


MEDIA REVIEWS

Wheeler, Darby, dir. *Hip-Hop Evolution*

Banger Films, 2016. Streaming

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In the spring of 2019, the second time I offered the undergraduate course Music and Culture of Hip-Hop at the College of William and Mary, the waitlist was more than three times the capacity of the course, demonstrating students' overwhelming interest in the material. At the end of the first class meeting, in which I introduced students to early hip-hop culture and the context surrounding its development, a student who was on the waitlist came up to me to express his disappointment that he couldn't enroll, but he also marveled at how closely my narrative had followed one he had seen on television: "This is exactly what they talked about in *Hip-Hop Evolution!*"

I was a bit miffed that a student would compare my class to a television docuseries, but indeed, he was in some ways correct. The first episode of *Hip-Hop Evolution* follows a familiar narrative, tracing the beginnings of the genre as a youth party culture in 1970s Bronx in which early DJs developed new turntable techniques in a symbiotic relationship with b-boys (with no mention of b-girls or dancers of other genders). The show touches on many of the same themes and events that I introduce in my opening lecture, but it also contributes to the problematic framing that many retellings of hip-hop's origins tend to reinscribe—it fails to position women and girls and LGBTQ+ practitioners as central to the genre's development.

As hip-hop courses have become increasingly prevalent in universities, especially in undergraduate music curricula, a hip-hop canon has developed. Loren Kajikawa reminds us that the incorporation of hip-hop within the academy is not always as inclusive as it may seem.¹ In adding this music culture into our curricula, we must ask: What narratives are told, and from whose perspective? *Hip-Hop Evolution* falls into the familiar trap of utilizing a Great Man approach to the canonization of a far-reaching genre at the expense of women and other marginalized practitioners.

Hip-Hop Evolution is a four-season Canadian docuseries that originally aired on HBO Canada in 2016 before it was added to the streaming platform Netflix.² Hosted by Canadian rapper Shad (Shadrach Kabango), the series features in-depth interviews with artists, journalists, and other industry professionals and seeks to tell the story of the genre as it evolved in the United States. Each season consists of four episodes ranging from 36 to 51 minutes in length, each with a focused theme. Season 1 focuses on the genre's development in broad strokes from the 1970s to the early 1990s. Seasons 2 through 4 expand on this narrative with emphasis on specific regions (such as New York City, the Bay Area, and the South more generally; more specifically, there are also individual episodes on Atlanta and New Orleans).

¹Loren Kajikawa, "Leaders of the New School? Music Departments, Hip-Hop, and the Challenge of Significant Difference," *Twentieth-Century Music* 18, no. 1 (2021): 45–64. doi: 10.1017/S1478572220000262.

²To watch the series, one must have a Netflix subscription. Many users canceled their subscriptions in late 2021 and early 2022 in protest of transphobic content on the platform and its treatment of LGBTQ+ employees, and thus might not have access to this show (see e.g., Jon Blistein, "Trans Employees and Allies at Netflix Plan Walkout in Protest of Dave Chappelle's 'The Closer,'" *RollingStone.com*, October 20, 2021, <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv/tv-news/netflix-trans-employees-walkout-protest-dave-chappelle-the-closer-1241802/>). Subscriber numbers have also declined due to competition from other services, increases in subscription costs, and other reasons. See Nicole Sperling, "Netflix loses subscribers for first time in 10 years," *New York Times*, April 19, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/19/business/netflix-earnings-q1.html?smid=url-share>.

The real strength of this series is its interviews with featured artists, journalists, scholars, and industry professionals. Perhaps because Shad is an artist himself, the interviewees (at least in the included footage) respond thoughtfully and thoroughly to his questions, explaining their contributions and the contributions of others from a first-hand perspective. This interview focus allows the narratives to appear largely artist-driven and not sensationalized. For example, across several episodes, the context around the deaths of rappers Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G. is carefully unpacked with an emphasis on their musical and artistic contributions instead of a hyper-fixation on violence. Rather than glorifying the darker aspects of the industry and hip-hop culture, we see artists express genuine grief over the loss of their colleagues. In Season 2, Episode 1, “The Southern Way,” for example, several interviewees become emotional when discussing the death of UGK member Pimp C. Although the role of codeine-based cough syrup (“lean”) is mentioned, we see not a heavy-handed cautionary anti-drug tale but an honest reflection on the loss of life. The richness of the interviews in the series presents a multi-dimensional view that the genre deserves.

The series’ biggest flaw, and one that is often prevalent in both academic and journalistic narratives about hip-hop, is its marginalization of women and LGBTQ+ practitioners. Despite the richness of the interviews, it is not until halfway through the second episode that we get a feature on a woman, Sylvia Robinson, the founder of Sugarhill Records and the producer of one of the first commercial rap recordings, “Rapper’s Delight” (1979). There are no interviews with women until Episode 3, when Roxanne Shanté, a pioneering rapper, appears only to discuss the impact of Big Daddy Kane. This is a trend in the series: While women appear as interviewees increasingly throughout, mostly they are there to *talk about men*. The first song by women artists discussed is Queen Latifah and Monie Love’s “Ladies First” (1989), which gets a feature in Season 2, Episode 3. In this episode, Shad asks Love why there were suddenly women rappers with a message during this era (the late 1980s and early 1990s), to which she responds that we need to look at Pebble Poo, Sha Rock, Debbie D, Lisa Lee, and any number of women artists who came before her. Indeed, Love articulates the series’ very grave error in suggesting women don’t appear in the genre until “Ladies First.” Instead of learning from this moment and expanding to be more gender inclusive in future episodes, the only other woman artist to get a feature is Lil’ Kim (Season 3, Episode 2), who is discussed primarily for her relationship to B.I.G. and the Junior M.A.F.I.A. crew to which she belonged.

