

## **Rap Music: An Interview with DJ Romeo**

**Debra Wehmeyer-Shaw**

*I'm mean like Joe Green  
Clean like a limousine  
Bad like a hurricane  
Lean like a jet plane  
Hot like a house on fire  
Not like a flat tire  
Rule like a president  
Cool like a cigarette  
Rough like Mr. T  
Tough, bad as I can be  
Real like a heart attack  
And quick like a six-pack  
Big like a Hollywood  
I make you feel good  
Like a gigolo  
'Cause I'm Romeo*

—DJ Romeo, 3/26/92

George Sutherlin (DJ Romeo) was born April 24, 1964, in St. Louis, Missouri. He grew up there in the inner city, one of five children. His first musical influences were James Brown, Aretha Franklin, and Stevie Wonder, as well as blues and R&B artists such as Johnny Taylor, B.B. King, Bobby Bland, and Al Green. The influence of the early rap group Sugar Hill Gang, however, provided a lasting direction for Sutherlin's music, beginning around 1979.

He came to the University of Missouri-Columbia in 1982, completing two years in the music program. Since that time he has pursued his musical career in a variety of ways, from deejaying parties to producing and

recording his own and other artists' work. The latter efforts have resulted in a six-song release, *Look My Way*, as well as a guest appearance on the compilation CD *Noise Ordinance*, which consists of contributions by local artists.

Sutherlin's career continues to gain momentum. Most recently he has prepared a cassette single for regional release, and has appeared as a supporting act for the celebrated rap group Public Enemy. He emphasizes that his first artistic commitment is to utilizing the social impact of his work in a constructive and essentially optimistic way.

### **Rap: Its Origins and Nature**

*OT:* How did you get started in rap music?

*DJR:* Well, I got into rap when it first came out. I first became aware of it through the Sugar Hill Gang.<sup>1</sup> I learned that whole rap in a short amount of time. I've always written lyrics and been good at lyrics and been able to know a song by a certain line and been able to memorize a song lyric. When rap came out it was so different and the lyrics were so alive. So then I started writing raps.... I remember one of the very first raps I wrote. I was going to call myself Ace. I was going to be the "Ace of the Bass." I didn't even have a bass, didn't even know how to play bass. But that was the deal.... It was all stuff that won't matter the next day. I really started getting into more serious lyrics after Grand Master Flash came out with "The Message."<sup>2</sup> Grand Master Flash came out with "The Message" and they came out with "Survival" and "New York, New York."<sup>3</sup> All of those

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<sup>1</sup> One of the first rap groups, the Sugar Hill Gang was a trio and virtually unknown until the release of their first single, "Rapper's Delight," launched on Sugarhill Records in 1979.

<sup>2</sup> In the early 1970s, Grand Master Flash got its start as one of the first rap groups. Their song "The Message" appeared in the late summer of 1982 on Sugar Hill Records.

<sup>3</sup> These two Grandmaster Flash tunes, which came out after "The Message," broke ground on positive political themes in rap.



George Sutherlin in the recording studio

just hit me hard. I remember being stirred by Melle Mel's "Beat Street."<sup>4</sup> "The Message" was hit and "Survival" and "New York, New York" was really hittin', but Melle Mel—he was Grand Master Melle Mel, one of the original members of Grand Master Flash—did "Beat Street," the theme rap to "Beat Street," and it just blew me away. It was killer.... I took a turn toward more positive things and more socially relevant issues....

And it never got beyond the level of writing raps, knowing lyrics, until I came here in '82 and studied music.... I did a Delta After Dark Talent Showcase in, I think, '85. It was real primitive by today's standards—what's acceptable in rap, even live. But the thing about it was that I was playing guitar and rappin'. I had a bass player, a drum machine, a guy on keyboards, and a dee-jay up there scratchin'. We didn't have a sound system and we got by with what we had. It was okay. I got my feet wet with it.... And then I got in a group in, I believe, '85. One night we were jamming together and I just started doing one of the rap songs and they said eh! you know. And the rap was "Romeo." I didn't have a name at that time so Romeo kind of stuck with me.

