

# FUTURE SHOOK: RAP IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM



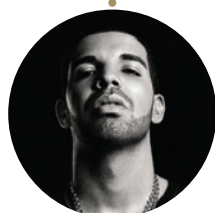
**By John Kennedy**

## **Hip-Hop x File Swap**

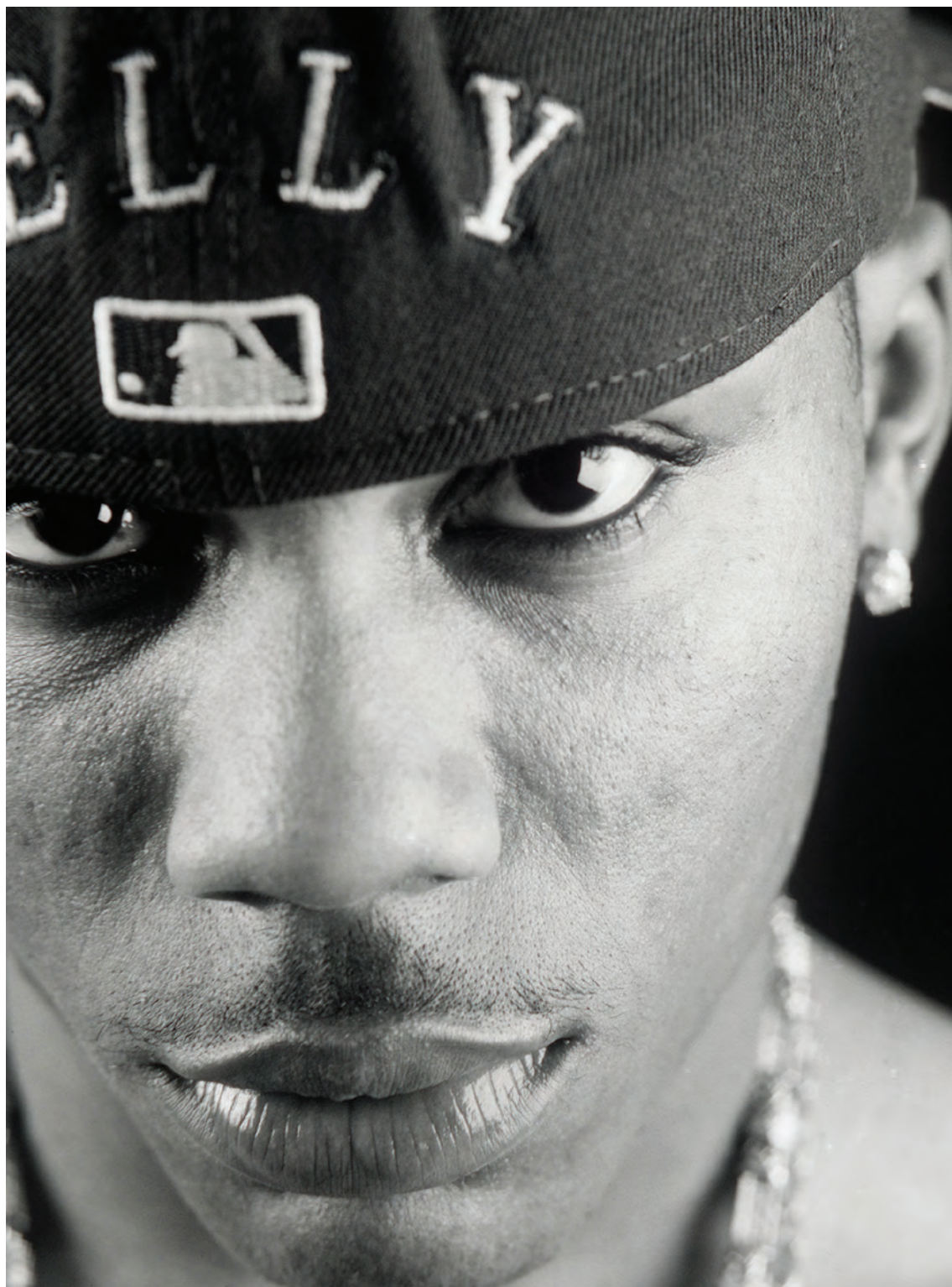
**As the turn** of the millennium approached, rappers, doomsday believers and everyday people alike were shook. The Year 2000 problem—a computer-coding glitch (dubbed Y2K) that many feared would cause the collapse of information systems around the world—threatened to trigger widespread chaos once the clock struck midnight on Jan. 1, 2000. Of course, those concerns proved unwarranted, as the new year went off without a hitch—those vital financial

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*Left: Jay-Z*



*Above, top-bottom: Internet-connected artists A\$AP Rocky, Drake and J. Cole.*



*Above-right: Nelly 2000*

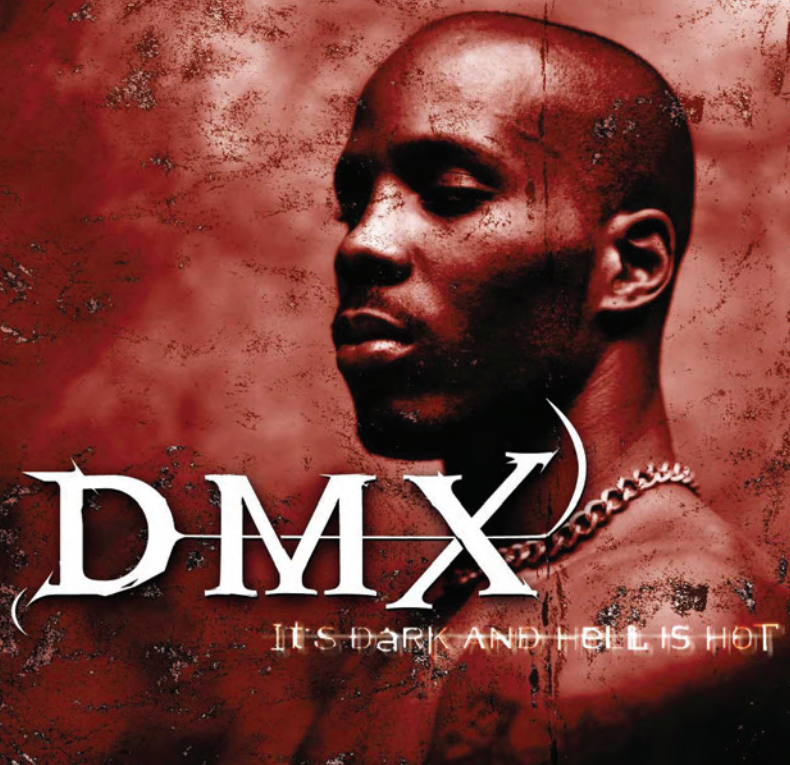
and governmental records were not bugged by the Y2K bug. But hip-hop had already been dealing with a separate technological predicament of its own, one that persisted well into the new century.

