Crate Digging Begins at Home: Black and Latinx Women Collecting and Selecting Records in the 1960s and 1970s Bronx

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Abstract and Keywords

Many scholars, music journalists, and hip hop heads have discounted the diversity of ways women helped create the now global art-form known as hip hop. One of these overlooked labors involves the cultivation and passing on of a black and Latina feminist listening praxis through record collecting and selecting. This chapter contributes to black feminist scholarship dedicated to moving hip hop historiography from the critical but critically well-worn streets into the more woman-centric and therefore often marginalized spaces of the South Bronx—those living rooms, kitchens, bedrooms, bathrooms, hallways, stores, and stoops, where black women and Latinas not only participated in early hip hop, but helped to bring it into sonic being. Through archival evidence, rhetorical analysis, and an oral history, “Crate Digging Begins at Home” moves toward the interconnected goals of reconceiving gender in hip hop historiography, rethinking the figure of the “mother” in popular music studies and record collecting culture, and documenting the selecting practices of Black and Latinx women.

Keywords: hip hop, DJing, black, feminism, motherhood, record collecting, listening, 1970s

In the early 1970s, black and Latinx Bronx residents created a new musical culture that eventually became a global movement: hip hop. As the now-familiar story goes, the art form’s earliest sonic practitioners were DJs who—to riff on Amiri Baraka—changed the same by using their ears, record collections, and secondhand stereo equipment against the grain: cutting, mixing, and recontextualizing the shared, connective aural tissue of familiar beats and hooks, juxtaposing soul and disco with rock, punk, new wave, calypso, country, and even television commercials until it sounded fresh. Hip hop’s “official” history begins with the Bronx Big Three: Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, and Afrika Bambaataa. Building reputations fierce enough to back up their superhero-inspired street names, hip hop’s early DJs filled public parks and rec-rooms with sounds bringing together America’s seemingly disparate musical presents with black and brown communities gathering to imagine futures beyond oppression. Recent television shows such as
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Netfix’s The Get Down (2016) and documentaries—Shan Nicholson’s Rubble Kings (2010) and Netflix’s Hip Hop Evolution (2016)—have hardened this history into common knowledge, a two-turntable-tale twice told.¹

However, although masculinist historical praxis would have us believe it, hip hop did not spring fully formed from the heads and hands of Herc, Flash, and Bam, and the first musical archives they used to summon hip hop’s samples and breaks into being did not come solely from record shop and thrift store digs. Connected as it has been to airplay charts, Soundscan figures, personal “top fives” and other forms of archival quantification, US popular music history tends toward iconic masculine origin stories, a historiographic praxis ironically obscuring how musical forms actually come into being. Black feminist theorist Alexis Pauline Gumbs insists on different questions: “if we acknowledge that Hip-Hop was a cry from Black and Latino youth, screaming against the common knowledge that they were not supposed to exist, we have to ask ourselves about the birth process that made these creative screams possible” (Gumbs 2012, 56). This essay reveals a crucial stage in hip hop’s birth process, one grounded in the radical mothering praxis of black women and Latinas, who left an indelible audible imprint that emphasis on the “Big Three” has muted. Quiet as it’s kept, hip hop’s first DJs were often mothers—and aunties, and sisters, and girlfriends, and play cousins—and the practice of crate digging began at home.

The first two hundred records in Bambaataa’s prized collection, for example, belonged to his mother. Once again, with emphasis: The first two hundred records in Afrika Bambaataa’s record collection—now permanently archived at Cornell University and considered “THE cop[ies] that started everything,” according to DJ Shadow, “Not just any records, the MASTER OF RECORDS’ records”—belonged to his mother (DJ Shadow, qtd. in Kugelberg 2015, n.p.). When I briefly interviewed Bambaataa in October 2015, he would not tell me her name. Admittedly, Bambaataa may have had other reasons to court secrecy then—allegations of child molestation surfaced just six months after we talked²—but he’s maintained a long-standing secrecy about his personal life. Even the archivists at Cornell do not know her name.

Though an important part of the historical record, I cannot find this momentous collector’s identity anywhere in books or online. Bambaataa “was exposed to his mother’s extensive and eclectic record collection,” says Wikipedia (2016)—and the many websites that crib from it—using a passive sentence construction that refuses even a space for Bambaataa’s mother’s name and syntactically erases her agency. Use of the passive voice when talking about mothers’ contributions runs rampant in hip hop reporting and historiography; such description flattens his mother’s record-playing praxis into mere “exposure” for Bambaataa and, ultimately, her records only become important when they pass through his hands, when he numbers them, etches “Lance” on them with an Exacto knife, and starts playing them in public.

