

# SCHOOL'D BY FUNKMODE

You want to become a Hip Hop expert? Learn the info below and you're on your way, yo!

## HOW HIP HOP MUSIC IS MADE

In the very beginning, Hip Hop music was no more than a DJ inventively mixing popular albums at a party while shouting out to the crowd. Before long, one turntable became two and the DJ turned over shout out duties to a dedicated MC who crafted clever rhymes to entertain the audience as they danced to the music. Ultimately, the MC's rhymes became a show unto itself and gave way to the creation of a whole new genre of music called Rap. Today, Rap is known all over the world as the voice of Hip Hop. It is a billion dollar industry, commanded by experts in every aspect of music making. However, Rap is still made at the street level, as well. In this lesson, we are going to look at how a Hip Hop song is made. From idea to distribution, you will learn how the professionals do it and also how you can make your own Hip Hop music.

## CONCEPTUALIZATION

At this stage in the process, making a Hip Hop song is not tremendously different from making any other kind of song. What is unique about producing Hip Hop is that you are rapping, possibly using samples, most likely using digital instruments instead of analog and perhaps employing a DJ as a musician. However, regardless of the genre or product, if you are going to make anything, first you need an idea. You have to ask yourself what you are trying to accomplish with this work and how you are going to get there. At this stage, some questions you will consider are, what do I want this song to be about? What style of rap am I going to deliver? How do I want my voice to sound? Am I going to be the only person rapping on this track? Will there only be rapping on this song or do I want some part of it sung? What is the mood of this song? What do I want the beats to sound like? Who is my audience and how do I best speak to them? What is the tempo of this track? Will I be using samples on this track and, if so, which ones? Will I be producing this song by myself or will different people handle each aspect of production? Once I create the song, how will I get it out to people? Is this a single I am producing or is it part of a larger album? If it is part of an album, how does it fit in with the rest of the tracks? Have I ever made a song like this before? Has any artist made a song like this before? All of these questions and more are important to answer early on as each affects the type of song you will make. Once you have these questions answered, it is time to start composing.

## COMPOSING

Which comes first, writing lyrics or composing an instrumental track? An artist using an analog instrument like a guitar might get a line in her head and then strum out a guitar melody to match that vocal idea. However, in Hip Hop, it is more likely for a second person to be producing the instrumental track, while the rapper simply handles writing. In that situation, most rappers will want to wait to hear the beat and then get to writing. Sometimes rappers produce beats as well. Not only is this common at the home studio level, where the artist may handle every aspect of production, but also at the professional levels where you have producers like Kanye West, Timbaland and Pharrell writing both the lyrics and crafting the instrumentals. Composing in Hip Hop is unique compared to other musical genres because, as mentioned earlier, it usually includes sampling, digital instruments and a DJ on a turntable. Therefore, when creating a Hip Hop instrumental, you have considerations such as, what type of machine am I going to use to make this track (drum machine, turntables, computer)? If I use a computer, which software am I going to use? Do I want to create something that can be reproduced at some point with analog instruments? Do I want to include analog instruments? Will I need to get clearance for a sample that I use? Do the sound and tempo match the style of song I'm producing? Who is rapping on this track? Once those basic questions are answered, you get started. If you are creating the track using a computer/software, just like an analog band, you have to choose which instruments you want to use. Digital Audio Workstations (DAW, the software used to make Hip Hop/Electronic Music) work off of a repository of musical instrument samples that potentially give you every instrument in the world at your fingertips. Once you choose the instruments you will use, just like any composer, you start to arrange those instruments into melodies and beats that suit the music you want to make. This can be a simple or tremendously time consuming process depending on the song you are making. Hip Hop music tends to have many layers and therefore a well composed Hip Hop song tends to require great skill and effort to sound just right. In addition, skillful Hip Hop composers will often go to great lengths to make an instrumental made from digital instruments sound as if they are actually analog instruments or mix up their instrumental/vocal samples so drastically that they are unrecognizable from the original. Moving on, now that the beat is made, it is time to bring it to life with lyrics.

## WRITING

Writing Hip Hop lyrics is a nearly unparalleled experience in our modern world of music. Unlike almost all other music, Hip Hop is primarily spoken, or ... rapped. This provides new opportunities and challenges for a Rap writer. For example, even content is unique when it comes to Rap. Rap emerged from shouting out the crowds but gained its strength in the battle circles. What is rapped in battle circles does not usually follow a contextual flow but rather is a stream of consciousness made up in the moment, meant to dazzle the crowd and outperform an opponent. Therefore, MCs often write their raps as if they were being delivered in a hypothetical battle, not following any kind of narrative or theme but simply to show off vocal or rhyming ability. However, many MCs also write songs that speak directly to particular subjects or tell stories, therefore making



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writing Hip Hop music unique. As another point of contrast, a singer usually chooses a few melodies and then continues with that basic sound for the entire song. However, a rapper's vocal delivery can change many times within half a verse. A rapper's voice is often used as another percussive instrument and therefore has to play with and around the instrumental track. To use the same delivery throughout an entire song is possible, but highly unlikely for most rappers as it is seen as a display of poor skills. As such, a rapper has to write considering content, style, delivery and instrumentation. Finally, Hip Hop music is usually lyrically dense. For an artist in the fast rap genre, a half of a verse can contain the same amount of lyrics as an entire song of another genre\*. Therefore, rappers often have to be prepared to say a lot more in every song, while still rhyming skillfully and staying fresh in content throughout the song and from song to song. Going forward, now that you have beats and rhymes, it is time to put it all together.