While bootlegging had long been a nuisance for hip-hop artists, 1999 saw the explosion of peer-to-peer sharing via the Internet, primarily via the music-swapping software called **Napster**. The program allowed users around the world to transfer mp3 files illegally, causing a catastrophe for record labels and artists looking to protect their profits.

But the rampant piracy also had at least one fortuitous effect: It helped sounds from elsewhere—from everywhere—to spread without reliance on radio or TV. This played a key role in hip-hop's democratization, slowly swaying the influence of hubs like Los Angeles and New York City and leveling the playing field for other cities, all while presenting a buffet of influences for a future generation of music-makers to ingest.

The transformation of hip-hop by technology in the new millennium was the real digital tidal wave.





There's a reason the music of Harlem's own **A\$AP Rocky** often recalls the nimble flows of Cleveland's **Bone Thugs-N-Harmony**, while his tracks nod to chopped-and-screwed aesthetics birthed in Houston. It's the same foundation for **Drake**—a former child actor from Toronto—becoming one of the biggest megastars hip-hop has ever seen. Likewise for Fayetteville, North Carolina, rapper **J. Cole**, who, before making it big, met some of his closest collaborators while geeking out over rhymes by **Canibus** on message boards. It all starts with the Internet.

#### Mic Check: Middle America

**Yet a decade** before that generation of artists rose to prominence, back in 2000, the wheels were already turning on that shift, especially in the Midwest. **Dr. Dre** had plucked a protégé straight outta Detroit two years prior, and this great white hope proved to be the real deal. After years of cutting his teeth in the underground and battle circuit, **Marshall Mathers**, known to the world as **Eminem**, made his major-label debut on the N.W.A/*Chronic* legend's **Aftermath Entertainment** in 1998 with *The Slim Shady LP*. The album, which features tracks like “My Name Is” and “Guilty Conscience,” marked the arrival of one of hip-hop's most polarizing figures to date.

Eminem was quick to silence early skepticism of his skills or comparisons to white rap predecessors like **Vanilla Ice** and **Marky Mark** (aka **Mark Wahlberg**). His vivid, multisyllabic rhymes—which poked at parents and pop stars alike—quickly set him apart, as did his confrontational and sometimes outright misogynistic music videos. In May 2000, under Dre's guidance, Em dropped his definitive work, *The Marshall Mathers LP*, which features “Stan,” a sobering account of a deranged fan driven to the edge by unrequited love for his idol. The RIAA-certified diamond project joined a short list of albums (includ-

ing sets by the likes of **The Notorious B.I.G.** and **Tupac Shakur**) to sell more than 10 million copies. His burgeoning legend was sealed by his starring role in *8 Mile*, a semi-autobiographical coming-of-age film about an aspiring battle rapper, whose soundtrack contained the hip-hop anthem “Lose Yourself.”

That same year, fewer than 600 miles away, another superstar began to stake his claim in hip-hop. With a melodic flow and Midwestern twang, **Nelly** emerged from St. Louis to become one of rap's biggest breakouts. The catchy-yet-street jingle “Country Grammar,” which interpolated a children's rhyme, set things off. The 2000 album of the same name heralded the arrival of this former major-league-baseball prospect, who scored with singles like “E.I.” and “Ride With Me.” Other STL artists like **Chingy**, **J-Kwon** and Nelly's **St. Lunatics** crew followed in his footsteps, as he continued to expand his sound, experimenting with traditional R&B crossover fare (“Dilemma” with **Kelly Rowland**) and even country (the **Tim McGraw**-featured “Over and Over” and **Florida Georgia Line**'s “Cruise” remix).

One thing shared by Nelly, **Ludacris**, Jay-Z, Snoop Dogg and numerous other rappers of the era: They collaborated (and scored their first #1s) with influential production duo **The Neptunes**. **Pharrell Williams** and **Chad Hugo** shaped the sound of the aughts with synths, live instruments and distorted percussion arrangements, guiding rappers to the top of the pop charts. Beyond sound, Pharrell's outside-the-box taste set the tone for a new generation of alternative fashion and lifestyle, as black youth embraced skateboard culture like Pharrell did for his 2003 cover shoot for *The Source*.

#### The Hova-Throw

**But while** artists on America's fringes planted their flags in hip-hop, New York City remained the mecca—and its alpha MCs quickly





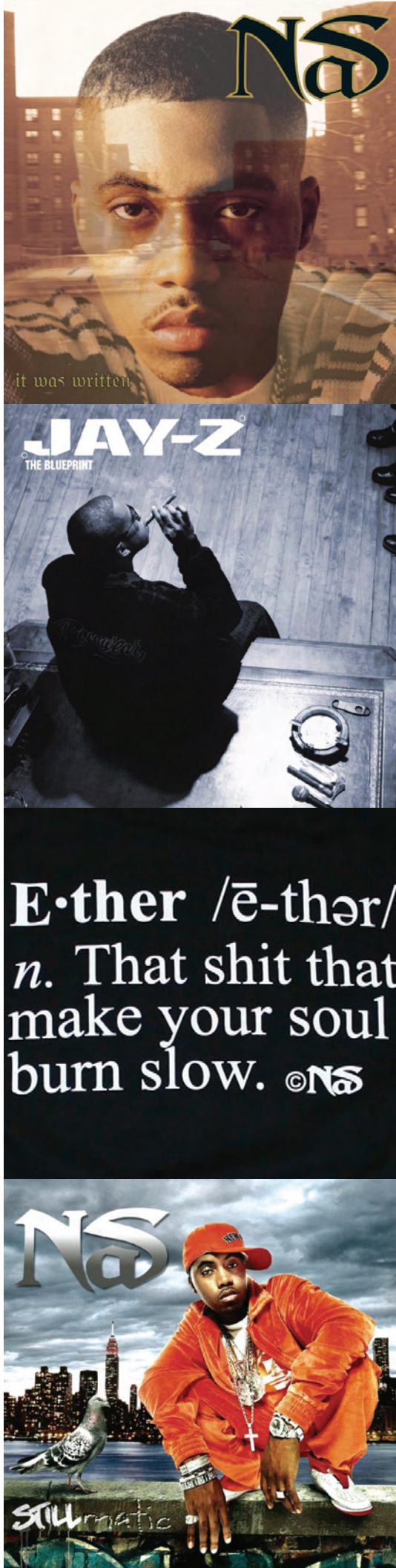
found themselves in competition. Following the 1997 murder of The Notorious B.I.G., then believed by many to be the king of the Big Apple, multiple contenders vied for the throne. **Puff Daddy** carried the torch for his late protégé, alongside signees to his **Bad Boy Entertainment** family like **Mase** and **The Lox**. **Fat Joe** and **Big Pun** repped for Latino hip-hoppers with their own **Terror Squad** set. **Busta Rhymes** continued to create high-energy anthems, while **Ja Rule** put on for the streets and the ladies. Meanwhile, **DMX** made history by becoming the first rapper to drop two #1 debuts on the album chart within the same calendar year (his first set, *It's Dark and Hell Is Hot*, and sophomore effort *Flesh of My Flesh, Blood of My Blood*).

