

# SCHOOL'D BY FUNKMODE

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

## **THE RISE OF OLD SCHOOL HIP HOP MUSIC: GOOD OR BAD?**

Over the past two years, radio companies across the country have started to change the format of stations struggling to make ratings to old school Hip Hop. In some cases, modern Hip Hop is the format being replaced by old school programming. For many of these stations, the change has brought immediate and alluring success, thus causing a tidal wave of change. In Atlanta, an old school Hip Hop radio station launched in late November of 2014 and within only a few days, two other major radio companies launched their own old school Hip Hop stations as competitors. In light of this change, the obvious question emerges, is this trend good or bad for Hip Hop? In a departure from the usual format for "SCHOOL'd by FUNKMODE", this "lesson" is actually going to be an opinion article from the authors. While this opinion will be presented so as to make a convincing argument for our particular point of view, we strongly encourage our readers to form their own opinions on this subject through further research and reflection.

## **CULTURE LOVE OR CASH GRAB?**

Promoting Hip Hop culture is one of the most basic components of FUNKMODE's existence. Therefore, you might expect that we are thrilled about old school Hip Hop being made more available commercially. In general, you would be right as we expect that more people will connect with Hip Hop culture because of these new radio stations. However, there are many specific and discouraging issues that arise when you take a closer look at the people and motivations behind the change. For example, large radio companies frequently switch programming formats according to ratings. They have no loyalty to any particular format or genre of music, they simply play what is popular in order to drive the most advertising dollars to their station. In addition, radio companies look to make changes according to what allows them to cut costs and thereby produce more profit. These two situations are not bad in and of themselves but they can create a negative situation depending on the specific context. Case in point, when the old school format was changed for Philadelphia radio station Boom 107.9, they also got rid of their on-air DJs, replacing them with automation technology. Not only is this a general problem in terms of eliminating jobs, but it is a specific problem for Hip Hop, as the culture was founded by the innovative work of DJs. Also, because the changes are not being made by people specifically looking to give a greater voice to Hip Hop culture, but instead by those who want to run a popular radio station, you can be certain that if an old school Hip Hop channel dips in ratings, it will quickly be replaced by the next popular thing. This happened at a Dallas radio station who changed to an old school Hip Hop format and then changed back after only two weeks. Those who love Hip Hop are not interested in it as a fad. Furthermore, we do not want to be fed our culture by people who have no actual concern for the culture. While we don't expect companies to die because of trying to promote something that no one wants, we also don't want to support people who will nonchalantly drop our culture because something newer and seemingly more profitable comes along. In our opinion, this programming move is purely about money and not the love of Hip Hop. Therefore, while Hip Hop may benefit in the short term, it is not the positive change we need to truly preserve the future of the culture.

## **THE DECEPTION OF NOSTALGIA**

We all have a fondness for things from our past. Music has a particularly special way of bringing us back to a treasured memory, feeling or time in our lives. Not surprisingly, we all develop an attachment to music that gives us the best connection to our best experiences. In this attachment, we also have the tendency to remember things in a more positive light than they actually occurred. It is not at all uncommon to hear people say, "Hip Hop music was so much better back then!" And while it is absolutely true that Hip Hop has produced some classics over the years, it is absolutely untrue that this is all it has produced. From the very beginning, Hip Hop was flooded with copycats, untalented opportunists, and just a whole lot of bad music. If you take a long enough period of time, say, a decade, and you pull together all of the best music from that time, what you will collect will impress not only lovers of the genre but outsiders as well. However, to get to that point, you also have to dismiss all of the mediocre and absolutely unlistenable entries into that genre. The people who remember Hip Hop fondly are remembering the hits. Consider this quote from Carl Dash, a Hip Hop DJ in Philadelphia, "People feel fatigued by negativity, and that's where the nostalgia is legit for artists of another time. However, that old-school music had its share of violence. But that's when the glossing-over of nostalgia comes in." People frequently complain today that Hip Hop is overly explicit and negative, but it didn't get more aggressive and hardcore than the Gangsta Rap and Miami Bass of the late 1980s/early 1990s. However, people today who grew up loving that music quickly justify it by contextualizing it as a reflection of the times, portraying the reality of the people making and consuming the music. Unfortunately, that perception is greatly flawed. One of the biggest names in Gangsta Rap, Ice Cube, was never a criminal, had two loving parents, went to good schools and was pursuing a college education when he made the transition to music. This is not to say that Ice Cube was in any way inadequate to deliver the message he did, it just means that we often perceive and remember things differently than they actually occurred. Hip Hop is truly no more violent or negative than it ever was. It is arguable to say that what is in the mainstream is less creative than in times past. But, to be fair, we have already had 35 years of commercial Hip Hop music. To be original now is much harder than



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it was then. Being shocking now is much harder than it was then. Still, we believe that it is very possible to continue to be unique in the genre. Hip Hop has much more potential, as we'll talk about later in this article. Another thing to consider is that Hip Hop natives have become smarter and more discriminating in their tastes. In the 80s and 90s, radio was a major way to receive and discover music as there was no internet or digital music devices that allowed you to search and store thousands of songs in your hand, accessible at the touch of a button. Whatever the radio played, you listened to because you didn't have much of a choice. People expect more from their music today. In addition, it is far easier to obtain music now. As such, it is much harder to make music that makes as strong of an impact into people's minds and hearts. That doesn't make yesterday's music better. In fact, it can be argued that the music which is truly noteworthy today is actually better considering these new challenges. However, nostalgia is a hard thing to argue against and people tend to cling to what is familiar instead of embracing newness and change. Just as with relationships, people tend to look past obvious faults early and then find themselves impatient and annoyed as time moves on, so too does the love of anything go. Those who grew up with the culture were all madly in love with Hip Hop music when it was new, even going so far as to look past obvious faults, but now those faults are grating and it is so much easier to just go back to a time when it all seemed perfect. Again, this is not reality but the deception of nostalgia.

