Hip Hop in Singapore: From Vandalism to Art

Hip Hop is a culture replete with rebellious elements and characterized by an anti-establishment attitude. How can Hip Hop find a place in a polished and controlled society like Singapore?

Ningthoujam, J.

The following is an excerpt from the weblog entry of a person who is contemplating visiting Singapore:

'I've got a certain amount of hip-hop and other odd stuff on my iPod. Does Singaporean immigration consider such music to be contraband? I may sound paranoid, but this is the place that just de-criminalized gum.

Alex:
hip hop isn't banned in Singapore the majority of the population hates it the people that like it get stoned to death they see a poster of dr dre and they'd tear it down

Nori:
who says hip hop is discriminated is Singapore?! i think singapore has grown to accept hip hop and even promote it. nowadays u hear almost as much hip hop music here as compared to any other country. three cheers!

Although informal and in few parts hilarious, this small conversation shows the agony and ecstasy of being a Hip Hop follower in Singapore - a country known for its order, planning, penalties and above all, tight state control. Such qualities appear antithetical to the rebellious streak inherent in Hip Hop culture. This then raises the question of whether Hip Hop can find a place in a society like Singapore.

Globalization has influenced the production and proliferation not just of economic assets, but in the media infested world of today, it is affecting the way the modern generation establishes their cultural identity. The impact of popular music and art forms on the way the youth think, act and live is not just a matter of leisure and enjoyment, but also questions the way modern global subcultures like Hip Hop have been propagated, and how they clash with local cultures.

Negotiating the existence of an influential alternative subculture while adapting it to the pre-existing socio-political realities is not always an easy proposition. The case of Singapore is an interesting one and presents a great deal of insight in the way subcultures are created from consumer culture and sustained by its practitioners. Hip Hop as a music and lifestyle industry has propagated itself on the shoulder of a largely Afro-American centric rebellious post civil-rights reality and carries an anti-establishment attitude wherever it goes. In his study of Virtual Communities and Hip Hop in Singapore, Yasser Mattar mentions,

The popularization and subsequent globalization of hip-hop has allowed for the further appropriation of aspects of African American culture that are associated with hip-hop music. While in the United States the appropriation of style is related to identity and resistance against mainstream dominant-ethnic group values, it does not hold the same meaning in Singapore. Consumers of hip-hop in Singapore are found across socio-economic, ethnic and gender categories.

When we place a consumerism-sustained culture like Hip Hop within a consumerism prone society like Singapore, we might expect a cultural fusion. However, this is not the case here and using the local breakdancing and graffiti writing scenes, I shall present my argument that in sustaining a subculture antithetical to the prevalent socio-political realities of Singapore, Hip Hop in Singapore has been ridden of its rebellious wing. In addition this paper will also highlight the manner in which the government has negotiated the rise of a Hip Hop influenced generation by relaxing minor regulations and presenting a platform where Hip Hop can thrive as a socially acceptable subculture.

In order to substantiate my views, I shall first introduce Hip Hop culture from a historical perspective. Subsequently, I will analyze Singaporean society and use anecdotal evidence from personal interviews and a documentary on the graffiti writing scene to highlight the nature of Hip Hop in Singapore.

Introduction: What is ‘Hip Hop’?

For most non-listeners Hip Hop is synonymous with the violence loving, homophobic, sexually aroused and vocally ‘uncensored’ African-American male. Most non-listeners confuse Hip Hop with rap but Hip Hop purist KRS-One ‘explains that while ’rap is something you do, Hip Hop is something you live.’ Hip Hop is composed of five elements, namely, the four artistic styles of breakdancing or “Bboying,” DJ-ting, Emceeing or Rapping, graffiti writing, as well as an intellectual orientation referred to as knowledge or ‘overstanding.’ From its beginnings in the 1970s South Bronx, New York, Hip Hop has since trans-
formed into a cultural lifestyle with a mass following reminiscent of the folk rock acts of the hippy generation. It is testimony to the evolution of the identity of minority groups in a multicultural environment.