*OT:* What is the significance of the names that all the rappers have?

*DJR:* Well, I think that if the first rap song had been "The Message" by Grand Master Flash then the whole rap scene would have been different, but since the first song was "Rapper's Delight" by Sugar Hill Gang, rap was on a competitive level—"I'm this, I'm that, I got six cars, I got diamond rings on every finger"; since that song had that kind of context I think that's the direction most rap went. Nobody got into any social significance until "The Message" came out. When that came out that really changed a lot of things. A lot of the attitude. It wasn't so party-oriented. It wasn't so happy....

*OT:* Did rap get its start in the South Bronx right around 1972, 1973, 1974?

*DJR:* From what I understand, that's fairly accurate. From what I understand—and I'm by no means in the mainstream of it—I'm here in

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<sup>4</sup> *Beat Street* was a black film released during the break dance era; it was produced by Grand Master Melle Mel.

Columbia—but Grand Master Flash used to dee-jay in a park in New York. And some black guys would come up, and he'd be basically mixing two songs together or using a drum machine or whatever drum machine they had back then. And mixing songs together and then guys would come up and get on the microphone to rap just to give it some kind of counter-beat. It all got started that way. And then it got to the level of a big recorded music and then it became more attitude when Sugar Hill Gang came along. But rap by no means started there. When you dig a little bit you see elements of rap in square dance music and in the African traditional music....

*OT:* What are your views on the popularity of rap music?

*DJR:* Rap isn't in the mainstream. One of the things that I think keeps rap out of the mainstream per se is the technology that's used to create a song; whereas rock 'n' roll is still basically guitar-oriented, rap heavily relies on technology to constantly come up with new sounds. A sound that you hear in rap now won't be acceptable three years from now. It simply won't be. A lot of the sounds that we used in the early eighties were alive and fresh. They were using analog keyboards—people like Planet Patrol<sup>5</sup> and Grand Master Flash. All the rap groups that were coming out then were using big old synthesizers, and they were getting those basic sounds out of them, basic sounds that are just unacceptable now as far as drums are concerned. A lot of times they were using live drums but usually they were using a drum machine that just put out the same story every time—*snare*, *snare*—whereas now there's a lot of expressiveness to everything. So that's one thing that's going to continually change with rap. In order to stay on top you have to come up with new sounds all the time. And that's why I try to concentrate as well on the lyrical edge—because the lyrics have changed a lot....

*OT:* What's the significance of the rivalry between east coast rap and west coast rap?

*DJR:* It's the same thing. Everybody wants to be the first. Everybody

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<sup>5</sup> Planet Patrol was a group affiliated with Afrika Bambaata, who broke ground in rap music using Kraftwerk electronic music around 1982.

wants to be the best. Everybody wants to be original. And a lot of times the only way you can get attention and feel that you are doing what you set out to do is to find somebody that you feel you're better than and then tell everybody else that you *are* better.

*OT*: I guess it's all part of the competition, keeps it all going.

*DJR*: Yeah, exactly. And New York is notorious for being hard-core, streetwise, and L.A. is notorious for being hardcore, streetwise, street gangs, and stuff. So there's naturally going to be that competition; it was bound to happen....

### **Learning to Rap**

*OT*: How does a person learn to rap?

*DJR*: You know, it is just that—a learned experience. A person learns to rap a lot of times by learning other rappers' raps. They learn the raps that they like. They might write them down or learn them phonetically. Usually people learn raps phonetically and then later they piece together the things that they don't understand and the things that don't make sense. You know, they just accept lyrics that are disjointed and don't make sense because a lot of the time it's hard to understand everything that a rapper says. Possibly because some of the rappers don't stick to the point; they'll interject a word or phrase just to rhyme or just to sound cool.