My use of “selector,” a Jamaican term for DJ, represents more than rhetorical flourish, as it encourages a retracing of hip hop’s Caribbean roots via everyday practice, while ampli-
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fying the role and the curatorial agency of hip hop’s mother DJs as they selected records at home and other gathering places. It is well known that the “Big Three” have Caribbean backgrounds—Kool Herc is Jamaican, Grandmaster Flash was born in Barbados, and Bambaataa’s parents are Jamaican and Bajan—and that early hip hop parties brought Caribbean bass culture to the Bronx. Jeff Chang’s Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop discusses reggae as “rap music’s elder kin,” sonically, historically, and politically (Chang 2005, 23). Recognizing the role of mothers, aunts, sisters, and cousins as collectors and selectors in the 1960s and 1970s Bronx offers new insight into how and why Caribbean musical culture shaped hip hop. Black and Latinx women, in particular, carried and shared particular musical lineages and forms of listening to their children via personal DJ practice. While often equated with “DJ”—and DJ’s definition increasingly limited to a specialized form of public performance in particular venues—“selector” instead emphasizes the careful, deliberate, and meaningful act of choosing music for oneself and others to hear, feel, and move to. “Selecting” encourages us to find the threads connecting hip hop to the Caribbean and between women and their collections, a shift in perspective that enables the spaces, stories, relationships, and memories these record collections hold within their grooves to surface more freely in hip hop’s history and sonics.

Thinking through the critical lens of “selecting” also emphasizes black and Latinx women’s personal praxis as important in its own right. This project challenges us to consider their home-based selecting as a form of DJing itself, taking seriously what it meant to flip through their records to find just the right album to set the mood in their apartments, maybe, or to change their perspective on a challenging day, or to fill in their children’s musical education, or to get ready before a night out. This critical lens also emphasizes women’s influence on their children’s musical tastes, and therefore, their hand in shaping a large share of hip hop’s sonic palette. How did their selecting practices speak and sound? How did they listen—and perform listening—for themselves and others? How did their taste in selecting impact hip hop’s sound and affect? How, why, and by whom has their influence been muted? Through archival evidence, rhetorical analysis, and an oral history, this essay moves toward the interconnected goals of reconceiving gender in hip hop historiography, rethinking the figure of the “mother” in popular music studies and record collecting culture, and documenting the selecting practices of Black and Latinx women.

Hip Hop and Mom-ism

Bambaataa himself has always been forthcoming about the role of his mother as an influence on his listening habits and artistic development. As Bambaataa told Vice:

I have to give credit to my mother—she played a lot of different music in the house. One minute you could hear soul, like James Brown and Motown and the STAX-Volt sound, and the next minute it could be African sounds like “Mama Africa” by Miriam Makeba, and calypso and salsa or Salsoul [Records] . . . and
then more pop sounds like Edith Piaf and Barbra Streisand, to, like, Three Dog Night and Creedence Clearwater Revival. I was heavy into all that. (qtd. in Rafaeli 2014)

When Bam recounts this history there is nothing passive about his mother’s interventions; he did not just “grow up with” music, nor was he simply “exposed” to it, two agency-erasing phrases I often encounter in journalistic accounts of how Bam and others came to hear the music eventually called hip hop through their mothers. No, Bambaataa’s mother bought music she wanted to hear, arranged her records chronologically or alphabetically or by genre, on a shelf or in a crate or leaning up against the corner—I would love to find out exactly how—and she selected when, how, and what she wanted to play. Then, in arguably the single most generous moment in record collector history, she allowed her son to touch and explore them, to lay on the floor and look at their covers, to play them when/how he wanted to, and, eventually, to tag her records with “This Album Belongs to Bambaataa Khayan Aasim” and take some out to parks, parties, and clubs—first in the neighborhood, then all-city, then around the world—and now in Cornell University preserved for generations to come, however invisible her hand in hip hop remains. In fact, in almost every interview I encounter, Bambaataa gives his mother credit, lovingly and in beautiful detail; it is the interviewers who either ignore the history Bambaataa shares or treat it as a humble, sweet, and/or pat gesture before quickly moving on.

Such dismissive treatment of Bambaataa’s mother’s legacy bears relation to the way that mothers are imagined more generally as thoughtless consumers of American pop music. Arguably the most maligned audience next to the infamous “screamers”—a.k.a. teenaged girls (Baker 2003) and the “muse[s], moll[s], and groupie[s]” identified by Simon Reynolds and Joy Press (1995, 4)—mothers have come to represent a lack of musical taste, expertise, seriousness, and/or contemporary experience in US culture and criticism. In fact, Reynolds and Press go so far as to cite rebellion against “Momism”—a misogynistic term attributed to Philip Wylie’s Generation of Vipers (1943) that blamed “the destroying mother” for a perceived decline in American culture following World War II—as the “impetus for the entire genre of rock and roll” (1995, 4, 14). Whereas male critics, fans, and collectors often imagine teenaged girls as overly emotional fans driven solely by sexual desire, they represent mothers as sentimental, worrisome, out-of-touch, dominating—“turn it down!” (see Keightley 1996)—overprotective, and guilty of the absolute worst musical taste. Rather than normalizing popular representations of moms’ collective cluelessness—and conversely, the alleged connoisseurship of male collectors and their canons—we need to examine how such gendered, binaristic categories of value developed, whom they serve, and what is at stake in unsettling a system that denies women the power of musical tastemaking and demands that records must physically pass through a man’s hands in order to even be considered a “collection.”

