Preface

The late 1970s and early 1980s saw a flowering of urban music and art forms that would come to be known as “hip hop.” These included rap music, break dancing, and graffiti. In the Bronx, rap pioneers like Kool Herc were sampling beats from earlier funk records to create the sonic backdrop for a musical revolution. With dilapidated buildings and subway cars as their canvas, graffiti writers created masterpieces of the “wild style.” On the street, new dance forms appeared, with innovators like Jimmy D and Crazy Legs from Rock Steady Crew battling one another to perform new feats of agility and stamina. Today, hip hop aesthetics dominate youth culture, with rap supplanting rock ‘n’ roll as the pre-eminent musical idiom among young people of many races, ethnicities and geographic regions.

In this seminar, we examined the origins of the hip hop style. We noted, for example, the debt rap owes to previous musical genres, including jazz, funk, soul, reggae, and African forms. We also looked at the post-modern universe in which hip hop emerged, the influence of pop culture, television, emerging digital technologies, and the fascination with borrowing (“appropriation”) that was very much a feature of 1980s art.

Fellows who participated in the seminar taught a variety of subjects and grade levels. Many were interested in linking hip hop, which is so much a part of their students’ lives, to the curriculum they teach every day in their classrooms—even using it as a tool to convey state-mandated subject matter. For example, a number of units touched on figurative language—citing rap lyrics in lessons about simile, metaphor, and irony. Some connected hip hop to poetry, dance and music from previous eras, such as the Harlem Renaissance. Others used a social science lens, connecting hip hop’s widespread influence to communications, advertising, and economics. Yet another group focused on the visual aspects of hip hop—noting the influence of graffiti on contemporary artists such as Jean Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring.

While it was not the major focus of our study, the seminar gave teachers a forum in which to debate issues of racism and sexism, and the appropriateness language that is part of rap music. Overall, fellows benefited by the opportunity to research, discuss, and share knowledge of a culture that is so pervasive in today’s schools, yet so widely misunderstood.

--Edward Epstein, Director, University City Arts League