*OT*: How did you learn to rap?

*DJR*: My personal experience is that I learned from the Sugar Hill Gang and the early rappers, Kurtis Blow<sup>6</sup> and Grand Master Flash.

*OT*: Did they influence your style or material?

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<sup>6</sup> Contemporaneous with Grand Master Flash, Kurtis Blow was one of the first rappers. Kurtis Blow came out with "Christmas Rap," an all-time unofficial Top 10 classic (hip-hop Top 10). Soon after, Sugar Hill did "Rapper's Delight" (Christmas of the same year).

*DJR:* Let's see here. Yeah. A person learns to rap and then they form their own style when they start composing their own raps. You know, when they listen to what they've composed and compare it to what's out there, either they will adjust to what's out there or they will like what they do and stick with it. I try to be very flexible in what I do so that I keep up with the times yet keep my own personal style. The song that I just came up with, "Black List," was slightly influenced by the hip-hop<sup>7</sup> groove that LL Cool J laid down on "The Boomin' System."<sup>8</sup> It was laid back, one of the same samples that I use in mine. As always, when I finish a work it has my personal touch on it. I don't feel like I've done anything that sounds exactly like something that somebody else has done or that I could be mistaken for them, because I have my own inflections and my own way of phrasing that I feel is uniquely personal to me. I hope it is. I mean I don't try to be like anyone. If it just so happens that my style coincides with another established rapper's style then so be it. It's not any intentional thing on my part.

*OT:* Do some rappers imitate each other's styles? It seems that certain styles do lend themselves to imitation.

*DJR:* I notice a lot of people do get a certain style. There's a style of being very monophonic with the tones.... [For instance, one rapper] has a way of flowing rhythmically—and as far as the harmonic content of his rap, it's very monophonic, it's on one level. It doesn't vary from that. He throws some rhythmic accentuation in there, but it's basically a beat that you could really get into and he locks into it real well. I don't do it that well. It's not my style. I'm not saying one style is better than another.

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<sup>7</sup> The term "hip-hop" originated in the mid-1970s in the early history of what is now known as rap; it was coined by DJ Hollywood, who, while playing records, would get on the mike and shout, "To the hip-hop the hippy hippy hippy hop and you don't stop!" The term caught on, and other pioneering DJs and MCs in Harlem and the Bronx picked up on it, and it became the one expression used by everyone involved in the music. The term is now used to specify the type of rap music that is closest and truest to the original, as well as the style and state of mind established by the originators of hip-hop music and culture.

<sup>8</sup> This rap was recorded by LL Cool J on the Def/Columbia label.

They're two different interpretations of the same rap—not very good imitations at that, I might add. I don't do other people's raps very well. Some people would say that it's amazing that I could know someone else's rap that well. But I get personally involved in everything I do, even though it's not mine per se. That's the way it is....

*OT:* How much of your heritage do you put into your music? How much of your African music do you put into it?

*DJR:* I have to admit that it has a lot to do with the way I was educated and the way I was raised. In my home I have four brothers, and one sister who grew up, and two other brothers, and there was never any African, or rather it was never brought up about the African experience or any part of that. My mom was raised in Mississippi and of course there were always references about “when I was your age.” And while I was being educated in St. Louis, I remember once when I was in kindergarten Miss Wilkins told the class that there was going to be an African lady that was going to come in and talk to us. I remember having this image of some really black lady in African gear with a big ring in her nose and having big muscles from carrying water, and when she got there she was beautiful. I mean, she was from Ghana. That was my first awareness that things aren't the way I had been hearing. Because all I knew was what I had seen in *National Geographic*. So even in high school and even in college I was educated about the cradle of civilization and the Samaritans and all that, but there's a lot that was not touched upon. And now I'm beginning to come into that. So in my rap I haven't claimed to be African in any of my songs. I feel a lot of people are selling out to that mentality, jumping on that bandwagon because that's hip right now. I know a guy in St. Louis who sells African jewelry. He makes it himself, he makes it out of plywood and uses those little beads that we used to use in kindergarten, and people are buying it. To me that's not what it's all about....

