

Now imagine this. It happens just as the performance reaches its peak. First the melody drops out, then the bass, and finally the drums. The stage is now silent and empty save for a lone MC, kicking rhymes a cappella. His voice fades from a shout to a whisper, then finally to nothing at all. As he turns to leave, you notice something stranger still: lyrics projected in bold print against the back of the stage. It's like you're looking directly into an MC's book of rhymes. The words scroll along in clear, neat lines against the wall. People stand amazed. Some begin to boo. Some start to leave.

But you remain, transfixed by the words. You notice new things in the familiar lyrics: wordplay, metaphors and similes, rhymes upon rhymes, even within the lines. You notice structures and forms, sound and silence. You even start to hear a beat; it comes from the language itself, a rhythm the words produce in your mind. You're bobbing your head again. People around you, those who remain, are doing it too. There's a group of you, smaller than before but strong, rocking to an inaudible beat.

The change is subtle at first. Maybe it's a stage light flickering back to life. Maybe it's a snare hit punctuating that inaudible rhythm. But now the lights burn brighter, the beat hits harder than ever, the MC bounds back on stage, the crowd reaches a frenzy. It's the same song, just remixed.

Through the boom of the bass you can still somehow hear the low rhythm the words make. Lines of lyrics pass across your mind's eye while the sound from the speakers vibrates your eardrums. For the first time you see how the two fit together—the sight and the sound. Rap hasn't changed, but you have. This is the poetry of hip hop.

Rap Poetry 101

**I start to think and then I sink
into the paper like I was ink.
When I'm writing I'm trapped in between the lines,
I escape when I finish the rhyme . . .**

—Eric B. & Rakim, "I Know You Got Soul"

A BOOK OF rhymes is where MCs write lyrics. It is the basic tool of the rapper's craft. Nas raps about "writin' in my book of rhymes, all the words pass the margin." Mos Def boasts about sketching "lyrics so visual / they rent my rhyme books at your nearest home video." They both know what Rakim knew before them, that the book of rhymes is where rap becomes poetry.

Every rap song is a poem waiting to be performed. Written or freestyled, rap has a poetic structure that can be reproduced, a deliberate form an MC creates for each rhyme that differentiates it, if only in small ways, from every other rhyme ever conceived. Like all poetry, rap is defined by the art of the line. Metrical poets choose the length of their lines to correspond to particular rhythms—they write in iambic pentameter or whatever other meter suits their desires. Free

verse poets employ conscious line breaks to govern the reader's pace, to emphasize particular words, or to accomplish any one of a host of other poetic objectives. In a successful poem, line breaks are never casual or accidental. Rewrite a poem in prose and you'll see it deflate like a punctured lung, expelling life like so much air.

Line breaks are the skeletal system of lyric poetry. They give poems their shape and distinguish them from all other forms of literature. While prose writers usually break their lines wherever the page demands—when they reach the margin, when the computer drops their word to the next line—poets claim that power for themselves, ending lines in ways that underscore the specific design of their verse. Rap poets are no different.

Rap is poetry, but its popularity relies in part on people not recognizing it as such. After all, rap is for good times; we play it in our cars, hear it at parties and at clubs. By contrast, most people associate poetry with hard work; it is something to be studied in school or puzzled over for hidden insights. Poetry stands at an almost unfathomable distance from our daily lives, or at least so it seems given how infrequently we seek it out.

This hasn't always been the case; poetry once had a prized place in both public and private affairs. At births and deaths, weddings and funerals, festivals and family gatherings, people would recite poetry to give shape to their feelings. Its relative absence today says something about us—our culture's short attention span, perhaps, or the dominance of other forms of entertainment—but also about poetry itself. While the last century saw an explosion of poetic productivity, it also marked a decided shift toward abstraction. As the

poet Adrian Mitchell observed, "Most people ignore poetry because most poetry ignores most people."

Rap never ignores its listeners. Quite the contrary, it aggressively asserts itself, often without invitation, upon our consciousness. Whether boomed out of a passing car, played at a sports stadium, or piped into a mall while we shop, rap is all around us. Most often, it expresses its meaning quite plainly. No expertise is required to listen. You don't need to take an introductory course or read a handbook; you don't need to watch an instructional video or follow an online tutorial. But, as with most things in life, the pleasure to be gained from rap increases exponentially with just a little studied attention.

Rap is public art, and rappers are perhaps our greatest public poets, extending a tradition of lyricism that spans continents and stretches back thousands of years. Thanks to the engines of global commerce, rap is now the most widely disseminated poetry in the history of the world. Of course, not all rap is great poetry, but collectively it has revolutionized the way our culture relates to the spoken word. Rappers at their best make the familiar unfamiliar through rhythm, rhyme, and wordplay. They refresh the language by fashioning patterned and heightened variations of everyday speech. They expand our understanding of human experience by telling stories we might not otherwise hear. The best MCs—like Rakim, Jay-Z, Tupac, and many others—deserve consideration alongside the giants of American poetry. We ignore them at our own expense.

