

Bounce: Rap Music and Cultural Survival in New Orleans

Matt Miller, Emory University

Introduction

For the past five years, I have been engaged with the rap music scene of New Orleans, where a local subgenre called "bounce" has coexisted with more mainstream expressions since the early 1990s. Bounce is a form of rap music that is heavily oriented towards dancing, which uses particular sonic markers in the form of samples and tempi as well as a call-and-response form of rapping based upon hooks or chants, and which often includes lyrical themes that refer to neighborhoods or other places in the city, as well as cultural practices that are associated with it. In this paper, I will discuss my approach to the subject of bounce and locally produced rap music in general. I will discuss my methodology, which is an interdisciplinary one combining traditional research methods with documentary filmmaking. I will give a brief overview of the history of bounce, and attempt to describe its general characteristics and the settings in which it plays out. Finally, I will briefly discuss the ways in which the recent hurricane relates to discussion of rap music in the city.

History of the project

I began my engagement with the rap music of New Orleans in my capacity as amateur musician, music fan and record collector, and gradually progressed from a casual interest to a determined obsession. This pursuit overlapped with my efforts to explore and understand previous eras and genres of popular music from New Orleans, most notably the R&B of the '50s as exemplified by Dave Bartholomew, Fats Domino, and Shirley and Lee, and the subsequent "soul" era, which saw the rise of artist such as Lee Dorsey, Earl King, and Irma Thomas, as well as producers like Allen Toussaint and Wardell Quezergue. I became interested in bounce around 1996 or 1997, after hearing a song by DJ Jubilee called "Jubilee all." With its singsongy, chanted lyrics, and strong emphasis on call-and-response and dancing, the song at first seemed crude and primitive in comparison to other, more mainstream forms of rap music. However, the recording conveyed a contagious energy and an uncontrived commitment to enjoyment that was completely free of cynicism, elements which I found to be intriguing in an era when much rap music seemed to be headed in the opposite direction.

At the urging of a close friend who had moved down to New Orleans (and who had been supplying me with more bounce recordings) I traveled with my wife in 2000 to see DJ Jubilee perform and give a talk at the annual Jazz and Heritage Festival. Although the festival was an extremely 'inauthentic' venue for bounce, which is usually performed and/or consumed at small clubs and at outdoor parties known as "block parties" or "deejays" by almost exclusively local African American audiences, several aspects of the performance were compelling to me. The enthusiasm and energy of Jubilee's rapping was supported by four male dancers, who eschewed coordinated routines for more individualistic expressions which ranged from the acrobatic to the erotic, resulting in a

diverse and somewhat chaotic but ultimately coherent presentation reminiscent of the free-for-all nature of early New Orleans jazz. DJ Jubilee, while not the most proficient rapper in the world, proved himself a consummate entertainer in his ability to convey his own enthusiasm to audience members, and in his Q&A session he demonstrated his impressive knowledge and understanding of the history and nature of local rap music.

After this experience, I was hungry to deepen my involvement with bounce and New Orleans rap music. I hit upon the idea of making a documentary film on the subject, even though I had absolutely no filmmaking experience and lived in Atlanta. I convinced my friend (and fellow Emory alumnus) Stephen Thomas, who did have significant film and video experience and a "prosumer" video camera, to join me in this venture. I wrote to Take Fo' Records (who represented DJ Jubilee, among others), and proposed the documentary film idea, which was met with an enthusiastic reception. A little more than a year after attending JazzFest, I was down in New Orleans, filming interviews with DJ Jubilee and other rappers and producers, most of whom were also associated with the Take Fo' label. One of the most intriguing of these was Katey Red, a male-to-female transvestite who at the time was the first of a whole line of "sissy" rappers to emerge on the scene (more on this later).

Had I known then what I know now, I may never have embarked on this project. The film has now entered its fourth or fifth year of production. Stephen has spent over \$25,000 on various equipment, including cameras and external harddrives. The rap scene in New Orleans has turned out to be much more complicated, diverse, and populous than I had originally understood it to be. Our inability to finish the film by ourselves led Stephen and me to pursue a relationship with two outside producers from Rhode Island, a decision that resulted in the complete destruction of our decade-long relationship with our New Orleans-based friends.

This development occurred due to differences of opinion as to the direction of the film, a lack of clearly-defined roles, and what ultimately amounts to personality conflicts. In addition to the two aforementioned producers, we are also working with John and Glenda Robert, New Orleans-based producers of the cable-access television show "It's All Good in the Hood." We had originally planned to work with them as our New Orleans point-people—now, they have left the devastated city and have been working on the film from temporary locations in Providence R.I. and Baton Rouge. Negotiation between all of these parties has been a long and tension-fraught process, despite the general consensus that we all want to see the film finished. The only things that keep me going at this point are my determination to see my time and effort come to some sort of fruition and my desire to give some of the talented and inspired performers with whom I worked the exposure they so richly deserve.

In addition to these difficulties in the working relationships with the film, we have also had our share of troubles in obtaining the content that we had envisioned. Some of these problems are due to the fact that we have not been living in New Orleans, and instead have spent relatively small periods of time in the city over successive summers. Initially, the film had taken the form of interviews, and we eventually realized that we would need

more "observational" material, where the story is allowed to unfold in front of the camera in a less structured fashion, material that proved frustratingly difficult to obtain. The fact that the film crew has been largely made up of white, middle-class men also presented barriers in our ability to be accepted within the circles of rap music in New Orleans.