In her seminal paper on Hip Hop history Tricia Rose clearly summarizes the socio-economic conditions during the birth of Hip Hop when she says

Postindustrial conditions had a profound effect on Black and Hispanic communities. Shrinking federal funds and affordable housing, shifts in occupational structure away from blue-collar manufacturing and toward corporate and information services, along with frayed locally communication patterns, meant that new immigrant populations and the city’s poorest residents paid the highest price for deindustrialization and economic restructuring. 5

The period of transition from the Civil Rights generation of the 1960s to the Hip Hop generation saw the loss of African-American social and political identities, as well as a decline in their economic power. Hip Hop’s birth in such a climate was an effort by the youth born in this era to identify and express themselves in ‘a hostile, technologically sophisticated, multi-ethnic, urban terrain.’ 3 This new identity was being forged in the areas of fashion, language, street names, neighborhood “crews,” newfound economic empowerment and even religious belief systems. This new identity gradually coalesced into the modern definition of Hip Hop. What began with Jamaican DJ Kool Herc rhyming over pre-recorded music tracks in 1979 slowly culminated into a multi-disciplinary cultural-art form which came to define the modern African-American identity. The association of Hip Hop with African-Americans is so strong that the contribution of other ethnic groups including Puerto Rican Americans to the development of Hip-Hop music has been generally overlooked. 6

Yet to say that modern Hip-Hop is solely an African-American culture would be inaccurate. Rose for example, notes that about 70 percent of Hip Hop consumers in the United States are White suburban youths. 7 In my own study at DefEd (Definitive Education), a Hip Hop foundation in the Bay Area, San Francisco, more than 80 percent of the practitioners were either Hispanic or Asian American. Interestingly enough, Krikit, the person in charge of the foundation was a young white female breakdancer or “bgirl.”

The 1990s saw the rise of Cable television and the Internet making popular culture globally marketable. Hip Hop was no exception. Barring Japan, Hip Hop’s foray into Asia followed the mass-media trail. The following short section will detail the societal nature of Singapore and demonstrate the rise of consumerism and media penetration which has resulted in Hip Hop being exported to this nation.

Consumerism and the Singaporean Society

Singapore is a tiny city-state in Southeast Asia with a recent history. Its multi-ethnic makeup - racially divided into Chinese, Malay, Indian and “Others” - and the resulting issues of inter-ethnic strife in the early days of independence, have caused the People’s Action Party (PAP) government to impose strict rulings to ensure the peace and progress of the nation. H.C. Chan mentions the existence of a ‘siege’ and ‘garrison’ mentality, which prepares Singaporeans for the worse possible scenario in the form of external aggression or internal imbalance. 8 This has resulted in a tightly controlled state. The PAP government has employed a pragmatic mode of governance. 9 Pragmatism refers to a kind of ideological stance whereby citizens take rational actions geared towards the expected receipt of pecuniary remuneration. 10 This has resulted in the transformation of the economy from a developing to a developed one in the course of as little as 30 years of independence.

However the last two decades have seen not only an increase in individual purchasing power and consumerism, but also a growth in the influence of the arts in society. Prior to the 1980s, as the economy was still developing, the arts were regarded as marks of hedonism and inefficiency, very much antithetical to the economic efficiency that has come to symbolize Singapore. However, the marked increase in media penetration, with particular reference to the coming of the Internet age in the 1990s, resulted in a spike in the consumption of Western cultural products including Hip Hop. Hip Hop with its Afro-centric casual appeal, rebelliousness, and cry for individualism appealed to teenagers and young adults. Currently, it is not only making its presence felt in the way the youth think, but as we shall see in the following section, it is also changing the way an erstwhile elitist political institution, namely the PAP, with its mantra of societal and economic efficiency, relates to this new Hip Hop generation.

Changing Attitudes - Singapore and Hip Hop

Examining Hip Hop culture in an alien environment is not just challenging, but also raises questions about the authenticity of the imported culture. Asian Hip Hop is not an inbred culture but rather a marketable product of the MTV wave and free market capitalism. Concurrently, the values, ideals and ‘authenticity’ of Hip Hop get diluted and commercialized when it crosses the Pacific. What is being sold is a product, packaged around the African-American “gangsta” lifestyle and “thug” theme. Unlike the case of African-Americans, an authentic identity is not being created in this scenario, but rather is being fused
with pre-existing realities, consequently modifying not just the cultural landscape of the host society but also the very nature of Hip Hop.