Ed Piskor’s recent and ongoing comic canonization of hip hop’s origin story, Hip Hop Family Tree, Vols. 1–4, exemplifies the representation of “Momism” in hip hop. Most revealingly, Piskor’s retelling features a panel depicting the notorious white British punk rock
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icon/mogul/opportunist Malcolm McLaren talking Club Negril owner Ruza Blue into hosting hip hop nights by regaling her with tales of Bronx parties. “But the real stars of the show,” McLaren exclaims, “are these boys who obliterate their mother’s record collection” (Piskor 2014, 18, emphasis in original). Piskor ventriloquizes McLaren to make two insightful and all-too-rare acknowledgments: that mothers collect records, and that hip hop drew from these sonic archives. Piskor’s ventriloquization of McLaren, however, casts hip hop uncomfortably—and inaccurately—as a Freudian Moynihan Report revenge plot, where black “boys” become men through public “obliterations” of their mothers’ (too) powerful listening practices, sonic legacies, and carefully preserved grooves, a symbolic destruction made material for McLaren through the sound of the needle’s scratch. But no matter how high McLaren’s 1981 rap-inspired neo-minstrel pop song “Buffalo Gal” would chart, he remained an appropriative outsider, ultimately unable to hear hip hop’s musical expression, familial dynamics, and cultural politics as anything other than the latest iteration of rock-and-roll’s capitalist framework, a genre profiting from the sound of racialized sexuality and intergenerational conflict for over twenty-five years.

In contrast, three groundbreaking volumes—Home Girls Make Some Noise: Hip Hop Feminism Anthology (Pough et al. 2007), Mothering in Hip-Hop Culture: Representation and Experience (Motapanyane 2012), and Revolutionary Motherhood (Gumbs, Martens, and Williams 2016)—have expanded hip hop’s historical narrative by starting a critical conversation about motherhood and hip hop, urging us to widen hip hop scholarship beyond the genre’s well-documented misogyny and the politics of the identifiable public roles women have played. Brittany Cooper’s entry in Home Girls, in particular, argues “hip hop feminism can insist upon hearing and telling the stories of young black women from the mouths of young black women, including baby mamas, thereby creating additional space for black women to speak for themselves” (Cooper 2007, 320, 321, 340). My focus on women selectors builds from Cooper’s foundational theorization of “black womanhood in hip hop vis-à-vis black motherhood” and answers the call of Durham, Cooper, and Morris for research “acknowledging that hip-hop and contemporary (second-wave) black feminism developed in the same cultural moment” (2013, 731). I also emphasize the largely undocumented history of black and Latinx women as record collectors and selectors in their homes—urban spaces not in opposition to the stage and street, but rather fluidly connected to them—by combining archival documentation of their experiences in the 1960s and 1970s-era Bronx with personal interviews that open space for them to tell their stories.

As my research reveals, Bambaataa and many other hip hop pioneers who grew up with a record-collecting, music-selecting mother, sister, aunt, play cousin, and/or girlfriend experienced hip hop as a continuance of female relatives’ wide-ranging listening practices, a sonic cultivation rather than an obliteration. For example, Kool Herc—all but universally acknowledged as hip hop’s first DJ, dating back to his sister Cindy Campbell’s now-legendary “Back to School Jam” on Sedgwick Avenue on August 11, 1973—described how, when he was a child in Jamaica, his mother, Nettie Campbell, “was studying for nursing in New York, and she used to bring back records from Motown, Smokey Robinson” that influenced his taste and aesthetic (qtd. in Fricke and Ahearn 2002, 25). From Grandwizzard
Theodore, who innovated the needle drop and the scratch: “Now I loved to dance ever
since I can remember—dancing to James Brown for my family…. At the age of eleven I
used to play my mother’s 45s on her record player, and when the record got to the break
I used to skip the record back. As time went by, I started skipping the 45s like a loop, not
knowing I was on to something” (qtd. in Kugelberg 2007, 202). Then there’s Casanova
Fly, aka Grandmaster Caz, member of early DJ crew Mighty Force and later the Cold
Crush Brothers, who wrote in Born in the Bronx that he “jacked some old soul and R & B
joints from my big sister and started my record collection. I found some of my first breaks
on those albums. Soul Makooza by Manu DiBango. The Fatback Band’s Street Music, and
of course the Godfather of Soul’s Hell album and the live Sex Machine album with the
classic ‘Give it up or Turnit a Loose’ break” (qtd. in Kugelberg 2007: 198). DJ Disco Wiz,
Caz’s collaborator and one of hip hop’s first Latinx DJs, used to steal his mother Ana Cira
Garcia’s turntable and take it to Caz’s house. Caz’s mother eventually bought them new
DJ equipment with money left by his father’s will (Cedeño 2009, 37–38). While musically
on the electro/disco edge of hip hop, the producer and DJ John “Jellybean” Benitez also
grew up in the South Bronx, where he was raised by a single mother, and “as a kid he lis­
tened to his sister’s record collection, [and] checked out Bambaataa and others at local
jams” (Lawrence 2016, 184). Both Benitez and Brooklyn-born Larry Levan—legendary
resident DJ of New York City’s Paradise Garage from 1980–1987 who helped break hip
hop beyond the Bronx—represent a second-generation transfer of Bam’s mom’s listening
praxis, remixed with that of their own mothers. Levan too, credits his single mom Minnie
Levan’s musical influence for his emotive and innovative DJ aesthetic; she regularly
played him blues, jazz, and gospel and taught him to use her turntable when he was
three, so she could “make him put records on so that we could dance together” (qtd. in
Owen 1993). When Minnie would drop by the Garage, Levan would start spinning gospel
songs such as “Mary Don’t You Weep” by Aretha Franklin for her, no matter who was on
the floor (Lawrence 2016, 71–72).