Perhaps my greatest regret at this point is that we have a dearth of interview material with women in general, a fact that both reflects and contributes to the general tendencies to exclude women from rap music production and business circles. Additionally, we have been unsuccessful in our attempts to obtain interviews with some of the more well-known and successful rappers and producers from the city, such as Juvenile and Mannie Fresh. After bringing John and Glenda Robert into the project, we have benefited from their "insider" status to rectify some of these shortcomings in our most recent filming sessions.

Despite all of these misgivings and anxieties, however, I must insist that I am excited about this film. Our lack of access to the exceptionally successful performers and producers forced us to focus on the city's rap scene as it exists on a more grassroots, local level. While I am aware that I could justifiably be accused of trying to turn a bushel of lemons into lemonade here, I honestly feel that this local and grassroots focus has put us in touch with a music scene that is ultimately much more exciting and interesting than the more mainstream that it both draws from and feeds into. Throughout the process, we have met people in a variety of roles—DJs, nightclub owners, sweet shop owners, record label owners, teenage dance crews—who contribute to a diverse perspective on the grassroots music scene in the city. "Big name" artists and producers, from my limited experience, are often concerned with justifying their success with narratives of exceptionality and artistic greatness, which, although they may very well be correct to some degree, often militate against a frank engagement with the collective nature of innovation and creation within the field of rap music generally.

Although it is difficult to gauge objectively, the fact that the majority of the film crew was composed of college-educated, middle-class "white" folks seemed to be much less of an impediment than I had originally expected. The rappers, audience members, and others who agreed to talk to us (admittedly a self-selecting sample) were generally forthcoming and candid with us in our interview sessions. While the complete transcendence of differences of race, class, gender, and local/regional identity is impossible, I often found that our knowledge of and appreciation for the local rap music that we were investigating opened up avenues of communication and led to a mutual understanding along musical lines..

Our willingness to film in and around working-class or poor neighborhoods and housing projects demonstrated our commitment to portraying bounce in a way that does not elide the major role that these communities play in the local rap scene. Our outsider status was even more pronounced due to the fact that we were not residents of New Orleans, but this actually had both negative and positive ramifications. When we were not in the city, our distance and lack of access proved frustrating, but we were also accorded a certain amount of respect for having learned the little that we did know about the local music scene. Our connection with Atlanta also seemed to carry a good bit of cache within rap

music circles, both for its industry connections and, one presumes, its status as a black middle class "mecca."

In addition to the above mentioned elements, I also attribute our warm reception to a uniquely New Orleanian approach to existence, one which places expressive culture in the center of an aesthetic value system and which has historically produced a rich array of institutions, practices, and events. From my limited exposure, I would assert that New Orleans people not only celebrate and party with each other more than people in other places, but are also more understanding of the need to document and preserve these events for posterity, a tendency which has no doubt become more pronounced as the city has increasingly turned to tourism for its economic sustenance. The creolized and rich cultural traditions in the city engender a form of sophistication and cosmopolitan sensibility, even among residents whose frame of reference is almost entirely limited to New Orleans, and lead to an understanding of the importance and power of expressive culture and the crossing of boundaries in order to enjoy it.

New Orleans has been the site of some of the most influential and notable African-American expressive culture in the United States, a history which encompasses Congo Square, early jazz, as well as the spectacular celebrations and performances enacted by organizations such as the Zulus and other, rougher forms of collective expression such as the Mardi Gras Indians, Skull and Bones, or Baby Dolls (the latter three are groups of working-class blacks who appear in thematized costumes during carnival season). The reasons why New Orleans became a sort of cultural wetlands for music in the United States are varied. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall has demonstrated that from its inception as a French colony, New Orleans and its environs was the site of an unusually coherent African cultural identity, which resulted from a high representation of people from the Bambara ethnic group (41).

Under French and Spanish domination, the blacks of the city enjoyed a higher degree of freedom to gather and engage in cultural and musical activities, as well as a generally less restrictive approach to miscegenation and racial categories. With the Louisiana Purchase and Americanization, another dimension was added to the struggle of cultures, race and power. As the United States tightened its control over the city in the post-Civil War years, racial categories became much more restrictive, and the city's Creoles of color (many of whom had arrived from Haiti in the early 1800s following that country's revolution) found themselves categorized as equivalent with the American blacks whom they had previously viewed as their social inferiors. This division within the 'black' population of the city played out over the spatial divide of Canal Street, which separated the Creole-dominated Downtown area from the black Uptown area. This basic division continues to structure neighborhood rivalries within the city today.

For these reasons and others, New Orleans has played a uniquely important role in the evolution of several forms of popular music in the United States. The emergence of Jazz from the city's red-light district is the best known and most heavily marketed by New Orleans tourist interests, but it represents merely one of several important stages in the city's musical history. While it has always remained marginal in terms of the

geographical distribution of music-industry infrastructure and resources, New Orleans contributed in an essential and foundational manner to the development of Rhythm and Blues, Rock and Roll, Soul, and Funk during the latter half of the 20th century. The community and family-based support for musical activity combined with the port city's exposure to a variety of Caribbean-based forms of expressive culture to engender an extremely rich and varied musical environment.

