

Perfect Beat v7n4 January 2006

## PUBLICATION REVIEWS

**Maxwell, I (2003) *Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes: Hip Hop Down Under Comin' Upper*, Middletown (Connecticut): Wesleyan University Press**

A few years ago, a new National Museum of Australia opened on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin in Canberra, Australia's capital city. Both the design of the museum and the contents of its exhibitions had been controversial, caught up in the culture wars initiated by the conservative Howard Government. I popped along to see what the fuss was about. Upon arrival, my fellow visitors and I were herded into a small theatre where an introductory film was to provide a brief introduction to Australian history and culture. Within a minute, I was ready to start yelling back at the screen. The film began with an awful, conservative (although widely circulated) narrative of Australian national identity – of proud colonial beginnings, of mateship forged in war, and so on. But my reaction was possibly the intended effect. Suddenly, the narrative was cut mid-stream, interrupted by the sound of a record being backspun in order to be re-cued – a noise inextricably linked with hip hop music. Then the scene abruptly changes to a hip hop jam, where a young female MC (MC Trey) raps about multiculturalism and Australian identity.

To me at least, this was pretty remarkable. It signalled that the local hip hop scene had achieved quite a degree of recognition as a part of the Australian cultural landscape. If this recognition was limited to relatively small numbers of fans and sympathisers in the intelligentsia in the mid 1990s, it has subsequently continued to expand. Locally-produced hip hop has now established a solid foothold in the mainstream Australian music market. Acts like Koolism and the Hilltop Hoods have their songs aired regularly on commercial radio and music television.

The growing profile of locally-produced hip hop in the Australian cultural landscape makes Ian Maxwell's excellent book all the more timely. It traces the initial emergence of Australian hip hop, focusing particularly on Sydney scenes. Maxwell states that he is not writing as a 'fan' (11). As such, this book is not a standard narrative history of the emergence and growth of a local hip hop scene which focuses on influential individuals and events. Rather, Maxwell is primarily concerned with the labours involved in the making of a hip hop scene. He takes an ethnographic approach to understanding the localised production of a hip hop social imaginary – through what truth discourses and practices do participants in the Sydney hip hop scene understand themselves to be doing hip hop?

The book proceeds in 3 sections. First, Maxwell devotes space to his approach to

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the making of culture, setting out a framework which emphasises the importance of discourse and performance, rather than identity and essence. From here, he establishes the book's agenda for tracing the strategies through which a heterogeneous field of practices (such as rapping, graffiti writing, breakdancing, wearing particular kinds of clothes, etc) came to be articulated into a unified conception of a culture called Hip Hop.

In the second section, 'Locations', Maxwell investigates the ways in which participants in Sydney hip hop have situated their activities through different discourses. In three chapters, he discusses how Sydney hip hoppers located themselves within historical narratives of hip hop culture, within global geographies of hip hop's mediated global circulation, and within the local geographies of the city of Sydney and the Australian nation. In order to explore the production of these discourses, Maxwell has paid close attention to the spaces and media through which they are articulated – the community radio shows, the 'zines and liner notes on cassette and album sleeves, and the lyrics of various raps by local artists. He also conducts interviews with participants in the scene. We are treated to fascinating accounts of how participants understand hip hop's origins, both in the United States and in Australia, and of the hard work they put into developing outlets for the circulation of narratives about hip hop culture.

In the third section of the book, 'Performance', Maxwell argues persuasively that identification with hip hop culture – *being* hip hop – is more than a matter of ideas and discourse; it is a "state of being" associated with particular kinds of embodied performance and affect (178). Here, Maxwell pays close attention to the practices of rapping, listening, making beats, dancing and writing graffiti. He provides lively accounts of freestyle battles on community radio and on the floor of an independent record shop specialising in hip hop, and of the dance floor dynamics of concerts and hip hop jams. This section gives Maxwell's book a terrific depth – having already demonstrated the importance of representational discourses in the previous section, he now pushes his analysis into a territory beyond that which could be achieved through discourse analysis. He makes a powerful case that meaning is not only a matter of words – it is also a matter of phatness, of flow, of groove, of feeling. What is more, he finds ways to write about these non-textual elements of hip hop that effectively convey their importance.

