-style performance?"<sup>48</sup> Her confusing distinction between these two performance acts is telling. It's unclear from reading her column what the difference between "a rap-style performance" and a "vocal performance . . . spoken rhythmically" actually is (not to mention which of these Milli Vanilli was doing), indicating that even the chart editor couldn't explain what defined the genre.

Rossi wasn't the only person having trouble differentiating between genres. Top 40 programmers—who were far from experts on the matter—thought that their audiences weren't sure what rap was, although they disagreed about the extent of their audience's confusion. According to one consultant, adults believed *En Vogue*'s 1990 beat-driven song with no spoken vocals, "Hold On," was rap. Denver program director Mark Bolke complained that some of his listeners categorized Bobby Brown, Madonna, and New Kids on the Block as rap artists.<sup>49</sup> Denver listeners weren't alone in their confusion about New Kids on the Block; *Radio & Records* reported in 1990 that 5 percent of participants classified the boy band as a rap group in a study about how audiences categorize artists.<sup>50</sup>

A few months after printing Phillips's letter about Milli Vanilli, *Billboard* changed its policy and removed Milli Vanilli and other rap-adjacent songs from the rap chart. Because the chart was supposed to measure the popularity of rap songs that didn't have enough radio airplay to appear on other charts, Rossi wrote that it didn't make sense to include what she referred to as "R&B records that include rap," as their "mainstream exposure . . . would prevent a real rap record from charting." In the beginning of June, *Billboard* began manually removing songs it didn't think were "all-rap records" from the chart so that its charts would "represent pure musical genres," a decision that defined rap, at least according to *Billboard*, by its sound.<sup>51</sup>

A month later, Milli Vanilli's downfall began. During a concert televised live on MTV the record ostensibly playing their backing track skipped, causing a small snippet of the recording—which was no mere backing track, as it included the song's vocals—to loop over and over. While a looped breakbeat was precisely what



rap had been built on, the duo didn't know what to do when their lip-synched vocals also looped, and group member Rob Pilatus ran off the stage. Throughout the next year, the duo rode high even as criticism mounted, and they won the Best New Artist Grammy in 1990. But by the end of that year, their lip-synching truth was revealed, their Grammy award was revoked, and they settled multiple class-action lawsuits in which they were accused of deceiving their fans.<sup>52</sup>

While most listeners moved on to something new, the music industries did not, for Milli Vanilli's influence was long-lasting. Few working within the growing rap-music industry embraced the duo; record executive Bill Stephney, for example, described them as "tragically unhip."<sup>53</sup> But their style of pop-rap, soul-rap, or whatever one might call the combination of beats and rhymes with soulfully sung pop choruses, inspired Top 40 music for decades to come.<sup>54</sup> From Biz Markie and Salt-N-Pepa singing about relationships on their respective turn-of-the-decade singles "Just a Friend" and "Do You Want Me," through Puff Daddy and Kanye West building their careers on sampled melodic hooks, and Bone Thugs-N-Harmony (and later Drake) obliterating the distinction between rapping and singing, this musical formula has continued to facilitate mainstream success. Top 40 programmers love a melody.

#### "REAL SMOOTH" RAP

In late 1991, the combination of rapped verses and sung choruses took the rap duo P.M. Dawn's "Set Adrift on Memory Bliss" to number one on the "Hot 100." Working out of a UK recording studio, brothers Prince Be and DJ Minutemix had recorded what *Billboard* described as a "pop/rap reinvention of Spandau Ballet's 'True.'"<sup>55</sup> Combining the synthesizer introduction from Spandau Ballet's 1983 multiformat hit with—yes, again—the "Ashley's Roachclip" breakbeat, "Set Adrift on Memory Bliss" used the standard crossover technique of combining instrumental sounds from various genres. P.M. Dawn's vocals also combined pop and rap styles, as they wistfully sang during the choruses and rapped about existential questions and general romantic longing during the verses. Together, these elements created a sensual song that their label's general manager noticed "[didn't] scare anybody away," not only because of the familiar Spandau Ballet sample, but also because "the rest of it [was] real smooth and easy to take."<sup>56</sup> More to the point, the song didn't scare *adults* away; the same manager reported, "the comment that comes back from radio is that this works for adults," who may have especially felt catered to in the first verse, which references a Joni Mitchell song.<sup>57</sup> With all of these adult-friendly qualities, the song did extremely well, rising to number one on the *Billboard* "Hot 100" within two months of its release.

With songs like this, rap was officially white women-friendly, at least according to many programmers and their limited conceptions of listener preferences. By bringing pop's enduring love themes and catchy, sung melodies to the hippest new

genre, rappers created music that appealed to older audiences. Did these songs obscure whatever line had previously been imagined between the genres of rap and pop? Of course they did. That's why programmers, looking as always for the latest Goldilocks style, played them.

But programmer acceptance didn't always correspond with critical acclaim. When hip hop-magazine *The Source* asked artists and journalists what the best album of the year was at the end of 1991, the results made clear the difference between what programmers were playing and what "the people of the Hip-Hop Nation" were listening to. Very few of the albums listed were by artists who appeared on the "Hot 100 Airplay" chart that year, and the top two albums, listed by almost half of respondents, were A Tribe Called Quest's *The Low End Theory* and Brand Nubian's *One For All*, albums with singles that never made it onto the "Hot 100" and only peaked in the lower half of the "Hot R&B Singles" chart.<sup>58</sup> Perhaps this was just a symptom of who "the people of the Hip-Hop Nation" were, a community whose tastes—informed by periodicals like *The Source*—were quite distinct from the tastes of radio programmers. Or at least that's what programmer Dave Allan thought. "The true rap fan," he claimed, "is always striving for finding something new that they can turn their friends onto first. To the true rap fan, once a song makes it to radio, it's not happening."<sup>59</sup>

#### RAP THAT MOMS AND KIDS LIKE

Happening or not, ballad-inspired rap songs pointed one way forward for Top 40 programmers. But they couldn't focus solely on white women to the exclusion of younger listeners, the other major portion of their audience. Adolescents, especially those twelve-and-older who were the youngest demographic Arbitron measured, were important to Top 40 stations. Easy targets for the hip new music that these stations claimed to play, adolescents helped boost the size of a station's audience. Programmers also believed that young listeners brought in the older listeners that Top 40 stations wanted, because families listened to the radio in their cars.<sup>60</sup> This meant that hit music needed to appeal to young listeners while not alienating their parents, who might be listening along with them.

One of the rap groups who skillfully appealed to this mixed-age audience was DJ Jazzy Jeff & the Fresh Prince. Their 1988 song "Parents Just Don't Understand" neatly outlines how a song could appeal to multiple demographics at the same time. Atop a sample of a 1977 Peter Frampton tune, the Fresh Prince raps about a classic teenage conundrum: parents not having a clue. But he's not angry about this, which might have alienated adult audiences; rather, the song exposes the inanity of teenage opinions. The first verse details a middle-class story of going back-to-school shopping where the parent and child disagree about what to buy. As might happen on a sitcom, other kids point and snicker at the Fresh Prince when he shows up to the first day of school "dressed up in those ancient artifacts."