But it was Biggie's friend and peer **Jay-Z** who most consistently stood out from the crowd. Jay's debut full-length, *Reasonable Doubt* (1996), and Biggie's sophomore album, *Life After Death* (1997), both feature collaborations between the two rap icons and set the stage for the passing of the torch that took place in 1998 with Jay's critically acclaimed, 5 million-selling third album, *Vol. 2... Hard Knock Life*. That album, which includes the Annie-sampling "Hard Knock Life (Ghetto Anthem)" as well as "Can I Get A...", helped to set him apart from the pack; the music that followed from both Jay and his developing label, **Roc-a-Fella Records**, only tightened his grip.

By the turn of the millennium, Jay-Z found himself embroiled in a cold war with Queens rivals **Mobb Deep** and **Nas**. Years of subliminal and overt disses came to a head in 2001 at hometown radio giant **Hot 97's** high-profile **Summer Jam** concert. There, the Brooklyn lyricist premiered the first half of his staggering diss track, "Takeover," which namechecks Nas and takes aim at **Prodigy** of **Mobb Deep**. "When I was pushing weight/Back in '88/You was a ballerina/I got the pictures, I seen ya," Jay rapped before taking a dramatic pause, as jumbotrons at Long Island's **Nassau Coliseum** displayed a childhood photo of a young boy in dancer garb, with the caption "Prodigy of Mobb Deep in 1988." It was meant to be an emasculating shot at the credibility of one of rap's most respected street rhymers, and it served an opening salvo in one of hip-hop's most legendary square-offs.

Prior to that public shot by Jay-Z, Nas was approaching a crossroads in his career. His 1994 instant classic *Illmatic* was a watershed moment—a flawless marriage of raw, vivid lyrics over beats by some of the best producers of the era. Instantly, folks began comparing the Queensbridge street poet to the god MC, **Rakim**. Nas remained that street-certified wordsmith, even as his music at times aspired to mainstream success on *It Was Written*, with tracks like "Street Dreams" and "If I Ruled the World" featuring **Lauryn Hill**. Yet bootlegging derailed subsequent albums *I Am...* and *Nastradamus*, resulting in weaker, watered-down versions of the intended releases. His impending battle with Jay-Z would unexpectedly provide a creative spark.

Nas and Jay-Z spent the latter half of 2001 trading shots in the form of freestyles and full songs.



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Jay-Z's masterful *The Blueprint* includes a full version of "Takeover," with a fresh verse focused on dismantling Nas. The rapper responded with "Ether," a diss so searing that its title entered the cultural lexicon for a particularly harsh putdown. It was a classic battle of two street-hardened MCs whose careers had taken different shapes: Jay a certified mainstream force and Nas the eternally respected ghetto *griot*. They'd continue beefing on wax until October 2005, when they united onstage in concert to officially declare a ceasefire. (Shortly afterward, Nas signed with **Def Jam**, where Jay-Z served as president and CEO of the label.)

While Nas and Jay-Z jostled for the New York crown, other artists rose up the ranks. The Lox's **Jadakiss**, **Styles P** and **Sheek Louch**—who also collided with Hov and other Roc-a-Fella artists on wax around the same time Nas did—left Bad Boy for **Ruff Ryders Entertainment** (home to DMX). They embarked on solo careers of their own, starting with the former's 2001 album, *Kiss Tha Game Goodbye*. Brooklyn's own **Fabulous** became a poster child for punchline rap, rising from the mixtape circuit to crossover phenom. Elsewhere, elite Harlem lyricist **Cam'ron** signed with Roc-a-Fella in 2001, establishing a label home for his **Diplomats** crew. The following year, Cam and his rhyme cohorts **Juelz Santana**, **Jim Jones** and **Freekey Zekey** built their buzz via idiosyncratic flows, ostentatious fashion and a series of self-released mixtapes, a formula that a future NYC legend would perfect and ride to the top.

When the hip-hop world first took notice of **50 Cent**, he was sticking up music stars for all their riches. His 1999 single "How to Rob" fantasized about mugging everyone from Puff Daddy to **Will Smith**, quickly stirring up talk around the industry. Artists like Jay-Z and Big Pun quickly clapped back with their own namechecks. That early buzz fizzled out just as quickly, though, after the rapper was hit in a May 2000 shooting outside of his grandmother's house in Queens due to a street-related beef. Fitty miraculously survived nine bullet wounds—a fact that fortified his unstoppable mythos—but he was dropped from his deal with **Columbia** and back at square one.

50 took his music career into his own hands and hit the mixtape market—hard. At the time, it was commonplace for rappers to record freestyles over beats by their contemporaries. 50 upped the ante by completely remaking popular tracks—complete with new hooks and his own gangsta twist—and servicing them to mixtape DJs like **DJ Clue** and **DJ Whoo Kid**, who'd feature them on their own mix CDs. Fans took to Fif's defiant demeanor and unbreakable spirit in the wake of the shooting; demand quickly hit a fever pitch. To satisfy the frenzy, 50 independently released the comp *Guess Who's Back?* The set gathered new material, freestyles and shelved tracks from his Columbia days. He followed that up with *50 Cent Is the Future*, the first of a long series of self-released mixtapes that showcased the then-underdog alongside protégés **Lloyd Banks** and **Tony Yayo**. These Whoo Kid-hosted tapes made 50 Cent the hottest, most





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sought-after unsigned artist in rap. He would soon ink with the biggest name in the game.

