

Review

***How Hip Hop Became Hit Pop.* By Amy Coddington. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2023. 226 pp. ISBN 978-0-520-38392-0
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For those of us who teach US rap music history, its first few decades are often characterised by a slow but steady mainstreaming of the genre through various media formats. However, as Amy Coddington's new book teaches us, a moment like 'Walk this Way', the oft-touted rock-rap crossover track by Run-DMC and Aerosmith in 1986 does not tell us the full story of rap's crossover journey in the 1980s and early 1990s. To understand it better, Coddington argues that we need to look to radio formats in the US and their shifting categories in the 1980s. Her book is a successful investigation of radio's relationship with rap music from the first recordings to the early-to-mid 1990s.

Recorded rap music in its first decade was paradoxically mainstream and marginalised, and this book explains the conditions for how this was possible. One of the many things that I applaud about the book is its focus on the mainstream, both in terms of media format (radio in particular) and in terms of the songs which charted in the mainstream. Artists and groups are discussed that have received less scholarly attention than others: Milli Vanilli, DJ Jazzy Jeff and The Fresh Prince, PM Dawn, LL Cool J and MC Hammer. While their music is discussed in little detail, Coddington makes the case that they are crucial figures in the mainstreaming of rap and are important figures in the narrative.

To this last point, the book's clear introduction points to the 'elephant in the disciplinary room' – that rap is the most popular genre in the world, and intersects with popular music artists in many different ways. This is a wider point about hip-hop aesthetics (including fashion, dance, etc.) informing stars like the Spice Girls or Ed Sheeran, as well as its radical politics informing the pop mainstream in places. This echoes Steven Gamble's work on the 'hiphopification of pop' (2022), and one might see Coddington's book as the first instalment of a such a story which continues well into the internet era (Gamble 2024). She notes how 'mainstream' is a 'profoundly ideological term' (p. 6), a concept that has needed more scholarly attention, especially in hip-hop studies. In short, Coddington investigates race and industry through the lens of radio, and illustrates the way in which radio formats ignored and then fostered rap music into the mainstream.

Chapter 1 focuses on the history of 'Black-oriented radio'. What was once simply a format of radio shows for Black audiences for Black audiences (e.g. 'The Negro Hour') expanded into full stations which became known as the 'black format' in the 1970s and 1980s. These stations were not interested in rap music initially, and nor were they when Black radio was rebranded into 'urban' or urban contemporary stations as the 1980s progressed. Chapter 2 moves from Black-oriented formats to the newer invention of 'crossover radio'. It was crossover radio, and the broadcasting of the format to multicultural audiences, that helped to facilitate the

mainstreaming of rap music. Power 106 in Los Angeles, which started in 1986, was the first example of multicultural radio, playing songs to an audience imagined across the lines of race (in the context of Los Angeles, Black, white and Hispanic listeners specifically).

The use of the term 'multicultural' in the book could do with some more critical unpacking, at least to the level that Coddington does for the term 'mainstream'. It would have been useful to have more data around the demographics of the most important radio cities. I'm thinking of something akin to Anthony Kwame Harrison's work on the Bay Area Underground rap scene (Harrison is one of the book's endorsers). Harrison (2009) looks at census data in the Bay Area, and presumably radio stations doing market research would also be accessing similar data for their own business decisions. It would have been helpful to get a fuller definition of multiculturalism as a concept and in this context, both as the industry and as Coddington define it. A wider investigation of the multicultural contexts could show how this shift in radio formats aligned (or not) with phenomena such as the Benetton ads of the 1980s and 1990s with their iconic and arguably postracial depictions of children of various racial presentations modelling clothes in the magazine advertisements. While radio is firmly the subject of the book, it would be interesting to see how these policies and shifts in catering to audience demographics were implemented in related media of the period.

Chapter 3 focuses on the main moment when hip hop became hit pop, partially fuelled by the aim to monetise an age-diverse radio audience. This new crossover space was able to facilitate new forms of rap music, from 'rent a rapper' (p. 87) collaborations or new jack swing, to the chagrin of rap subgenres that deemed themselves more 'real' or authentic. Chapter 4 is about the pushback against this mainstreaming, akin to a moral panic from rock and pop-centric radio stations around the inclusion of rap in the mainstream. Coddington discusses new Top 40 subformats (rock-oriented Top 40 and adult Top 40) that would advertise rap free playlists. The chapter demonstrates most convincingly that US rap became 'a sonic symbol of Blackness and a touchstone for white anxiety about the diversification of the mainstream' (p. 2). I would have liked to read more about these sonic symbols, although one can read Loren Kajikawa's excellent *Sounding Race in Rap Songs* (2015) for the intra-musical complement to Coddington's extra-musical analysis of the radio industry (Kajikawa also endorses the book). Both make a strong case for something the American listening public may well take for granted: that the organisation of the American music industry has been and remains strongly based on race.

The book's conclusion opens with the state of the industry in 1995, with rap firmly in mainstream radio and dominated by both West Coast and East Coast artists. The rest of the chapter covers more recent developments, from the ramifications of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, through the internet and platforms such as Spotify. While extremely interesting, the conclusion feels like a different book, or plants the seeds of another one. I think it is important to link what is happening today with the trends discussed in the body of the study, but I also worry that it might be *too survey* compared with the tight arguments provided in the book proper. Covering the past 25 years in the conclusion does not do the past quarter century justice, but does signify the need for another book-length study to cover radio and streaming developments in the new century thus far.

In contrast to the fairly sprawling conclusion, the four chapters of the book cover a focused story. At the risk of making it less tight, or at least longer,

however, it could have done with more side-by-side images of the various charts at a given point in time. For example, the comparison of the *Billboard* Crossover, 'Hot 100' and 'Rock 40' on 9 September 1989 was extremely enlightening, and I would have loved to have seen this at various points in time in the story. The visual chart comparison demonstrates in one figure what takes a few paragraphs to explain in prose, and so it is useful from a scholarly and teaching perspective.

One potential challenge of such a study of the music industry, whether it be 1980s radio or 2010s Spotify, is that still-operating businesses may be unwilling to share data that would be useful. A potential omission in the book, which is not for want of trying I suspect, is a clearer sense of agency. It is difficult to state who exactly is making these decisions, even when we are clear about the financial motivations for them. For all the intermediaries involved, and artists, the people in the story risk going missing in a somewhat grand narrative. However, it would be difficult to provide an alternative way of carrying out and presenting this research given the opacity of the popular music industry. Dan Charnas (2011) is a notable exception to this, as he interviewed label executives for his book *The Big Payback*, but he is a journalist with potentially more access. For these reasons and more, it would have been useful to have some grounding in Coddington's positionality and disciplinary leanings early on. Lack of access to industry playmakers could be one reason why other scholars have not pursued this topic, but Coddington has been able to map this story in a compelling way so far. Her book is not only valuable for teaching, but also fills an important gap in scholarship, in hip hop studies, the pop mainstream and the history of radio.

Ultimately, the moral of this book's story is that it is always business and financial incentives that drive shifts in the music and other cultural industries. Rap is part of the mainstream because it is lucrative with a multicultural audience. Even when the topics of rappers cover anti-capitalist perspectives, or try and redress various racial and social inequalities, the popularity of such tracks still contributes to the systems in place. Therefore, *How Hip Hop Became Hit Pop* is an exciting contribution to a cultural studies approach to radio history, and a prime case study for how systemic inequalities and race-based hierarchies are reinforced while promoting an arguably more diverse range of artists in the mainstream.

Justin A. Williams 

University of Bristol, UK
justin.williams@bristol.ac.uk

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