Sampling the 1970s in hip-hop

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Abstract
Musical borrowings, or samples, have long been a means of creating lineage between hip-hop and older genres of African-American music such as funk, soul, and rhythm and blues. DJs who sample from this so-called 'Old School' attempt to link hip-hop to older, venerable traditions of black popular music. This article investigates the importance of 1970s pop and culture to hip-hop music. This era is depicted as a time in which African-American identity coalesced, and a new political consciousness was born. The primary source for images of the 1970s was and continues to be blaxploitation film, a genre of low-budget, black-oriented crime and suspense cinema. This article will detail how blaxploitation distilled certain societal concerns of the 1970s, and how in turn hip-hop feeds off blaxploitation both dramatically and musically, reusing its story lines and sampling its soundtracks.

Introduction
Rap lyrics teem with history, political critique, innuendo, sarcasm and wit, as many authors have remarked (Spencer 1991; Stephens 1991; Wheeler 1991; Rose 1994). Over the past twenty-five years, hip-hop has amassed a cultural lexicon of vocabulary, lore and characters. This lexicon exists because hip-hop artists continually return to certain archetypal images and conceits. Unlike other forms of popular music that attempt to reinvent or subvert tradition for the sake of novelty, hip-hop culture prizes and cultivates its memory, such that lyrics and images of rap songs from the 1970s and 1980s are still accessible and usable to MCs today.

Yet the musical elements of hip-hop have largely escaped critical scrutiny, even though hip-hop DJs also treasure the past. For the past quarter of a century, hip-hop music has displayed various forms of musical borrowing. In the late 1970s, during the infancy of hip-hop, DJs from the Bronx and Harlem developed techniques for manually scratching vinyl records into a seamless mix of dance music (Rose 1994, p. 53; Blow 1997, p. 10; George 1998, p. 17). DJs favoured an elite collection of soul, funk and R&B for their samples, from artists such as James Brown, Curtis Mayfield, Isaac Hayes and George Clinton (Demers 2002). During the 1980s this soul repertoire was known as the 'Old School', and for numerous rappers and DJs epitomised an authentic black consciousness. Many hip-hop artists and groups replaced scratching with sampling, a digital process in which pre-recorded sounds are incorporated into the sonic fabric of a new song. In the middle and late 1980s, as digital sampling technology grew prevalent, hip-hop began to sample from a more diverse assortment of music ranging from heavy metal to country. Nonetheless, a sizeable number of DJs and producers faithfully returned (and continue to return) to soul and funk as a means of linking their work to venerable musicians of the past.

Yet, scratching and sampling from Old School soul constitutes simply one
activity amid the incredibly rich assortment of multimedia borrowings, references and parodies that operate in hip-hop music as a whole. These citations most often originate from the period between 1965 and 1980 in American society. This era is depicted as a time in which African-American identity coalesced, and a new political consciousness was born. The primary source for this simplified version of the 1970s was and continues to be ‘blaxploitation’ film, a genre of low-budget, black-oriented crime and suspense cinema. This article will detail how blaxploitation distilled certain societal concerns of the 1970s, and how in turn hip-hop feeds off blaxploitation both dramatically and musically, re-using its story lines and sampling its soundtracks.

**Blaxploitation film and ghetto children**

The term ‘blaxploitation’ is an elision of ‘black exploitation,’ referring to some two dozen B-rated films catering to African-American urban audiences between 1970 and 1979. Although technically not the first of its kind, Melvin Van Peebles’ *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971) stands as the prototype of blaxploitation.1 *Sweetback* introduced the elements that would become germane to the genre: sex, drugs, crime, and caricatured racist depictions of both blacks and whites. The plots of the most famous films inevitably glorify macho behaviour and anti-social crime as antidotes to class and race tensions. *Sweetback* narrates the moral transformation of a sex-show performer into a cop-killing revolutionary. Goldie, the hero of *The Mack* (1972), is a recently released convict who becomes the most powerful pimp of Oakland. In *Superfly* (1972), Priest is an extravagant Manhattan drug pusher who plans one last cocaine deal before renouncing crime. *Black Caesar* (1973) traces the rise and fall of a Harlem youth who assumes leadership of the black mob and challenges both the police and the Mafia. Black masculinity is defined by wealth and sexual prowess; machismo negates any meaningful relationships with women. Whites appear only as police officers, detectives, politicians or prostitutes, and most are untrustworthy and bigoted. While drugs and crime might offer temporary relief from poverty, these films are quick to demonstrate their egregious effects on the black community, particularly women and children. In other words, blaxploitation plots offer a peculiar mix of fantasy and pragmatism, whereby criminal behaviour is at once commended and deplored.

A popular theme of blaxploitation film concerns a black hero or heroine who is torn between duty to the law (usually white-controlled) and loyalty to the African-American community. The first among this group is *Shaft* (1971), the filmic incarnation of the Ernest Tidyman novel in which John Shaft is a private detective hired by a black mob boss to investigate the kidnapping of his daughter. In *Foxy Brown* (1974), the heroine embarks on a lurid spree of revenge against the drug pushers, among them her brother, who assassinated her boyfriend. Like *Foxy Brown*, *Coffy* (1973) features a vengeful Pam Grier in the title role, this time as a nurse by day and prostitute by night who tracks down the pushers who overdosed her sister. In both *Blacula* (1972) and *Detroit 9000* (1973), black police detectives figure as images of successful racial assimilation who are nevertheless plagued by guilt for ‘betraying’ their race. The main character of *Cleopatra Jones* (1973) is a vague amalgam of black activist and FBI special agent ordered to infiltrate the operation of a lesbian drug lord named Mommy (played by Shelley Winters!).