The second verse is more serious: he takes his mom's new Porsche joyriding, and along the way picks up a twelve-year-old who has run away from home. When the Fresh Prince's parents come to pick him up from jail, they are upset. Recounting the ride home, he raps that they "took turns, one would beat me while the other was driving"; he is incredulous at their anger, claiming "I just made a mistake." A clear exaggeration of a parent-child conflict, the story is told with an obviously humorous tone. So while expressing that it's the parents who "just don't understand," the song simultaneously demonstrates how clueless children are, themes easily agreed upon by all parties driving home from school.<sup>61</sup>

This song and the group's subsequent singles were crossover smashes. In part this was due to their kid-friendly rhetoric; the group was so beloved by this age bracket that they won a Nickelodeon "Kids' Choice Award."<sup>62</sup> But their singles also appealed beyond rap's younger fans; they were, as the Fresh Prince put it, "what your mother might want your sister to marry, and you may not like us, but your girlfriend does!"<sup>63</sup> While "Parents Just Don't Understand" lacks the sung vocals that programmers were coming to rely on when pitching rap to an adult audience, other elements make up for this. The track samples a recognizable song and is easy to follow, beginning with a sing-songy couplet that introduces the catchphrase of the song and repeats after every verse. These techniques likely placated at least one adult: the Fresh Prince's mom, who claimed in an interview about the album that she could "stand to listen to it."<sup>64</sup> Black-Oriented programmers commended the song's age-diverse appeal; one noted its "universal message whether you are young or old," and another noticed that "it seem[ed] to fill the generation gap."<sup>65</sup> Top 40 programmers also praised it: one claimed the "new reaction record" was the third-most-requested song on his station after only a week of airplay, and Twin Cities programmer Brian Phillips remarked that "if you just fool around with it a little bit at night, it goes out of control."<sup>66</sup> Phillips, whose station was not regularly playing rap, thought that the song "transcend[ed] the normal boundaries of rap." And this was precisely why major label RCA agreed to distribute the group's record; the label's vice president Rick Dobbis believed that it was "a universal track that would appeal to a large audience," provided it could "get past the limited 'tag' that's been put on rap."<sup>67</sup>

For radio programmers this transcendence likely had something to do with musical sound, but it was also part of the group's marketing. The press often characterized the duo as suburban- and middle-class-friendly, and less stridently political than other rappers. They also highlighted the Fresh Prince's scholastic aptitude, making it clear that this MIT-accepted teen who got 1470 out of 1600 on his SATs was anything but your average rapper.<sup>68</sup> Ann Carli, vice president of artist development at Jive, claimed that the group's pop appeal was one reason she signed them since she wanted each artist in her roster to fill a different niche (at the time, her roster included Boogie Down Productions and Kool Moe Dee).<sup>69</sup>

The artists themselves had a complicated relationship with their pop appeal, and many of the songs on the album featuring "Parents Just Don't Understand"

didn't so overtly target a pop audience. While DJ Jazzy Jeff described their music in a 1988 *Spin* interview as "pop, humorous," the Fresh Prince was wary of this categorization—in the same interview he stressed that it was "not pop. Definitely not pop. Wrong word." Pop, for the Fresh Prince, was music for white audiences, and he wanted nothing to do with that. "Our music," he noted, "is definitely 100 percent geared to a black audience. The music that we make, it's coming from our background. It's real, it's us. It's not like we sit down, like some other guys, and say 'Well, we [want] pop radio to play this.' Or, 'We want this kind of person to listen.'"<sup>70</sup> The major difference between his group and other rap artists, he believed, was that the DJ and the rapper came from the middle-class suburbs of Philadelphia. This gave them a unique perspective; they could talk about "problems that relate to everybody," likely meaning middle-class families. But while the Fresh Prince was hesitant to call his music pop, he acknowledged that the duo had a specific goal that sounded a bit like the music industries' perception of rap's crossover: they "want[ed] to bring rap out of the ghetto."<sup>71</sup>

The thirty-first-annual Grammy Awards, the first to feature a "Best Rap Performance" award, clinched the group's adult appeal, as the all-adult panel of voters chose the duo's "Parents Just Don't Understand" over songs by Kool Moe Dee, LL Cool J, Salt-N-Pepa, and J.J. Fad.<sup>72</sup> That same year, Disney—a company devoted to designing adult-friendly content for children and teens—hired the pair to create a rapped remake of "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" for the celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of Disneyland, hosted by Tony Danza and broadcast nationwide on NBC. And the group's age-diverse audience bought into the latest music marketing scheme: the 900-number "Jazzy Jeff Rap Hotline" that charged two dollars for the first minute and thirty-five-to-forty-five cents for every additional minute, a fair chunk of change when the album itself cost between ten and fifteen dollars.<sup>73</sup> The first hotline made specifically for musicians, the promotion proved to be more popular than expected, and within six months the number had been dialed over two million times.<sup>74</sup> Parents seemed to understand paying for the hotline; *Billboard* reported that there had been no complaints about "excessive calls."<sup>75</sup>

### RAP'S SUPERSTARS

Around the same time that DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince released "Parents Just Don't Understand," Capitol Records signed an up-and-coming rapper from Oakland who had made a name selling his self-produced album out of his car: MC Hammer. Initially, Hammer had trouble getting his music played on the radio, but—perhaps recognizing the industry's preference for mass-appeal acts—he soon decided to rethink his approach. "The time was right," he told his biographer, "for a different style of music that was more danceable and that appealed to both young and old."<sup>76</sup> The industry, looking for just that style, noticed him. In May 1989, Terri Rossi of *Billboard* wrote that his song "Turn This Mutha Out" was being played

on Black-Oriented radio stations that usually didn't program rap because, she assumed, the music video featuring his unique dancing was popular on MTV.<sup>77</sup>

But this song was soon forgotten when another of his singles swept across the country. Sampling Rick James's 1981 hit song "Super Freak"—but carefully not including any references to how kinky the super freak was—MC Hammer's "U Can't Touch This" was a certified smash. The album, which most fans had to buy because Hammer's label only sold the single on twelve-inch vinyl and as a maxicassette, went diamond in a little over a year.<sup>78</sup> And despite its label-induced tough odds, in the early summer of 1990 the song made it to number eight on the *Billboard* "Hot 100," less than two months after its release. Radio embraced the song in large part because some programmers thought it exceeded what they considered to be the limitations of other rap songs. Songs like this, according to one programmer, didn't "get classified as *real* rap records" because they "[fell] outside of the genre and [became] 'special' rap records."<sup>79</sup> Over the next year, Hammer had three top-ten singles—all with family-friendly lyrics and recognizable samples—and his album *Please Hammer Don't Hurt 'Em* topped the *Billboard* album chart for twenty-one non-consecutive weeks. The album was so popular that it held one of the top-two spots on the chart for longer than any album since the mono and stereo charts had merged in 1963.<sup>80</sup>

Looking only at radio airplay and sales, however, doesn't reveal the breadth of Hammer's accomplishments or the depth of his entrepreneurial spirit. Over the next couple of years, he starred in advertisements for Taco Bell (where he jumped off a roof and used his parachute pants to help him land directly in front of one of the chain's restaurants) and Pepsi (where, during a concert, the cool refreshing taste of the soda gave him the energy to transition from a boring ballad to a spirited up-tempo dance-rap tune), created his own Saturday-morning cartoon for ABC (*Hammerman*), appeared on the soundtrack of a successful movie (*The Addams Family*), sold his signature pants pattern to a sewing magazine, signed a deal with toy company Mattel to put out a doll in his likeness (complete with a noise-making boom box), released his own feature film, licensed branded backpacks and chewing gum, and sold a board game where players could rap or dance their way to victory.<sup>81</sup>