The city's carnival culture—and the "parade beat" that accompanied it—has also provided an axis around which rich musical and expressive practices have emerged (Broven xx, McKnight 115). Brass bands have been a staple of the city's musical life for more than a century now, and the formerly all-white carnival crews were joined in the early part of the 20th century by the Zulus, a group of black maskers who appropriated grotesques of African primitivism in a sublimely parodic expression of resistance and cultural sophistication. Also emerging in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were the various groups of working-class African Americans who organized in order to claim public space through performance. These included the now-famous Mardi Gras Indians, working-class blacks organized along neighborhood and family lines who walk the streets during carnival season dressed in elaborate and riotously colorful feathered and beaded costumes that reflect a stereotyped "Plains Indian" look seen through the prism of an Afro-diasporic visual aesthetic and cultural sensibility. Groups of Indians cruise the streets and engage in ritualized aesthetic conflict with one another based on extemporaneous singing/chanting and dancing, forms which have replaced the more violent clashes of the past. Other groups such as the Skull and Bones gangs, who parade in skull masks and often carry markers of primitivism such as butchers bones with sinews and scraps still attached, can be classed in the same general category, as can the Baby Dolls, originally consisted of prostitutes who would dress in an infantile manner and carry lollipops, engaging in a carnivalesque reversal of ideas of virtue and (sexual) maturity.

While these groups emphasized spectacular and creative visual presentation and a performative engagement with spatial politics, they drew upon and contributed to a general musical environment of New Orleans, which also included more everyday elements such as children's rhymes, street musicians, and fruit or vegetable vendors hawking their wares. The Mardi Gras Indians are especially known for their unique form of music making, which consists of group-based call-and-response accompanied primarily by tambourine and other ideophones such as glass bottles, metal cookware, or pieces of scrap metal. As Smith observes (66), the music of the Mardi Gras Indians has exercised a significant influence over New Orleans music for at least the last 50 years, especially in its privileging of chanted call-and-response phrases in distinct patterns, and in its emphasis on rhythmic rather than melodic elements. This influence has taken the form of direct musical influence as well as more abstract influences upon the philosophy of performance (audience/performer) and an integration of, and a privileging of call-and-response-based collective musical practice.

Bounce draws on these elements in strategic and selective ways. In general, the rap music of the city shares with earlier forms of locally grounded popular music a

commitment to danceable enjoyment and a sensibility that often relies on the collective energy of crowds and audience for its life force. Musically, the chants of the Mardi Gras Indians (and their style of percussive accompaniment) seem to be one of the most prominent influences from the New Orleans folk culture to impact the rap scene. Brass band music has enjoyed a relationship of mutual exchange with bounce. The playfully antagonistic chanted refrains of brass bands ("If you ain't gonna roll get the fuck on out the way") have been easily adapted to use in rap music, and numerous rap songs have sampled brass band songs, including Rebirth Brass Band's "Feel Like Funkin' It Up."

Seminal bounce rapper Warren Mayes enjoyed a close relationship with the Rebirth band before he was murdered, and bounce rappers such as Cheeky Blakk and Big Heavy have recorded and released songs with the Rebirth and New Birth bands respectively. As many of the new brass band players are within the age range of the so-called "hip-hop generation," their primary reference point in popular music is rap, a fact which has led to the adaptation of several rap songs (including Warren Mayes' "Get it Girl") by brass bands. While the Rebirth band has been at the forefront of the rap/brass band fusion movement, other bands engage in similar practices and cater to local audiences who have grown up against the background of rap music. On an individual level, few of the rappers, producers, and entrepreneurs involved with rap music in New Orleans have the family history of musical practice that is so central to studies of Jazz and R&B in the city (Berry, Foose and Jones, 1986). While some of the participants in the rap scene can claim family members with musical backgrounds, most of them have accrued their sense of "New Orleans-ness" from the atmospheric background of the city's musical practices rather than from any direct connection to prior musical forms.

Rap music in New Orleans

While bounce and other rap music from New Orleans draws upon the rich musical and cultural heritage from the city, it is also imbricated within a national culture of rap music production and consumption. Bounce drew on this culture in important ways, most notably through the appropriation of a 1986 record by New York-based group The Showboys as one of the core sonic markers of the genre. The lyrical style and imagery of Tupac Shakur also played a prominent role in influencing New Orleans rappers. Perhaps most importantly, the dynamics of national rap music production and consumption in the late 1980s and early 1990s provided a space for bounce to emerge.

During this period, the rap music industry began to expand beyond its traditional limits of "East Coast" (New York and other large cities in the Northeast) and "West Coast" (large cities in California) as rappers from other areas began to be accepted into the national genre. In the late 1980s, the bass-heavy sounds of rap music from Miami began to gain audiences in other parts of the country. Major label involvement with rap acts from the South began in earnest in the early-to-mid 1990s, when rappers based in Atlanta such as Outkast and Goodie Mob, signed to the LaFace label (a subunit of Arista), broke through to national audiences, leading music corporations towards a more engaged position with regards to rap acts from previously uninteresting regions. In comparison with Atlanta,

New Orleans has been the site of more limited infrastructural investment on the part of major labels.