Among the criticisms of blaxploitation is the argument that the films over-
simplified and parodied the ghetto, which during the 1970s proved to be the crucible for considerable racial, socio-economic and gender tensions (Hartmann 1994; Simon 1998). Yet in this respect blaxploitation was only mirroring parallel developments in popular literature and music of the time, in which a fascination with the ghetto was already prominent. The works of Iceberg Slim (Robert Beck) were among the first to grapple with the problem of the ghetto. A former pimp, Slim authored several stark portraits of inner-city blacks, including the novels *Trick Baby* (1967) and *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (1969), as well as an album of poetry set to jazz entitled *Reflections* (1976) (James 1995, pp. 112–16). Slim defines the quintessential black pimp as a man who exerts a hypnotic control over his prostitutes, using violence, drugs and intermittent affection to secure their loyalties. Slim’s world is peopled by alcoholics, prostitutes, gamblers, gang members, drug pushers and errant preachers. His characters are unscrupulous and dissolute, but Slim’s keen talent for humour and wordplay renders them both repugnant and fascinating:

*Broadway Sam, the big mack man, you oughta know the name*
I almost cried the day he died, it was a dirty shame
He liked to play on old Broadway, that’s how he got his name
He lived off the kicks from out in the sticks
He was a master at the long-shoe game
He was always pressed, nothing but the best
Vines and kicks he had
A thirty dollar lid and gloves of kid
Man, his threads were bad
White on whites and black skin tights
And a belt of pure crocodile
When he stepped out, all the ho’s would shout
But Sam, why, he’d just smile
He was riding high, his limit was the sky
He had all kinds of dough
But he became a junky, a low-down flunky
When he pulled a dope-fiend ho. (*Slim 1994, my transcription)*

Broadway Sam subsequently becomes so addicted to drugs that he turns tricks as a gay prostitute to support his habit, and eventually is murdered by a client. Broadway Sam and Slim’s other pimp characters dressed flamboyantly, were rich, and profited from the bodies of (usually) black women, choosing to exploit their own race rather than be exploited by white capitalism. While the fates of such characters inevitably were grim, these works fired the imaginations of many 1970s blaxploitation film-makers as well as modern rappers such as Ice Cube and Ice-T, both of whom chose their stage names in honour of Slim.

A foil to Iceberg Slim’s glorification of the ghetto can be found in the work of the poet Gil Scott-Heron, whose mixture of Last Poets-inspired verse with jazz-funk accompaniments aestheticised the urban mean streets. In Scott-Heron’s ‘Whitey On the Moon’ (1970), the poverty of the ghetto is humorously contrasted to NASA’s recent lunar missions:

*A rat done bit my sister Nell, with whitey on the moon*
Her face and arms began to swell, and whitey’s on the moon
I can’t pay no doctor bills, while whitey’s on the moon
Ten years from now I’ll be paying still, while whitey’s on the moon
You know, the man just upped my rent last night, cause whitey’s on the moon
No hot water, no toilets, no lights, but whitey’s on the moon
I wonder why he’s upping me,’cause whitey’s on the moon?
Well I was already giving him fifty a week and now whitey's on the moon.
Taxes taking my whole damn check
The junkies make me a nervous wreck
The price of food is going up
And as if all the crap wasn't enough,
A rat done bit my sister Nell, with whitey on the moon
Her face and arms began to swell, and whitey's on the moon
With all that money I made last year for whitey on the moon
How come I ain't got no money here?
Hmm, whitey's on the moon
You know I just about had my fill of whitey on the moon
I think I'll send these doctor bills, air mail special,
To whitey on the moon. (Scott-Heron 1999, my transcription)

Scott-Heron's acerbic poetry condemned the negligence of white legislators in their treatment of the inner-city, but he was equally harsh towards ghetto blacks who perpetuated the cycle of poverty through drugs and violence. His exhortations to political activism — such as the song 'Get Out of the Ghetto Blues' (1972) — rebutted the nihilism and amorality of Slim's works. Here Scott-Heron attacks apathetic blacks who try to 'escape' the ghetto either by ignoring it, defrauding it, or fleeing it with drugs:

I know you think you're cool, Lord if they bus your kids to school
I know you think you're cool just 'cause they bus your kids to school
But you ain't got a thing to lose, you just got the get out of the ghetto blues
I know you think you're cool if you're gettin' two welfare checks
You done told me you think you're cool because you're getting two welfare checks
Yeah but you got ten years to lose if they catch you
Just trying to fight that get out of the ghetto blues
If they don't get you in the washer, Lord knows they'll get you in the rinse
I know you think you're cool just 'cause you shooting that stuff in your arm
I see you noddin' 'cause you shoot that stuff into your arm
And it don't matter which pan box you choose
You got the get out of the ghetto blues. (Scott-Heron 1999, my transcription)

Slim's and Scott-Heron's work spanned the gamut of responses to the ghetto. Although highly influential among many black artists, neither artist achieved pop star status; Scott-Heron's political stance alienated him from FM radio, and Slim's subject matter relegated his writings mostly to adult bookstores. Nonetheless, several mainstream 1970s black musicians tried to address the concerns of urban crime and poverty, mixing Iceberg Slim-inspired fantasies of gangsters with the conscience of Scott-Heron's critique. While African-American music had a long tradition of discussing civic problems, black pop of the 1970s developed a unique style that suggested a previously unheard-of level of racial and political unity. This style, which I refer to as the 'ghetto sound', spoke specifically to the concerns of inner-city blacks, and delineated the separation between blacks and whites through music.