Grandmaster Flash, in particular, grew up surrounded by women who influenced his mu­
sical taste, style, and methodology. Flash admits remaining enamored with his father
Joseph Saddler Jr.’s “prize collection of records,” precisely because he made them forbid­
den; he once beat Flash almost to hospitalization for playing them. Saddler left the family
when Flash was seven, taking most of his records and the turntable too (Flash and Ritz
2008, 16). Saddler represented a more traditionally masculine mode of record collection
—strict ordering, pristine quality, proprietary playback, and concern for rarity, genre, and
monetary value—one that made a lasting impression on Flash’s perception of Djing as
mastery and control. On the other hand, Flash experienced his mother Regina Saddler’s
relationship to collecting and selecting quite differently, as an activity bringing them clos­
er in the often-troubled flow of everyday life and its labors, a form of situational, transfor­
mational, and transferrable “magic medicine.” “As she’s cooking,” Flash recalls, “she
throws on an Ella Fitzgerald LP . . . the strings rise and I watch the muscles in her face
ease up. Mom smiles all the way up to her eyes. Mom still loves Ella. Mom still loves me
too . . . when she squeezes my hand, I can feel a little magic medicine of my own” (Flash
and Ritz 2008, 155). He accepts his mother’s selecting as a pleasurable loss of control on
his part; he experiences her listening as a healing emotional and physical exchange, a reparative moment of touch, of receiving and giving in equal measure. Just as Levan’s mom’s gospel vibe inflected his work at the Garage—folks used to refer to his sets as “Saturday Mass” (Shapiro 2014)—the squeeze of Flash’s mother’s hand resonates in his practice; he describes himself searching for “euphoric union” in his sets, when “everybody was keeping the beat” and “it was about the energy between us. I was giving it to them and they were giving it back. The beat was love.” And then, when Flash began building his own collection, “he’d also go steal his sisters’ tunes. One had a Latin thing: Tito Puente, Eddie Palmieri, Joe Cuba; another was into the pop-soul of the time: Jackson 5, Martha and the Vandellas, the Supremes, a little Sly and the Family Stone. ‘I was pretty fortunate to grow up in a household where I heard all this,’ he says” (Brewster and Broughton, 2002). I have to interrupt and reframe: Flash was lucky to grow up in a household where his mother and sisters, Violet Saddler, Penny Saddler, and especially Carmetta Saddler—who told Flash “what music was hip and what music was square” (Flash and Ritz 2008, 14)—played their collections for him, helped shape his taste, and tolerated their brother sneaking off with their Fania stuff.

Presence: Meeting Women Where They Listen

Women’s participation in musical subcultures has been twice obscured: first by the large-ly patriarchal organization of most subcultures that values masculine expressions of performance, fandom, style, curation, and “connoisseurship,” and a second time by research methodologies developed to study subcultures such as hip hop and record collecting, which normed masculine modes of participation. “Girls subcultures may have become invisible,” wrote Angela MacRobbie and Jenny Garber in their contribution to Resistance through Rituals, “because the very term subculture has acquired such strong masculine overtones” (MacRobbie and Garber 1975/2006, 179). Women were everywhere present in the British postwar musical subcultures studied by MacRobbie and Garber’s male peers, who relegated women participants to stereotypical roles, discussed them primarily in terms of physical appearance and sexual attractiveness, and/or deemed them “passive” consumers rather than active participants. MacRobbie and Garber also discuss how class and gender intersect differently in women’s lives, impacting their access to public space, leisure time, disposable income, and time away from parental figures that scholars presume necessary for subcultural participation. For example, white working-class British women who self-identified with Teddy-boy culture risked being deemed “promiscuous” for “spending too much time on the street” (MacRobbie and Garber 1975/2006, 181). In the context of early Bronx hip hop, Tricia Rose notes, “women’s participation in rap was hindered by gender-related considerations” such as getting DJ equipment stolen, needing to haul equipment around public transportation, and having the means to get enough cash together to buy equipment in the first place. Women, she argues, were unable to make a significant impact on musical production because many were actively dissuaded from gaining technological skills and informally barred from male-dominated studio spaces; and in breaking and graffiti cultures, “strong social sanctions against their participation limited female ranks” (Rose 1994 57–58, 57). Also citing Resistance through Rituals, Rose
observes, “the marginalization, deletion, and mischaracterization of women’s role in black cultural production is routine practice” (Rose 1994, 152). The unequal and highly gendered consequences structuring subcultural participation, MacRobbie, Garber, and Rose argue, mean women’s efforts and expressions often take place in locations less accessible to researchers (and more culturally devalued overall) because of associations with the private, domestic “feminine” sphere: girls’ bedrooms, apartment complex recreation rooms and/or shopping malls. One of the images hip hop photographer Joe Conzo captured of his mother Lorraine Montenegro’s bedroom in the early 1980s (Figure 1), for example, provides insight into where she listened to her records. Placing her stereo atop her dresser, adjacent to her religious shrine suggests Montenegro’s spiritual reverence for music and her desire for its nearness; a careful look reveals a pile of record sleeves next to her receiver.

