

Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes: Hip Hop Down Under Comin' Upper
Ian Maxwell
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Review by:
Tom Solomon
Grieg Academy—Institute for Music
University of Bergen
Lars Hilles gt. 3
5015 Bergen
Norway

The last few years have seen a steady growth in research on the international spread of rap music and Hip Hop. While a number of journal articles and two edited volumes (Androutsopoulos 2003, Mitchell 2001) have recently explored rap and Hip Hop outside the USA, monograph-length ethnographic investigations of local Hip Hop scenes outside the USA are only now beginning to appear. The first is Ayhan Kaya's book (2001) on Hip Hop youth culture in the Turkish diaspora in Germany, focusing on the Berlin scene. The second is the volume reviewed here, a study of a Hip Hop scene in Sydney, Australia. The author, Ian Maxwell, is Chair of the Department of Performance Studies at the University of Sydney. The book is a revision of his doctoral thesis, based on research from August 1992 to October 1994.

The main body of the book is divided into three main sections — "Introduction," "Locations," and "Performance" — each composed of two or three chapters. These three sections are framed by an opening preface and prologue, and a concluding epilogue.

The two chapters in the section "Introduction" establish Maxwell's theoretical points of departure and present some ethnographic vignettes that introduce some basic premises and practices of Hip Hop in Sydney. Maxwell describes his approach as a phenomenological analysis, and he is explicitly concerned with the relationships between experience and language — how Sydney hiphoppers negotiated a dialectic between embodied experiences and the textualized narratives that they deploy to explain those experiences.

The three chapters of section two, "Locations," make up the bulk of the book. Chapter 3, "Origins," examines narratives of the local history of

Hip Hop in Sydney, and how participants in the scene used these narratives to authenticate their practices. The central chapter of this section, "Global Cultural Flows," is the longest chapter of the book. Here Maxwell provides an extended discussion (ca. 60 pages) of how Sydney hiphoppers engaged with and used the materials of Hip Hop public culture that circulate globally (what, borrowing Appadurai's terminology, he calls "the global Hip Hop mediascape"), including recordings, films, mainstream publications like *The Source*, fanzines, and academic writing on Hip Hop. Maxwell shows how Sydney hiphoppers reterritorialized these materials in their creations of a local Hip Hop scene. But the level of analysis here is primarily textual, as in, for example, his lengthy discussion of locally produced fanzines, with long quotations from articles in the zines and analyses of the discourses deployed in them. Maxwell recognizes that this privileging of the written word may be methodologically problematic, but defends his discussion by noting that much of Hip Hop practice (e.g. rapping, graffiti) is itself logocentric. Chapter 5, "West Side and the Hip Hop Imaginary," focuses on local place-making practices, examining the ways in which local actors produced a Hip Hop cartography of Sydney, and the relationships between Australian nationalist discourses and the discourses of a specifically Australian Hip Hop.

In part three, "Performance," Maxwell turns from discourses to the ways in which agents articulate their experiences and performances to these discourses. Chapter 6 focuses on rap music. After a brief review of some issues related to the musicological study of mediated popular musics, Maxwell turns to a discussion of how rap tracks were made in the (bedroom-) studio, and then presents brief but sensitive musicological analyses of rap tracks by two different Sydney groups. He concludes the chapter with a discussion of how local ideas of being "true to the music" were deployed to connect local music-making with African-American musical practices, and thus to authenticate local musical practices.

While Maxwell states early on his concern with embodiment, the bulk of the book remains at the level of discursive analysis of experiences as textualized in and mediated through discourse. He finally gets to discussing embodied experiences more directly in chapter 7, titled, perhaps predictably, "Dance." But besides just breakdancing, Maxwell also discusses here embodiment in relation to other practices, including DJing and rapping. Going beyond simply the texts themselves of raps, Maxwell discusses, for example, the feeling of the sound booming from the speakers that one hears on the dance floor at a Hip Hop show, and "the affective, embodied dimension of rhyming" (p.224).

