Conclusion

Formatting Race in the New Century

By 1995, rap had been swallowed whole by the record industry and spat out as West Coast gangsta rappers and their East Coast hard core rivals. The genre was well on its way to becoming the most popular genre in the country even as activists and politicians continued to condemn its influence. It had found a stable home on some commercial radio stations, including Crossover stations like Hot 97 and Power 106 as well as some in the still-fragmented Urban format. And the genre would continue expanding: over the next few years, Puff Daddy and his crew at Bad Boy Records would redefine the mainstream potential of rap with their shiny suit releases; the never-officially-solved murders of rap's two most popular stars, the Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac Shakur, would fuel the popularity of the East and West Coast scenes; the Fresh Prince, now known as Will Smith, would inaugurate his own intensely mainstream version of rap; *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* would become the first rap album to win the Grammy Award for Best Album; the Wu-Tang Clan would develop their aesthetic into a multi-million-dollar clothing brand; and southern rappers such as OutKast, Juvenile, and Master P would explode the sonic and thematic parameters, not to mention the commercial potential, of the genre. Rap in the late 1990s would become a force to be reckoned with.

As would the radio industry. While the identity-challenged Top 40 format lost half of its listeners between 1985 and 1995, other stations picked up the slack. In particular, the Country format expanded thanks to superstar Garth Brooks's growing popularity and rap's lack thereof. Or, at least, that was what country-music producer and executive Jimmy Bowen thought: "Every morning" he claimed, "I get up and thank God for rap music, 'cause it runs people to country."[1] But it was the Telecommunications Act, a 1996 piece of federal legislation that increased the limit on how many stations an individual company could own, that would ultimately change the industry's future. Station prices soared amidst a catastrophic wave of industry consolidation into a few large media conglomerates.

And things were about to get more interesting. By the end of the decade, two teenage computer whizzes and their file-sharing platform Napster threw the music industries into disarray, the advertising industry found new ways to target increasingly connected consumers as they adjusted to new digital marketplaces, and rap surpassed rock and country as the most popular genre in the country—if not the world.[2]

This conclusion analyzes the commodification of music listening in a media economy altered by these regulatory and technological changes. It offers a brief analysis of how music consumption and the methods of monetizing this consumption have changed since the mid-1990s, how the technological innovations of the twenty-first century have challenged the concept of the mainstream, and what the ever-growing popularity of rap says about our contemporary world.

THE NEW BUSINESS OF RADIO

In 1996, the US Congress passed the Telecommunications Act, which deregulated the radio industry by increasing the number of stations that a company could legally own. The industry had initially brought the idea of changing station-ownership limits to Washington's attention during a brief moment of unprofitability in the early 1990s, and the FCC responded in 1992 by increasing the number of stations a single company could own in a local market to as many as six.[3] But by the time Congress passed the Telecommunications Act, the industry had recovered and had plenty of capital to throw around to purchase new stations.[4] Within a year of passing the law, over 2,000 stations changed hands.[5] By the early 2000s, a study found that 70 percent of stations in virtually every radio market were owned by only four companies, including Clear Channel, whose stations reached 27 percent of all commercial radio listeners in the United States.[6] While the Telecommunications Act changed the fortunes of many in the industry, it didn't alter the industry's format structure, which continued to fragment as owners were able to offer advertisers ever more narrowly targeted stations.[7]

The Black-Oriented format, still divided into two subformats defined by their attitude toward rap, rose in popularity throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s.[8] Ownership consolidated as growing corporations priced individual owners out of local markets: by 2007, about 30 percent of Black-Oriented listeners heard white-owned Clear Channel's stations; another 20 percent tuned in to stations owned by the largest Black-owned radio conglomerate in the country, Radio One.[9] And despite concerns that corporate owners might destroy the format, Black-Oriented stations persist as perennially underfunded platforms on which Black artists gain exposure.[10]

The Top 40 format rebounded following its mid-1990s nadir. By the early 2000s, the format was firmly under the control of Clear Channel, whose stations were heard by nearly half of the nation's Top 40 listeners and around a third of those listening to Rhythmic Top 40 stations (the latest name for Crossover stations).[11] While Rhythmic Top 40 stations still played plenty of pop-influenced rap, they lost some of their coalition audience as many Black listeners tuned to Black-Oriented stations and some young Latinx listeners found better-targeted programming on the growing Latin Urban format.[12]