MacRobbie, Garber, and Rose’s observations make Montenegro’s records legible as a “collection”—not that Montenegro ever needed anyone’s permission to do her thing—despite the continued invisibility of women of color in both early hip hop history and the historiography of record collecting, which can be particularly exclusionary. Amplifying the record-collecting and listening practices of women of color unsettles the comfortably masculinist—and overwhelmingly white—images of the “record collector” and “crate digger” ghosting popular music and popular music studies since the days of the 78.4

MacRobbie and Garber’s cautionary analysis regarding women’s invisibility in music scenes also invites a rereading of the historiography of early hip hop, particularly when situated in the robust critique of the genre’s gender politics by black feminists and hip hop feminists.5 Because hip hop culture evolved in part from preexisting 1960s–1970s Bronx gang culture—which marginalized female participants in its own way—men often dominated hip hop’s public forms and forums. Furthermore, the way men’s participation

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Figure 1  Lorraine Montenegro’s bedroom, Michelangelo apartments, 225 E 149th St., Bronx, NY, (c. 1980–1982).

Photograph by Joe Conzo, Cornell University, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell Hip Hop Collection, Joe Conzo Archive.
in the early art form’s development coalesced into the four classic elements identified by Bambaataa—DJing, B-boying, MCing, and Graffiting—also potentially masked the diverse ways women helped to grow both the art form and its social scene. While the concept of the elements initially created a multisensory through-line across several simultaneous art forms, uniting them as an interrelated culture through the fifth element of “knowledge,”

they also served an exclusionary function, obscuring participation that does not fit neatly within the established categories, like the feminized—and necessary—labor of street promotion, for example.

Standing in Cornell’s archive, my fingers flipping past Bambaataa’s mother’s copies of Aretha Franklin’s *Live at the Fillmore West* (number 24), Isaac Hayes’ *Live at the Sahara* (94), *The Isleys Live* (146), The Main Ingredient’s *River Euphrates* (148), Honey Cone’s *Love. Peace and Soul* (148) and especially Weldon Irvine’s *Cosmic Vortex* (172)—I was struck, wounded really, that we have missed the brilliant listening of hip hop’s earliest selectors. These selectors—these women—transformed their lives and living spaces while shaping the listening habits enabling young men and women like Bambaataa to hear hip hop’s call. The cover of *Cosmic Vortex* (Figure 2), for example, reveals an inspiration for Bambaataa’s stage costuming and its connections to black history and Afrofuturism. The record collections of black and Latinx women in the politically resonant 1960s and 1970s opened up new identities, listening practices, and sonic possibilities for themselves, their children, and eventually, the world. These women’s selecting, unsleeving, playing, and flipping of their records makes the American grammar of racialized gender that Hortense Spillers theorizes in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” kinesthetically concrete and sonically vibrational: both hip hop and African American men have “been touched, therefore, by the mother, handed by her in ways that [they] cannot escape,” a recognition acknowledging the “heritage of the mother” in ways that powerfully unsettle not only how we hear and understand hip hop but also the very ground of gender (Spillers 2003, 228). When Herc, Flash, and Bam spun their mother’s collections in the Bronx streets, they explored —and gave material voice to—what Spillers calls “the power of ‘yes’ to the ‘female’ within” and Gumbs defines as the “particular radical practices and affirmations of Black mothering . . . practices of nurturing the exploited, the criminalized, the undervalued, the sacrifices, the sacred, the immeasurable, the magical within ourselves and each other intergenerationally” (Spillers 2003, 228; Gumbs 2012, 58). In other words, there is something specifically feminine and radically black/brown about hip hop’s sonic labor—DJing in particular—and such work often begins with a woman’s hand dropping the needle, spinning another-worldly soundscapes of radical love, politics, affirmation, and care.
Both record collecting and hip hop are more gender diverse and multigenerational than previously understood, and women’s living room selecting functioned as an important practice in its own right, congruent with and intimately related to public DJing. By no means do I discount women working in the important but limited ways deemed “active” participation in early hip hop—scratching a record as a DJ like Latoya Hanson, breaking like Daisy Castro/Baby Love of the Rock Steady Crew, working the microphone with the deftness of Sha-Rock as an MC, or bombing trains as a graffiti artist like Lady Pink. However, a narrow focus on the street, the stage, and the trainyard has obscured other fundamental realms of participation that shaped hip hop music and culture. Widening the scope enables due props to be given to many other hip hop makers: from front-row fans to ghost writers, custom velvet-lettered t-shirt designers to illicit work-Xerox-machine flyer-makers, and others outside the spotlight of popular and academic discourses. What happens to our understanding of hip hop, for example, if we look at Conzo’s famous photographs—the images the *New York Times* dubbed “Hip Hop’s Baby Pictures” (Gonzales 2005)—with an eye on people made marginal by years of performer-centric focus?