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By February 2003, 50 Cent had dropped debut album, *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*, which was instantly hailed as a classic. It combined pop-friendly hit records ("In Da Club," "21 Questions") with street anthems that were hard as concrete ("Many Men [Wish Death]," "What Up Gangsta"). Solo albums from every G-Unit member followed, from the laid-back Banks to the amped-up Yayo to Nashville native **Young Buck** to **The Game**, a Compton MC shoehorned in from Dre's Aftermath roster. While Game's 2005 debut album, *The Documentary*, moved more than 4 million units—outselling every album in the label's history outside of 50 Cent and G-Unit's collaborative album *Beg For Mercy*—his run with the crew came to an end after about a year, as clashing

egos caused a rift that left Game a lone wolf.

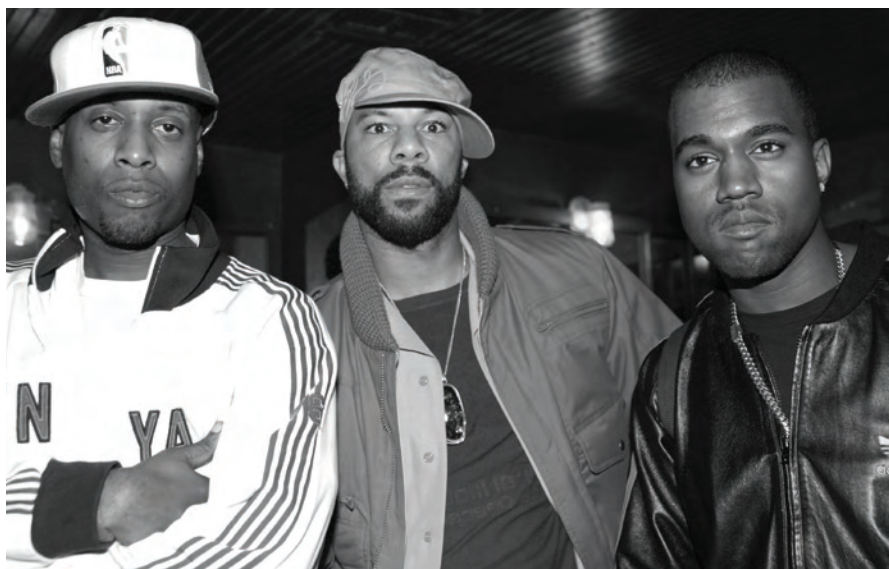
But just as 50 Cent was becoming hip-hop's alpha MC, a paradigm shift was under way in hip-hop. The aggressive, street-informed aesthetic that became 50 Cent's calling card was quickly countered by a Chicago rapper who also faced a near-death experience, albeit an accidental one. Driving home from a late studio session in October 2002, producer **Kanye West** dozed off at the wheel of his rented **Lexus**, colliding with another car in a serious crash that resulted in a fractured jaw.

At that point, Ye's rap career had yet to gain traction, but he'd gotten his foot in the door as an in-house producer for Roc-a-Fella Records, having laced tracks for Jay-Z, **Trina**, **Scarface** and many others. But the accident became the inspiration for "Through the Wire," a track that reflects on the brush with death; Kanye rhymed with his jaw wired shut over a cleverly manipulated sample of **Chaka Khan**'s "Through the Fire." And even as that track got some momentum, no one could've predicted the heights to which he would take his career.

Ever the Gemini, Kanye showed a duality early

**Shady**  
RECORDS

Pictured above:  
50 Cent mural



Pictured above, left-right: Talib Kweli, Common and Kanye 2003. Far-right: Outkast 2000.

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in his career, nodding to both the socially conscious backpacker rhymes of buddies like **Talib Kweli**, **Mos Def** and **Common** (whom he'd later sign to his **G.O.O.D. Music** imprint) and the glitzy, materialistic enchantment of his labelmates at the Roc. That supposed paradox, expressed over his own beautifully sliced soul samples, was the key to Kanye Omari West's appeal. He bridged the gap in a way that felt authentic, right from his groundbreaking 2004 debut album, *The College Dropout*. As the years flew by, Kanye continually pushed the sonic envelope—from the lush instrumentation of 2005's *Late Registration* and electronic sounds of 2007's *Graduation* to the sonically jarring, **Travis Scott**-influenced *Yeezus* in 2013 and the full-fledged gospel of 2019's *Jesus Is King*.

Kanye's sound and style were so diametrically opposed to that of 50 Cent that the two artists orchestrated a media-hyped album-sales showdown between their respective third solo albums, which were set for release on Sept. 11, 2007. Kanye's *Graduation* prevailed in first-week sales over 50 Cent's *Curtis* by more than 250k units. The contest crystallized the evolution of hip-hop's dominant sound toward the end of the decade. Kanye's early rise, however, also marked the end of another archetype: conscious rap. Artists like Lauryn Hill had successfully walked the line between conscious and commercially successful, but none did so in a nimble, seamless way; artists and fans typically felt they had to choose one or the other. This paved the way for thoughtful rappers like **Lupe Fiasco**, **J. Cole** and **Kendrick Lamar**, who arrived later in the decade with compelling work that resisted categorization.

#### **The South Got Something to Say, Part 1: The ATLien Invasion**

**André 3000** made himself perfectly clear. The year was 1995. New York City and California were in the midst of a heated, media-instigated rivalry dubbed the East Coast vs. West Coast beef, centered around The Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac Shakur. And on this particular night



during **The Source Awards** at **Madison Square Garden**, the tension of that energy was as acute as a muscle cramp. Still, perhaps the most enduring message to come out of the historic event came on behalf of the Dirty South.

**OutKast** took the podium to claim their best new group of the year honors as boos rained down from the audience. With his partner-in-rhyme **Big Boi** by his side, André 3000 spoke defiantly to the detractors: "I'm tired of them closed-minded folks. It's like we got a demo tape but don't nobody want to hear it. But it's like this: The South got something to say! That's all I got to say."