With regards to Japanese Hip Hop culture, Ian Condry asks the following question:

Is this the spread of “Western-style consumerism” or a process of “Americanization”? What kind of social and cultural effects are associated with the spread of music styles? What drives the spread of these styles, and to what extent is it “top-down” or “bottom-up”? (Indeed, what is the “top”? America? Media conglomerates? Dr. Dre?) If it is “bottom-up,” organically emerging from local artists, lifeways, and politics, does this mean we have nothing to fear from the consolidation of media businesses and the transnational spread of popular culture?31

Although he does not give an answer, he paints a picture of an American-influenced popular culture which has been adapted to suit the local flavour. However, unlike Japanese ‘Genba’ Rap, South African Kwaito or Indian Bhangra which have drawn influences from Hip Hop and localised it to form a fusion music, Singaporean Hip Hop is still very much in a nascent stage and imitation forms the core behind much of the Hip Hop music, dance and art that we see in Singapore. Barring the more established artists like Garuda and DJ Ko Flow, most of the music is confined to local clubs, underground scenes and the realm of myspace.com. Concurrently I have focused much of my research on the non-vocal and more visible aspects of Hip Hop culture - street fashion, bboy-ing, and graffiti writing. Hip Hop reached Japan in the 1980s whereas, as Bboy Calvin, a young Singaporean breakdancer says, ‘Hip Hop in Singapore became noticeable only towards the end of the last decade.’ However, it is interesting to observe the way Singapore has negotiated the rebellious nature of Hip Hop by internalising and institutionalising it.

Before delving into the world of Hip Hop practitioners, I shall introduce the Hip Hop consumers and how their choice of music and culture is affecting the way they look at the larger society and how the society looks at them, thereby creating their own small identity in this larger group. In her essay “Globalization and Identity” Catherine Den Tandt questions ‘how the purchase of (that) music form, and subsequent exchanges (both material and symbolic) in which it figures, contributes to the formation of status groups and group identity.’32 We can raise a similar question when examining the Hip Hop consumer culture in Singapore. Perhaps the most noticeable change in Singaporean culture is the evolution of a distinctive fashion style that is an amalgam of Hip Hop and punk rock street-wear. Singaporean street fashion today is replete with canvas shoes, spotty, colourful and at times gaudy clothes and the usual caps, hats and baggy attire. Even more interesting to observe is the way some young Malay Muslim girls have chosen to abandon their traditional headscarves in favour of this new fashion statement. However, not every one who wears these clothes necessarily subscribes to Hip Hop culture. As Murray Forman mentions with regards to Somali teenagers ‘sometimes the decision is one of practicality, mood, or peer pressure.’33

Nevertheless, this change in dressing sense has resulted in the common Singaporean associating Hip Hop with the ‘Ah-Beng’ cultural stereotype. Although there are no formal definitions, ‘Ah Beng’ and ‘Ah Lian’ (the former’s female counterpart) are colloquial terms popularly used to refer to young Chinese males and females who are perceived to have little intellectual and cultural capital, have a very flashy and gaudy fashion sense, and may even employ a lot of vulgarities in their speech.34 Even though some correlation can be drawn between them and Hip Hop culture, a closer look yields an unauthentic lifestyle borrowed not just from Hip Hop, but also from various other Western pop cultures such as Punk Rock, Heavy Metal and Goth. Moreover as I found through informal conversation, most of these individuals do not even listen to rap music let alone follow the Hip Hop cultural discourse. Rather ‘Ah Beng’ is a distinct consumer sub-culture fueled by an innate desire to conform to what is defined as ‘cool’ at the present moment. Consequently Ah Bengs of the 21st century have adopted Hip Hop as their definition of 21st century ‘cool’. However they come across as unauthentic in their mimicry of Hip Hop culture.