Hammer's rapid transformation into a superstar was scorned by some at *The Source*, which had become the most important magazine for hip hop fans. These detractors thought that he was more of an entertainer—or, worse, a dancer—than a rapper.<sup>82</sup> Hammer was such a source of consternation that the magazine dedicated a fifth of their 1990 reader survey to questions about his popularity. While some readers commended his professionalism, fewer than a quarter of respondents confessed to owning his album, and readers rated his rapping ability at only a 1.7 out of 5, around half of the score they gave his overall talent and personality.<sup>83</sup> One critic applauded his business acumen, but acknowledged that "he needs a definite lesson in the roots of rap."<sup>84</sup> Others made clear that Hammer's quick rise to fame and

subsequent commodification were also a problem: comparing him to Too \$hort, another writer claimed that for an “average Oakland rap (not pop) music fan[,] Too Short is cool because he came up in Oakland and stayed in Oakland, not just whizzed through on his way to the Arsenio show.”<sup>85</sup> Hammer acknowledged this criticism, noting that some fans would rather “keep rap in a small box only for the hard-core inner-city people.” But Hammer had at least one vocal advocate among hip hop enthusiasts; Chuck D told the *Washington Post* “that brother’s bad,” and said that those criticizing Hammer “don’t know enough. . . . [H]e’s built a whole environment around him that’s real.”<sup>86</sup>

Hammer’s family-friendly rise to fame motivated another rapper, who we all knew must be coming at some point in this narrative: Vanilla Ice. “The bionic pop star constructed by the record company’s market research and A&R departments to defeat the invincible M.C. Hammer,” as one critic jokingly referred to him, Ice studiously followed Hammer’s career.<sup>87</sup> Six months after Hammer found his way to the upper reaches of the chart, Ice rose to fame by also releasing a danceable number with family-friendly lyrics atop the bass line of a hit from 1981. But unlike Hammer’s song, “Ice Ice Baby” zoomed all the way to the top spot on the *Billboard* “Hot 100.” Ice certainly benefited from his record label’s releasing his single in several more popular formats but, more importantly, he had easier access to Top 40 playlists because he was white. Two months after his single reached number one, Vanilla Ice took over the top position on the *Billboard* album chart from Hammer. While Ice didn’t sell a signature pants pattern, he released his own board game, action figure, bubble gum, backpacks, and t-shirts. Like Hammer, he appeared in his own feature film (although Ice’s received a theatrical premiere in close to 400 theaters, most of which dropped the film in a few weeks) and was featured on a popular 1991 kids’ movie soundtrack (*Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles II: The Secret of the Ooze*).

### HIP HOP IS HIT POP

But the popularity of rap at the turn of the decade cannot be represented by these two artists alone. To borrow from the overly staid and sober comments the president of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences made when he introduced the new Grammy category for rap, comments that betrayed the music industries’ enduring characterization of Black music as marginal, what had once been “an urban black music form” had “evolved into something more than that.”<sup>88</sup> Rap was everywhere. Turn on the TV and you’d not only see rap music videos but also find shows starring Kid ’N’ Play and the Fresh Prince, shows that scholar Mark Anthony Neal writes lacked “even the taint of oppositional realities that marked [hip hop’s] emergence.”<sup>89</sup> If you changed the channel, you’d hear a judge rapping on the math show *Square One Television* or the multicultural cast of *Kids Incorporated* rapping about conflict resolution. Regardless of channel choice, you’d hear

rap soundtracking commercials for kid-oriented products like Lego, Nintendo, and Fruity Pebbles, not to mention the chubby doughboy with the coincidentally appropriate MC name Poppin' Fresh rhyming on behalf of Pillsbury.<sup>90</sup> Substitute in the Fat Boys or Kurtis Blow and you'd get commercials for Swatch or Sprite. At schools in the early 1990s, you could hear rap not just emanating from boom boxes in the hallways but also in classrooms, as educational companies capitalized on the popularity of the genre and released rap-based lessons that taught history, reading, geography, multiplication, and more. In the library, you could find picture books featuring hip hop retellings of classic fairy tales as well as Gini Wade's *Curtis the Hip Hop Cat*, which tells the story of a fat school-aged cat who gains confidence through learning how to breakdance.<sup>91</sup>

Driving around, if you were to turn to your local Top 40 station, you'd hear a lot of rap. During the summer of 1990, as "U Can't Touch This" first ascended the charts and then remained in the top ten for nearly two months, about 15 percent of the songs Top 40 radio stations played had rapped vocals, including Bell Biv DeVoe's new jack swing slammer "Poison," Snap!'s hip-house jam "The Power," and Bobby Brown's duet with Glenn Medeiros on "She Ain't Worth It." As the year continued, this percentage would only increase.

To offer a little perspective, let's rewind to the mid-1980s. During these years, Top 40 stations played very few songs with rapped vocals in them. And most of the songs with rapped vocals that these stations played between 1984 and 1986—for instance, the number one singles "West End Girls" by the Pet Shop Boys and "Rock Me Amadeus" by Falco—were by white new music artists taking influence from rap. From a contemporary vantage point those songs might not even be classified as rap, but programmers in the mid-1980s considered these songs at least rap-adjacent. *Billboard* described the latter record as "rap-edged," and one programmer described the former as "sort of a rap with a neat musical hook."<sup>92</sup> Another popular song with rapped vocals during these years, British singer-songwriter Murray Head's performance of "One Night in Bangkok" from the musical *Chess*, sounded enough like a rap song to mid-1980s ears that the singer was mistaken for a Black rapper and was courted by a Black agent to do nightclub performances in the United States.<sup>93</sup> But even using such an expansive definition, these songs made up only a tiny portion of playlists; between 1984 and 1987, songs with rapped vocals never accounted for more than 4 percent of *Billboard's* "Hot 100 Airplay" chart (figure 5).

By 1990, this had all changed. As noted in the previous chapter, songs with rapped vocals constituted a significant portion of Crossover station playlists by the beginning of the decade, but Top 40 stations weren't far behind them. In 1990, over 17 percent of songs on the "Hot 100 Airplay" chart had rapped vocals, and between 1991 and 1993 this was true for about a quarter of songs on the chart (figure 5). This included hits by all of the rappers this chapter has discussed, as well as songs by hip-house artists, which typically featured rapped verses and sung choruses atop



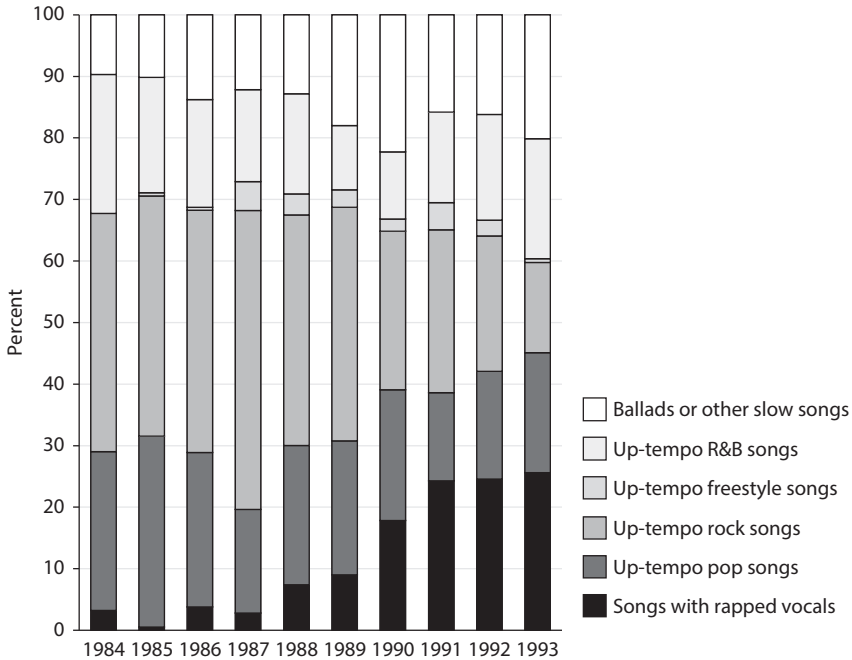


FIGURE 5. Stylistic composition of the *Billboard* “Hot 100 Airplay” chart, October 20, 1984–July 17, 1993.