André's words became a rallying cry for his Southern brethren, many of whom felt their artistry had been overlooked. The night certainly energized **André "3000" Benjamin** and **Antwan "Big Boi" Patton**, a funky rap twosome from Atlanta whose sharp lyricism, experimental sonics and eccentric style lived up to their name. Their singular style fused the interstellar party manifestoes of **P-Funk**, **Native Tongues'** bohemian storytelling and other vibey influences, even embracing the black roots of rock 'n' roll. After their stellar 1994 debut, *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik*, OutKast's run spanned more than a decade and yielded some of hip-hop's most pivotal works, including the diamond-certified double-disc *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below* and monster hits like the frenetic "Hey Ya," the loping, infectious "Ms. Jackson," the soul-infused romp "The Way You Move" and the rapid-fire, nonchalant "So Fresh, So Clean." They also earned six **Grammys**, among the countless other trophies that shared the shelf with their lone Source Award.

OutKast wasn't the first group to make a thud in the South—**UGK**, **Geto Boys** and **2 Live Crew** preceded them—but in many ways they led the charge through the '90s and early 2000s, pushing the artistic limits (along with **Goodie Mob**, who also repped the **Dungeon Family** collective). By the end of the '90s, though, the South's rap strength had proved unstoppable.

**No Limit Records** plowed onto the national hip-hop scene in the mid-'90s like the tank depicted on the label's logo. New Orleans' own **Master P**





(born Percy Robert Miller) started the imprint, selling albums directly from the trunk of his car until he'd built an empire that boasted a stacked music roster (**Snoop Dogg**, **Silkk the Shocker**, **Mystikal**, **Mia X**, **Soulja Slim** and P's son, **Lil Romeo**, among others) and theatrical films (*I Got the Hook Up*). Master P's homegrown success inspired many of his peers, especially after his 1997 single "Make Em Say Uhh!" became one of the biggest songs of that year.

Around the same time, brothers and fellow Nawlins natives **Bryan "Birdman" Williams** and **Ronald "Slim" Williams** began to see success with their own **Cash Money Records**, built around the talents of the **Hot Boys**, a formidable hip-hop foursome that featured **Juvenile**, **B.G.**, **Turk** and **Lil Wayne**. Juve's thick drawl powered classics like "Ha" and "Back That Azz Up." B.G.'s "Bling Bling" birthed a new dictionary entry. And Lil Wayne grew into a rhyme goblin whose favorite vegetable was beats. His lyrical development from his teenage beginnings ("Tha Block Is Hot") to full-grown man ("Go D.J.") was astonishing to witness.

Back in Atlanta in 2000, another rap rookie with Midwestern roots—just like Nelly—was set to embark on a legendary career of his own. Born in Champaign, Illinois, **Christopher Bridges**, better known as **Ludacris**, spent his formative years in Atlanta, infiltrating the local industry mix as a radio DJ dubbed **Chris Luva Luva**. Yet outside of the booth, Luda was the truth. His rhymes were fun but far from a joke, helping Ludacris' Def Jam debut, *Back For the First Time*, move 3 million copies—aided by smash cuts like "Southern Hospitality" and "What's Your Fantasy?" It was the start of a sturdy career that eventually pivoted to Hollywood, as Luda became a key character in the *Fast & Furious* franchise. Yet while his music tends toward the lighthearted, a more straight-faced branch of ATL hip-hop began to grow in the midst of his emergence.

## The South Got Something to Say, Part 2: Trap Time, We Want the Crunk and Other Byways

**Who invented** trap music? Depends on who's asked. The subgenre—a sound powered by booming 808s and skittering snares—gained traction in the early 2000s as a soundtrack to selling drugs out of abandoned houses. With the title of his 2003 sophomore album *Trap Muzik*, Atlanta rapper **T.I.** (born **Clifford Harris Jr.**) gave it a proper name. He claims to be the subgenre's originator, as do fellow ATLians **Gucci Mane** and **Young Jeezy**. But beats and lyrical content are equally vital to trap's identity, so producers like **Shawty Redd**, **Zaytoven** and **DJ Toomp**, who've each worked with some combination of that big three, can just as rightfully stake their claims.

There's less confusion around another phrase that T.I. spoke into existence as early as 2001: King of the South. The former dope boy made his mark on the game with aggressive singles ("24s," "What You Know"), crossover records ("Live Your Life" f/**Rihanna**) and blockbuster albums like 2006's *King*, which dropped the same week he made his acting debut in the film *ATL* alongside **Lauren London** and **Big Boi**.

A boisterous new sound that had been simmering in Atlanta throughout the '90s began to bubble over in the early 2000s. This subgenre, dubbed crunk, took over hip-hop with its deep, thumping bass, synths and call-and-response lyrics, often delivered in guttural shouts. **Lil Jon & the East Side Boyz** were ambassadors for the style, first catching nationwide attention with the 2001 posse cut "Bia Bia" and collaborating with the **Ying Yang Twins** for 2003's "Get Low," a #2 Pop hit. Jon became a household name after being parodied by **Dave Chappelle** in a series of hilarious sketches on *Chappelle's Show*, supercharging his

*Pictured above, left-right: ATL's Ludacris, 2000. T.I. with "Live Your Life" featured artist Rihanna, 2008.*

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## Down in Miami, Rick Ross began shaping his persona as a coke king of rap.

Pictured above, left-right: Rick Ross, Kid Cudi, Wiz Khalifa.

already-ubiquitous production. Pretty soon, everyone from **Usher** to **Pitbull** was requesting Jon's special production sauce.

Crunk dovetailed with another musical style that had a moment in the sun: snap music. The genre took the baton in 2005 off the strength of tracks like **Dem Franchise Boyz's** "I Think They Like Me," Lil Jon's "Snap Yo Fingers" and **D4L's** #1 Pop hit "Laffy Taffy"—minimalist thumpers that incorporated finger snaps both sonically and in accompanying dances. **Soulja Boy Tell 'Em** cashed in on the sound with his 2007 breakout, "Crank That (Soulja Boy)," which he promoted via early social network **MySpace** and an instructional video he posted to **YouTube**—an innovative approach for the era.