While the Top 40 format was still divided into various subformats, the ideological power of its mainstream held in some part, thanks to media conglomerates' top-down programming decisions. Some programmers hoped that consolidation might prompt innovation, but many corporate owners were wary of experimenting with new formats and instead increased profits by cutting local programmers and news teams.[13] These cost-cutting measures reduced listeners' options; by 2000, Guy Zapoleon concluded that owners slashing programming budgets to please investors had led to the "homogenization of radio programming, reduced creativity and huge spotloads."[14] So while those paying attention to record sales noticed that consumer taste was rapidly decentralizing, on the radio the concept of the popular-music mainstream—or several rival popular-music mainstreams, as Eric Weisbard has theorized—was still plausible because only a few programmers chose playlists for hundreds of stations.[15]

Rap was part of this consolidated mainstream. In the latter half of 2002, Nelly and Eminem fought over the top chart position on the "Hot 100," and singles by Fat Joe (featuring the year's debut star, Ashanti) and Linkin Park peaked at number two. That year, *Billboard* reported that Top 40 stations were "resembling R&B radio more than ever before. There are still genre hits that don't cross over, but they are rare."[16] Record companies seized on this crossover moment. One A&R executive claimed, "[my boss] just wants to cash in right now. We have records to sell, and that's what he cares about. There'll be something or someone else to cash in on tomorrow, after we've tapped this out."[17]

Cashing in, but at what costs? As had long been the case, playing rap didn't mean that stations had the political interests of artists or their diverse listeners in mind. Rather, the business model of the radio industry incentivized catering to white listeners, regardless of a station's music selection. A memo leaked in the late 1990s revealed one company's utter lack of interest in programming music for "ethnic" consumers because, in their words, "when it comes to delivering prospects, not suspects, the Urbans deliver the largest amount of listeners who turn out to be the least likely to purchase."[18] To deliver "prospects, not suspects," radio stations playing rap would need to demonstrate their appeal to white consumers, a requirement that influenced the music they played. For example, legal scholar Akilah N. Folami argues that large white-owned corporations' orientation toward white listeners contributed to the rise of the "gangsta image" as "the defacto voice of contemporary hip hop culture."[19] It's no wonder that rap has been accused of profiting off of racist and misogynistic stereotypes when the genre is often targeted toward white listeners who are often less attuned to the potential damage of these tropes.[20]

Consolidation disempowered local minority communities.[21] Locally owned stations, which often had strong community ties, suffered in a consolidated industry because advertisers often preferred working with larger companies that had designed their station portfolios to facilitate selling multiple specifically targeted demographic packages. When local stations were sold to large radio groups, community advocates found it difficult to sway programming, because stations' corporate owners had little connection to their communities.[22] What's more, stations being programmed by someone half a country away didn't often pay attention to local acts.[23] The smaller scenes from which hip hop developed were rarely highlighted by large radio corporations more interested in maintaining their easy—and lucrative—relationships with major labels. As one programmer put it, "I know Mary J. Blige is a winner. . . . What's gonna make me give up that slot?"[24]

One other development in the radio industry exacerbated the move away from local content: the development of satellite-radio stations that broadcast the same material across the country. In the early 2000s, Sirius and XM (at the time two separate companies) began offering subscription-based radio programming; by 2010, the united company known as Sirius XM controlled the largest share of the radio marketplace. Advertised as an alternative to the standardized playlists heard on consolidated terrestrial stations, satellite radio offered listeners over a hundred narrowcast channels devoid of local programming. Tuning in to "The City" on XM or the multiple stations devoted to Howard Stern on Sirius, listeners could find music and talk more closely targeted toward who they were, or, in the case of a station like XM's "Sunny," how they were feeling. But within a few years programming narrowed, after Sirius and XM realized that niche stations weren't as profitable; while they could subsidize an experimental station with the rest of their portfolio, it made more financial sense to broadcast more standard formats.[25] And listeners tended toward more traditional formats; in 2008, *Billboard* reported that the most popular music station on both of these services was the Top 40–styled one.[26] Like their terrestrial counterparts, satellite-radio companies catered to the tastes of adult listeners for financial reasons. As satellite receivers were available primarily in new cars, these companies skewed their programming towards music they believed new-car purchasers would be interested in hearing. In 2002, this meant that nearly a quarter of the sixty music channels on Sirius were devoted to rock programming; rap and R&B programming had nine dedicated channels, two of which played only older songs, reflecting the new reality that rap's audience had aged into a more easily commodifiable demographic.[27]