As hip hop goes global, the making (and analysis) of hip hop scenes by people outside of the US lives under the shadow of its origins there. As Maxwell notes, those involved in making the hip hop scene in Sydney have developed a particular strategy to address the tensions involved in their appropriation of cultures and forms from elsewhere. They effectively define authentic hip hop in terms of performance and practice of its constituent elements, thus opening up a space for their own identification with (and representation of) the culture:

*the massive labor of effacing the irreducible discontinuity of experience between (a perceived) African-American Hip Hop and the local experience relies on the fabrication of an idea of an abstractable, reified essence of Hip Hop, an essence evidenced, and thereby given*

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*credence (the term used within the scene is 'represented'), by the public, visible, sustained practice of rapping, writing, and breaking.*  
(46-47)

Authenticity, here, is about being 'true' to this essence. Further, these essential hip hop 'elements' are conceived of as tools for thematising local experiences. From this perspective, hip hop is understood to have emerged as a means for representing the experience of living in the New York ghettos. As such, its forms are perceived to be adaptable for young people to represent their experience of growing up in Sydney's western suburbs. 'Keeping it real', in this context, is about representing the culture by being true to one's place. As British (and white) b-boy Patrick Neate (2004) put it in the title of his recent book on the state of global hip hop, borrowing from a line from New York MC Rakim, "it's not where you're from, it's *Where You're At*". This explains the connection Maxwell observes between the discourses of the nation in the local hip hop scene and discourses of Australian (multi)culture propagated by the Australian state – indeed, as Maxwell notes, there is a "neat fit between their respective discourses" (167). Little wonder, then, that MC Trey could appear on screen at the National Museum.

Of course, this strategy for making hip hop culture in Sydney raises questions about the racial politics at play. The issue of hip hop's appropriation by non-African-American white young people in Australia, who are at some remove from its origins in the Bronx, is addressed sensitively by Maxwell in the book's opening pages. As he notes, hip hop's forms have escaped their moorings through their global circulation. While he situates this circulation within a globalised politics of race, he conceives of his task not as presenting an ideological critique of Australian hip hop, but rather as presenting an ethnographic account of how the subjects he researched "justified and sustained their claim to Hip Hopness" (x).

Unfortunately, Maxwell's North American publishers don't seem to have handled this issue with quite the same degree of sensitivity. The press release accompanying my review copy of the book reads in part: "Author Ian Maxwell explains how middle-class, white Australians – members of the 'master race' – partake in a hip-hop culture rooted in black slavery". With this line, it seems to me that the publishers are trying to position Maxwell's book as a contribution to a debate about authenticity that he seeks to avoid.

I do not mean to suggest (nor does Maxwell) that these debates about authenticity are unimportant. Clearly, the on-going appropriation of (primarily) African-American music and culture by whites deserves critical analysis – Greg Tate's (2003) edited collection on this issue bears the title *Everything But the Burden*, his answer to the question of "what white people are taking from black culture" in the United States today. But these issues take on more complex layers when the global nature of hip hop's circulation is taken into account. The politics of identity and identification which sustain hip hop scenes outside of the US have become the subject of critical scrutiny both by academic scholars of these scenes

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and by their participants. Tony Mitchell's edited collection *Global Noise* (2001) brings these issues to the fore, and Patrick Neate (2004) also has a crack at them in *Where You're At*. Neate presents portraits of his travels to various cities around the world where different hip hop scenes have established themselves. Flipping the script somewhat, he provocatively accuses much hip hop in the USA of being complicit in a general American refusal to engage with the rest of the world on any other terms but their own. In terms of 'underground' (that is, non-commercial) hip hop, he finds much more to be excited about in Johannesburg than in New York City.