While the period around 1991 when bounce emerged can be seen as a milestone in the city's rap music chronology, the decade leading up to this turning point saw the slow but steady emergence of a local scene in the city. Despite important antecedents to the emergence of bounce, the city would not be perceived (both by insiders and outsiders) as having its own distinctive style of rap music until the early 1990s. Until that time, more locally-oriented expressions were overshadowed by those which drew upon national stylistic trends for their inspiration. During this period, rappers and producers who would be active during the 1990s honed their performance and composition skills and established connections with rap music industries in other regions in both concrete and imaginative ways. For example, the group formed by MCs Gregory D and Sporty T with DJ Baby T secured a contract with Miami-based 4-Sight records in 1986. Gregory D went on to team up with DJ/producer Mannie Fresh, and the pair were then signed to the Dallas-based Yo! Records.

Mannie Fresh, who would later become famous as the production genius behind the Cash Money Records empire, began his rap career in New Orleans as a member of a group called "New York Inc.," which featured Denny D, a recent transplant from New York who showed him the latest methods for producing rap music, as well as a young Mia X, who would go on to become one of the city's most prominent women rappers (Murphy 34). Mannie Fresh's experience as an understudy to Chicago-based house DJ Steve "Silk" Hurley demonstrates the ways in which the rap music of New Orleans was connected on multiple levels to music scenes based in other cities. Meanwhile, other rappers such as MC Thick, Bustdown, and Tim Smooth (all operating out of the West Bank area of New Orleans) as well as Warren Mayes secured deals with majors or large independents in the late '80s and early '90s, and generally interpreted the rap form in a manner that was consonant with national trends at the time. Despite a few notable exceptions, the music of these artists did not emphasize their New Orleans roots through lyrical or musical devices.

This would change in the early 1990s with the emergence of a rapper named MC T. Tucker. With backing arranged by DJ Erv, Tucker inaugurated a new style of rap music, one which drew upon elements of previous New Orleans rap (the chanted lyrics of Warren Mayes, the local place-identification of Gregory D and Mannie Fresh's "*Buck Jump Time*") but which placed a greater degree of emphasis upon these elements than previous artists. Working out of a club called Ghost Town, Tucker pioneered a style of rap music that depended heavily upon "back-scratched" samples from the Show Boys' song "*Drag Rap*" and which employed lyrical devices that relied upon a chanted repetitiveness ("*I'm the nigga / The nigga nigga / The nigga nigga*") and a strong embeddedness in local New Orleans neighborhood/ward culture.

As Scott Aiges, a New Orleans-based journalist, observed (1994), Tucker's role bears no small similarity to that of Buddy Bolden, the black (as opposed to Creole) barber and cornet player who pioneered the early jazz style. Bolden, considered somewhat

disreputable or rough by many of the city's more established musicians, played a style that relied heavily upon improvisation and was revered amongst the working class black milieu from which he emerged. Despite his seminal role, Bolden never recorded, and spent the latter years of his life in a sanitarium. This also bears many similarities to Tucker's career: his groundbreaking song "Where Dey At" received limited release in the form of self-produced cassettes or bootlegs, and his career has been repeatedly interrupted by periods of incarceration. DJ Erv was shot to death in 1999, while Tucker, in and out of jail, maintains the status of a local legend but has had very little exposure outside the city and is relatively unknown and unappreciated outside of a small cult of bounce enthusiasts.

While Tucker is generally acknowledged as the initiator of the local style, another rapper, DJ Jimi, who also worked with DJ Erv, took the concept introduced by Tucker to the next level. DJ Jimi secured a record deal with Memphis-based Avenue Records, and recorded a song called (rather ironically) "(The Original) Where They At?" that was very similar in its lyrics and concept to Tucker's song, although it employed a much more complex and polished performance and musical production. The song penetrated the *Billboard* charts and received exposure throughout the nation, a fact that not only established the New Orleans sound in other locales but also demonstrated to artists working in New Orleans the potential for larger markets with a highly locally-oriented style. While Jimi would never be able to duplicate the success that he enjoyed with his first record, his role is an important one, not least because his second record featured the debut of Juvenile, a rapper who would later become instrumental in the further national exposure of New Orleans rap.

The runaway local success of T. Tucker's self-distributed debut in New Orleans, in combination with the national success enjoyed by DJ Jimi, kicked off a wave of similar recordings in the city. Musically, the new style of music had several distinguishing features. As previously mentioned, samples from the Show Boys song "Drag Rap"—especially an arpeggiated, up-and-down sequence of three high notes known around New Orleans as the "*Triggaman bells*"—became commonly-used sonic markers for the local style. Other elements of "*Drag Rap*"—such as vocal samples and a version of the signature "*dum, da-dum-dum*" riff of the theme music from the television show *Dragnet*—became widely used as well, and were often combined with a rhythmic pattern made by producer Paul Cameron called "Brown's beat." These elements contributed to a style that generally employed tempi ranging from 95 to 105 beats-per-minute (b.p.m.). The style of vocal performance, as previously mentioned, relied more heavily than national rap on chanted, call-and-response expressions, often employing certain repeated melodic patterns.