a slamming house beat. But just as often, already-successful singers were adding rapped verses into their songs, clearly indicating the genre’s popularity. Michael Jackson’s producer Bill Bottrell rapped on “Black or White”; Paula Abdul hired Derrick Stevens, who was portrayed in the music video as an animated cat, to add a rapped verse to “Opposites Attract”; and even Tammy Wynette got into the spirit, collaborating with rappers and house musicians KLF on their song “Justified and Ancient.”<sup>94</sup>

While Top 40 stations were playing an astonishing amount of rap, this was hardly the only avenue through which listeners could find the genre. By the turn of the decade, most Black-Oriented stations had added rap to their playlists and hosted mix shows where DJs showcased tracks that didn’t make it into regular rotation. Mix shows broadened the scope of what one might hear on the radio: while nearly every DJ that reported to *The Source* in December 1990 was playing LL Cool J, for example, some also played more underground artists such as Kool G Rap and Poor Righteous Teachers, as well as local acts like Trenton, New Jersey’s Blvd. Mosse. Shows on community stations such as Dallas’s KNON played Queen Latifah and Special Ed alongside Vanilla Ice, and college radio shows across the country played X Clan, N.W.A, Monie Love, and Ice Cube.<sup>95</sup> While the rap on MTV and BET’s regular rotation was pretty similar to what you’d hear on commercial radio stations, their shows *Yo! MTV Raps* and *Rap City*, as well as the New

York City-specific show *Video Music Box*, played plenty of songs that an average DJ wasn't spinning. Across the country, viewers could call to request their favorite videos on what was at that time called the *Jukebox Network* (later shortened to *The Box*), which would play just about anything that was requested at any time of day. In late 1990, that meant playing a lot of rap, including less mainstream artists like A Tribe Called Quest and Two Kings in a Cipher alongside Top 40 stars Bell Biv DeVoe and Salt-N-Pepa.<sup>96</sup> Late 1980s movies like *Colors* and *Do the Right Thing* featured rap soundtracks that similarly mixed more mainstream hits with lesser known acts. Rap fans could find album recommendations and the latest on their favorite artists in a host of rap periodicals that began publishing in the late 1980s, including *The Source* and *Rap Pages*.<sup>97</sup> And once these readers found their way to local record stores, there was an easy way to find songs that were almost guaranteed to be outside of the Top 40 mainstream: a parental advisory label, stuck right on the front of the record.

These other avenues presented a viable alternative for artists not interested in making music for a more mainstream audience. So while C+C Music Factory's radio-friendly hip-house album was the best-selling rap record in 1991, multiple other rap records—including Ice Cube's *Death Certificate*, N.W.A's *EFIL4ZAGGIN*, Public Enemy's *Apocalypse 91... The Enemy Strikes Back*, and Too \$hort's *Short Dog's in the House*—went platinum without a wisp of Top 40 airplay.<sup>98</sup>

But unlike these other ways that listeners encountered rap music, Top 40 radio playlists had a particular ideological power. The format's acceptance of the genre repackaged it as part of the sound of mainstream popular music in the United States. By regularly playing rap, rather than separating it onto a mix show, these stations made rap into an integral part of their everyday mainstream, forcing listeners interested in hearing hit music to confront the genre. But this confrontation was hardly difficult, as hearing rap in this context required little knowledge of hip hop's culture, politics, and history.<sup>99</sup> Tuning in to these stations, audiences heard a rap song as just another pop hit. Hip hop had become just that: hit pop.

A three-panel cartoon by André LeRoy Davis published on the back page of *The Source* in late 1991 (figure 6) made this abundantly clear. Picturing a white man talking to a Black man about rap, the drawing shows rap's transformation—and the shift in how white audience members reacted to it. Rap, which once was “crap” that “only blacks like,” had become music “for everybody.”<sup>100</sup>

#### “IT'S FOR EVERYBODY”

But what did it mean for rap to be “for everybody,” regardless of race? And how did the genre's incorporation into the mainstream influence its racial politics? Some answers can be found by examining three of the many diverging yet interdependent paths that the genre took. First, we'll turn to rap at its poppiest, fully integrated into the sounds and marketing practices of the mainstream, to see how its politics of race were visually represented.

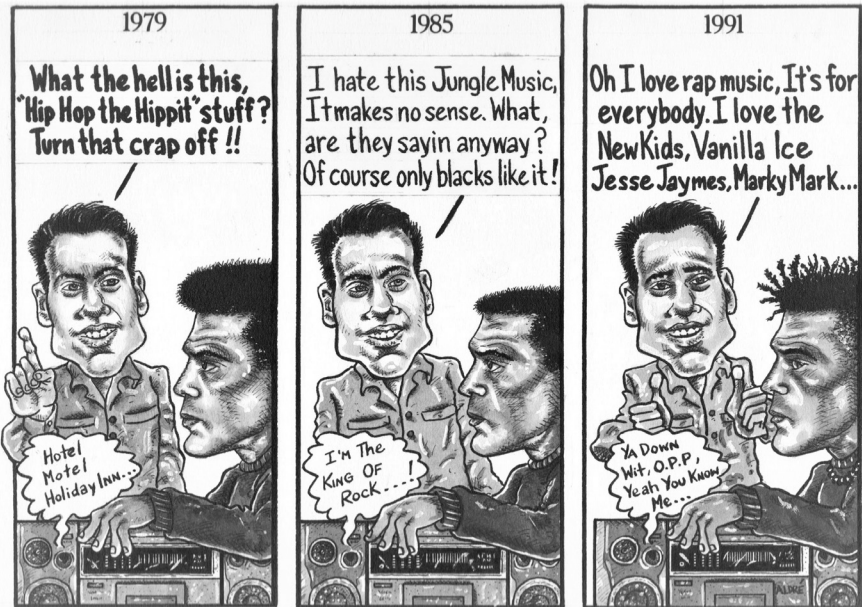


FIGURE 6. André LeRoy Davis, “White Fans Evolution with Hip Hop.” Originally published in *The Source*, November 1991, 64.

In the summer of 1990, a New Kids on the Block-inspired quintet called the Party, formed from the cast of the *Mickey Mouse Club*’s latest season on the Disney Channel, released the aptly named song “Summer Vacation.” Its music video begins with the five teens on a beach but quickly moves into a classroom, where group member Chase Hampton acquires a large boom box. The Party is visibly multiracial—during the verses, white Houstonite Damon Pampolina alternates rapped lines with Albert Fields, a Black performer from Indiana, while Virginian of Filipina background Deedee Magno and white Los Angeleno Tiffini Hale sing the song’s choruses. The other member of the Party, redheaded Hampton, only vocalizes occasionally on the song and is shown carting around a boom box, carefully placed on his shoulder (highlighting the lines cut into the side of his haircut), as he raps the song’s catchphrase “tune in, groove on, bust out.”<sup>101</sup> Toward the end of the song, the lyrics name hip hop, and Fields references a line from Eric B. & Rakim’s 1987 song “My Melody” (later interpolated in Eazy-E’s not-appropriate-for-Disney 1988 song “Eazy-Duz-It”).