Ghetto sound / blaxploitation sound

One of the architects of the ghetto sound was Norman Whitfield, a songwriter and arranger for Motown who penned some of its most celebrated hits including 'I Heard It Through the Grapevine' (1968). Inspired by funk and Jimi Hendrix, Whitfield's late 1960s and early 1970s work grew increasingly referential to African-American tradition. He jettisoned the radio-friendly format of three-minute love
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songs along with Motown’s trademark sound of ebullient strings, xylophone and horns. Tracks that Whitfield wrote for the vocal group, the Temptations, including ‘Cloud Nine’ (1969), ‘Ball of Confusion’ (1970) and ‘Papa Was a Rollin’ Stone’ (1972), introduced darker, ‘blacker’ sounds of jazz and blues, and experimented with the novel technological innovation, the wah-wah pedal. In using blues scales and jazz instrumentation, Whitfield invoked idioms that represent traditional black American music. Much subsequent black popular music continued this impetus to code ‘blackness’ acoustically, choosing the ghetto as the centre of African-American identity (Ward 1998, pp. 346–8).

One of the most articulate discussions of the ghetto can be found in Marvin Gaye’s What’s Going On? album (1971), a revolutionary condemnation of drug use, pollution, corruption and racism that marked Gaye’s transition from a love balladeer to a politically conscious artist. Throughout the album, Gaye decries the ghetto as a purgatory for lost souls forgotten by society at large. Repression from without (through racist governmental policies) as well as degradation from within (through black-on-black violence and drug sales) conspire to change once-thriving urban centres into ghettos. What’s Going On? was a risky proposition for Motown Records (wary of alienating its white clientele), but its success popularised both the ghetto and musical strategies previously felt to be too ‘black’ for commercial success. In the early 1970s there was an explosion of ghetto-titled songs, such as the Spinners’ ‘Ghetto Child’ (1972), Leroy Hutson’s ‘The Ghetto ’74’ (1973), War’s ‘The World is a Ghetto’ (1973), and the Philadelphia All Stars’ ‘Let’s Clean Up the Ghetto’ (1977). Most ghetto-themed songs featured nominally African or African-diaspora percussion, such as conga drums and wood blocks. As an aestheticisation of black music, the ghetto sound was a musical manifestation of Afrocentrism, an attempt to valorise African roots and African-American culture.

In creating and performing the ghetto sound, artists proposed a new vision of black identity and politics. A case in point is Curtis Mayfield, who used the ghetto sound as a tool of civil protest. Mayfield was originally the leader of the male vocal group, the Impressions, a gospel-inflected R&B quartet that paid oblique homage to the Civil Rights Movement through songs like ‘People Get Ready’ (1965). In the mid-1960s, most black popular musicians avoided public comment on American racial relations for fear of alienating white audiences and record executives. Mayfield, along with Harry Belafonte, Ray Charles, Isaac Hayes and Nina Simone, were among the few who jeopardised their careers by publicly aligning themselves with the struggle towards equality (Ward 1998, p. 299). By the time political climates changed in the early 1970s, these artists were hailed as pioneering heroes who stood up for integration before it was fashionable and expedient to do so. Curtis Mayfield remained a moral centre of soul throughout the decade with his politically progressive Curtis (1970) and Roots (1971) albums, both replete with Afro-inflected instrumentation. Audiences perceived a link between the ghetto sound and black politicisation. A slew of funk and soul recordings emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, attempting to follow Mayfield’s example. James Brown released ‘(Say It Loud) I’m Black and I’m Proud’ (1968), a track widely interpreted as one of the first musical utterances of black pride. Funkadelic’s first eponymous album in 1971 featured tracks such as ‘What Is Soul?’, an ode to soul food and culture. The Isley Brothers recorded ‘Fight the Power’ (1973), an overt criticism of white political corruption and bureaucracy.

The ghetto sound became the primary musical inspiration for blaxploitation
film soundtracks, and many prominent ghetto sound artists, including Mayfield, Brown, and Hayes, easily made the transition from pop star to soundtrack composer. Since blaxploitation cinema by definition dealt with issues of black identity and resistance, the ghetto sound naturally fitted into this filmic environment with its treatment of the ghetto and black politicisation. But unlike ghetto-sound pop in general, which dealt with a variety of subjects, blaxploitation scores treated only the sociopolitical concerns that pertained directly to the story lines of their respective films. This was usually achieved through the use of theme songs or anthems, tracks that fashioned a uniquely ‘cinematic’ treatment of instrumentation and text. Just as Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song set the tone for future blaxploitation cinema, the soundtrack of Sweetback determined the course of future blaxploitation scores.

At several critical moments in Sweetback, the anthem ‘Sweetback’s Theme’ (performed by Earth, Wind and Fire) serves as a sonic backdrop for Sweetback’s flight from the police. This song features a moderately fast funk groove performed by organ, percussion and horns. The scenes in which ‘Sweetback’s Theme’ appears contain no dialogue, but display the fugitive Sweetback running through ghettos, churches and whorehouses, across freeway overpasses, and eventually in the desert to cross the Mexican border. Frequent cross-cuts (e.g. Sweetback is shown approaching a riverbed, then the camera cuts to show him on the other side) abridge the passage of time by summarising a lengthy voyage into two or three scenes. At times, Van Peebles adds surreal effects by switching to the photonegative of an image, and then passing it through a blue or red filter, lending the fleeing Sweetback a psychedelic presence. The treatment of ‘Sweetback’s Theme’ within the cinematic frame changes how it is perceived and understood by the audience. Once pitted against the film’s images, this song becomes a symbol of flight and resistance, inextricably linked with the character of Sweetback himself. In other words, once a theme song is used in a movie, it retains its cinematic associations even when heard outside the theatre.5