Thematically, the lyrics that these artists composed often contained references to the various wards (districts), neighborhoods, and housing projects in the city, elements that contributed to their ability to engage audiences through call-and-response practices. Also common were lyrical themes that emphasized parasitical or exploitative relationships between men and women (what Tricia Rose calls "the culture of sexual exchange" (169) as well as celebrations of the gangster or underworld ethos. In addition to these musical

characteristics, bounce can be further defined by the spaces in which it thrives. Nightclubs and lounges such as Ghost Town, Big Man's, Flirts and others (which, due to the city's French-influenced and tourism-friendly laws, are allowed to stay open all night) were and continue to be important venues for the development of a local rap style. Also, large, outdoor neighborhood parties known as "*block parties*" or "*deejays*" are sites where working-class black residents of all ages are brought together. In both of these types of venues, locally oriented music is mixed with that of national artists.

These elements formed the core of a new style that proved surprisingly popular in New Orleans. A 1994 *Billboard* article on the new genre by Scott Aiges remarked on the degree to which sales of local music were outselling national artists by large margins, based only on word-of-mouth promotion. The success of bounce and the perceived simplicity of the style caused no small amount of consternation among rappers and label owners from the city who were interested in producing music more in line with national aesthetic values. Even some who were profiting directly from the sales of bounce rap music (such as Pack Records owner and rapper James Joseph) lamented the lack of difficulty or complexity that they perceived in the music. Despite these expressions, a review of several of the records produced in this period suggests that they vary widely in their level of complexity, ranging from crude and sparse to sophisticated and rich in texture.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of bounce and its history is the speed and power with which it made itself the center of the local rap music scene. This centrality would be solidified in the years 1992 and 1993, which is the period when the subgenre became widely known as "bounce," as a result of several songs in this period which used the word (Juvenile's "Bounce for the Juvenile," Lil' Slim's "Bounce Slide Ride" and Everlasting Hitman's "Bounce! Baby, bounce!"). The highly imitative ethic that characterized the local rap of this period, in combination with a tendency to eschew complete documentation in the form of dates and credits on releases, makes it difficult to identify any one of these recordings as "the" source for the genre's name. Interestingly, the word "Bounce" seems to have prior associations with the city—a 1968 release of New Orleans "*Urban Blues*" on Imperial Records bears the subtitle "*New Orleans Bounce*." This is likely due to the city's historical association with music that is oriented towards dancing rather than more intellectualized forms of consumption.

With sales of bounce booming, overhead costs relatively low, and a large pool of talent to draw from, several independent record companies came to prominence in the period of 1993 and 1994. Chief among these was Cash Money Records, which combined the production expertise of Mannie Fresh with the ruthless, gangster-inspired management practices of owning brothers Ronald "Slim" Williams and Bryan "Baby" Williams. With rap acts such as Lil' Slim and UNLV achieving large sales figures locally, the label solidified its dominance in the New Orleans rap market, despite the emergence of several other important local labels such as Take Fo' and Big Boy Records. Big Boy was the home of rapper Mystikal, who in 1994 became the first New Orleans-based artist since DJ Jimi to break out of local markets and onto national playlists. With a dense, rapid-fire lyrical style delivered in a growling voice which is vaguely reminiscent of

Louis Armstrong's (a style no doubt related to the West African aesthetic of "*vocal masking*," which is also very popular with singing members of brass bands), he was picked up by the national label, Jive.

The period of 1994-1998 would see Cash Money establish its dominance in the local market, despite the meteoric rise of another New Orleans-based label, Master P's No Limit Records. No Limit had less extensive roots in the city's bounce scene, but instead was established in Richmond California by Master P. Sensing the opportunity for artists who mediated between a regional and national style, Master P quickly built his company up into an underground gangsta rap powerhouse, which attracted the attention of California-based Priority Records, which was flush with cash after the runaway success of their animated group "The California Raisins." After signing a lucrative distribution deal with the company—one in which he retained the rights to all of the "*master*" recordings and gave Priority only 15% control of the company—Master P and No Limit became the most well-known record company associated with the city, and released a string of platinum-selling albums in the mid-to-late 1990s.

Master P drew upon the local scene to recruit artists such as Mia X and Fiend, as well as his in-house production team "Beats By the Pound," which featured KLC, a producer with deep roots in the New Orleans scene, among others. However, the music released on the label had less in common with the local aesthetic values of bounce and more in common with West-coast based gangsta rap, a style which also enjoyed a significant amount of popularity in New Orleans, as it did in the south more generally. The stylistic orientation of No Limit would gradually shift during the mid-1990s towards a more bounce-flavored aesthetic, as artists such as Juvenile and B.G. (both Cash Money artists) demonstrated the potential success for such a formula.

Like the Williams brothers of Cash Money, Master P employed a business strategy that combined a corporate logic with one based in the tight family- and neighborhood-based networks of his city. While the jazz and R&B eras in New Orleans were rooted in the traditions and activities of musical families such as the Nevilles or the Batistes, the rap scene in the city is characterized by family- or neighborhood-based cliques that develop and employ business practices and philosophies which are rooted in the same grassroots forms of community that engendered cultural organizations such as Second Line clubs or Mardi Gras Indian tribes, as well as illegal drug networks. For his part, Master P has focused heavily upon building an artist roster out of his own family, promoting rap careers by his brothers C-Murder (now incarcerated) and Silkk the Shocker, as well as his son, "Lil Romeo."