Disney had recently begun incorporating rap into their adult-friendly youth-oriented music, so much so that every episode of the *Mickey Mouse Club*’s recent reboot ended with the genre’s trendy sounds. The sequence began with a conspicuously multicultural group of kids, standing together in solidarity, slowly and solemnly singing the signature “M-I-C-K-E-Y M-O-U-S-E” song. Then, the beat

dropped and a dance party erupted on stage accompanied by a rap song complete with record scratches and beatboxing, encouraging those in the live audience to “wave your hands in the air, and wave them like you just don’t care” for the famous mouse whose name was rhymed with “rock the house.”<sup>102</sup>

Like Crossover stations, both of these Disney-affiliated songs used rap’s multicultural appeal—its “common denominator” quality—to bring together age-diverse, racially diverse audiences and artists to dance, to celebrate the start of summer, and to show just how joyful being a young person could be. These songs, like those of DJ Jazzy Jeff & the Fresh Prince, weren’t solely for kids: adults tuning in alongside them could sing along to the choruses while finding little to object to in the upbeat positive verses. Using hip hop culture as a conduit to cool fun, these songs take the multicultural promise of rap and commodify its easily salable qualities while neatly sanding over its potential rough edges.<sup>103</sup>

As tweens listening to the *Mickey Mouse Club* in 1990 grew into teens, they could see rap music as a proxy for trendiness in a song by white teen idol Jeremy Jordan, whose first single “The Right Kind of Love” was featured on the *90210* soundtrack in 1992. A mid-tempo, doo-wop-inspired love song, “The Right Kind of Love” is replete with multipart vocal harmonies, perhaps modeled on the many New Edition offshoots that Michael Bivins was involved with, such as Bell Biv DeVoe, Boyz II Men, and Another Bad Creation. Below the vocals, synthesizer chords bop along in regular eighth-note pulses above a sparse bass line and funky guitar and synthesizer fills. As was entirely normal by 1992, a rap is inserted right at the moment where a 1980s-pop listener might expect a bridge; Jordan switches into a slightly whispered tone as he raps at an easy pace about how well he is going to treat his girl.

Jordan’s musical relationship with hip hop culture was tenuous at best. Although he raps in “The Right Kind of Love,” his record company didn’t classify this vocal act as hip hop in their track titles for the multiple versions of the song, which included a “Main Mix,” a “Main Mix (No Rap),” and a “Hip Hop Jeep Mix.”<sup>104</sup> The title of the “Main Mix (No Rap)” version indicates that his record company—and likely radio stations who received a promotional copy of the single—would have heard Jordan’s rapped vocals as rap, but the “Hip Hop Jeep Mix” does not include the rap. Rather, it sets Jordan’s sung vocals atop something close to the breakbeat from the Honey Drippers’ “Impeach the President,” indicating that hip hop, to his record company, meant something other than Jordan’s rapping.

The music video makes clear how Jordan’s engagement with Black culture only went so far. The video begins with five guys (one white, four Black) playing basketball. When the vocals begin, there’s a moment of potential ambiguity over which of these people is Jordan; it’s not until around thirty-five seconds in that the white guy moves out of the periphery as he dances, sings, and looks sultry while framed by Black teammates. Back in the mid-1980s, a musician’s white identity would have been all but assumed on MTV; by the early 1990s, the logic of multiculturalism

had so taken over pop music that Jordan obscures his racial identity, using his Black friends as cultural capital.<sup>105</sup>

By the end of the rapped section, however, the political limits of multiculturalism are laid bare when Jordan makes clear his choice of romantic partner. Throughout the video, Jordan is seen primarily with two girls, one Black and one white. During the rapped section of the song Jordan exclusively dances with the Black girl, but as soon as he finishes rapping he finds the white girl and stays with her until the end of the song. As fun and trendy as engaging with Blackness might be, the video suggests that “The Right Kind of Love” for Jordan was a white girl; as Jared Sexton reminds us, “the politics of interracial sexuality are fundamental to racial formation,” as white supremacy produces itself in relation to the threat of miscegenation.<sup>106</sup> Jordan himself acknowledged his appropriative relationship with Blackness; he said in a 1999 interview that after the release of his first album and his subsequent popularity as a teen idol, he began to reckon with his sound and with “being this thing, this white guy trying to sound black.”<sup>107</sup>

As these two songs demonstrate, rap being for everyone meant that anyone, regardless of race, could profit from the genre. Like many Crossover stations, this sort of rap used the genre’s cultural capital without fully attending to its racial politics; at its worst, it deracinated rap into depoliticized multiculturalism that centered white interests even as it showcased Black musicians.

“HIP HOP, SMOOTHED OUT ON THE R&B TIP, WITH A  
POP-FEEL APPEAL TO IT”

Although teen performers of all races have continued to casually borrow from rap, this wasn’t the only way forward for the genre. An alternative form of racial politics can be heard in new jack swing, the R&B-rap-hybrid style that filled the airwaves between 1987 and 1992.

Two months before Milli Vanilli brought their mix of rap and up-tempo pop to the airwaves, singer Keith Sweat, who was at the time a brokerage assistant at New York firm Paine Webber, released what is considered to be the first new jack swing single.<sup>108</sup> The song, “I Want Her,” was produced by musical prodigy and fellow Harlemitte Teddy Riley, who had previously produced songs for rappers Kool Moe Dee and Heavy D & the Boyz. At Sweat’s request, Riley made him a couple of beats, including the one for “I Want Her,” and together they added Sweat’s melodious and seductive sung vocals.<sup>109</sup> The song shared more with rap than just its beats; in his name-coining article on the genre, screenwriter Barry Michael Cooper wrote that Riley “used the verbal animus of rap to enter his beastmaster subconscious, and when he found himself inside, he slammed the door and swallowed the key.”<sup>110</sup> Sweat and Riley’s genre combination became a crossover smash; the song hit number one on the “Hot Black Singles” chart in late January 1988, and it reached number five on the “Hot 100 Airplay” chart a few months later.

Teddy Riley is often credited with developing the new jack swing sound, which he originally called “street funk” because he intended to transform Parliament-Funkadelic’s complex grooves and keyboardist Bernie Worrell’s playing into something more modern and street-savvy.<sup>111</sup> New jack swing shared with rap an interest in 1970s funk; rap frequently sampled Parliament-Funkadelic as well as James Brown and Rick James. While new jack swing songs often relied on a jaunty, dotted drum-machine rhythm—the “swing” of the genre name—that differed from the steady beats in rap songs of the era, the style was influenced by rap’s emphasis on the beat rather than on mid-range frequency synthesizers. This was, as Riley puts it, a product of growing up with rap.<sup>112</sup> Balancing the frequencies in a song was vital to producing his beast-mode sound; Riley told *Billboard* that “You’ve got to have the bottom and the highs so people [can] really feel the music. If you don’t have that I don’t think your record will do very well.”<sup>113</sup> This aesthetic came out of his work with rappers; in a 2012 interview commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of Sweat’s first album, Riley disclosed that he “had no plans to do R&B music. New Jack Swing would’ve been just rap if I didn’t get with Keith Sweat.”<sup>114</sup>

Their success inspired many other singers to combine melodic vocals with rap’s beats—including Bobby Brown, Riley’s group Guy, Al B. Sure!, and New Edition—and inspired many other producers to draw from rap’s emphasis on the beat—including Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis, and L.A. Reid and Babyface. Black-Oriented stations welcomed these songs even when they were still hesitant to accept rap wholeheartedly; these stations “embraced [rap’s] progeny” while still “thumbing their noses at rap” because new jack swing songs aligned to the format’s R&B-filled playlists more closely than rap songs without melodies did.<sup>115</sup> In 1989, *Billboard* columnist Nelson George observed that “it is one of the ironies of the moment that this new direction in R&B . . . may be a big long-term threat to rap. If an act can rap and sing adequately . . . they may soon be able to outposition their rap-only counterparts.”<sup>116</sup>