The theme song sequences of Sweetback determined the usage of soundtracks in subsequent blaxploitation films. Sweetback’s heir apparent, Shaft, had by the end of 1971 created a demand for blaxploitation soundtracks in which at least one song served as an anthem dedicated either to the hero or to the plot in general. Isaac Hayes’ Shaft soundtrack achieved such mainstream acceptance that it earned the 1971 Academy Award for Best Soundtrack, the first Oscar ever awarded to an African-American composer. Shaft launched the trend for opening credit theme songs with Hayes’ ‘Theme to Shaft’, the orchestrated rap that glorifies its hero. As the song plays, Richard Roundtree, who plays John Shaft, walks calmly through Manhattan, dressed fashionably in corduroy and leather. His nonchalance seems utterly oblivious to Hayes’ laudatory song, as if Shaft were too cool to notice his own sophistication. This sequence cleverly divides responsibilities between the actor and the composer, allowing the actor to avoid emoting while letting the music tell the audience what to think. The stylised combination of opening images and theme music rendered Shaft an archetype of blaxploitation films.

The sequels, Shaft’s Big Score (1972) and Shaft in Africa (1973), plus Coffy, Foxy Brown, Cleopatra Jones and several other black films utilised theme music to introduce their main characters. These soundtracks were often performed by famous funk, R&B or soul artists and were available as purchasable LPs. Hits from several of these albums were popular on both Top 40 and black radio. But unlike Sweetback,
in which the theme song returns several times throughout the course of the movie, post-Sweetback theme songs were often relegated to the opening or closing credits of the film. This was an ideal location to ruminate on the virtues and vices of the main character because credits typically are a static frame in which characters and/or a setting are introduced (opening credits) or withdrawn (closing credits). Superfly was unique in being one of the few blaxploitation films after Sweetback to use theme songs in the body of the film rather than merely at the beginning or end. The most famous track off the Curtis Mayfield soundtrack, ‘Freddie’s Dead’, is used at several instances to accompany the main character Priest’s travels, either on foot or in his Cadillac. Like Sweetback, Superfly relies on ‘Freddie’s Dead’ to style relatively static scenes focusing usually on the hero. The track never plays during scenes of action or dialogue.

Foxy Brown pushes the already considerable camp of blaxploitation to a new level with its title heroine played by black film starlet, Pam Grier.6 Two of Grier’s films (Coffy and Foxy Brown) are reworkings of a standard blaxploitation plot line: the death of a loved one of the hero prompts him/her to wreak bloody vengeance on the criminals and/or police responsible. But Foxy Brown ascends above the typical vigilante fare through ironic self-awareness: it panders to, as well as mocks, male fantasy. Set to Willie Hutch’s ‘Super Bad’, the opening credits feature Grier dressed in various costumes that Foxy will later don in the story. Grier dances sinuously and flirts with the camera as special effects show her in slow motion, silhouetted and multiplied across a psychedelic-coloured screen. While characters in Shaft, Superfly and other films seemed to be unaware of their soundtracks, Grier as Foxy Brown not only hears her theme music, but dances to it as if to seduce her audience. Yet because Grier is the hero/ine of the film, not merely a female accessory, her wink and smile reveal that ultimately she is playing with the sexist conventions of blaxploitation. Even as she dons revealing outfits and allows herself to be objectified under the camera, Brown is the agent of change rather than a passive recipient of action. The Foxy Brown opening credits owe much of their inspiration to the credit sequences of the James Bond series of films in which Bond calmly walks through an array of stunning female assassins. The Bond credits are similarly lacking in substantive plot, and function simply as opportunities to display Bond’s overwhelming sex appeal (Smith 1998, pp. 121–2). Foxy Brown’s credits, however, feature no object of Brown’s desire, instead offering her to the male gaze. In effect, Foxy becomes her own ‘Bond babe’, and as Brown, Pam Grier shares the joke with her audience by laughing with (at) the camera.

The typical blaxploitation theme song/anthem accompanies scenes of travel, either in a car or on foot, just as ‘Sweetback’s Theme’ always coincided with footage of Sweetback’s flight. Blaxploitation theme songs, in choosing movement as their locale, continue a tradition of African-American music that has long dwelt on travel and flight as states of being. As Paul Gilroy comments,

In the space and time that separate Robert Johnson’s ‘Hellhound on My Trail’, the Wailers’ exhortation to ‘Keep on Moving’, and the more recent Soul II Soul piece with the same name, the expressive cultures of the black Atlantic world have been dominated by a special mood of restlessness. These songs, like so many others in the same intertextual sequence, evoke and affirm a condition in which the negative meanings given to the enforced movement of blacks are somehow transposed. What was initially felt to be a curse – the curse of homelessness or the curse of enforced exile – gets repossessed. It becomes affirmed and is reconstructed as the basis of a privileged standpoint from which certain useful and critical perceptions about the modern world become more likely. (Gilroy 1993, p. 111)
More specifically, Samuel Floyd has traced appearances of the chariot trope from spirituals through more recent black musical genres (Floyd 1995, pp. 213–16). The chariot metaphor (most famously appearing in ‘Swing Low, Sweet Chariot’) in pre-Civil War days stood as a symbol for freedom. Many chariot treatments employed imagery from Exodus accounts of the Hebrews’ slavery in Babylon and Egypt as analogies to the plight of African slaves. The heavenly chariot promised an afterlife of freedom in Heaven to compensate for servitude during life. In the days of Reconstruction when the abolition of slavery only proved to complicate the lot of blacks, the locomotive supplanted the chariot as a promise of freedom, a means of travel to the city where supposedly better prospects awaited. ‘Sweetback’s Theme’ was a clear perpetuation of the trope of ‘travelling to freedom’. The theme songs for Shaft and Superfly discarded overt references to freedom or purification, but their music nonetheless acts as a referent to free movement and often aids the camera in shaping a filmic ode to the main character. The freedom associated with such blaxploitation scores is of considerable importance to the hip-hop artists who sample from them, as will be discussed below.