Hip hop emerged out of urban poverty to become one of the most vital cultural forces of the past century. The South

Bronx may seem an unlikely place to have birthed a new movement in poetry. But in defiance of inferior educational opportunities and poor housing standards, a generation of young people—mostly black and brown—conceived innovations in rhythm, rhyme, and wordplay that would change the English language itself. In *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, Jeff Chang vividly describes how rap's rise from the 1970s through the early 1980s was accompanied by a host of social and economic forces that would seem to stifle creative expression under the weight of despair. "An enormous amount of creative energy was now ready to be released from the bottom of American society," he writes, "and the staggering implications of this moment eventually would echo around the world." As one of the South Bronx's own, rap legend KRS-One, explains, "Rap was the final conclusion of a generation of creative people oppressed with the reality of lack."

Hip hop's first generation fashioned an art form that draws not only from the legacy of Western verse, but from the folk idioms of the African diaspora; the musical legacy of jazz, blues, and funk; and the creative capacities conditioned by the often harsh realities of people's everyday surroundings. These artists commandeered the English language, the forms of William Shakespeare and Emily Dickinson, as well as those of Sonia Sanchez and Amiri Baraka, to serve their own expressive and imaginative purposes. Rap gave voice to a group hardly heard before by America at large, certainly never heard in their own often profane, always assertive words. Over time, the poetry and music they made would command the ears of their block, their borough, the nation, and eventually the world.

While rap may be new-school music, it is old-school poetry. Rather than resembling the dominant contemporary form of free verse—or even the freeform structure of its hip-hop cousin, spoken word, or slam poetry, rap bears a stronger affinity to some of poetry's oldest forms, such as the strong-stress meter of *Beowulf* and the ballad stanzas of the bardic past. As in metrical verse, the lengths of rap's lines are governed by established rhythms—in rap's case, the rhythm of the beat itself.

The beat in rap is poetic meter rendered audible. Rap follows a dual rhythmic relationship whereby the MC is liberated to pursue innovations of syncopation and stress that would sound chaotic without the regularity of the musical rhythm. The beat and the MC's flow, or cadence, work together to satisfy the audience's musical and poetic expectations: most notably, that rap establish and maintain rhythmic patterns while creatively disrupting those patterns, through syncopation and other pleasing forms of rhythmic surprise.

Simply put, a rap verse is the product of one type of rhythm (that of language) being fitted to another (that of music). Great pop lyricists, Irving Berlin or John Lennon or Stevie Wonder, match their words not only to the rhythm of the music, but to melodies and harmonies as well. For the most part, MCs need concern themselves only with the beat. This fundamental difference means that MCs resemble literary poets in ways that most other songwriters do not. Like all poets, rappers write primarily with a beat in mind. Rap's reliance on spare, beat-driven accompaniment foregrounds the poetic identity of the language.

Divorced from most considerations of melody and harmony, rap lyrics are liberated to live their lives as pure

expressions of poetic and musical rhythm. Even when rap employs rich melodies and harmonies—as is often the case, for instance, in the music of Kanye West—rhythm remains the central element of sound. This puts rap’s dual rhythms in even closer proximity to one another than they might usually be in other musical genres. Skilled MCs underscore the rhythm of the track in the rhythm of their flows and the patterns of their rhymes. As a consequence, the lyrics rappers write are more readily separated from their specific musical contexts and presented in written form as poetry. The rhythm comes alive on the page because so much of it is embedded in the language itself.

Many of the reasonable arguments critics offer to distinguish musical lyrics from literary poetry do not apply to rap. One of the most common objections, voiced best by the critic Simon Frith, is that musical lyrics do not need to generate the highly sophisticated poetic effects that create the “music” of verse written for the page. Indeed, the argument goes, if a lyric is too poetically developed it will likely distract from the music itself. A good poem makes for a lousy lyric, and a great lyric for a second-rate poem. Rap defies such conventional wisdom. By unburdening itself from the requirements of musical form, rap is free to generate its own poetic textures independent of the music. Another objection is that popular lyric lacks much of the formal structure of literary verse. Rap challenges this objection as well by crafting intricate structures of sound and rhyme, creating some of the most scrupulously formal poetry composed today.

Rap’s poetry can usefully be approached as literary verse while still recognizing its essential identity as music. There’s no need to disparage one to respect the other. In fact, per-

haps more than any other lyrical form, rap demands that we acknowledge its dual identity as word and song.