“The Cold Crush Brothers performing at the Hoe Avenue Boys Club,” from 1981 (Figure 3) presents a symptomatic example. Widening the frame reveals a decidedly female hip hop community gathered to listen, dance, sing along with, and pass judgement on the performers. Visible in the far right background is DJ Tony Tone’s mother, Gertie King, in mid-clap. While I have not yet had the opportunity to interview King, I have seen her in photographs throughout the Conzo archive, suggesting an intimate involvement with her son and his group, the kind of support necessary to birth new artforms but made invisible
by traditional historiography. “Hip hop is only alive because of women,” the rapper Toni Blackman told Elaine Richardson, “Concerts, there may be male promoters, but often time women are doing the grunt work” (Richardson 2007, 78-79). Blackman calls out a triple exclusion at work in hip hop: first, the active marginalization of women from more public (and therefore more valorized and memorialized) scene-making roles; second, the denigration of women’s labor as “grunt work”; and finally, the need for a feminist historical praxis (Glenn 2000) in hip hop studies that revalues scene-making and -sustaining labor and tells the stories of the women who performed it. Such a praxis would represent the presence of women in hip hop history and the fruits of their labor within a larger framework of raced and gendered power dynamics in the United States.

![Figure 3](image)

*Figure 3* “The Cold Crush Brothers performing at the Hoe Avenue Boys Club,” 1981. From left, Easy AD, Almighty Kay Gee, and JDL. Visible in the background at right is Tony Tone’s mother, Gertie King. The front three rows are almost exclusively female; none of these women are identified in the archive. Photograph by Joe Conzo, Cornell University, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell Hip Hop Collection, Joe Conzo Archive.

Particularly when understood as a method of critically listening to the past, feminist historiography bears striking resemblance to record collecting and selecting as innovated by Bronx mothers. Black and Latinx women collecting and selecting records manifested new forms of listening—to themselves, to history, and to their present surroundings—what I am calling a feminist listening praxis. By collecting and selecting specific songs and sounds literally “frozen” in vinyl and audibly making new meanings and connections in their homes—layering records with filiations, feelings, affects, and stories—Bronx mothers freed these sounds to create new contexts, audiences, and meters, particularly when changed up, back spun, and cut by their DJ-ing sons and daughters. Hip hop bears the material traces of maternal cultivation, intervention, and surrogation; selecting here functions as a form of self-making, an expression of love, and a mode of historical thought sonically challenging the world as given.
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Tracing the repressed and audible-but-unsayable black and brown maternal at the center of hip hop’s creative development presents a radically different hip hop historiography than the “great men” approach. It enacts a feminist historical praxis that recontextualizes the Big Three within the Bronx’s everyday culture, domestic spaces, and familial relationships, revealing whose listening habits and record collections first shaped the activist, interventionist take on music that hip hop DJing enacted. This new historiography moves our conversation about hip hop and urban space from the critical but critically well-worn (and often male-dominated) streets into the more female-centric and therefore marginalized spaces of the South Bronx—those living rooms, kitchens, bedrooms, bathrooms, hallways, lockerrooms, stores, and stoops—showing how black women and Latinas helped bring hip hop into sonic being through listening and sharing music with their children, relatives, and friends. Part of the hip hop feminist project of developing more expansive and inclusive frameworks for understanding female participation in hip hop, my research meets women in spaces and through forms where their hip hop praxis occurred—presence—rather than continuing to point to where and when it did not—absence.

The overdetermined narrative of hip hop’s masculinity protests too much, repressing the diversity of ways women helped bring hip hop into being. One of the most important of these overlooked labors involves the cultivation and passing on of a Black and Latinx feminist listening praxis. Wanda Alarcon argues, “listening is a critical praxis for remembering histories of feminist of color solidarity,” one capable of bridging time, space, ethnicity, and generation, actively challenging how women of color are “perceived as inaudible, their claims to sonic space . . . considered noise” (Alarcon 2016, 37, 10). Recounting the history of their acts of collecting, selecting, and listening—and the history expressed through those same acts—challenges the repressed audibility of black and Latinx women in the Bronx and in hip hop. Recasting the background “noise” of living room music selection as active sonic engagement enabling black and Latinx women to remix their self-images and those of their children opens up new understandings of agency in the face of oppressive and seemingly intractable white supremacy.