With regard to partnership with powerful national companies, Cash Money followed in the footsteps of No Limit in 1998, as the Williams brothers signed a pressing and distribution deal with Universal, one that also placed them in an unusually strong bargaining position due to their impressive history of sales in the local New Orleans market. Worth 30 million dollars (Forman 335), the deal resulted in the emergence into the national playlists of artists such as Juvenile and B.G., who incorporated many more bounce-like elements into their performances than New Orleans-based artists who had

previously broken in to the national market, such as Mystikal. In 1998, Juvenile's song "Ha?" sold close to three million copies, a feat which represents an unprecedented level of success for an artist heavily rooted in a local style.

The success of No Limit and Cash Money occurred against the backdrop of the rap industry's discovery of the "*Dirty South*," which was animated by a realization that large southern cities such as Atlanta, Memphis and New Orleans could be exploited for their dynamic and vital rap music scenes. However, I would argue that it is no coincidence that the two companies that "represent the main success stories of independents joining forces with majors and their efforts skyrocketing" (Kenon) are both from New Orleans. This reflects two of the most important factors about the city and its historical relationship to the national music industry: its musical richness and its geographic isolation from centers of power.

With No Limit and Cash Money riding the national charts, other labels and the artists they represented aspired to similar success. The New Orleans scene in the late 1990s is characterized by an optimistic attitude towards national success and a concomitant loosening of the hold of local aesthetic and thematic values. Labels such as Take Fo' and Big Boy jockeyed to be the next in line for promotion to the national spotlight. In the case of Take Fo', a proposed deal with Tommy Boy for their artist DJ Jubilee seemed to signal a new mobility for artists who were previously viewed as having an exclusively local appeal. However, the deal fell through, and as the decade came to a close, optimism waned in general, and Cash Money and No Limit seemed to be headed towards a rough patch. Many of the artists who had led these labels to breakthrough successes were now leaving to start their own labels, and they became increasingly insular and limited in their rosters. In a possibly related development, the appetite for New Orleans rap outside of the city seemed to be reaching its limits.

Despite this darkening forecast for local labels, the city's grassroots music scene maintained much of its energy and enthusiasm. In nightclubs, lounges, and block parties, local rappers and DJs who maintained contact with the everyday reality of the projects or working class neighborhoods continued to produce music that responded to the dance-centered needs of New Orleans audiences. In the late 1990s, this milieu would become the site of one of the most interesting developments in the history of the New Orleans rap scene, and the history of rap music in general-, the emergence of openly gay male "sissy" rappers, who often appeared and performed in drag. Katey Red, who released a debut EP on Take Fo' in 1999, was at the vanguard of this trend. Initially perceived as a novelty act by her record label, Katey Red (whose lyrics often dramatized the life of a hustling male prostitute) achieved a level of popularity among New Orleans audiences that prompted the emergence of other "*sissy rappers*," including but not limited to Vockah Redu, Big Freedia, and Chev. I have written elsewhere (Miller: unpublished) about the themes and aesthetics that characterize sissy rapper performance, as well as their reception by local and national audiences and critics and the historical precedents to their emergence, and will only give a brief overview of these issues here.

The *sissy rappers* generally adhere to a performance aesthetic that is almost completely oriented towards New Orleans audiences. Perhaps because of their perception that the national rap music industry is unlikely to sign gay male rappers, the "sissy" rappers performances are heavily characterized by intense call-and-response and musical accompaniment, marked as local by tempo and samples. Along with the emergence of *sissy rappers*, the local scene continues to be the site of intense and sophisticated musical production that is geared almost exclusively towards local audiences. While rappers like Juvenile and Lil Wayne who came up through the Cash Money Records empire attempt to recapture the national spotlight, other rappers such as Hot Boy Ronald, Gotti Boi Chris, Déjà Vu and others maintain a much closer connection to the local scene and local audiences, and continue to produce music which is distinctive in its adherence to local New Orleans-based aesthetic and thematic preferences.

Ruth Finnegan writes, "The local foundation of overall cultural patterns ... is often overlooked, not just at the local level, but also in wider studies of the functioning of our society in general." 331 This is certainly true as it relates to New Orleans. Several authors who have written about bounce in the context of emergent rap scenes and styles (Forman, Keyes) have framed the local musical context as a springboard for the success of a select few artists, producers and labels; an approach which provides a distorted view of the relationship between the grassroots and the commercial forms of rap music coming out of the city. In fact, the national-level careers of artists like Juvenile and labels like Cash Money and No Limit are much more transitory and ephemeral than the bounce scene from which they emerged.

Despite the fact that a chronological description of the careers of artists and local companies is often the most sensible way to organize a discussion of bounce, it should not be seen as a denial of the importance of ongoing and *continuous* networks and processes of local activity that range from audience members buying a cassette tape to JazzFest organizers inviting local rappers to perform. The success stories of Cash Money and No Limit were predicated upon the responsiveness of local, grassroots audiences to their products. In fact, just as call-and-response forms is one of the most dynamic elements of bounce vocal performance, the history of the genre can also be viewed as an ongoing process of "call-and-response" between artists, the companies that mediate their performances, and local audiences.