## **THOSE OUT OF TOUCH SHOULD NOT BE THE TASTEMAKERS**

The New York times reports that "the new stations target an age group of 35 to 49-year-olds, who grew up with rap but may be out of touch with the genre's latest developments." Again, as promoters of Hip Hop culture, it is encouraging that more listening options are being created for lovers of Hip Hop. And, if old school Hip Hop stations were being developed in addition to Hip Hop stations featuring contemporary music, we would have no objection at all. However, if such stations are replacing contemporary music stations, we have a problem with both the programmers and the listeners. As we already pointed out the problems with the former, let's continue by discussing the latter. Hip Hop music was started by young people and flourished in their hands. It was counterculture, aggressive, cutting edge, misunderstood and greatly challenged the mainstream both in terms of content and style. It is still being argued today as to whether it should even legitimately be called "music". It was certainly not made to please older people or target a 35-49-year-old demographic. Despite those formerly young people now being older people, the genre should not be being shaped exclusively by their tastes. If older people have lost touch with the newest developments in Hip Hop, they are no longer a relevant part of the Hip Hop discussion. It would be akin to listening to someone whose last interaction with video games was playing Atari talk about what should be released on the PS4. For those people, having the capacity to replay Atari hits using new technology is a great option, but it should not halt or replace the development of new games. However, just like in the times when Hip Hop was created, the older people are the ones who have money, so they are the ones being listened to most. Hip Hop found its voice without money and while its creators were among the most ignored members of society. The essence of Hip Hop is that you can make something from nothing (including yourself) and that you can be someone that society deems a nobody yet still produce something they will all beg for tomorrow. If Hip Hop is to continue its dominance in the next decade, its primary voice has to come from those who see the future, not those enamored with the past.

## **RADIO ITSELF IS THE PROBLEM**

Traditional radio is dead. Technology has surpassed it and made it largely irrelevant. There used to be a time when it was the best way for people to receive music and news but that time has passed. We now have podcasts, streaming music services, digital music stores, music on-demand and other similar options that let us listen to exactly what we want to, when we want to and without interruption. Radio has so many problems that make it nearly unlistenable compared to the alternatives. Radio has too many commercials, they don't play enough/introduce new artists (something they used to do well in the past), they play what record companies pay them to play, they haven't innovated their delivery format, they repeat the same songs until favorites become hated, and the sound quality is very low. The low ratings they are experiencing have much less to do with old school versus new school Hip Hop, or any genre, and much more to do with the fact that the world has moved on.

## **GROWTH = SURVIVAL**

With all things, growth and change equals survival. If Hip Hop music hits the pause button now and revels in its "Golden Age" of the late 80s and 90s, it will end there. New music must be made. New styles must be innovated. If people are not connecting to mainstream, commercial artists, the underground and independent artists must take their place. In our opinion, the future of Hip Hop is not popular music, at least, not immediately. We see people finding artists through different means like YouTube and free music sites using technology that is as unique today as radio was when it first came out. Hip Hop's next generation is out there, they just aren't where we discovered the previous generation. When people stop looking in the old places, they will find a whole new world of Hip Hop even greater than anything that has come before. New pioneers of the genre exist and they are original, refreshing and ground breaking, just like the first generation that paved the way. These new artists have learned from the past and are using it to create the future. They are taking what those who came before them

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made and elevating it to a new level. Rhyme styles are improving. Content is improving. Production is becoming more artful and skilled. There is a whole new generation that knows what Hip Hop today is missing and they are creating work to fill those gaps\*. But this music and these artists are not on the radio. They are creating music away from the influence of record label executives and radio companies who don't truly care about Hip Hop culture or innovative artistic expression. They are making what they know needs to be made and they are doing it for the love. If Hip Hop is to survive, again, it is the job of those within the culture to find these artists and support them, eventually introducing them to the rest of the music-loving world.

Long story short: Is the "new" old school radio format switch bad? Only if it stops new music discovery and artist innovation.

## REFERENCES

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"Ratings Bounce for Radio Stations That Turned to Classic Hip-Hop": <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/12/25/ratings-bounce-for-radio-stations-that-turned-to-classic-hip-hop/>

\*For a song that addresses the issue in this article, listen to "Back to the Future" by FUNKMODE

## HIP HOP WORD OF THE WEEK

Stunt/Stuntin'/Stuntin' on em: to show off. Similar to past HHWOTW "floss".

EX: "I'm gonna be stuntin' all the way live tonight. I got a whole new outfit from cap to kicks and it's fly as a 747!"

Song reference: "Stunt 101" by G-Unit

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

## EXTRA LEARNING

- 1) Name a place besides iTunes or the radio to discover new music.
- 2) Name a website besides YouTube/Pandora/Spotify to find free and new music.
- 3) What do you see as an area of Hip Hop music that is underrepresented or has yet to be created? What do we need more of?