sweetback rendered film anthems fashionable, creating a commercial demand for soundtracks written by contemporary funk and soul artists. Director Melvin Van Peebles anticipated the interest in the music of Sweetback by releasing a commercially available LP featuring the Earth, Wind and Fire songs as well as various portions of dialogue from the film. Gordon Parks Sr., who directed Shaft, followed suit by hiring Isaac Hayes to compose and score Shaft, a work that enjoyed both commercial and critical acclaim. By the end of 1971, it was common practice for blaxploitation films to release a separately purchasable album, and directors sought high-profile musical talent as a way to attract audiences into the movie theatre. Since the early 1970s was a time of down-sizing and financial trouble for black music labels such as Motown and Stax, blaxploitation soundtracks provided welcome income for the few artists fortunate enough to be invited to compose them (Toop 1995, p. 78). One marketing strategy for blaxploitation film was to elide the personas of the musicians who contributed soundtrack with the plot of the film itself. Thus James Brown displayed the very best in ghetto chic clothes and hairstyle during the publicity for Black Caesar. Following the success of Shaft, Isaac Hayes began his live performances dressed in black leather pants and chains across his chest, and he would enter the stage accompanied by two Harley Davidson motorcyclists (Ward 1998, p. 406). His appeal as a ‘Black Moses’ was so great that he gradually assumed the identity of Shaft, becoming more recognisable than Richard Roundtree who portrayed Shaft in the film. Several artists (including Curtis Mayfield, Isaac Hayes, Willie Hutch, and The Hues Corporation) not only provided soundtracks but also appeared in blaxploitation films, either as themselves in a performance milieu or as someone else. As a result, the blaxploitation era is remembered as a time when soundtrack artists were conflated with the movies for which they composed.

Hip-hop and blaxploitation

Three elements explain blaxploitation’s allure in contemporary hip-hop: its use of theme songs or anthems, its overt politicisation, and its fascination with the ghetto or ‘hood’. Musical samples instantaneously invoke the characters and situations of the films, and transfer their mystique into their new hip-hop context. By re-using
anthems, numerous hip-hop artists hope to capture some of the film's glamour and transfer it to their own artist-personas. A prime example can be heard in Jay-Z's 'Reservoir Dogs' (1996), which samples the guitar solo and rhythm from Isaac Hayes' 'Theme to Shaft'. In the film Shaft, this theme song is set to scenes of the well-dressed main character walking the streets of Manhattan. His actions display his cool lack of regard for authority: he jaywalks, and 'gives the finger' to a taxi that threatens to run him over. Hayes' lyrics elaborate Shaft's charisma and intelligence:

Hayes: Who's the black private dick that's a sex machine to all the chicks?
Background singers: Shaft!
Hayes: Damn right! Who is the man that would risk his neck for his brother man?
Background singers: Shaft!
Hayes: Can you dig it?

Most film soundtracks are non-diegetic, meaning that they do not actually occur within the narrative frame. Non-diegetic music can support the emotional tone of a scene, but does not disrupt the action with its own reflections (Gorbman 1987). Blaxploitation anthems break from traditional non-diegesis because their lyrics comment on the plot; for this reason hip-hop artists prize these songs as means of transplanting the glamour of a film plot onto the new track. The producers of Jay-Z's 'Reservoir Dogs' found in 'Theme to Shaft' a rich reference: a well-known, critically acclaimed song that touts the independence and rebelliousness of its hero. By sampling from the song, the character portrayed in Jay-Z's rap seems cooler and more dangerous:

Yo shut the fuck up 'fore I blast and ban from TV your ass
With no mask, look at the camera like what?
Yeah I did it like them sick white boys the court committed
To the death of me, I'm spaz like I'm on Ecstasy
Drop a 100 bars for real like I'm lookin' for a deal
If I ain't hungry, who the fuck is, I'm worse than them African kids. (Jay-Z 1998, my transcription)

'Reservoir Dogs' draws its title from the graphically violent Quentin Tarantino 1992 film of the same name. The violence described in 'Reservoir Dogs' far exceeds that in the film Shaft; indeed, the allure of John Shaft was that he was adept at avoiding violence unless absolutely necessary. In other words, Jay-Z, like many gangsta artists, perceives in blaxploitation sound a potent symbol of strength, freedom and resistance. Yet in sampling from blaxploitation sound, the original content of these films is sometimes overshadowed by the machismo and aggression of contemporary hip-hop culture.