I was hopeful that Season 4 would be more inclusive, especially when the first episode, “Bounce to This,” included interviews with LGBTQ+ New Orleans bounce rappers Katey Red and Big Freedia, as well as influential women artists Mia X and Cheeky Blakk, in its first few scenes. The episode traces the history of New Orleans hip-hop but stops around 1998 with the release of Juvenile’s “Back That Azz Up,” missing the period post-Hurricane Katrina (2005) when queer and trans artists became some of the most prominent in the local bounce scene. Although of course a television show with limited time allowance cannot cover every aspect of a topic, here LGBTQ+ and women artists were yet again shown speaking not about their own work, but about the work of the cisgender, heterosexual men around them. This was a missed opportunity to show explicitly the influential work of not only women rappers, but LGBTQ+ rappers as well.

There are other ways in which the Great Man approach allows the series to be uncritical of hip-hop’s cultural heroes, especially when it comes to gender and sexuality. We should avoid continuously situating hip-hop as always problematic, but we still must be honest about both the accomplishments and shortcomings of its star players. The first episode draws heavily on interviews with Afrika Bambaataa but fails to address the sexual misconduct allegations made against him that were already public by the time of its first airing.³ Although the lyrics from Tim Dog’s “Fuck Compton” (1991), in which he references Dr. Dre’s assault of Dee Barnes, play in an episode, the series never mentions Dre’s documented violence against women. Tupac’s 1995 prison sentence is framed as the result of a revolutionary coming up against the repressive forces of the police. Tupac was brutalized by the Oakland Police in 1991, for which he filed a lawsuit that was settled, but his prison sentence was a result of his

³For more on these allegations, see Leila Wills’ podcast, *Trapped in a Culture*, 2020, <https://open.spotify.com/show/71FHhgOIYyRauZSwzu1brS>.

being found guilty of sexual abuse—a very different case. As Joan Morgan writes, hip-hop feminism makes space for these contradictions inherent in hip-hop, the ways it can both speak to oppression and be itself oppressive, especially along gender lines.⁴ A critical, feminist approach to its history would celebrate these artists' contributions while also honestly acknowledging the harm they may have caused. To downplay these complexities is yet another way to marginalize women and LGBTQ+ practitioners in the genre.

If an instructor were to use episodes of this series to introduce students to topics related to the history and development of the genre, I would strongly recommend supplementing them with additional materials. Readings that I incorporate in my own hip-hop courses to decenter the otherwise male- (and hetero-) centric narratives include Kyra Gaunt's repositioning of Black girl culture within hip-hop, Tricia Rose's foundational anthropological study of rap, Shanté Smalls's historiography of queer hip-hop, and Cheryl L. Keyes's work on archetypes of women rappers.⁵ *Hip-Hop Evolution* might be a useful tool for introducing students to the genre, but when curating materials for teaching this subject, we must be mindful of not only content but also framing. We should avoid a process of canonization that tokenizes a few women, or worse, writes them out of the story altogether.

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Caroline Shaw and Sō Percussion. *Let the Soil Play its Simple Part* Released June 25, 2021. Nonesuch Records, SKU#075597915891, 2021. CD

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“People are more important than music.” In a 2021 interview with Rebecca Lentjes, Caroline Shaw offhandedly explained how the phrase, a piece of advice she often gives to young musicians, circumscribes her artistic philosophy: Music's coordination of social relationships—especially between performers and composers—should be of primary, rather than peripheral, concern.¹ In the context of Shaw's 2021 album *Let the Soil Play its Simple Part*, such a worldview offers its creative team the basis on which to challenge the presuppositions of a traditional composer-performer relationship, translating collaborators Sō Percussion (Eric Cha-Beach, Josh Quillen, Adam Sliwinski, and Jason Treuting) and engineer/producer Jonathan Low into co-composers. Historically, the substance of composer-performer collaborations has not always matched the rhetoric; musicologist Arnold Whittall has expressed skepticism about the veracity of shared authorship, writing that “collaboration in the sense of a kind of co-working, which begins to take on some aspects of sharing, influencing and even determining the outcome of the ‘real’ composer's creative process ... has been, unsurprisingly,

⁴Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It Down* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).

⁵Kyra Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes From Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Shanté Smalls, “Queer Hip Hop: A Brief Historiography,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness*, eds. Fred Everett Maus and Sheila Whiteley, published online September 2018, doi: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199793525.013.103; and Cheryl L. Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

¹Rebecca Lentjes, “Meaning in the Parentheticals: An Interview with Caroline Shaw,” *Van Magazine*, July 1, 2021.