The hybrid style easily made it onto Crossover and Top 40 playlists. New jack swinger Bobby Brown, the “rapper trapped in the body of an R&B singer,” had six top-ten *Billboard* “Hot 100” singles in less than a year, including the number one hit “My Prerogative.”<sup>117</sup> Brown, wrote Peter Watrous of the *New York Times*, “fully incorporate[d] rap’s beats, rhythms and hard street attitudes into a pop-music format” that appealed to diverse audiences.<sup>118</sup> New jack swing-group and New Edition-offshoot Bell Biv DeVoe described their music in a similar way, as “hip-hop, smoothed out on the R&B tip, with a pop-feel appeal to it.”<sup>119</sup> Their record company promoted their album by emphasizing its integration of hip hop with pop, its “juxtaposing hip-hop’s beats and samples with pure pop’s deepest aural beauty secrets.”<sup>120</sup>

Incorporating pop sounds as a means to cross over was risky. As chapter 1 notes, Black artists were regularly criticized for their overtures to white audiences. But many contemporary critics understood new jack swing to have crossed over



without losing its Black identity. Nelson George applauded Bobby Brown's crossover, claiming that the "hard hip-hop/R&B" record "My Prerogative" reaching number one on the *Billboard* "Hot 100" was "a major cause for celebration." "Yeah, Brown crossed over," George writes, "but not by catering to any racist assumptions about what whites would accept; it was because the kid 'got busy' and MCA supported his funk all the way."<sup>121</sup> New jack swing artists seemed to effectively balance the hardness of rap with the romantic or soft qualities of R&B into what ethnomusicologist Kyra D. Gaunt describes as a "fusion of opposing urban styles and sexual identities."<sup>122</sup> This meant that even while they sang and danced, new jack swing artists were not characterized as feminine; record executive and journalist Bill Stephney, for example, wrote in *The Source* that Brown "rhymed and danced with a Black machismo not seen outside of rap in years."<sup>123</sup>

Another artist who took advantage of this new type of crossover was LL Cool J, who in 1990 released "Around the Way Girl." The "inventive R&B/rap mosaic" that "cleverly blend[ed] both formats" to the extent that it "nearly create[d] its own genre" discusses LL Cool J's interest in finding a woman, but not just any woman.<sup>124</sup> Unlike "I Need Love," which carefully keeps the description of the girl vague and universally applicable, "Around the Way Girl" makes it clear that LL Cool J wants a specific type of girl: a girl with extensions in her hair who talks with street slang and can dance to the rap jams. This is no white suburban mom; this is a Black woman from an urban neighborhood, one who knows that Bobby Brown used to be a member of New Edition, who has homegirls, and who is "as sweet as brown sugar with the candied yams."<sup>125</sup> Even with its lyrical specificity, the song was sold as legible to the Top 40 audience. In an advertisement for the song, one programmer described it as "cool, mass-sounding rap," and another noted that "the sophisticated production and strong melody line makes this much more than a rap record."<sup>126</sup>

What "mass-sounding rap" *was* had changed, in large part thanks to Crossover radio stations. Crossing over had once entailed making aesthetic decisions that were often poorly received by Black listeners, at least according to critics of crossover artists like Whitney Houston, who was booed at the 1989 Soul Train awards because some Black listeners felt she "wasn't theirs anymore."<sup>127</sup> But rap's crossover was distinct. Def Jam publicist Bill Adler gives his business partner Russell Simmons credit for reengineering the racial politics of crossing rap over; at Def Jam, he recalls, they had the philosophy of doing "what we do at full strength and pull[ing] the mainstream in our direction. We didn't cross over to them. They crossed over to us."<sup>128</sup> Mighty as Def Jam was, a single record label wasn't solely responsible for this change. Crossover stations were one major way in which the mainstream was pulled toward rap, as this format turned crossover from a musical process that traded Black audiences for white ones into a sonic location that multicultural audiences bought into. Rather than reaching a mainstream audience by adopting techniques found in George Clinton's "Your Roots Erasing Manual," Black artists like LL Cool J could keep their roots because Crossover radio stations had moved the mainstream closer to rap.<sup>129</sup>



This new crossover space afforded additional credibility to what one MC referred to as “rent-a-rapper” collaborations between rappers and R&B singers.<sup>130</sup> As the name indicates, these duets might have been seen as yet another craven attempt by the music industries to cash in on the latest hip Black style. Following in the footsteps of crossover songs like Lionel Richie’s “Deep River Woman,” “rent-a-rapper” songs used artist features rather than solely stylistic modification to broaden their potential audience. Joyce “Fenderella” Irby admitted as much: striking out on her own after singing in the R&B group Klymaxx, she featured Doug E. Fresh on her 1989 song “Mr. DJ” because “Rap is very hot, and has a large important audience I want to reach.”<sup>131</sup> Reaching that audience meant working hard to capture rap’s street credibility, which Irby tried for by prominently featuring Fresh in the video and using samples that Public Enemy and Eric B. & Rakim had used on their recent albums.

But a better indication of the potential of this new crossover space could be found in a different “rent-a-rapper” song from the same year: “Friends,” the second single off of Jody Watley’s second album, featuring Eric B. & Rakim. The new jack swing song highlighted Watley’s sassy-yet-flexible vocals above a shuffling beat alongside Eric B.’s record scratching and Rakim’s characteristically agile rhymes. While not directly influenced by Whodini’s radio-friendly song of the same name, both songs expand on their family-friendly titles to offer real talk about difficult relationships.<sup>132</sup> “In groove and attitude [Watley’s] answer to Bobby Brown’s *Don’t Be Cruel*,” the song was a hit on Crossover stations and crossed over onto Top 40 stations, landing at number fourteen on the “Hot 100 Airplay” chart in the late summer of 1989.<sup>133</sup> While *Billboard* didn’t consider Rakim’s feature substantial enough to include the song on their “Hot Rap Singles” chart, appearing on a chart-topping, genre-blending crossover hit did nothing to harm Rakim’s credibility among rap critics and fans. His following album received one of the first-ever five-mic reviews from *The Source*, and to this day he ranks among the most celebrated MCs of all time.

And LL Cool J, who had been booed for his apparent disconnect with Black audiences, seemed to gain back some credibility with “Around the Way Girl” and the rest of his 1990 album *Mama Said Knock You Out*. Listeners at a Michigan Black-Oriented station, one programmer reported, had “been calling in for [the song] frantically.”<sup>134</sup> The album—released by Def Jam and certified gold within two months—was rated the fifth-best album that year by readers of *The Source*.<sup>135</sup>

#### “RAPPERS AGAINST PHONY ENTERTAINERS”

As one strand of rap became fully integrated into pop, and as another more convincingly combined “hip-hop’s beats and samples with pure pop’s deepest aural beauty secrets,” some rappers found another path in disavowing rap’s popification.<sup>136</sup> One example of this third possibility can be found on 1991’s *Derelicts of Dialect* on Def Jam, which went gold almost as quickly as LL Cool J’s album had.