Atlanta wasn't the only hub of burgeoning musical styles. 2005 marked the explosion of a new crop of Houston artists who introduced their own drawl and lean-influenced sound. **Mike Jones** led the way in '04 with "Still Tippin,'" followed closely by the grill-making **MC Paul Wall**, deep-voiced **Slim Thug** and **Chamillionaire**, whose "Ridin'" *f*/**Krayzie Bone** was a #1 giant. Down in Miami, **Rick Ross** began shaping his persona as a coke king of rap, dropping his debut album, *Port of Miami*, which featured the smash single "Hustlin'." He'd build on that bigger-than-life image through the next decade and beyond, dropping 10 solo albums. Elsewhere in Florida, Tallahassee's self-proclaimed "rappa-ternt-sanga" **T-Pain** made his mark around this time, crafting a vocal that leaned heavily on **Auto-Tune** (2005's "I'm Sprung,") and inspiring artists like **Snoop Dogg**, **Kanye West** and **Lil Wayne** to incorporate the pitch-bending tech in their own music.

Among some hip-hop traditionalists, these middle years of the decade became known as ringtone rap, a backhanded nod to the truncated versions of popular songs that would announce the phone owner's excellent taste whenever a call came in. Ringtones were a rare bright spot in the music economy of the time, ravaged as it was by **Napster** and post-9/11 doldrums; they gained momentum in 2004, peaking in 2007 with \$1.1 billion in sales, according to the **RIAA**.

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By the time **Lil Wayne** dropped his sixth studio album, 2008's *Tha Carter III*, it was clear that he was head, shoulders and dreadlocks above his peers—making good on his Best Rapper Alive declaration from a few years earlier. The triple-platinum effort, which features the woozy "Lollipop" and the no-hook-all-bars session "A Milli," represents the critical and commercial peak for **Dwayne Michael Carter Jr.**, whose career spans more than two decades. The only thing that could slow Weezy's roll was an eight-month jail sentence he served in 2010 (and years later, a record-release stalemate with his label, **Cash Money**), but by that point he had reserves who were well suited to keep his throne warm.

### The Internet 2.0 Era: Blog Rap and Beyond

**If hip-hop** was a street culture in its first three decades, it firmly transitioned to the interwebs during its fourth. By the late 2000s, interaction between artists and fans was being transformed. CD sales were nosediving, and music blogs like **NahRight** and **2DopeBoyz** gradually became the gatekeepers and sources of discovery for new (or leaked) music. Half a decade after a 2001 injunction

ordered Napster to immediately cease the sharing of copyrighted music via its platform, the Internet was still a wild west for piracy; the only difference was that files were shared via links from hosting sites like **ZShare** and **Megaupload**.

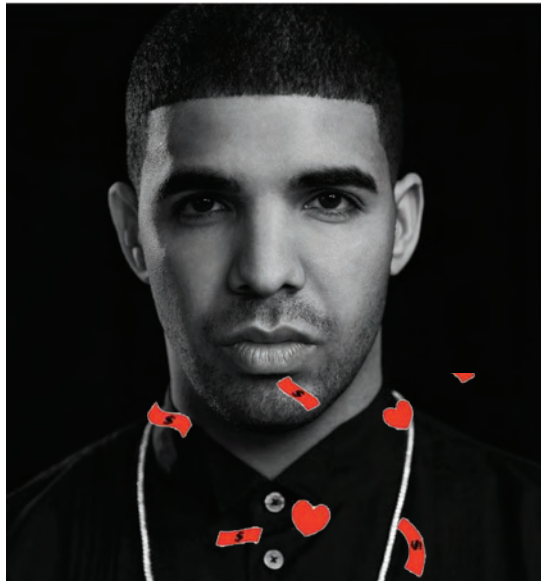
But that all changed in January 2007. Following the infamous raid of **DJ Drama's** Atlanta headquarters—in which more than 80,000 CD mixtapes were seized—it was clear that the Feds sought to crack down on pirated music, particularly via the mixtape market. Thereafter, the shape and feel of these projects morphed: original beats replaced instrumentals jacked from pop hits, while skits and filler began to disappear, as did obnoxious DJ drops. They were already tools for promotion and building a street buzz—Drama's *Gangsta Grillz* series was one of the best co-signs in all of hip-hop—but these projects became free promotional projects primarily released straight to the Internet.

These low-stakes drops, which were becoming increasingly easy and inexpensive due to advances in production and recording software, gave young artists a means to deliver their music directly to would-be fans without reliance on a label. As such, even more sounds from relatively obscure cities (at least in the traditional hip-hop sense) began to emerge.

Thus, music heads got the emo vibes of **Kid Cudi** via his 2008 debut mixtape, *A Kid Named Cudi*. The project, which featured #3 Pop hit “Day 'n' Nite,” set off a new wave that Kanye West absorbed for his daring-yet-polarizing album *808s & Heartbreak* that same year (Cleveland upstart Cudi quickly signed to Ye's G.O.O.D. Music imprint). **Wiz Khalifa** planted his flag for the similarly underrepresented Pittsburgh, cornering the market for stoner raps of the most potent quality. Pretty soon, his #1 smash “Black and Yellow” served as an anthem for the **Pittsburgh Steelers** leading up to an NFL championship in 2011's **Super Bowl XLV**. From slick-talking coke rapper **Freddie Gibbs** out of Gary, Indiana, to everyman rapper/producer hybrid **Big K.R.I.T.** from Meridian, Mississippi, to the poetic justice of **Wale** repping Washington, D.C., the era affectionately known as blog rap kicked the door off the hinges. Every city on the U.S. map—and beyond—was fair game.

**Drake** wasn't supposed to win. It's not that his talent wasn't instantly apparent. It's just that hip-hop hadn't seen anyone quite like **Aubrey Drake Graham**: a former child actor who played in the teen drama *Degrassi: The Next Generation* and rapped and sang with equal finesse, covering love, lust, inner strife, ambitions, fears, desires. His words and thoughts were lucid, without much of the posturing that was still typical for hip-hop. He was revolutionary. From the moment Drake hopped on Lil Wayne's tour bus in support of *Tha Carter III*, the wheels were in motion for one of the greatest hip-hop artists of all time to claim his crown.

Drake's anointing didn't happen overnight, although it might feel that way. Years of toil on self-released underground music led to the 2009 breakthrough *So Far Gone*, a genre-blurring mixtape that instantly catapulted Drizzy into the stratosphere. He signed to Wayne's **Young Money Entertainment**, and within



**DRAKE**  
**SO FAR GONE**

just a couple of years he was challenging his idols Kanye West, Jay-Z and Lil Wayne for rap's throne.