The emergence and growth of bounce, as well as the content of its music and the careers of artists involved with its production, must also be understood within the wider political economy of Louisiana and New Orleans in the last decades of the 20th century. The lives of working-class African Americans in the city are affected by a variety of historical forces, including racism and neglect on the part of local and state officials, and the "*war on drugs*" with its resulting surge in incarceration. Since the oil business went bust in the late 1980s, the city's poor and working-class residents have found their employment opportunities narrowing and becoming concentrated in the service industries. With a decline in extractive industries, as well as the volume of the business passing through New Orleans' port, the city has staked its future on the tourist industry, which includes casino gambling. These developments affect the rap music scene in the city in several

important ways. The rising poverty in the city, combined with the illegal drug trade and the state's "tradition" of interpersonal violence, resulted in an extremely costly period of violence in the mid-1990s.

The city's murder rate peaked in 1994, with New Orleans surpassing other, larger cities to become the "murder capital" of the country. Rappers, DJs, producers, and label owners were not immune to this crisis. Several of bounce's leading lights, including rappers Warren Mayes, Pimp Daddy, and UNLV's Yella as well as DJ Erv and Tombstone Records owner Elton Wicker were all shot to death in the mid-1990s. While some of these deaths resulted from the victim's close involvement in drugs or other criminal activity (as in the case of the recently deceased rapper Soulja Slim) or deadly personal vendettas, others (such as Tombstone Records head Wicker, shot while crossing the street), simply happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Artists such as T. Tucker, C-Murder, and a host of others have had their careers interrupted by jail time due to their involvement with violent crime. These rappers have joined the legions of souls condemned to the state's Angola plantation, the largest prison in the United States.

Interestingly, New Orleans' criminal subculture displays some of the same tendencies towards self-sufficiency and insularity as does its music scene. A 2001 report by the National Drug Intelligence Center claimed, "Most New Orleans street gangs are not affiliated with national gangs and have fought any attempts by national gangs to organize in the city. Law enforcement agencies identify them by housing projects or neighborhoods rather than any adopted name or affiliation to a national organization." (p. 4). The growth of the tourist economy has also played a role in the development of a self-consciousness on the part of those involved with bounce and its production as a historically significant form of local cultural expression, a development which has no doubt been aided by the inclusion of local rap artists in the annual Jazz and Heritage Festival from 1994 onwards.

Another aspect of local politics that has impacted the rap music scene is the recent attempt to dismantle many of the large housing projects that were constructed in the middle part of the 20th century. Like many American metropolises, the powers that be in New Orleans have decided that the benefit of concentrated affordable housing provided by the projects is outweighed by their role as a limiting environment which tends towards insularity and criminal activity. While it cannot be denied that the projects have provided something of a safe haven for drug gangs, who harness considerable human, financial and technological resources in order to exert control over their environment and protect their profits, the other side of the coin is that the projects have been a site of poor and working-class black community, performance, and pleasure.

The housing projects were instrumental in the emergence of bounce, as many of the performers, artists and label owners emerged from the tight networks established within these communities. Residents, past and present, would agree that there are pathological effects from being impoverished and marginalized as second class citizens. However, there are others who recognize the ambivalent nature of this development, as drug-addled communities are often replaced with no community at all. As in other cities, of course,

the amount of "affordable housing" constructed in the wake of destruction of projects is often much too small to meet the demand that would logically stem from the exodus of displaced residents.

Preliminary conclusions

At this point, the reader may fairly inquire, what is the point of all of this history? Besides a conviction that such details are worth knowing in their own right, there are several elements of the story of bounce that I think are worth considering. First, bounce provides a case study of the ways in which national, mass-mediated forms of cultural expression are negotiated with more localized values and aesthetics. In its formative period, bounce was characterized by an insular quality, as a very vital and dynamic music scene that enjoyed a unidirectional relationship with more mainstream forms of rap music—national music went in, but the local music scene did not contribute in any meaningful way to the rap music scene or industry on the national level.

The reasons for this include the short-sighted conservatism of the national record labels, which saw only belatedly that bounce could be a source of profit in wider markets, a dynamic which was exacerbated by the geographic isolation of New Orleans. By the time they bought into the New Orleans rap game to any significant degree, the major companies were forced to negotiate from a position of weakness due to the dominance of the local market by labels like Cash Money. In a sense, then, the local rap industry benefited from the neglect of the major corporations, a dynamic that may have relevance in wider questions of cultural practices in a mass-media environment.

Another important aspect of the bounce phenomenon relates to Roger Abraham's observation that "there is an ultimate and fascinating relationship between social and psychological adversity and the black cultural mechanisms that promote emotional flexibility and creativity" (2). *Bounce's* status as a dance-oriented form of rap music that has generally eschewed lyrical complexity and which does not place a strong emphasis on innovation makes it easy to dismiss it as fluff, just as many of the early commentators on the genre called it "silly," "basic," or "stupid" (Aiges 1994). For many scholars, the resistive potential of rap music has been easier to locate in the explicitly political discourse of groups like Public Enemy than in expressions keyed to enjoyment and pleasure. I would argue, however, that the very elements of bounce which have drawn criticism for their regressive or simplistic nature—the repetitive use of particular beats or samples, the sexually explicit lyrics, among others—are in fact those which are central to its power as a resistive cultural practice that allows for survival in a more or less hostile environment. The very persistence of bounce as a distinct subgenre of rap music is in itself evidence that it plays an important role in black New Orleanians' ability to cope with an ongoing but constantly evolving succession of hardships, insults, exclusions and neglect.