Other cases of blaxploitation theme-song sampling involve even more drastic departures from a work's original message. The group Smoothe Da Hustler sampled the main groove of Curtis Mayfield's 'Freddie's Dead' (1971) in their 'Hustler's Theme' (1996). Freddie is an underling of Priest who is murdered by his boss's rivals. 'Freddie's Dead' is one of the most politicised moments in blaxploitation soundtracks. Rather than blaming white oppression for ghetto realities, Mayfield decries the black pushers and pimps who deal in vice at the expense of their own community:

Everybody's abused him, ripped him up and abused him
Another junkie plan, pushin' dope for the man
A terrible blow, but that's how it go
Freddie's on the corner now
If you wanna be a junkie now, remember Freddie’s dead
We’re all built up with progress, but sometimes I must confess
We can deal with rockets and dreams, but reality, what does it mean?
Ain’t nothin’ said, ‘cause Freddie’s dead . . .
If you don’t try, you’re gonna die
Why can’t we brothers protect one another?
No one’s serious, and it makes me furious. (Mayfield 1998, my transcription)

Mayfield’s activist lyrics clash with the plot of *Superfly*, which is essentially a glorification of Priest’s slick pimp life, so it is conceivable that some audiences might overlook the conscience in Mayfield’s musical cautionary tale. Smoothe Da Hustler seems to have overlooked these lyrics altogether, since ‘Hustler’s Theme’ incorporates ‘Freddie’s Dead’ into a vivid celebration of a pimp’s life.

This goes out to the hustlers
Gettin’ the fast way dough, the cash way flow, it’s all about hustlers
To all the big remies around the world doin’ their thing
You gotta be hustlers
To all the hand-to-hand brothers around the way puttin’ time in
It’s all about oh, oh, hustlers
To all my people from the hill, makin’ moves, gettin’ dough. (Smoothe Da Hustler 1996)

While the connection between Priest, a 1970s pimp, and modern hustlers is understandable, it is nonetheless curious that Smoothe Da Hustler would so transform the original intent of ‘Freddie’s Dead’ that Mayfield’s wordless vocal, a moan mourning the tragedy of Freddie’s death, is transformed into ‘oh, oh, hustler’ in ‘Hustler’s Theme’.

In effect, Smoothe Da Hustler’s reading of *Superfly* ignores all the tensions between Mayfield’s soundtrack and the narrative. For many rappers, in fact, the elevation of blaxploitation to canonical status has meant a monolithic interpretation of these films as unified, both politically and morally. Hip-hop references to the 1970s often allude to the birth of a new black American political consciousness, one that rejected the assimilationist tendencies of 1960s Civil Rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. in favour of more separatist voices such as those of Malcolm X and the Black Panthers. The hip-hop movement neatly compressed this more pessimistic view of racial relations under the aegis of ‘Black Power’, which in film, music video and album art is often invoked with afros, dashikis,9 and raised clenched fists as symbols of revolution. Black Power in reality was a term describing a variety of political stances, some radical and others merely progressive. Jeffrey Louis Decker remarks that black nationalists in hip-hop exploit the sounds and images of a wide variety of black militants from America’s past, but particularly those who advocate building the black nation. Their sources most often include the community-based activists, such as Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Adam Clayton Powell, Muhammad Ali, Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, Angela Y. Davis and Huey P. Newton. They also sample from the philosophies and attitudes of distinctly black institutions – ranging from the Black Panther Party to the Nation of Islam – that are organically tied to the communities they serve. (Decker 1993, p. 58)

Popular culture’s oversimplification of the 1970s is not relegated to politics, however. The homogeneity of black culture that is implied in nostalgic reflections on the history of the Civil Rights era can be neatly referred to as ‘soul’. In an interview, Paul Gilroy has said that soul is constituted by sartorial, musical and culinary elements that distinguish African-Americans from Caucasians, and thus protect black culture from white co-optation (Green and Guillory 1998). The mythic por-
trayal of 1960s and 1970s black political resistance simplifies the socio-economic tension of the period into a simple ‘white vs black’ showdown, obfuscating the intra-racial differences that proved equally challenging to the era.

Soul and its incumbent generalisations concerning Black Power provide useful, if sometimes facile images of black self-assertion in the 1960s and 1970s. The standard hip-hop invocation of black nationalism and political separation often errs in equating the 1960s with assimilation and the 1970s with protest and separation, as Decker notes in mentioning the pacifist Martin Luther King, Jr. alongside the revolutionary Huey Newton. Most of the ground-breaking work for Black Power in its various forms was accomplished in the late 1960s; by the early 1970s, internal dissent and external governmental pressure had all but killed Black Power as an organised movement (Decker 1993, p. 60). In addition, the cliché black political experience of the 1970s often conflates divergent philosophies for the sake of clarity and ease in transmission; thus two widely diverging organisations, the Nation of Islam (an American nationalist group) and the Black Panthers (a Marxist, internationalist group) are often elided in rap lyrics, music videos and promotional material such as posters, all for the sake of aligning contemporary rap groups with a proud tradition of black resistance.

It is perhaps not surprising that hip-hop’s remembrance of black militancy be flawed, since it relies almost exclusively on film, television and the media for its often casually assembled historical source materials. Nostalgia for 1970s black politics is particularly image-fixated, leading to bizarre situations like one that Angela Davis recounts:

Not long ago, I attended a performance in San Francisco by women presently or formerly incarcerated in the County Jail, in collaboration with Bay Area women performance artists. After the show, I went backstage to the ‘green room’, where the women inmates, guarded by deputy sheriffs stationed outside the door, were celebrating with their families and friends. Having worked with some of the women at the jail, I wanted to congratulate them on the show. One woman introduced me to her brother, who at first responded to my name with a blank stare. The woman admonished him: ‘You don’t know who Angela Davis is? You should be ashamed’. Suddenly a flicker of recognition flashed across his face. ‘Oh’, he said, ‘Angela Davis – the Afro’. (Davis 1998, p. 23)

For Davis, a University of California professor who in 1970 appeared on the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s ‘Ten Most Wanted’ list for murder, kidnapping, and flight across state lines, the compression of her career as a political activist and revolutionary into a single image, the afro hairstyle, was particularly distressing for two reasons. Considering how crucial Davis believed her objectives to be, she was saddened that more than two decades later, all that remained of her legacy was her fashion sense. More ironically, the afro style she wore, a symbol of natural black beauty, had become simply one more accoutrement of the past, a piece of retro-fashion that was all the rage in the early 1990s following campaigns by Vibe and other magazines to re-introduce ‘soul fashion’.