In a sense, Drake's explosive arrival marked a reboot for hip-hop—and the start of a new class that came up squarely in the second Internet age. In 2009, Jay-Z signed J. Cole, who immediately revealed himself as a thinking man's foil to the comparatively introverted Drake via his seminal third album, 2014 *Forest Hills Drive*. Kanye scooped up **Big Sean** in 2007, but he really began making his mark around the turn of the decade, when his signature hashtag-rap flow had half of hip-hop spitting truncated punchlines. Wale and Philly street rapper **Meek Mill** found their spaceship via Rick Ross' **Maybach Music Group** in 2011.

Meanwhile, a parallel movement was taking place out West. The Los Angeles rap scene had largely been carried by The Game throughout the 2000s, but a new crop began to emerge toward the end of the decade, including the likes of **Jay Rock**, **Nipsey Hussle** and **YG**. While these artists by and large rapped about the gang culture that characterized their city's hoods, others, like the **Odd Future** crew and Northern Cali's **Lil B**, leaned into lo-fi aesthetics, untethered from the traditional vibe of their regions. Kendrick Lamar became the breakout, though, catching a spark with his 2011 debut album, *Section.80*, exploring the plight of '80s babies raised through the crack epidemic and **Reaganomics**. The project caught the attention of Dr. Dre, who signed the Compton rapper to his Aftermath Entertainment via **Top Dawg Entertainment**. The following year, Kendrick dropped *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, a classic conceptual LP that put his ease for storytelling and world-building on full display—and was quickly

**Drake's words and thoughts were lucid, without much of the posturing that was still typical for hip-hop. He was revolutionary.**





## In 2012, Kendrick Lamar dropped good kid, m.A.A.d city, a classic conceptual LP that put his ease for storytelling and world-building on full display.

heralded as a new-age counterpart to Nas' *Illmatic*. Kendrick built on that landmark project with increasingly ambitious works, dropping the angsty *To Pimp a Butterfly* in 2015, and taking message music mainstream with 2017's Pulitzer-winning *DAMN*. Thanks to Disney/Marvel's gigantic *Black Panther* soundtrack, which he curated with TDE boss Anthony "Top Dog" Tiffith, all residents of and visitors to Wakanda now grasped K.Dot's superheroic importance.

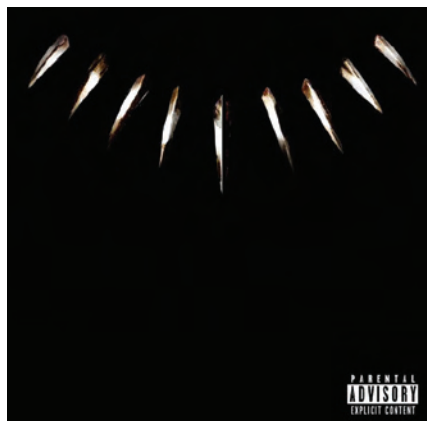
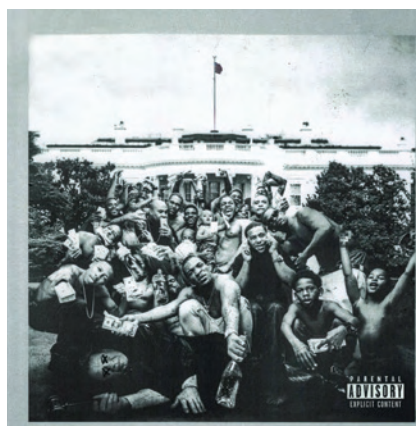
Still, Drake has remained hip-hop's nucleus over the past decade. He featured Kendrick on his own masterpiece, *Take Care*, and guested on J. Cole's sterling mixtape, *Friday Night Lights*. Drake jumped on records with **Waka Flocka Flame**, Meek Mill and **Fetty Wap** as they made their own names. When he appeared on **Migos'** infectious 2013 hit "Versace," the music world at large got hip to this idiosyncratic Atlanta trio (inked to **Coach K** and P's **Quality Control** via **Motown/Capitol Music Group**) bringing a fresh spin to trap music. From their expensive designer threads to their triple-time flows, **Quavo**, **Takeoff** and **Offset** quickly became icons in their own right, especially after their hypnotic 2016 single, "Bad and Boujee" *f/Lil Uzi Vert*, soared to #1 on the pop chart.

Migos aside, trap music got a fresh bump in the 2010s thanks to **Future**, a descendant of the Atlanta cooperative **Dungeon Family**, who marked his arrival with high-powered bangers like "Tony Montana" while continuing to evolve into more emotive, trippy vibes throughout the decade. **Young Thug** similarly brought a fresh energy, his warbled, often indecipherable lyrics coloring trap in new shades.

Back in 2010, New York was a mere shadow of the hip-hop hotspot it had once been. The stars were now largely legacy acts, and some of the newer artists of the day (including **Mims**) seemed hellbent on mimicking the sounds of the South. But in 2010, the city designated a new queen.

**Nicki Minaj's** stronghold on hip-hop was unprecedented. With little competition from other

Pictured from top: Kendrick Lamar's debut album, *Section.80*, 2011; *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, 2012; *To Pimp a Butterfly*, 2015; *DAMN.*, 2017; the *Black Panther* soundtrack, 2018.