BEYOND BROADCASTING

But radio's new corporate owners had only a few years to enjoy their economic gains before the rising popularity of the internet shifted the ground beneath the music industries' feet. At first, the internet had only a marginal effect on the radio industry, although the same couldn't be said for the record industry, which virtually imploded in the late 1990s following the development of file-sharing networks.[28] Most radio programmers were enthusiastic about connecting with their listeners online. Stations used their websites to solicit contest entries, share news about artists, connect advertisers with listeners, display pictures of DJs previously known only by their voices, and ask listeners to test music.[29] As social media became more important to how users engaged with the internet, radio stations connected with listeners via this medium as well.[30] And in the early 2000s, before the royalty rate for simulcasting radio stations had been formally considered, many terrestrial radio stations broadcast their programming over the internet.[31] Listeners appreciated the possibilities internet radio afforded them, as they could tune in to broadcasts from anywhere.[32]

But the relevance of the radio industry has slowly dwindled over the past two decades. Radio-research companies and advocacy groups like Arbitron, Edison Research, and the Radio Advertising Bureau continue publishing research indicating that radio maintains a steady listener base despite competition from other media platforms. In 2006, Arbitron measured that 93.5 percent of the US public listened to the radio, a percentage that far exceeded the reach of newspapers and network TV; in 2018, the company reported that a similar percentage still tuned in to AM/FM radio five days a week, more than consumed streaming audio, podcasts, satellite radio, TV broadcasts, or videos on a smartphone.[33] CEO of Spotify Daniel Ek corroborated the study, noticing that same year that "the vast majority of the minutes that are being spent on radio today haven't yet moved online."[34] But in recent years, even the industry's own surveys have noted decreased listening. In 2021, Nielsen found that 86 percent of people over the age of eighteen in the United States listened to the radio on a weekly basis, tuning in for about twelve hours a week. Younger listeners, the study revealed, more often listened to music online, but the 77 percent of teens who listened to the radio tuned in for an average of seven hours weekly.[35]

In 2000, tech columnist Walter Mossberg forecast that the internet would cause "a tremendous shock to the system of radio as we now understand it," although he wasn't sure of the timeline. The internet, he warned radio programmers, would offer listeners a new option: by pressing a couple of buttons they would be able to generate a station (or, in modern parlance, a playlist) that closely corresponded with their musical tastes. Deriding the radio industry for its "incredibly rigid playlist formats," he wrote that people "listen to [the radio] because that's all they have."

Presented with an alternative that better fit their needs, they wouldn't hesitate to change their behavior.[36]

And that's precisely what has happened over the last two decades. Each successive launch of a myriad of music sites and services such as Last.fm (2002), the iTunes Store (2003), MySpace (2003), Pandora (2005), YouTube (2005), SoundCloud (2007), Bandcamp (2007), Amazon Music (2007), Deezer (2007), Spotify (2008), Tidal (2014), Apple Music (2015), and TikTok (2017) has taken a bite of radio's audience. By 2016, Spotify claimed that their free version's market reach was greater than that of many terrestrial-radio stations, and a 2020 report found that 33 percent of music listening happened via streaming services versus 16 percent on the radio.[37] And increasingly, many people don't even own a terrestrial-radio receiver. Radio groups have tried their best to stay relevant: in the early 2000s, Clear Channel designed a website that allowed listeners to personalize stations, and later they tried to emulate Pandora's success by creating branded artist channels on their iHeartRadio streaming platform.[38] But the declining relevancy of commercial radio stations began affecting advertising rates starting in the late 2000s; in the first nine months of 2009 alone, industry revenue fell by 21 percent.[39] While radio play still matters to many artists because it helps their prospects on the *Billboard* "Hot 100," radio stations no longer do the work of exposing audiences to new music; rather, airplay "helps extend the life of the streaming," according to a major-label commerce chief interviewed in 2021.[40]

All the while, rap has become the most popular and influential style of the last fifty years—musically, it is not so much part of the mainstream as it *is* the mainstream.[41] In part, this is because rap's aging fans have become valuable demographics, a fact visible in the dozens of ads each year featuring rap. Whether they are targeted by throwback acts like Tag Team rewriting the lyrics of their early 1990s hit for GEICO or newer artists like Chance the Rapper shilling for Doritos, rap is now music for people who have money. But it's also because the genre has taken over popular culture: from Snoop Dogg hosting the Puppy Bowl to Kendrick Lamar winning the Pulitzer Prize for music, from the global popularity of K-pop boy band BTS's rapped verses to country artists incorporating trap beats while maintaining some vocal twang, and from rap soundtracking almost every sports arena to Jay-Z and Beyoncé filming a music video in the Louvre.

