

Breaks in the Air: The Birth of Rap Radio in New York City

JOHN KLAESS, 2022, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, pp. xiii + 218, \$99.95 (hardcover), \$25.95 (paper)

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Book Review

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‘We are a people station. We feel we are New York’, says Hal Jackson, one of the first black disc jockeys in the 1970s, when a group of fifty-eight investors from Harlem’s Black community became influential players in the sound of Black Progressive radio. It was the early days of Hip-hop when some stations were black-owned, black-operated and black oriented radio, like WBLS, whose call letters were known to mean ‘Black liberation station’. When rap radio in New York was such a global phenomenon, recalls DJ Chuck Chillout, you’d walk down King’s Highway on a Saturday night and ‘all you’d hear for miles was WBLS’ (p. 170). This is a time when rap, radio, and their listening communities – be they Latino, Jewish, White, Black, gay, youth, incarcerated or aspiring artists – were inseparable. These are the insights provided by *Breaks in the Air: The Birth of Rap Radio in New York City*, an important contribution to the history of New York hip-hop culture by John Klaess.

Among the plethora of books, articles, podcasts, exhibits, and events that came out around the 50th anniversary of Hip-hop culture, *Breaks in the Air: The Birth of Rap Radio in New York City* stands out as a uniquely valuable work. Before becoming a writer working in product education, John Klaess taught various courses in the music department at Yale University. This significant contribution to the history of New York hip-hop culture stems from his doctoral dissertation at Yale. Through a series of interviews (Chuck Chillout, Teddy Tedd, Special K, Daddy-0, Kool Keith, Wanda Ramos, Jay Dixon, and Dutch), accompanied by a collection of compelling tape recordings, he gives a broad sense of rap music that emerged in New York’s radiophonic institutions (WABC, WBLS, WHBI, WKTU, WLIB, WNWK, WRKS, WXLO). Through the entirety of the book, careful attention is given to the materiality of radio recordings. The author’s engagement with sources, including interviews, is notable, but it is the profound emphasis on cassette recordings that stands out in this work.

In the first chapter ‘Deregulating radio’, Klaess describes how the deregulation of the commercial radio industry has encouraged a close relationship between radio and investment communities, which benefited Harlem’s Black community, who formed the Inner City Broadcasting Corporation (ICBC). The author elucidates how deregulation has had concrete and indirect effects, shaping the infrastructures that facilitated the broadcast of hip-hop content. Moving to the second chapter ‘Sounding Black Progress in the Post-Civil Rights Era’, he presents the influential role of Percy Sutton as well as ICBC’s image-making mission that ‘maintained projection of a Black middle-class respectability’ (p. 64). Amidst the ‘Disco Wars’, the transition to ‘Urban Contemporary’, the delicate equilibrium between entertainment and education, and the debate surrounding the role of race in the cultural industries, Klaess posits that communications media was ‘to be used as an instrument for Black social advancement’ (p. 38). The third chapter deals with the impact of Mr. Magic’s Rap Attack show on WBLS, its aesthetic claims and profit potential, and, most importantly, its role in legitimizing rap, at a time when the media portrayed rap as ‘a symbol of Black pathology and a racial menace’ (p. 64). Chapter four, titled ‘Programming the street at WRKS’, covers KISS-FM branding, the distinctive sound of New York City ‘from the asphalt up’, and the idea that radio functions as ‘a megaphone amplifying the sound of New York’s African American and Latin youth cultures’ (p. 89). There are also reflections on fragmented formats, listener profiles, audience research and pivotal decisions in radio programming, including Barry Mayo’s meeting with Afrika Bambaataa and Afrika Islam. The fifth chapter examines the importance of Zulu Beat, a hip-hop radio show, shedding light on shout-outs, listener communities, and its distinct influence on early hip-hop culture. In the last chapter ‘Listening to the Labor of the Awesome 2 Show’, Klaess presents a specific form of work that the DJs and rappers craft in a unique space: the radio studio. Finally, the epilogue recounts an event from 1993 when Harlem pastor Reverend Calvin O. Butts intervened in the public space to denounce the violent and misogynist lyrics in gangsta rap. This anecdote from 1993 marks a shift where rap is no longer considered in terms of its suitability for radio formats but also as a moral issue.

This book notably delves into the author’s intricate relationship with various sources, specifically exploring the dynamics with broadcasts, which represented significant events for the audience, and tapes, which served as inscriptions of these events. John Klaess provides a distinctive perspective on the social and material history of tapes, considering them as valuable historical artifacts: ‘Each circulated in a world in which they were valued, exchanged, collected, and altered. They spread rhizomatically, mailed, sold, traded, and erased along the vicissitudes excitement and gain’ (p. 118). Despite acknowledging the inherent difficulty in uncovering the complete circulation history of these documents, the author highlights singular trajectories, such as the Dutch collection (<https://hiphopradioarchive.org/>) and the journey of a 1985 Red Alert show tape that found its way to Halifax, Nova Scotia.

As the author concludes, ‘There are still many stories – of women, of queer hip-hop, of regional scenes, of transmission, of the families and caretakers of artists who nurtured the music as much as those behind the turntables – that remain to

be written'. And Klaess adds, after the notable contribution of his book, 'the work is just beginning' (p. 171). By providing a framework for analysis, this book will be useful to authors who wish to continue writing this story in different localities. Commemorative anniversaries may present an opportune time to dig where we stand, unearth recordings not yet archived, and to locate the 'gardiens de cassettes' as Gilles Deleuze aptly refers to them – the guardians of the tapes. Klaess's book is a long, poetic shout-out to rhythm and poetry, DJs and the New York radiophonic institutions that enabled the emergence of Hip-hop culture.

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