This speaks to the possible role of bounce and New Orleans-oriented rap music in the post-Katrina environment. *Bounce*, like the people who produced it, is resilient and

flexible, not fragile, and therefore rather than being threatened by the dispersal and destruction of the hurricane will likely be strengthened by the experience. To the extent that the destroyed communities and neighborhoods of the city can be revived, bounce will play a central role in this process. *Bounce* is one of the channels through which community is forged "on the ground" in New Orleans, a site for the imagination of collective identity that is (more) real and (more) complex than (and yet, in dialogue with) shallow and commercial ideas of place identity. The ways in which bounce and rap music in New Orleans and the recently-created New Orleans diaspora will "establish, maintain, and transform social relations, and to define and shape material and geographical settings for social action" (Cohen 287) is one of the most productive areas for future inquiry. A recent, albeit crude example of the ways that bounce artists have directly dealt with the recent natural disasters can be found on the cover of the *Bouncedown Volume 4* compilation, which declares, "Fuck Katrina and fuck Rita!"

This should not be understood as a celebratory or redemptive narrative, however. In both the film and in my written work, I engage bounce and New Orleans rap in a way that reflects Stuart Hall's assertion that "by definition, black popular culture is a contradictory space. It is a site of strategic contestation" (26). I did not enter into my projects with this model in mind, but have instead come to adopt it based upon my experiences with and exposure to conditions "on the ground" in New Orleans. Like other ideas—New Orleans music, New Orleans culture, black music, rap music, black people, white people, The South—"bounce" and "New Orleans rap" are not stable or permanent categories. Instead, they are inherently politicized sites of conflict, struggle, and contestation, where competing ideas, individuals and factions negotiate and vie with one another for a dominance that can never be fully achieved.

The instability of these constructions is demonstrated by the many expressions or individuals who refuse to recognize or be contained by categorical boundaries. These entities are not "pure" in any sense of the word—they are all dynamic (continually changing), syncretic or, to use a more appropriate term, creolized (formed of many different strands), and exist only to the extent that a critical mass of people can generally agree on the ways that they imagine them. This is not to suggest that these constructions, categories and concepts are unimportant, just that they are not something that exists objectively in the "real" world. And, although they may be characterized by some historical continuity, they are being continually recreated through social and cultural practices and processes. They operate in ways that are essentially paradoxical and contradictory.

Looking at bounce and New Orleans rap as a site of conflict rather than harmony frees us of some of the constraining and limiting effects of looking at genres of music or local music scenes (or, for that matter, places in general) as natural, harmonious unities. In New Orleans rap, we see not only the negotiation of local and national lyrical themes and musical aesthetics, but also the contestation of the local scene (and the possible national stakes that accrue from its domination) by various actors and constituencies. Ward- and neighborhood-based rivalries, which have been part of New Orleans vernacular African

American culture for at least a century or more, are played out, defused and reinvigorated within the context of the rap music scene.

The rivalry between 3rd Ward-based Cash Money Records and 17th Ward based Big Boy Records in the early 1990s, inscribed on recordings by groups such as UNLV, Partners N Crime, and Warren Mayes, are an obvious sign that the local music scene is not a place of harmonious agreement but rather one of a sometimes acrimonious contestation. I would argue that bounce derives much of its creative energy by negotiating the tension between ideas of a pan-New Orleans culture that exists as an alternative to national musical expressions and allegiances to neighborhood and ward which promote divisions in the local scene, sometimes escalating into interpersonal violence. Further investigation needs to be devoted to understanding how these social and spatial processes and tensions are elaborated in musical forms. However, it is likely that the energy produced by this creative tension will be crucial to the psychic survival of many New Orleans residents as they work to reestablish lives and communities destroyed by Katrina and her bureaucratic accomplices.

Works cited

- Abrahams, Roger D. (1970). *Deep Down in the Jungle... : Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia*. (1st rev. ed.). New York: Aldine Publ. Co.
- Aiges, Scott. (1994). "Home-Grown Bounce Music Rules Big Easy's Rap Roost." *Billboard*, 19 March, 1.
- Berry, Jason, Foose, Jonathan, and Jones, Tad. (1986). *Up from the Cradle of Jazz : New Orleans Music Since World War II*. Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press.
- Cohen Sara. (1998). "Sounding Out the City: Music and the Sensuous Production of Place."
In *The Place of Music: music, space and the production of place*. Eds. A.Leyshon, D.Matless and G.Revill. Guilford Press, New York 269-290.
- Finnegan, Ruth. (1989). *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Forman, Murray. (2002). *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press.
- Hall, Gwendolyn Midlo. (1992). *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press..

- Hall, Stuart. (1993). "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" In *Black Popular Culture*. New York: New Press, 21-33.
- McKnight, Mark. (1988). "Researching New Orleans Rhythm and Blues." *Black Music Research Journal*, 8:1, 113-134.
- Mitchell, Gail. (2004). "Juvenile Signs with Atlantic." *Billboard*, 24 July 2004. accessed electronically thru LexisNexis academic.
- Murphy, Bill. (2005). "Bounce on the Brain." *Remix*, 1 March, 34.
- Rose, Tricia. (1994). *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press.
- Smith, Michael P. (1994). "Behind the Lines: The Black Mardi Gras Indians and the New Orleans Second Line". *Black Music Research Journal*, 14:1, 43-73.