But even as it has become the most popular genre in the United States, if not the world, rap has retained its outsider status. Each of the above examples, breathlessly reported as a remarkable accomplishment rather than the norm, demonstrates how rap's mainstream inclusion remains unfinished and provisional. Those in positions of power have systematically failed to afford the Black Americans associated with the genre the privileges typically extended to those within the mainstream. For, as media scholar Bill Yousman writes, there are "profound differences between acts of consumerism and acts of citizenship."[42] A half-century after rap first soundtracked parties in the South Bronx, Black Americans still continue to experience economic inequality, disenfranchisement, police brutality, disparities in public education, housing discrimination, racism in the workplace, and mass incarceration.

Just as it was when radio ruled, the reasons for this become clearer when looking at how the music is sold. While scholar Eric Weisbard argues that the Top 40 format has historically been a place for "social outsiders looking to become symbolic insiders," the economic conditions of the late 1980s and early 1990s didn't allow this transformation to occur because rap's radical potential didn't extend to how it was sold to the US public.[43] And the same is true in the contemporary streaming economy.

WHERE HIP HOP LIVES, ON THE INTERNET

Music-streaming services such as Spotify and YouTube combine the radio industry's traditional role of music discovery with the recording industry's traditional role of selling listeners access to music.[44] To help listeners manage their seemingly infinite offerings, these services offer playlists and recommendation systems that prioritize certain artists and styles in much the same way that radio stations do.[45] Appearing on one of the more popular playlists can translate into millions of streams and thousands of dollars; being featured in the top position on Spotify's most important music-discovery playlist, "New Music Friday," for example, was estimated to be worth over $55,000 in 2021.[46] These new means of discovery influence musical production. Labels employ promoters to pitch their songs to playlist curators, and—like they do with the radio industry—make music intended to fit on particular playlists.[47] Only, on streaming services, they have incredible amounts of data to work with.

By combining the point of promotion and consumption, streaming services are able to calculate exactly how a listener engages with a song. While radio programming once depended upon assumptions linking listener and performer, streaming services can now track users' every move, recording what songs get repeated, what songs get downloaded for offline listening, and at what point listeners decide they are ready to change audio content.[48] Obtaining this sort of information in the past took days of surveying; now, streaming services and labels can quickly capitalize on a popular style and more precisely target the sound of a playlist. Closely attending to these data, some critics submit, has led to musical homogenization. Mood-based playlists, which use musical language to keep a listener at a particular emotional level, are certainly some of the clearest examples of this, but genre-based playlists have the same potential.[49]

Since the advent of the internet, critics have forecasted its potential to decentralize media consumption; given access to all music in the form of a "celestial jukebox," why would everyone choose to listen to the same things?[50] But whether because of listeners' crowd-following tendencies or streaming services subtly directing listener choices, this hasn't happened.[51] Instead, listening habits have consolidated to the point that 90 percent of all Spotify streams in 2020 were of just 1 percent of total artists on the platform.[52] And listeners, as they long have, continue to listen to older music, often in lieu of supporting new artists. In 2021, new releases were responsible for only about a quarter of the US music market, and the 200 most popular new songs accounted for only about 5 percent of streams.[53] Many of these new releases are the natural descendants of LL Cool J's and P.M. Dawn's pop-rap hybridity: just as those artists' singles fit the economic constraints of their intended format, so too do Bad Bunny, Drake, and Future, whose songs fill playlists intended to keep listeners engaged across the same emotional level without disruption. While the concept of a popular-music mainstream is harder to imagine in our fractured contemporary-media ecosystem, and while the sound of the mainstream has shifted as rappers from across the globe dominate streaming numbers, streaming platforms replicate the sorts of inequalities long pervasive throughout the music industries.[54] Perhaps the gatekeepers have different titles, but the unequal power dynamics fundamental to creating a mainstream remain the same.

But this mainstream is disconnected from the sort of coalition building that programming Top 40 radio entailed, because the business model of streaming services monetizes individual consumers rather than audiences. Using cookies, "the little data breadcrumbs that you leave behind you as you move around" on smartphones and other digital devices, streaming services collect detailed data about a listener's current state, including their whereabouts, the outdoor temperature, their previous search history, and—if audio assistants like Alexa or Siri are used—their emotional or physical health as analyzed via voice capture.[55] This information is sold in real time to companies hoping to catch consumers in a susceptible state.