## **RECORDING/MIXING/MASTERING**

While we have chosen to include these three categories under one subheading, know that it is only because of space limitations in this lesson. In reality, each of these three phases of music production takes as much skill as conceptualizing, composing and writing a song. Recording a Hip Hop song is unique as it requires, when being done well, special equipment to get the sound right for Rap vocals. There are certain types of microphones built for Rap as well as digital processors to ensure what is actually recorded sounds like what the artist is performing. In addition, some rappers choose to add effects and distortion to their voice, creating the need for processing during the recording phase. At the home studio level, recording can be done inexpensively with a USB microphone and a laptop computer. At the professional level, you can find an artist recording in a multimillion dollar studio, complete with a variety of microphones, session musicians to play whatever instruments needed live, custom sound insulation and a recording engineer working with top of the line mixing/recording equipment. Speaking of engineers, once you have your recording complete, you now need another engineer to mix everything together. Mixing is the art of making sure every piece of the sonic puzzle fits together perfectly. At its most basic level, the engineer adjusts the volume level of every single sound to prevent anything from overpowering anything else, thus allowing the right sounds to come through at the right time. Beyond that, a mixing engineer adds reverb, equalization, compression, delays, effects, and fixes anything that might have gone wrong vocally during the recording phase. The mastering engineer, who can be a different person from the recording engineer and mixing engineer at the higher levels of production, finishes the track, preparing it for final distribution. If a mixing engineer adjusts each individual sound in a song, the mastering engineer adjusts each individual song in an album to make sure they sound consistent in volume and style to the listener. This, again, is a very technical process that requires a professional if the best result is desired. If you are doing home production, you can mix and master your own music with no more than the right software and computer. However, just because software will allow you to attack these necessary aspects of production on your own, that doesn't mean that just anyone can do it well. Only someone with excellent recording, mixing and mastering skills can produce a professional level song on basic equipment. At the end of the day, it is always skill and practice that produces the best result in any endeavor.

## **DISTRIBUTION/MARKETING**

Once you make your song/album, you need to get it out to your audience. Will you release on CD, vinyl, cassette, or only in digital format? If you release it digitally, which distribution method do you use? Do you sell it through your own website or through a channel like iTunes or Amazon? Do you make it available for free or do you charge for it? Artists work hard to get signed to a major recording label primarily because of distribution. When an artist is signed to a label, the label handles distribution and marketing and usually has a huge network for this purpose. While you can reach hundreds selling CDs to people on the streets, a major label can reach millions through their channels. Of course, as with any partnership, there is give and take. Many people do not feel what major labels take is worth what they give and therefore they market and distribute independently. This is the equivalent in the regular working world to having your own business instead of working for a pre-existing company. Whichever you choose, know that distribution and marketing can be as important as, or even more important than, every step in the creation process up until now.

## **SELF-PRODUCTION**

Like most things, making your own music can be as easy or hard as you want it to be. You can freestyle rhyme while your friend beatboxes, record it into your phone and then quickly upload it to YouTube. That YouTube video can go viral and the next thing you know, you're performing your song on TV. However, for most artists, becoming and connecting with professionals in each area of production is necessary for popular success. Still, it is important to know why you are making your music. Maybe your goal is just to express yourself and no one will ever hear your music but you. If you make something you are happy with, that is great success. Regardless of your ultimate aim, remember that respecting the creative process while constantly developing your skills as an artist will always yield the best art possible.

\*For example, the classic hit "Hey, Jude" by the Beatles is a 7 minute song with a little less than 200 total words while "3 Minute Murda" by Twista is 3 minutes long and contains over 700 words.

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## HIP HOP WORD OF THE WEEK

Shady: untrustworthy, disreputable, devious, seeming to have nefarious motives or purpose.

EX: "You ain't seen shady til you seen my cousin. I wouldn't trust that homey to hold a penny for me."

Song reference: "Izzo (H.O.V.A)" by Jay Z: "Industry is shady / It needs to be taken over / Label owners hate me / I'm raising the status quo up"

BONUS: NAME ANOTHER SONG/ARTIST THAT HAS USED THIS HHWOTW

## EXTRA LEARNING

1) Using the guidance from the lesson, start to create your own Hip Hop song.

- (A) Decide who is the audience for your song
- (B) Decide whether your song is a single or part of an album
- (C) If the song is part of an album, name the album
- (D) Choose a instrumental style
- (E) Choose a tempo
- (F) Decide what you will use to make the instrumental
- (G) Decide and name which, if any, samples you will include
- (H) Choose a Rap style
- (I) Choose what the song is about
- (J) Write 2 lines of the song that rhyme
- (K) Name your song
- (L) Decide where you will record it
- (M) Decide if you will be the engineer for production or if you will hire someone else
- (N) Decide how you will distribute the song