In the video for the album's lead single, which samples Stevie Wonder's "Superstition," two rappers spend the song aggressively criticizing the crossover moves of Vanilla Ice and other "phony entertainers." This culminates near the end when they beat a depiction of Ice, played with freakish accuracy by punk-icon Henry Rollins. While the rappers denounce using radio-friendly, familiar samples, they themselves utilize this tried-and-true crossover technique. And, while the rappers claim that the rap songs topping the pop charts are not "real hip hop," this song just so happened to be played on Top 40 stations and peaked at number nineteen on the *Billboard* "Hot 100." Likely referencing the race-based formatting structure that lent Vanilla Ice easier Top 40 access as compared to a Black rapper, the duo claims that the music scene in 1991 might appear to be different but that it's still the "same old Klan." What's notable, and perhaps ironic, about this critique is that the song—"Pop Goes the Weasel" by 3rd Bass—is performed by two white rappers alongside their Black DJ.<sup>137</sup>

Vanilla Ice's success—and subsequent fall from grace—provided a nameable specter for many advocates of rap who were fearful of how going mainstream would change the genre. Like jazz and rock before it, they worried, rap would become dominated by white performers.<sup>138</sup> The last panel of *The Source* cartoon about rap's mainstream turn (figure 6) put race at the center of this move, listing off 1991's crew of white rappers as evidence of the genre being "for everybody."<sup>139</sup> Phife Dawg—of A Tribe Called Quest, the group that claimed in a 1991 single "rap is not pop, if you call it that then stop"—was also concerned about the presence of white rappers and worried about "a little white boy named Bobby in, say, Indiana or Montana, and he sees the number one act is Vanilla Ice, and he says, 'Oh, that's hip[-]hop.'" <sup>140</sup> Journalist Kim Green wrote in *The Source* that a Vanilla Ice concert, evocative of a minstrel show, "managed to take an art form that we have crafted, and turned it into a star-spangled pop-suckle," one which she feared had "iced out" Black audiences as well as rap's core audience.<sup>141</sup> And 3rd Bass rapper MC Serch's fears manifested physically in real life, not just on video: when a writer for *The Source* presented him with white rappers' cassettes, Serch destroyed them, "repeatedly smash[ing] his fists into them," "shattering the cases," and "flinging the remains to the floor." Explaining his issue with these rappers, he despaired that "it's every horror that I ever contemplated or imagined" because "now it's like any white boy can rhyme and make a rap record. Any Caucasian kid who grew up in the demographics between 15–25 can make a fuckin' rap record; it's all bullshit."<sup>142</sup>

But white rappers were just that, a specter, a ghost standing in for the actual terror. The issue was far more complicated than a fear of white performers. For MC Serch, this was likely obvious—after all, audiences may have seen *him* as just another Caucasian kid making a rap record. A letter to the editor in the February 1992 issue of *The Source* made clear the complexity of the problem; a reader wrote that while "the white establishment has diluted the rap market somewhat by allowing knucklehead muthafuckas like Lavar, Vanilla Ice, and Jesse Jaymes to release

albums, you must look deeper to the real sellouts." White artists were not such a serious problem; rather, "[Queen] Latifah, [MC] Lyte and Heavy D have hurt rap worse than Vanilla Ice ever could with their sappy R&B songs." While these artists once had been "hardcore," they had decided to "experiment in R&B to 'expand their audience' and 'increase their sales.'" <sup>143</sup> Rather than being concerned about the racial identity of its performers, this writer balked at the hybridization of rap with other genres.

An incident involving "Set Adrift on Memory Bliss" by P.M. Dawn revealed that this writer wasn't the only one concerned about rappers putting out "sappy R&B songs." Just six weeks after P.M. Dawn's song reached number one on the pop charts thanks to steady airplay on Top 40 stations, the group was slated to perform the song at Manhattan's Sound Factory for the January 1992 televised birthday show of T Money, host of *Yo! MTV Raps*. As the song began, rapper KRS-One of Boogie Down Productions and his crew jumped on the stage, forcibly removed P.M. Dawn, shouted something like "Don't test BDP," and "proceeded to rock the house to heights of frenzy," as writer Havelock Nelson reported in the first weekly column devoted to rap in *Billboard*. <sup>144</sup>

The ruckus was directly linked to Prince Be's criticism of KRS-One's racial politics. Be claimed that he wasn't interested in racial identity, telling *Details* magazine that "Once you consider yourself black or white, you're stupid. The prejudice thing is so stupid. If you are prejudiced, you are stupid." In comments perhaps indicative of widening cultural and socioeconomic disparities among Black Americans due to the diverging outcomes of racial integration in the second part of the twentieth century and more recent defunding of federal entitlement programs, he said that "Public Enemy and people like that—they just make mountains out of mole-hills." Shifting his aim, he asked, "KRS-One wants to be a teacher, but a teacher of what?" <sup>145</sup>

While an argument over rap's changing racial politics seems particularly apt for this moment, Nelson, among others watching the fracas, believed the fight also represented more general creative differences. "Regardless of their individual philosophies," he writes, "rap artists need to make room for diversity. Whether it incorporates Spandau Ballet riffs or George Clinton grooves, homeboy swagger or nice-guy charm, rap's roots are black. As the browning of America continues, all African Americans should revel in the fact that their culture is becoming universal. They should strive to become hip-hop business people instead of warring among themselves. They should feel proud that they are movin' on up." <sup>146</sup> Rap's mainstreaming, here, was something to be embraced because it gave Black artists access to financial, and perhaps even social, capital. Rappers could become businessmen.

KRS-One didn't agree. He apologized for the incident, saying that he "simply got carried away." <sup>147</sup> But in his group's song that came out only a few weeks later, he doubled down on setting boundaries around a coalescing hip hop community, the insiders invested in the culture. In "How Not to Get Jerked," he describes rap as

music solely for rebels, claiming that any rapper who isn't part of hip hop culture is "a vulture" who "makes money on the culture." He ends his verse by characterizing artists that aren't "pushin' rap to another level," as simply "usin' rap like the devil."<sup>148</sup> KRS-One, as he put it, answered P.M. Dawn's question: he was a "teacher of respect," both concerning himself and the art form that had so utterly transformed his life.<sup>149</sup> P.M. Dawn had disrespected the culture—whether through their sound, their pop success, or their criticism of less mainstream artists. More likely, it was all three.

### "PUSHIN' RAP TO ANOTHER LEVEL"

Rap's crossover focused the attention of many in the rap-music industry on keeping it real in the face of increasing opportunities to sell out. And those concerned did this by defining realness as something other than radio-friendly music.<sup>150</sup> One of the first artists to articulate this distinction in their lyrics was Ice-T in his 1988 song "Radio Suckers," in which he stated that his "hard," "real," "no sell-out" version of rap will never be played on the radio, which he characterizes as a censor afraid of the truths he might tell.<sup>151</sup> When interviewed by *Billboard* a year later, he claimed that there was a difference between the "very generic form of rap on the airwaves" made by rappers willing to "bend to the format" and his music, which he referred to as "true rap."<sup>152</sup>

While Ice-T put the discussion on wax in the late 1980s, this discursive shift became an obsession by the early 1990s. At the 1991 New Music Seminar, for instance, nearly every panel on rap devolved into a discussion about how to "keep rap pure."<sup>153</sup> One of the clearest examples of this concern is the bluntly titled 1992 track by EPMD, "Crossover." Over an ironically catchy sample that helped the song sell more copies than any of their other singles, the group rails against rappers bending to the format, rappers who have changed their style as they try to make "a pop record, somethin' made for the station." For EPMD, crossing over meant crossing out: changing one's appearance, selling out, and making music that was no longer "a Black thing."<sup>154</sup>

But it wasn't just radio-friendly *music* that rappers defined realness against. For by the early 1990s, rap had a problem: what had once been music made by and for minority youth was suddenly music made by and for everybody. How could the genre born out of its distance from the white mainstream—whether musically, socioeconomically, or geographically—maintain this separation while simultaneously enjoying the financial benefits of its mainstream popularity?<sup>155</sup> In other words, how could real rap fans make space for 3rd Bass's Top 40 single, but not those by P.M. Dawn and Vanilla Ice? In a word: audience, for the audience-defined formatting structure of commercial radio made negotiating these boundaries much easier.