Or, rather, information is sold to companies hoping to catch *the part of* a consumer that might be most persuaded by their advertisements. While using consumer information to segment the US public into progressively smaller groups has been standard marketing practice since at least the 1980s, recent technologies allow for more precise targeting.[56] Advertisements on radio stations in the 1980s were targeted toward the specific group of people who listened to each station, but the new world of big data–based personalized marketing divides each listener into granular parts and targets them at exactly the moment they are supposedly most vulnerable to purchasing a particular product, be it listening to Spotify's "Sunday Morning Jazz" while lazily browsing travel destinations or realizing the fridge is empty as they park their car at home at the end of a busy day.

Music helps segment individual people into these discrete parts: switching from "Sunday Morning Jazz" to "Rap Caviar" or "Backyard Barbeque" indicates that a listener is in a different consumption space. Indeed, streaming services sell this kind of information as a valuable and intimate look into a consumer's immediate state.[57] Spotify, for example, claims to have "a personal relationship with over 191 million people who show us their true colors with zero filter," which provides them with "a lot of authentic engagement with our audience: billions of data points every day across devices!"[58] Listening to music via a streaming service lends marketers insight into who users are and how they might be feeling: turn on a "Sad Songs" playlist via your Spotify app and your Facebook feed might feature an ad for a virtual therapy service; listen to a workout-themed playlist and an ad for a local gym might find its way to the next YouTube video you watch. As music scholar Eric A. Drott writes, "playlists increasingly function as a means whereby music consumption taking place *within* the digital enclosure erected by streaming platforms can be used to track who we are, how we feel, and what we do *outside* this digital enclosure."[59] The mood- or activity-based playlists so popular on streaming services only make this work easier.

So what, then, does it mean that rap is the most popular genre in a media economy where music listening is used to divide us into discrete parts to better facilitate consumption? If we are constantly being treated as composites of separate consumptive parts, can listening to music—even on our individual devices, walled off via headphones—still be a means of forging community? Throughout the twentieth century, radio stations acted as a social adherent, bringing local listeners together if only for a song or two. This didn't create an equitable coalition, as the business model of the industry dictated whose voices were centered. As we've seen throughout this book, the mainstream created by Top 40 stations in the 1980s was deeply flawed: the format prioritized white listeners and ignored those that weren't profitable. But at the very least the music the format played was chosen to bring an audience together, turning private consumption into some sort of community where a mainstream American identity was forged, contested, and disseminated.[60] Playing music had ideological weight, at least according to the radio industry's business model.

When rap broke onto Top 40 playlists in the late 1980s, it demonstrated the music and advertising industries' recognition and subsequent bolstering of a diverse mainstream. What had once been marginalized, kept off playlists due to concerns that its fans would lower advertising rates, became part of the sound of musical consensus. And this only happened because programmers reshaped the industry's organization, monetizing multicultural audiences and broadcasting the genres they listened to. Creating music for this new coalition audience changed the genre, as some rappers chose to conform to programmers' musical preferences while others refused to pander to these gatekeepers and their limited conception of what their audiences would tolerate. But even with these alterations, rap's inclusion within the mainstream remained provisional, as one part of the mainstream inched closer to certain styles of rap and their multicultural audiences while another backed away, demonstrating how divided the United States was over multicultural inclusion.

And in the three decades since, the mainstream has continued to disintegrate, as digital media has largely given up on the sort of coalition audiences that the Top

40 format was designed to create. This has made it infinitely more possible to commodify listening to a subcultural genre like rap once was, as personalized marketing techniques can find value in just about anyone's digital footprint (or at least certain parts of it). But rap becoming more commodifiable on its own should not be mistaken for changing racial attitudes, for listening to rap has regularly failed to provoke listeners to tackle the racial divisions so entrenched in US society. As they always have, the financial imperatives of the music industries dictate the terms of rap's inclusion, the terms of the conversations these songs can invite. While popular music itself may offer listeners a chance at solidarity, the contemporary media economy incentivizes the reverse: each time we listen, we participate in the rendering of the public into ever smaller and more siloed moments of consumption. So even as artists continue prompting us to address systemic inequality, listening to these songs in our contemporary world participates in the very economy that has long contributed to social and economic marginalization.