The fact that rap is music does not disqualify it as poetry; quite the contrary, it asserts rap’s poetic identity all the more. The ancient Greeks called their lyrical poetry *ta mele*, which means “poems to be sung.” For them and for later generations, poetry, in the words of Walter Pater, “aspires towards the condition of music.” It has only been since the early twentieth century that music has taken a backseat to meaning in poetry. As the poet Edward Hirsch writes, “The lyric poem always walks the line between speaking and singing. . . . Poetry is not speech exactly—verbal art is deliberately different than the way that people actually talk—and yet it is always in relationship to speech, to the spoken word.”

Like all poetry, rap is not speech exactly, nor is it precisely song, and yet it employs elements of both. Rap’s earliest performers understood this. On “Adventures of Super Rhymes (Rap)” from 1980, just months after rap’s emergence on mainstream radio, Jimmy Spicer attempted to define this new form:

It’s the new thing, makes you wanna swing
 While us MCs rap, doin’ our thing
 It’s not singin’ like it used to be
 No, it’s rappin’ to the rhythm of the sure-shot beat
 It goes one for the money, two for the show
 You got my beat, now here I go

Rap is an oral poetry, so it naturally relies more heavily than literary poetry on devices of sound. The MC’s poetic toolbox shares many of the same basic instruments as the

literary poet's, but it also includes others specifically suited to the demands of oral expression. These include copious use of rhyme, both as a mnemonic device and as a form of rhythmic pleasure; as well as poetic tropes that rely upon sonic identity, like homonyms and puns. Add to this those elements the MC draws from music—tonal quality, vocal inflection, and so forth—and rap reveals itself as a poetry uniquely fitted to oral performance.

Earlier pop lyricists like Cole Porter or Lorenz Hart labored over their lyrics; they were not simply popular entertainers, they were poets. Great MCs represent a continuation and an amplification of this vital tradition of lyrical craft. The lyrics to Porter's "I Got You Under My Skin" are engaging when read on the page without their melodic accompaniment; the best rap lyrics are equally engrossing, even without the specific context of their performances. Rap has no sheet music because it doesn't need it—rapping itself rarely has harmonies and melodies to transcribe—but it *does* have a written form worth reconstructing, one that testifies to its value, both as music and as poetry. That form begins with a faithful transcription of lyrics.

Rap lyrics are routinely mistranscribed, not simply on the numerous websites offering lyrics to go, but even on an artist's own liner notes and in hip-hop books and periodicals. The same rhyme might be written dozens of different ways—different line breaks, different punctuation, even different words. The goal should be to transcribe rap verses in such a way that they represent on the page as closely as possible what we hear with our ears.

The standardized transcription method proposed here may differ from those used by MCs in their own rhyme

books. Tupac, for instance, counted his bars by couplets. Rappers compose their verses in any number of ways; what they write need only make sense to them. But an audience requires a standardized form organized around objective principles rather than subjective habits. Serious readers need a common way of transcribing rap lyrics so that they can discuss rap's formal attributes with one another without confusion.

Transcribing rap lyrics is a small but essential skill, easily acquired. The only prerequisite is being able to count to four in time to the beat. Transcribing lyrics to the beat is an intuitive way of translating the lyricism that we hear into poetry that we can read, without sacrificing the specific relationship of words to music laid down by the MC's performance. By preserving the integrity of each line in relation to the beat, we give rap the respect it deserves as poetry. Sloppy transcriptions make it all but impossible to glean anything but the most basic insights into the verse. Careful ones, on the other hand, let us see into the inner workings of the MC's craft through the lyrical artifact of its creation.

The MC's most basic challenge is this: When given a beat, what do you do? The beat is rap's beginning. Whether it's the hiccups and burps of a Timbaland track, the percussive assault of a Just Blaze beat, knuckles knocking on a lunchroom table, a human beatbox, or simply the metronomic rhythm in an MC's head as he spits a cappella rhymes, the beat defines the limits of lyrical possibility. In transcribing rap lyrics, we must have a way of representing the beat on the page.

The vast majority of rap beats are in 4/4 time, which means that each musical measure (or bar) comprises four quarter-note beats. For the rapper, one beat in a bar is akin to

the literary poet's metrical foot. Just as the fifth metrical foot marks the end of a pentameter line, the fourth beat of a given bar marks the end of the MC's line. One line, in other words, is what an MC can deliver in a single musical measure—one poetic line equals one musical bar. So when an MC spits sixteen bars, we should understand this as sixteen lines of rap verse.

To demonstrate this method of lyrical transcription, let's take a fairly straightforward example: Melle Mel's first verse on Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's classic "The Message."

One **TWO** **Three** **FOUR**
 Standing on the front stoop, hangin' out the window,
 watching all the cars go by, roaring as the breezes blow.

Notice how the naturally emphasized words ("standing," "front," "hangin'," "window," etc.) fall on the strong beats. These are two fairly regular lines, hence the near uniformity of the pair and the strong-beat accents on particular words. The words are in lockstep with the beat. Mark the beginning of each poetic line on the one and the end of the line on the four.