“We Women Saved Music”: Lorraine Montenegro

The lifelong Bronx resident and community activist Lorraine Montenegro (Figure 4) is one such mother whose record collecting and selecting practices shaped early hip hop, in particular the perspective of her son, the photographer Joe Conzo (Gonzales 2005). I interviewed Montenegro in October 2015 alongside Conzo—one of five children she raised as a single mother. Montenegro describes music as a lifelong interest, along with social justice, both instilled by her parents (Montenegro, personal communication). Her father avidly collected classical 78s, while her mother, Evelina Antonetty, founded United Bronx Parents in 1966. Antonetty’s tireless and fearless advocacy earned her the titles of “Titi” (Auntie) within the community and “Hell Lady of the Bronx” outside it. United Bronx Parents (UBP) was founded as a nonprofit coalition advocating for bilingual educa-
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Figure 4  Lorraine Montenegro in her apartment window, 225 E 149th St., Bronx, NY, (c. 1980–1982).

Photograph by Joe Conzo, Cornell University, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell Hip Hop Collection, Joe Conzo Archive.

Careful viewers can spot Montenegro’s record collection—mainly classical, Motown, and “a lot of Latino records,” especially salsa and bugalú—in many of Conzo’s photographs of their apartment from the late 1970s and early 1980s, when he served as the Cold Crush Brothers’ official photographer (as in Figure 5). Conzo and friends congregated at Montenegro’s, hanging out, listening to music, and talking about parties at places such as T-Connection and Disco Fever. Fluidly connected to these now-legendary sites of early MC
and DJ battles, Montenegro and her apartment enabled hip hop and its community to come into being through the fellowship of music and food. "Hip hop used to come over to my house every Tuesday and have pork chops" Montenegro described, telling me she fed many hungry young people during some of the Bronx’s hardest economic times, no small feat. Montenegro’s collecting and selecting practices show us, very materially, how music worked as a form of agency synonymous with survival for Bronx mothers of the 1970s and 1980s, growing from their political activism and, at times, bolstering and carrying it. For many DJs, MCs, dancers, and artists, crate digging began at home, in the working musical archives leaning up against the stereo, sounds carrying their parents’ histories, emotions, memories, and hopes. “Anything and everything with music I’ll keep,” Montenegro says about her collection, “because it relieves the stress you know.” Sitting next to her son, she forecasts: “You are going to come to the conclusion that we women saved music. We saved the music industry. We weren’t out there taking credit but we saved it.” The traditionally woman’s work of “saving” bears multiple deep resonances that challenge the affective limitations of “collecting.”

Figure 5  Donnie Antonetty and Naomi Herrera, inside Lorraine Montenegro’s apartment, crate of records in background. January 1983.

Photograph by Joe Conzo, Cornell University, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell Hip Hop Collection, Joe Conzo Archive.

The importance of black and Latinx women’s record collecting and selecting practices such as Montenegro’s likely extends both geographically and temporally beyond the Bronx. In Philadelphia, the future Motown artist and Black Panther Party chairwoman Elaine Brown grew up on her Aunt Mary’s record collection; Mary worked as a wire clipper for RCA Victor in Camden, New Jersey, and brought home discounted stereo equipment on which she played Marian Anderson, Harry Belafonte, and Eartha Kitt “virtually every night.” Brown’s memoir A Taste of Power describes her girlhood tastes running more toward The Spaniels’ “Peace of Mind” and “Sister Sookie” by The Turbans and recounts her playing disc jockey at neighborhood basement parties and regularly “going to some girl’s house to listen to records” (Brown 1993, 21, 37, 60). Brown later became a recording artist herself. The Black Panther and feminist Assata Shakur’s devotion to the
“picolo” (jukebox) growing up in North Carolina reminds us of the unspoken privilege of purchasing power among record collectors; even though she could not afford to do more than rent records by Fats Domino, Nat King Cole, James Brown, and Big Maybelle (among others) she describes how “next to food, music was my love” (Shakur 1987/2001, 25).

Hip Hop communities in other cities also grew from mothers’ home selecting. On the West Coast, “Dr. Dre’s most profound musical influence was his mother . . . the sounds of artists such as James Brown, the Marvelettes, and the Supremes filled the house when Dre was a child” (Borgmeyer and Lang 2006, 6). Wait, let me rephrase: Dr. Dre’s mother, Verna Young, played James Brown, the Marvelettes, and the Supremes for Dre; the opening scene of 2015’s Straight Outta Compton shows him engrossed in her records. And then a 2015 Tweet from the Philadelphia-raised record collector, music writer, and Roots drummer Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson (@questlove) publicly revealed his gratitude to sister Donn T: “Wish my cool ass sister (who really had a hand in my ‘know it all music steese’) a happy birthday.” In his memoir Mo’ Meta Blues, Questo not only gives Donn T’s far-reaching rock knowledge props but also cites his mother, Jacqui Thompson, as the most adventurous listener in their household: “if anyone in my family is what you think of as a crate digger, it would be her . . . as it turns out many of those records would be used as break beats in the future, so in a way it was an early education for my career in hip hop” (Thompson and Greenman 2013, 16). Around the same time in Detroit, Ma Dukes, mother of producer J-Dilla, describes giving him a similarly wide-ranging education: “We played every genre of music in the crib, so it was nothing foreign to him. It was just something that was everyday…. When nobody else was there I’d play opera” (qtd. in Diaz 2015). Down in 1980s Miami, Luther “Luke Skywyalker” Campbell of 2 Live Crew started DJ-ing with a stereo his mother purchased for the family with jai alai winnings “using some numbers that came to her in a dream—that was the start of Luke records and the Miami hip-hop scene right there” (Campbell 2015, 28). Once we begin listening for it, evidence of female musical listening and expertise is everywhere in hip hop history, in particular the thoughtful, intentional, and highly discerning record collecting and selecting practices of black and Latinx women—the progenitors of what Bambaataa would eventually call “edutainment,” the practice of self-making and teaching history, identity, and resistance by collecting, organizing, and playing music in everyday life.