Moving beyond consumer culture, Hip Hop in Singapore is experiencing a genesis, which is very much in conflict with the white-collar sophistication of Singapore. The Esplanade Underpass is one of the few places in Singapore where Hip Hop seems alive. The atmosphere is comparable to New York’s Central Park or Tokyo’s Yoyogi Park but on a smaller scale. Here bboys and bgirls come out, congregate, practice and promote some of their dance skills. Going back to Ian Condry’s question of whether spread of hip hop is a process of “Americanization,” I would like to point out certain factors differentiating the Hip Hop practitioners in Singapore. To begin with, the small size of the community delimits the formation of crews and gangs. Bboy Calvin mentions that there are forty or so people in the bboy ing circle in Singapore and consequently they do not function as crews battling with one another as seen in the more developed locales. Rather, there exists a more institutionalized process of group formation and peer review learning. Street battles have been transformed into dance competitions. Even where there are crews and posses, such as those comprising the graffiti writers, there is an absence of violent territorial demarcation as seen in the early days of Hip Hop in America. Rather, the graffiti crews of Singapore such as Zinc Nite Crew (ZNC) are more collaborative and to some extent even exist in a
symbiotic relationship. The small size of the community also makes the Hip Hop practitioners interdependent, thereby compelling the Emcees, DJs and Graffiti writers to collaborate in album productions and marketing. In addition, the presence of well-established social networks and strong familial structures in Singapore prevent young adults from going beyond the stage of a Hip Hop consumer to a practitioner. Unlike the United States, where Hip Hop became a viable source of income for African-American practitioners, the lack of economic incentive in being a Hip Hop practitioner causes most underground artists in Singapore to take up full time professions in-addition to practicing their art.

Although Hip Hop may seem to have become toned down in Singapore, it would be inaccurate to cite the complete absence of the genre's characteristic rebellious attitude. Nevertheless, it is true that accommodating the existing socio-political realities of Singapore while retaining Hip Hop's youthful angst is not easy. Prior to 1998 when artists like Slacsatu and the ZNC started to feature graffiti art on public walls around the youth skate park, Singaporeans had never witnessed graffiti walls before. Slacsatu and his fellow mates of the ZNC continued ‘bombing’ or indulging in illegal graffiti writing till they were charged with Vandalism in 2000. In the documentary ‘The Art of Vandalism’ Slacsatu corroborates this tale and further recounts how they managed to fight the case in court and reduce the charge to that of a mischievous act. Although put on probation for a year, they managed to get the first legal graffiti wall in Singapore. Slacsatu further mentions his goal to keep ‘bombing’ and fighting for the legalization of graffiti walls. Coincidentally after their probation, they were sanctioned as legal artists by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports. This was not just recognition of their talent, but an acknowledgment of the growing influence of Hip Hop and the need to provide more legal provisions for its growth. Similarly today, what was once banned is now featured in exhibitions and competitions for young talents. Most of the talented new graffiti writers are trained in graphical art at prominent Institutes of Technical Education (ITEs) but unlike the previous generation, they seem to have found their ‘canvas on the walls’. This freedom of expression and liberation from the constrains of traditional and commercial art seem to have resonated well with the younger generation.

Perhaps the most interesting development in the ‘top-down’ recognition of Hip Hop occurred during the 2007 Chingay Parade, when 12 “post-65” Members of Parliament belonging to the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) decided to participate in a Hip Hop dance segment to connect better with youths. It elicited a variety of reactions on the Singaporean blogosphere with some being critical and others sympathetic. However what interested me most was a comment by Hri Kumar, one of the PAP members who performed onstage. Following the reaction to their dance performance, he commented on his weblog,
Endnotes


4 Tricia Rose “A style nobody can deal with” in Mapping Multiculturalism, ed. Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 430.

5 Rose, “A style nobody can deal with”, 433.

6 Mattar, Virtual Communities”, 291.


13 Forman, “Keeping it real”, 124.


15 The Art of Vandalism, Online Video, Directed by Eman, Singapore


17 “Post-’65” Ministers of Parliament (MP) is a term used to refer to those MPs born after Singapore’s independence in 1965.