But rather than staking out his own ideological position in these debates, Maxwell is more concerned to talk about the constructions of authenticity that are produced in the local scene. Here, he discusses the whiteness of many participants in the Sydney hip hop scene not from a structuralist perspective, but rather by charting exactly how those participants found ways to position themselves as both white and hip hop. As Maxwell notes, this meant directly addressing their relation to African-American hip hop. But it gets even more complicated – not all young people in the scene were (or are) white, and these participants have emphasised the experiences of racism shared by African-Americans, Australian Aboriginals and young people of minority ethnicities (as MC Trey, a young woman of Fijian descent, did in the 1998 documentary on Sydney hip hop, *Basic Equipment*). Further, the scene Maxwell documents existed in parallel (and some tension) with a hip hop club scene, playing American-made hip hop to audiences primarily constituted by minority ethnic young people of colour, in which 'blackness' (rather than being an exponent of the 'four elements') remained an indicator of authenticity (see D'Souza and Iveson, 1999).

In contrast to his sophisticated treatment of these issues, I think Maxwell's deployment of 'class' in the book is problematic in some respects. He does deploy 'class' in a structuralist manner when seeking to position some participants in the hip hop scene as 'middle-class'. Certainly, questions of class are important here – but a more interesting approach to this question might have been to further explore exactly how different participants are able financially to sustain their involvement in a hip hop scene which did not, during Maxwell's research period at least, offer many opportunities for making a living. We are treated to some very suggestive glimpses in Maxwell's book – of rappers thinking of similes for their next freestyle session while on the job as air-conditioning mechanics, of DJs supporting their record collecting obsession with dead-end jobs at chicken shops, and of bedroom recording sessions interrupted by parents who want some peace and quiet. More sustained reflection on this might have added even further depth to Maxwell's story.

Like all good books, this one left me curious about 'what happened next'. In particular, I wonder how some of the participants in the scene that Maxwell writes about would feel about his analysis. I also wonder about how Maxwell's informants would feel about Australian hip hop's increased profile in the

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mainstream since he completed his research. The subtitle for Maxwell's book, *Hip Hop Down Under Comin' Upper*, is taken from a rap by Def Wish, part of which was:

*It won't be too long before we're breaking down the doors  
Of record companies who ignore the fact that hip hop  
Down under is just as strong... (166)*

Perhaps Def Wish's 'wish' has come true? If so, this would have profound effects for the strategies of culture making Maxwell discusses, which located Australian hip hop outside of the cultural mainstream.

Small concerns and curiosities aside, I think *Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes* is an excellent and thought-providing read. It succeeds both as an informative and lively study of a particular music scene and as a novel blueprint for a nuanced performative approach to researching music scenes and cultural production more generally. As such, it should be of interest to readers of this journal regardless of their prior interest in Sydney hip hop.

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### **Cox, C and Warner, D (eds) (2004) *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, New York: Continuum**

There are many sad consequences for the decline of the scholarly monograph market. One outcome is the explosion of rudimentary textbooks that every two or three years manage to gather sufficient corrections and alterations to justify a new edition, thereby destroying the secondhand book market. A second effect is the rise in 'Readers', those collections of earlier published writings, which save students the bother of actually going into a library and reading deeply in a field about which they intend to be expert. While the Reader revolution has its benefits, I am yet to be convinced that bullet points, keywords and questions at the end of a chapter have any place in a university's programme of teaching and learning.

One of the best collections of readings I have come across in recent years is *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*. Edited by Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner, of Hampshire College in Massachusetts, the reader encases well chosen, effectively presented and erudite selections of important works, not only for popular music studies but also for the teaching of sonic media. The necessary names and extracts are present, including Simon Reynolds, Marshall McLuhan, Iain Chambers, Brian Eno, Kodwo Eshun and David Toop. However there are also some surprises and finely ordered discussions in the 57 reprinted extracts. What I appreciate is the diversity: composers duel with journalists, producers work against academic writers. Cox and Warner have quarried books, magazine articles, liner notes and e-interviews.