Like all Black crossover artists before them, rappers were forced to walk the careful tightrope of making music for their core audience while their success relied

on creating songs for a mainstream, or at least a white, audience. MC Hammer, for example, attempted this high-wire routine following the crossover triumph of “U Can’t Touch This.” As *Please Hammer Don’t Hurt ’Em* was sitting atop the *Billboard* charts, Capitol Records sent out 100,000 mailings that included a cassette of Hammer’s latest single and a letter signed by the artist imploring the recipient to give the song a shot. The specifics of the intended recipients reveal how important maintaining “Hammer’s core audience” was: 70 percent of the mailings went to male teenagers in Black or Hispanic households.<sup>156</sup>

And indeed, this connection with a core audience was coming to define rap, at least according to *Billboard*. In response to the outcry over Milli Vanilli’s inclusion on the “Hot Rap Songs” chart in 1989, the editor had claimed that musical qualities determined inclusion on the chart. But by 1992, *Billboard*’s criteria had shifted. The genre, according to Havelock Nelson, was so diverse in sound that it was hard to determine when “a track with a rhyme stop[s] being rap”; rap’s identity was “intangible,” yet dependent on a “cultural code.” Suzanne Baptiste, the chart manager, wrote that songs included on the “Hot Rap Songs” chart had to have certain musical characteristics: the “verses have to be rap, and the music has to be hip-hop.” But beyond that, it was up to the “hardcore enthusiasts” to decide what was rap.<sup>157</sup> The genre was no longer just a sound, made by musicians—it was also defined by its distance from the mainstream.

The boundary between “hardcore enthusiasts” and the mainstream was of course complex, in ways that T Money’s reaction to the P.M. Dawn incident highlights. In a roundtable published in *The Source*, T Money, the guy at whose birthday party this scuffle occurred, questioned what the mass popularity of a group like P.M. Dawn meant for the genre, ultimately drawing a line between the group and whom he considered to be part of the hip hop community. While T Money was partially responsible for bringing rap into the mainstream—he was, after all, the host of *Yo! MTV Raps*, a primary conduit by which rap reached a white suburban audience—he was also worried about rap reaching that same population. He conceded that P.M. Dawn were “entertainers,” but was adamant in saying, “I don’t think they’re hip-hop, that’s not what hip-hop was built on. Have we gone that far away from the base?”<sup>158</sup> His comment reveals the difficulty of defining a hip hop community, given rap’s expanding audience: T-Money’s career depended upon broadening rap’s base to include some Top 40 audiences but also demanded the establishment of an authenticity framework that separated real rap from the pop stuff.

#### SELLING REALNESS

Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, rap music became deeply invested in realness; the debate about authenticity, as Michael P. Jeffries described it in 2011, “dominates entire songs, albums, and careers.”<sup>159</sup> Realness in rap is itself a performance, one that has often aligned with a specific type of decontextualized, Black, urban hypermasculinity. This is regularly characterized by, as journalist

Miles White writes, “emotional rigidity, a rejection of the feminine acted out in misogynistic behavior, nihilism, and an adherence to a code of the street that prioritizes illicit material gain, ostentatious consumption and the defense of territory defined as both personal and geographical space.”<sup>160</sup> The boundaries of this characterization, like all performances of identity, are developed in complex dialogue with hegemonic societal norms which include reductive and downright racist discourse about Blackness in the United States. As scholars Imani Perry and bell hooks both argue, rap artists’ identities are defined in relation to the historical feminization of Blackness as well as the white male objectification of Black male bodies.<sup>161</sup> But nuanced self-representation wasn’t really at play here: after all, there was music to sell. As scholar Regina N. Bradley writes, “constructions of racial discourse in popular culture cannot be divorced from the effects of capitalism.”<sup>162</sup>

Jon Shecter noted in *Billboard* that rap fans at the beginning of the 1990s could no longer look to the lack of commercial success as a distinguishing quality of rap; the genre now had mainstream popularity. Instead, fans had to negotiate a “web of blurred distinctions,” one that record companies, artists, and radio stations investing in the genre were also attempting to navigate.<sup>163</sup> Rap’s move to the mainstream via Top 40 radio lent this web of blurred distinctions far more clarity because it provided an audience to redefine the genre against. And so artists, labels, and fans constructed boundaries around their genre: real rap was hard, Black, urban, masculine, and underground; Top 40’s white, commodified, suburban, feminized audience came to symbolize everything that rap should not be.<sup>164</sup> While the outsiders programming Top 40 stations likely had no idea, their playing rap helped insiders define the genre and their hip hop community. For artists who did prove popular, this construction of realness helped protect against criticism that they too had sold out.<sup>165</sup> Rap’s commercialization became its “cultural emasculation,” in the words of critic Nelson George.<sup>166</sup>

This meant that there was something worse than a middle-American white male listener—the specter Q-Tip and MC Serch raised, and the intended audience of Run-D.M.C.’s rock-rap hybrid “Walk This Way.” And that something was a white girl from middle America listening to rap. Chuck D dismissed Vanilla Ice on the basis that his audience had nothing to do with rap, saying that he “sells 7 million to 13-year-old white girls who wear braces and hang his poster on the wall. That’s his thing. It has nothing to do with me, with rap.”<sup>167</sup> In her review of a Vanilla Ice concert, Kim Green makes the same point, reassuring herself and the rap fans reading the review that Vanilla Ice’s popularity is “not an issue of rap” because “he is a teen idol for God’s sake,” with fans that she describes as “screaming white children,” “little girls,” and “begging teenagers.” His audience doesn’t comprise real rap fans; his listeners are “people [who] don’t listen to, understand, or like rap.” “They are they,” she writes, “and we are we.”<sup>168</sup>

Redefining real rap in opposition to white and mostly female fans, however, did little to dissuade these same fans, who bought into these new authenticity frame-

works just as easily as they had bought Vanilla Ice posters.<sup>169</sup> These frameworks also helped white-owned major labels predict which artists would resonate with this audience and were thus worth signing.<sup>170</sup> By the summer of 1991, the development of this authenticity framework paid dividends for Priority and Ruthless Records, when they released the second album by the self-proclaimed “World’s Most Dangerous Group,” N.W.A, whose music producer Hank Shocklee described as “like going to an amusement park and getting on a roller coaster ride” for white listeners.<sup>171</sup> White America wanted to experience this ride; when *Billboard* redesigned their album chart to count sales via barcode scans in mostly white suburban areas as opposed to inaccurate record store reports in mostly big cities, the album zoomed to the top of that chart.<sup>172</sup> And white consumption of rap only increased over the 1990s; according to an often-cited but not well-supported estimate, 70 percent of rap-record buyers were white at the end of the decade.<sup>173</sup>

And as realness came to be synonymous with reality, as rap’s businessmen (to paraphrase Jay-Z) turned into businesses themselves, number one albums by Snoop Dogg, Tupac, and Biggie Smalls were accompanied by tabloid stories of their unassailable realness in the form of gang affiliations, murder accusations, and domestic-violence charges.<sup>174</sup> Despite—or more likely because of—these artists’ evident distance from most of the fans who bought their records, rap’s sales continued to climb.<sup>175</sup> Throughout the 1990s, these artists made their way onto Crossover station playlists; Death Row Records, in a brilliant promotional maneuver, turned radio’s insistence on selling advertising against itself and bought commercials featuring a minute of Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg’s “Nuthin’ But a ‘G’ Thang” to prompt listener requests on stations that refused to play the song.<sup>176</sup> All the while, white consumers, white-owned major labels, and white-owned radio stations continued supporting hip hop–influenced hit pop. And as Crossover stations increasingly became where rap lived on the dial, these same white stakeholders also supported the allegedly more real rap, these easily sellable versions of hip hop realness that were defined against the very songs they shared playlists with. Rap was decidedly opposed to pop, according to some. But on the radio? This music—regardless of whether it was Snoop Dogg, MC Hammer, or Marky Mark—was everywhere. It was mainstream.