

WHITE RAPPERS IN HIP-HOP

APPROPRIATE, COLLABORATE, AND RECIPROCATE

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In the 1930s, Jazz Age clarinetist Benny Goodman was dubbed the King of Swing. Elvis Presley will always be known as the King of Rock 'N' Roll. More recently, in 2003 *Rolling Stone* magazine declared Justin Timberlake the King of R&B, and Eminem has been called the Elvis of Hip-Hop. Each of these artists crafted their style and voice in the traditions of black music. Is this merely influence? Or is it appropriation?



MACKLEMORE AND PRODUCER RYAN LEWIS ACCEPTING THE 2014 GRAMMY FOR BEST RAP ALBUM.

In his essay *African-American Music: Dynamics of Appropriation and Innovation*, Perry A. Hall notes that the phenomenon of "disassociation

that tends to happen within the [...] white-dominated mainstream" from the African-American experience is what allows appropriation to occur. In other words, when the dominant culture is able to create distance between themselves and a marginalized community, they can take on the community's cultural forms without guilt, even after previously criticizing those innovations when initially performed. It matters that the people who own these musical forms are black, and that the people who are borrowing them are white, because when a dominating culture decides to hijack the musical innovations of a people they are already oppressing, it results in the erasure of these people's existence and facilitates the disenfranchisement of the artists. When black culture and artistic forms speak to white artists, who are then celebrated at the highest echelons of culture and politics, what responsibility do white artists have? Is there a way to borrow someone's culture while also respecting the folks who own it?

White rappers are inevitably confronted by and forced to grapple with this question of responsibility within the Hip-Hop industry by their fellow artists, collaborators, and fans. Popular contemporary white rappers like Macklemore and G-Eazy have publicly spoken about and wrestled with questions of appropriation. Macklemore, who won the 2014 Grammy for Best Rap Album over award-winning conscious rapper, Kendrick Lamar, is aware that his whiteness affects his commercial success in

the industry. In a *Rolling Stone* interview, he notes, "Just because there's been more successful white rappers, you cannot disregard where this culture came from and our place in it as white people. This is not my culture to begin with."

J. Cole, a rapper and producer who has worked with artists Jay-Z, Kendrick Lamar, and Drake, gives his response to appropriation in Hip-Hop in his music. In his song "Fire Squad" from his album *2014 Forest Hills Drive*, he comments on Macklemore's Grammy win, saying "white people have snatched the sound," while also telling black music makers to pay attention to the appropriation that's been happening. A few lines later, he encapsulates the impact of appropriation with the line: "same rope you climb up on, they'll hang you with."



J. COLE PICTURED ON THE COVER OF HIS ALBUM, 2014 FOREST HILLS DRIVE

Meanwhile, up-and-comer G-Eazy responds to his responsibility as a white rapper in an interview with *The Guardian* saying, "I didn't grow up around all white people, I never wanted to gentrify Hip-Hop, I've never wanted to speak to an all-white audience. I'm just making music and I'm paying my bills." Like G-Eazy, HYPE MAN's Pinnacle wasn't raised around all white people either. He grew up with Verb in a low income neighborhood in the Midwest, where rap battles kept you sharp, and where making mix tapes and selling them on the corner helped build your reputation. Making music together from a young age, but living seemingly parallel lives, it's possible to see how Pinnacle's upbringing influences how he views himself as a rapper, and complicates his view on his responsibility to black culture.



G-EAZY PICTURED ON THE COVER OF HIS ALBUM, THESE THINGS HAPPEN

Collaborative groups that come up together like Verb and Pinnacle often have a lot of personal history they inherently bring into their professional collaboration. While there is often loyalty and love, the conversations and dynamics can get complicated... especially when

it boils down to one black friend asking their white friend to stand up for them and their culture.