Much of contemporary mass culture including hip-hop tends to mis-remember and misquote 1970s black political activism in order to render it more glamorous and attractive to consumers. Hip-hop does not bear exclusive responsibility for this misrepresentation, however, as blaxploitation films aided in future caricatures of the 1970s by perpetuating some of their own. Leerom Medovoi notes that ‘blaxploitation can be seen as Hollywood’s attempt to objectify in popular film an image of the new, militant black manhood called for by the Black Power Movement but
without articulating that masculinity to any clear political programme’ (Medovoi 1998, p. 14). The attraction of blaxploitation to future generations is partially due to its commodification of concepts (like the Black Power Movement) that, unmediated, would be too complicated to treat in a cursory context. Films like *Foxy Brown* and *Cleopatra Jones* were among the first cultural artifacts to conflate black activism, such as the efforts of Angela Davis, with visual icons such as the afro hairdo. The soundtracks for many blaxploitation films exploited the above-mentioned ghetto sound as acoustic referents to ‘soul’ identity. These sonic and visual symbols are easily re-used through musical sampling and sartorial reference, and therefore many hip-hop artists rely on footage and music from these films as efficient (if inaccurate) evocations of black life in the 1970s.

One further example of a hip-hop musician aspiring to a blaxploitation alter-ego can be found in the opening of Snoop Doggy Dogg’s 1993 album, *Doggystyle*. In its introduction, Snoop includes a critical portion of dialogue from *Superfly*, in which Eddie tries to convince the protagonist Priest not to abandon his career as a drug dealer:

> What? Man, you wanna get outta the game? Come on, man, you can smoke a pound of bud everyday, gotta big screen TV, man, you wanna give all this stuff up? You got the dope and shit out on the streets. Nigga, you crazy? That’s the American dream. (Dogg 1993, my transcription)

Rather than being sampled from the original film soundtrack, this conversation is re-performed by Snoop and his entourage. But whereas in *Superfly*, Priest does finally succeed in leaving the business to ‘go straight’, *Doggystyle*’s ensuing tracks make clear that Snoop has no intention of giving up his gangsta lifestyle for any reason, moral or otherwise. Another Snoop album, *Tha Doggfather* (1996), is replete with close-up photos of the rapper, whose straightened hair and moustache bear more than a passing resemblance to Ron O’Neal who played Priest in *Superfly*. Other photos in the liner notes to *Doggfather* feature Snoop dressed in ghetto chic complete with a white fedora hat, leaning next to a Bentley luxury automobile. *Doggfather*’s rear illustration depicts a canine Snoop with all the accessories of a pimp: a cane, multiple rings, and a voluptuous woman serving him champagne. The liner notes for *Doggfather* list a producer/keyboardist by the name of ‘Priest ‘Soopafly’ Brooks’, indicating that the *Superfly* fascination infected not only Snoop Doggy Dogg but his retinue as well. Yet *Superfly* was one of the most morally ambivalent films of the genre, glamorising the criminal lifestyle yet displaying its grievous societal effects. Like Smoothe Da Hustler’s use of ‘Freddie’s Dead’, Snoop’s invocation of the character Priest flattens the contradictions of the film into a uniform façade.

The ghetto sound and shift to more African-sounding styles has undoubtedly contributed to the misconception that all black musicians were united under one political cause. Mayfield’s lush ghetto orchestrations set the trend for musical Afro-centricisms, but as the dialectic between Scott-Heron and Iceberg Slim indicates, black responses to urban problems ranged from outrage to apathy. Hip-hop artists, in sampling sounds and images from the 1970s, often err in conflating different political schools of thought or glorifying artists that may not even have been committed to revolutionary ideals. Historical accuracy notwithstanding, hip-hop imagery and sounds are replete with references to 1970s politics. Works by Public Enemy, Ice Cube, the Fugees and others make both subtle and obvious mention of this decade, interpreting it as a period in which blacks as a whole began to demand
control of their own political destinies. Through association, the music of this period, 1960s and 1970s funk and soul, is credited as being the unique utterance of resistance, hence its recycling as hip-hop rhythm loops and accompaniment. Sampling has contributed to the belief that 1970s politically minded musicians were the first to code 'blackness' acoustically as a free, resistant identity rather than a willing victim to governmental oppression.12

One incendiary instance of blaxploitation sampling occurs in Dr. Dre’s 1992 song ‘Rat Tat Tat Tat’ from his Chronic album. Dre begins the track with a sample from Willie Hutch’s ‘Brothers Gonna Work It Out’, the closing anthem for the 1978 film The Mack. On the Mack soundtrack album, ‘Brothers Gonna Work It Out’ includes a brief dialogue from the film in which the brothers – Goldie, a pimp, and Olinga, a Black Panther – argue about how best to survive on the streets. Olinga says to Goldie, ‘You really don’t understand, do you? Hey man, don’t you realise that in order for us to get this thing to work we’ve got to get rid of the pimps and the pushers and the prostitutes, and then start all over again clean?’ Goldie responds, ‘Hey look, nobody’s pushing me anywhere, okay? Not you, not the cops, not the pushers’. Hutch’s song then opens with a funk groove set to lush orchestration, and the lyrics urge the black community to unite against a common enemy of drugs and racism. Dr. Dre chooses to use only the first few seconds of ‘Brothers Gonna Work It Out’. Immediately after Olinga says ‘start all over again clean’, Dre interrupts by yelling: ‘Niggaz, you crazy!’ His first verse follows:

Rat, tat, tat, tat, with my hand on my Gat
On the streets of LA, wondering where the pussy at. (Dre 1992, my transcription)

For Dre, the Hutch composition functioned merely as a straw-man, a quaint bit of 1970s political nostalgia that he could easily ridicule in order to boast of his life as a gangsta. Works such as ‘Rat Tat Tat Tat’ and ‘Smoothe Da Hustler’, in which a theme song is used to epitomise the mood of a blaxploitation film, err in conflating the allure of its anti-heroes with the political commentary of the artists who actually recorded the songs. The few instances of critical self-reflection that are to be found in blaxploitation reside in the soundtracks, whose messages are usually obscured by the larger-than-life caricatures who dominate the screen.

Conclusion

Like Isaac Hayes and his generation of soul musicians, many current artists attempt to elide their identities with those of blaxploitation characters in order to appear credible and street-smart. The contemporary female rapper Foxy Brown chose her stage name as homage to the strength and sex appeal of the film character. Snoop Doggy Dogg and Dr. Dre are only two of several rappers who model their stage behaviour or image on Goldie from The Mack. But the most humorous case of blaxploitation imitation involves the music video for ‘Got Your Money’ by former Wu-Tang Clan rapper, Ol’ Dirty Bastard. A large majority of the images in this video are incorporated footage from the 1975 film Dolemite starring Rudy Ray Moore. Ol’ Dirty Bastard and his director ingeniously synchronised the music of ‘Got Your Money’ with scenes from the blaxploitation comedy, and even used computer imaging to superimpose Bastard’s face on Moore’s body. The end result: Ol’ Dirty Bastard successfully assumed the person-
ality of Dolemite, the black pimp who outsmarts corrupt cops with the help of his ladies and inimitable rapping style.

For O1' Dirty Bastard, the choice of Dolemite as a cinematic sample to ‘Got Your Money’ was natural for a song depicting a playboy. The lyrics feature a rather direct entreaty to female listeners:

Now I have no problem with you fucking me
But I have a little problem with you not fucking me. (Bastard 1999)

The choice of Dolemite was also an elegant means of returning full-circle to the roots of rap; the film is one of the most esteemed blaxploitation films of the whole genre in part because of Rudy Ray Moore’s on-screen recitation of ‘The Signifying Monkey’, the African-American dozen or rhyme that is an ancestor of modern rap (Gates 1988, pp. 44–88). While ‘Got Your Money’ is probably the first music video to borrow from blaxploitation scenes, it stands as the logical culmination of a process aimed at recreating and emulating 1970s black identity. For the hip-hop community, Dolemite links the blaxploitation era to modern hip-hop music, featuring a character who rapped before ‘rap music’ was born. And while the putative aims of sampling the 1970s are to define black identity, the underlying result of such borrowings is a reaffirmation of the musical and cultural lineage of hip-hop itself.

Copyright acknowledgements


Endnotes

1. It was preceded by two other Van Peebles’ films, *The Story of a Three-Day Pass* (1968) and *Watermelon Man* (1970), as well as the comedy *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970), directed by Ossie Davis.

2. ‘Long-shoe game’ refers to blackjack; ‘vines’ and ‘kicks’ are probably fine belts and shoes.


4. ‘Grapevine’ was first recorded by Gladys Knight and the Pips (1967), then by Marvin Gaye (1969).

5. The history of popular film music is largely based on the perceived interdependence of a film and its score, particularly in the case of anthems, theme songs or title songs. That is, a successful film can promote the songs used in it by linking them to moving or exciting moments in the story line. Conversely, a popular song can increase the ticket sales of the film in which it is used (Smith 1998, pp. 57–68).

6. Camp refers to discourse that favours artifice and exaggeration over sincerity. Blaxploitation counts as camp because it portrays such ‘serious’ subjects as racism and violence with over-the-top histrionics and costuming. For a pre-blaxploitation era discussion, see Sontag (1966, pp. 275–92).

7. Hip-hop places enormous importance on the origin of its artists. The ghetto is seen as the locus of ‘authentic’ black identity, while the
'hood or neighbourhood is the source for the individuality that distinguishes a Los Angeles rapper from, say, one from New York (Forman 2002).


9. A dashiki is a brightly coloured, loose-fitting African garment.

10. The afro gained ascendancy in the late 1960s among adherents to the Black Arts movement and many black entertainers as an alternative to white-imposed standards of beauty that dictated that blacks straighten and shorten their hair to appear more 'civilised' and 'assimilated'.

11. In Foxy Brown and Cleopatra Jones, the two respective title characters both don afros and bear some vague allegiance to Black Power organisations, even though Cleopatra Jones actually works for the FBI (something that in real life might have incurred accusations of treason to the black race!). The underlying assumption behind such representations suggested that courageous, 'authentic' blacks all rallied to the same cause. Conversely, villains of blaxploitation films (like Foxy Brown's brother, Link) collaborate with the inherently unethical white law enforcement for personal profit; Link reveals information about the whereabouts of Foxy's activist boyfriend in order to gain police protection from murderous debt collectors.

12. Professor George Lewis (University of California at San Diego) points out that the assertion that black musical politisation began with 1970s pop is flawed considering the Afrocentric recordings of Sun Ra, John Coltrane, and members of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) starting in the late 1950s (Lewis, personal communication, February 2000). Lewis will discuss this at length in a forthcoming book on the AACM. See also Kofsky (1970) for a discussion of politisation among jazz musicians in the 1950s and 1960s.

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