**Nicki Minaj's stronghold on hip-hop is unprecedented. With little competition from other female rappers and very few men who could keep up with her lyrically, the quirky Queens rapper put up nearly a decade of dominance.**

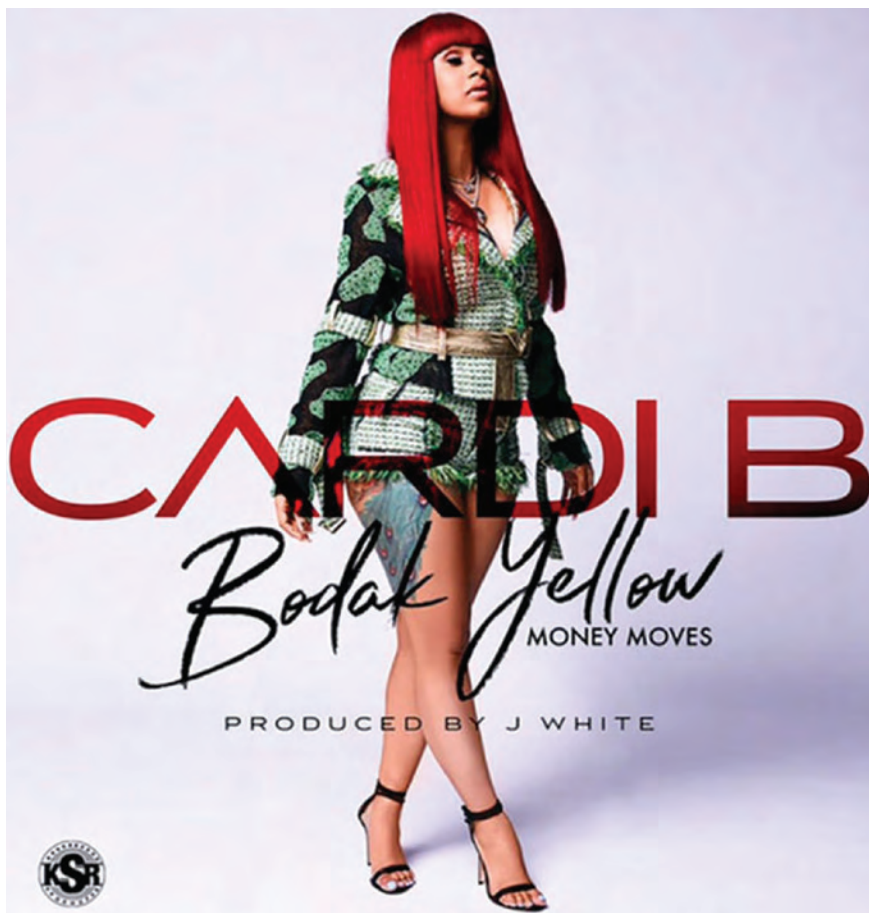
*Clockwise from top: Migos with Lil Uzi Vert on the video shoot for "Bad and Boujee," Nicki Minaj and Future.*

female rappers and very few men who could keep up with her lyrically, the quirky Queens rapper put up nearly a decade of dominance. Just listen to the way her rhymes and one-of-a-kind persona outshine everyone—Rick Ross, Jay-Z, Kanye West—on “Monster.” **Onika Maraj-Petty** redefined megastardom for herself, making sung pop hits (“Super Bass,” “Starships”) just as core to her identity as gymnastic bar work (“Chun-Li”).

Nicki Minaj held down the pole position among women in rap, while others had moments. Harlem rapper **Azealia Banks**, more known these days for her social-media antics than her music, showed promise

with her dizzying 2011 single “212,” a blend of hip-hop and house. Australian transplant **Iggy Azalea** nabbed a #1 Pop rap single with “Fancy” in 2014, although charges of cultural appropriation doused her flame. That same year, **Dej Loaf** broke out with the smooth but threatening “Try Me.” In 2016, **Young M.A** released “Ooooo,” one of the hottest songs of that summer. But when the *Love & Hip-Hop: New York* reality star turned rap star **Cardi B** emerged with her breakout song “Bodak Yellow” in 2017, it seemed she’d be here to stay. Her persona—outspoken, silly, sex-positive, Bronx to the core—oozed through her





TANIMA MEHROTRA

music, helping the aforementioned track and the bilingual cut “I Like It” hit #1. Her 2018 debut album, *Invasion of Privacy*, was certified triple-platinum. In Cardi’s wake, female rappers like **Megan Thee Stallion**, **Doja Cat** and **City Girls** gained popularity, making for one of the most abundant eras for women in hip-hop history.

Blending Southern rap with layered, psychedelic keys and guitar, Houston’s **Travis Scott** emerged in the mid-2010s as the next generation’s version of Kanye West. Scott’s fascinating brand merges rage, fashion and the hypnotic soundscapes associated with the festival-ready kids who grew up on Auto-Tune and emo. His 2018 masterpiece, *ASTROWORLD*, featuring smash Drake collab “Sicko Mode,” cemented Scott as a multifaceted hip-hop star and arena-sized brand; his record-breaking 2020 *Fortnite* concert was a new benchmark in the rap-tech interface.

Los Angeles-bred **Tyler, The Creator** carried the torch of Pharrell and Kanye West’s alternative-rap ethos into the 2010s. Tyler’s DIY spirit created *Odd Future*, a collective of young, black heroes consisting of future stars **Frank Ocean**, **Earl Sweatshirt** and **Syd**. The underground scene they championed eventually crossed over to fashion, television and pop culture, inspiring Gen-Z aesthetics and the sound of pop today. Like his predecessors Pharrell and West, Tyler produced his own material throughout his career, which culminated in his fifth LP, *IGOR*, winning Rap Album of the Year at the Grammys in 2020.

Tyler’s sound has been hugely influential, resonating in work from modern superstars like **Billie Eilish**, **Childish Gambino** and **Travis Scott**.

Where does hip-hop go in the future? As always, that depends largely on technology: the tools artists use to create, the mediums fans use to enjoy the music and the means of star-fan interactions. The effect of social networking is already apparent on hip-hop, as evidenced by the power of memes on **TikTok** and **Instagram** to pump up the popularity of songs like **Rae Sremmurd**’s “Black Beatles” or **Lil Nas X**’s mega-streaming cowboy-rap phenomenon, “Old Town Road.” The same goes for **SoundCloud**, a platform that’s proved important enough to birth a subgenre: SoundCloud rap, as epitomized by **Trippie Redd**, the late **Juice WRLD** and the late **XXXTentacion**.

As this issue goes to press, three of the top four releases in activity year to date are hip-hop records—by **Lil Baby**, **Lil Uzi Vert** and **Roddy Ricch**—and **DaBaby** has the #1 streaming track. Meanwhile, a fresh wave of hip-hop stars continues to storm the charts, including **Polo G**, **Lil Mosey** and **SAINT JHN**, among many others.

Hip-hop will forever remain in a state of flux, but one thing is for sure: No glitch is gonna stop the get-down. ■

Additional material by Simon Glickman and Michael Dominguez.

Pictured top-right: Rae Sremmurd. Bottom: Lil Nas X.



Top-bottom: Trippie Redd, Juice WRLD and XXXTentacion broke through on SoundCloud.