Not all lines, however, are so easily transcribed; many complications can occur in the process of transcription. Consider the famous opening lines from this very same song:

One **TWO** **Three** **FOUR**
 Broken glass everywhere,
 people pissin' on the stairs, you know they just don't care.

Looking at the two lines on the page, one might think that they had been incorrectly transcribed. The only thing that suggests they belong together is the end rhyme ("everywhere" and "care"). How can each of these lines—the first half as long as the second, and with fewer than half the total syllables—take up the same four-beat measure? The answer has everything to do with performance. Melle Mel delivers the first line with a combination of dramatic pause and exaggerated emphasis. He begins rhyming a little behind the beat, includes a caesura (a strong phrasal pause within the line) between "glass" and "everywhere," and then dramatically extenuates the pronunciation of "everywhere." Were it not for an accurate transcription, these poetic effects would be lost.

Sometimes rap poets devise intricate structures that give logical shape to their creations. Using patterns of rhyme, rhythm, and line, these structures reinforce an individual verse's fusion of form and meaning. While literary poetry often follows highly regularized forms—a sonnet, a villanelle, a ballad stanza—rap is rarely so formally explicit, favoring instead those structures drawn naturally from oral expression. Upon occasion, however, rap takes on more formal structures, either by happenstance or by conscious design. For instance, Long Beach's Crooked I begins the second verse of "What That Mean" by inserting an alternating quatrain, switching up the song's established pattern of rhyming consecutive lines.

Shorty saw him comin' in a glare
 I pass by like a giant blur
 What she really saw was Tim Duncan in the air
 Wasn't nothin' but a Flyin' Spur

By rhyming two pairs of perfect rhymes *abab* (“glare” with “air” and “blur” with “spur”), Crooked I fashions a duality of sound that underscores the two perspectives he describes: that of the woman onlooker and that of the MC in his speeding car. By temporarily denying the listener’s expectation of rhyme, he creates a sense of heightened anticipation and increased attention. Using this new rhyme pattern shines a spotlight on the playful metaphor at the center of the verse: what the woman saw was the San Antonio Spurs’ MVP Tim Duncan in the air, otherwise known as a flying Spur, otherwise known as his luxury automobile, a Bentley Continental Flying Spur. The mental process of deciphering the metaphor, nearly instantaneous for those familiar with the reference and likely indecipherable for anyone else, is facilitated by the rhyming structure of the verse. Rhyme and wordplay work together to create a sense of poetic satisfaction.

Rap’s poetry is best exemplified in these small moments that reveal conscious artistry at work in places we might least expect. It is this sense of craft that connects the best poetry of the past with the best rap of today. Consider the following two verses side by side: on the left is Langston Hughes’s “Sylvester’s Dying Bed,” written in 1931; on the right is a transcription of Ice-T’s “6 ’N the Mornin’,” released in 1987. Though distanced by time, these lyrics are joined by form.

Hughes’s form relies upon splitting the conventional four-beat line in half, a pattern I have followed with Ice-T’s verse for the purposes of comparison; I might just as easily have rewritten Hughes’s lines as two sets of rhyming couplets. This adjustment aside, the two lyrics are nearly identical in form. Each employs a two-beat line (or a four-beat line cut in two) with an *abcb* rhyme pattern. They even share the same syntactical units, with *end stops* (a grammatical pause

for punctuation at the end of a line of verse) on lines two, four, six, and eight. Both draw upon the rhythms of the vernacular, the language as actually spoken. This formal echo, reaching across more than a half century of black poetic expression, suggests a natural affinity of forms.

I woke up this mornin'	Six in the mornin'
'Bout half past three.	Police at my door.
All the womens in town	Fresh Adidas squeak
Was gathered round me.	Across my bathroom floor.
Sweet gals was a-moanin',	Out my back window,
"Sylvester's gonna die!"	I made my escape.
And a hundred pretty mamas	Don't even get a chance
Bowed their heads to cry.	To grab my old school tape.

Rap lyrics properly transcribed reveal themselves in ways not possible when listening to rap alone. Seeing rap on the page, we understand it for what it is: a small machine of words. We distinguish end rhymes from internal rhymes, end-stopped lines from enjambed ones, patterns from disruptions. Of course, nothing can replace the listening experience, whether in your headphones or at a show. Rather than replacing the music, reading rap as poetry heightens both enjoyment and understanding. Looking at rhymes on the page slows things down, allowing listeners—now readers—to discover familiar rhymes as if for the first time.

Walt Whitman once proclaimed that “great poets need great audiences.” For over thirty years, rap has produced more than its share of great poets. Now it is our turn to become a great audience, repaying their efforts with the kind of close attention to language that rap’s poetry deserves.