One issue Maxwell is particularly concerned with throughout the book is ways in which participants in the scene he studied authenticated their own practices and emplaced themselves within the global imaginary of the "Hip Hop nation." This issue is highlighted by the fact that the Hip Hop scene he studied was populated mostly by white, middle class young men who largely distanced themselves from Pacific Islander and other "ethnic" Hip Hop groups in Sydney (pp.66-67). Maxwell says he is "not interested in adjudicating the relative 'authenticity' of an Australian 'take' on Hip Hop" (p.47); that is, he is not concerned with passing judgment on whether white middle class Sydney hiphoppers can legitimately include themselves in the social imaginary of the Hip Hop nation. He is, however, interested in the discursive strategies these young people deployed to authenticate their own practices. This thread runs throughout the book, and in different places in the book he discusses various ways in which local actors authenticated their practices. He argues that white middle class Sydney hiphoppers constructed an "ideology" of Hip Hop that transcended race and class (p.65), and that they posited for the Sydney scene "the possibility of its truth as Hip Hop without predicating that claim on a simple identification of skin color, of shared blackness" (p.96). Maxwell argues that this Hip Hop ideology was predicated on otherness, but rather than being an otherness based on race or class, it was "a more generalized notion of 'otherness' or marginalization around which a desire to 'be' Hip Hop constellate; racial or ethnic otherness might then be considered a special case of a more general sense of otherness, the specificity of which might take any number of forms" (p.46). For Sydney hiphoppers there were, he suggests, "other ways to be 'other'" (p.65). One basis for this otherness may be geography; in this regard Maxwell discusses the way in which the western suburbs of Sydney, where the scene he discusses is centered, are demonized and marginalized within the geography of Sydney as a whole (chapter 5). Another basis for otherness is that it is not a marginalized group within youth (blacks, "ethnics," the working class), but <i>youth</i> itself that seeks emancipation (p.46). But the most compelling basis for this sense of otherness is based on affect, on "predicating a community based on an affective identity, rather than on blood descent" (p.97). For these Sydney hiphoppers "what counted was being 'true' to the 'ideals' of Hip Hop" itself (p.65); if you are true to these ideals, that's enough to make you authentically part of the social imaginary of the Hip Hop nation. On this basis, "A white Sydney kid could claim to empathize with a black American kid through the shared experience of Hip Hop, which had an ontological primacy" (p.205). The argument that the practices of white middle-class suburban young men from Sydney, Australia can be authentically Hip Hop may be heresy to

those who wish to claim Hip Hop as belonging to its original creators and other groups whose socially marginalized status can be more obviously demonstrated to have a material basis. It could be argued that the use of rap and Hip Hop by these young people in Sydney represents just another chapter in the long history of white appropriations of black music. But Maxwell wisely avoids getting caught up in these polemics. While he recognizes the power of essentialist discourses, he prefers to maintain an anti-essentialist stance when discussing the affective bases for community formation.

Returning to the larger theoretical perspective of the book, Maxwell's interest in the dialectic between experience and its articulation to discourse — its textualization — reflects also a tension in his research methodology and his own writing practices here, and reflects more generally a tension between participant-observation based ethnographic research and a cultural studies approach to the analysis of the mediated texts of public culture. Since the research report in the form of a journal article or book must take a written form, it is often easier to rely on written sources when constructing a research report. The vagaries of field work and the difficulty of reducing experience to written text make it especially tempting to rely on sources already conveniently textualized by the very actors whose expressive practices one is studying. The result, however, can be an over-emphasis on already-texted discourse that — while providing useful material that when sensitively analyzed can contribute to the discussion — can lead the researcher into the trap of neglecting other practices and non- (or pre-) textualized experiences of local people involved in a scene. For the most part, Maxwell successfully negotiates this methodological tension, reading, for example, fanzines "ethnographically" in dialog with his data from participant observation and ethnographic interviews.

This book is important for a number of reasons. Maxwell's synthesis of ethnographic and cultural studies text-based methods is a model that can be emulated by future researchers of local popular music-based scenes, including genres other than rap and Hip Hop. Within Hip Hop studies, the book's chief contribution is perhaps to a de-essentializing of rap and hip-hop as an expression of "black," "ethnic," or class resistance to hegemony. While resistance is an important part of Hip Hop discourse both in its global mediations and in many local scenes, too many authors (and I include here academics, not just writers of popular journalism) seem too eager to buy into unquestioningly and celebrate this discourse of resistance and ignore other, more contradictory aspects of Hip Hop as expressive culture. While the politics motivating this celebration are

noble, the result is a ultimately a patronizing essentialism that does little to help us understand the contradictory nature of popular cultural expressions. Maxwell carefully avoids this kind of essentialism. His respect for his interlocutors and desire to take their words and actions seriously does not prevent him from maintaining the critical perspective appropriate in popular culture studies.

References Cited

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