The “Dark Matter” of Hip Hop Listening

Revisiting early coverage of hip hop by white male music journalists, however, shows how so many legends have been built by denigrating women’s collections as merely raw material, either a forgotten treasure trove or a vinyl junk pile waiting to be discovered by male collectors and DJs. Here is the journalist and former Def Jam publicist Bill Adler—himself a collector whose materials Cornell acquired in 2013—in 1990: “It was up to the first great geniuses of rap—party deejays like Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash, Grand Wizard Theodore, Pete ‘DJ’ Jones, and DJ Hollywood—to pick through the auto graveyard of the previous twenty year’s worth of pop in a dedicated search for enough cool parts to build a serviceable new ride” (Adler 1991, xvii). Adler gives us (1)
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the lone male genius historiography, (2) the denigration of so-called “pop” music (almost always a feminized dis compared to rock, especially when Adler claims a few lines later that “rap is rock, after all”), and (3) the fallacy that black and brown teenagers built hip hop from haphazard exposure to capitalism’s cast-offs, hand-me-downs, and rusted-out rip-offs. Symptomatic of the historiographic damage that white male rock critics’ privileged access to tastemaking publications did to early hip hop, Adler projected rock’s gendered biases onto the new art form and essentially declared to Bronx kids (my translation): let them eat cereal commercials, and the kinds of crappy, cheesy LPs everyone seems to think Mothers buy.

Here’s the thing. Empirically, the widely held fantasy of Adler and others—that “necessity was the mother of hip hop”—is simply not true. Afrika Bambaataa’s mother’s collection is not, and has never been some kind of “auto graveyard”—Aretha? The Isleys? Bo Diddley?—Hip hop is a jewel made from gems! Hip hop’s mothers (and sisters, and girlfriends, and aunts, and cousins) are the mothers of hip hop, and to treat their music collections as spare part yards or as unknown gold mines to plunder robs us of their legacy and insight. It also obscures how their feminist listening praxis shaped what Imani Kai Johnson calls the “dark matter” of hip hop, deeply felt, embodied connections that “are not visible to the naked eye, but remain nonetheless tangible elements of its practice” (Johnson 2015, 30). While Johnson coined “dark matter” to describe the energy transfers between B-Boys in a dance cypher, I extend it to hip hop as a listening practice, referencing how listening practices accrue histories that we inherit, reconfigure, and pass on by playing recordings for other people, whether selecting in a living room or DJ-ing at a club. The first 200 records out of what would eventually grow to 42,000, Bam’s mother’s collection demonstrates the immense breadth that Bam—and hip hop in general—is famous for, along with the rich depth for which early DJs are rarely given enough credit. It is more than time to acknowledge and deeply meditate on the fact that the first two hundred records in Afrika Bambaataa’s record collection belonged to his mother, his first DJ, and one of hip hop’s too. The way that she, Lorraine Montenegro, Regina Saddler, and many other black and Latinx women in the Bronx collected, selected, and listened in their living rooms shifted their childrens’ worlds and the musical ground beneath all of our feet.

Dedication

This chapter is dedicated to the life and memory of Lorraine Montenegro (1943-2017), who died in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, a death likely preventable but for the lack of response by the U.S. Federal Government. I hope this piece provides comfort to her family and does her incredible legacy justice.

References

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Notes:

(1) For a symptomatic example of this version of hip hop’s origins, see J. Leland, “Grandmaster Flash Beats Back Time,” New York Times, August 26, 2016.

(2) In April 2016, four men came forward with similar accusations, sharing accounts of how Bambaataa exploited their loneliness and vulnerabilities as children and teenagers to groom them for sexual abuse. While Bambaataa—through a lawyer—has called these assertions “baseless” and “a cowardly attempt to tarnish my reputation and legacy in hip-hop at this time,” he was removed from the Zulu Nation, the international hip hop awareness organization he started in 1973 and had led since. After tapes surfaced of Zulu members harassing one of Bambaataa’s accusers—a rant that included the homophobic taunt “you making yourself seem gay right now”—the group issued an open letter “to the survivors of apparent sexual molestation by Bambaataa”; three of the four men started out in the organization as “crate boys,” who carted records for Zulu Nation DJs. For more on the


(6) Travis Gosa (2015) discusses Bambaataa’s intervention at length in “The Fifth Element: Knowledge.”

(7) All quotes in this paragraph are from this interview unless otherwise noted. Joe Conzo also participated.
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