### **Composition and Performance**

*OT:* How does the whole composition process come together? Do you get an idea, think of a lyric, then the beat?

*DJR:* Well, for me, rap is real flexible. You can either come up with a beat and then get inspired to write a rap tune or you can write a rap and then build a beat to it just as easy—I don't know which is easier—whereas in popular music usually the lyric comes first, and then the music comes later. I mean you might get an idea for a quarter progression and then write the lyric and then come back to the music. But it's hard, real hard, to compose a lyric to music that's already composed. So rap is very easy that way. Because basically it's rhythm. A lot of types of music accent on the melody and the notes, whereas rap accents on the beat. The beat comes up front.

A lot of people diss rap. I see a lot of bands, especially rock bands, that feel threatened by rap. And I don't know why they should because the rappers aren't trying to take any of their market—although they probably think so. But that's because rappers are acquiring some of the rock market; a lot of people who like rock 'n' roll like some rap songs. They don't look on the flip side of the coin though. A lot of people like rap and like a lot of rock 'n' roll songs. They diss it, you know. And that becomes a whole part of the rap thing too: dissin' each other and saying, "We're the best and this is good and that's not...."

*OT:* When we're looking at poetry we take things like meter and other elements of prosody into consideration. Do rappers do this?

*DJR:* Yes. A lot of rappers just rap. For instance, Hammer, Marky Mark,<sup>9</sup> people like that—they just rap. They don't use any of the tools that are at a poet's disposal, like simile, hyperbole, alliteration. But rappers like Big Daddy Kane, Ice Cube,<sup>10</sup> they create illusions, not only with the images

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<sup>9</sup> MC Hammer and Marky Mark are contemporary rap artists; they presently enjoy large popular followings.

<sup>10</sup> Big Daddy Kane is a New York rapper on the Cold Chillin' label. He worked on the soundtrack for the film *Colors* and Quincy Jones' LP "Back on the Block." He has also worked with Public Enemy on "Burn, Hollywood, Burn," which appears on the LP *Fear of a Black Planet* (1990). *Wrath of Kane* was Big Daddy Kane's debut LP. Big Daddy Kane has a reputation of being eloquent and elegant; he comes from the school of dress shirts and designer suits rather than street attire.

Ice Cube is a Los Angeles rapper who started writing lyrics for NWA and Easy E.

that they project with the lyrics but with the way the lyrics come out. You can say this is an orange or you can describe it without saying that it's an orange, but let the listener get whatever out of it that they want to get out of it.

*OT:* Create an illusion?

*DJR:* Yeah. You know—that, for me, is where you really make an impression on the listener. When the listener can listen to a lyric and get whatever they want to get out of it as opposed to “this is an orange.”

*OT:* Everybody is going to walk away with something a little different?

*DJR:* Right.

*OT:* Or they bring their own experience to it? I bring my experience to your music, so maybe I'm going to take something away with me that the next person is not.

*DJR:* Exactly. I find that there are elements of that as far back as the Bible. You know. It's just completely full of parables and statements that you can read your own experience into and get a certain level of truth out of it at different levels....

*OT:* What is a “break beat”?

*DJR:* A break beat is a break in a song where the beat changes. The whole drum set changes a lot of times. Or the effects that are on the drums, like the reverb, changes, and it changes the attitude of the song, the direction of the song. It's also a beat, a rhythm within the drum track that's in and of itself. Rap has made a lot of innovations in the way we construct music; it breaks music down a lot of times to its barest essential, which is sound. You can have a drummer playing a drum set and you can make the sound

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He is a pioneer in gangster rap. His debut solo LP, *Amerikkka's Most Wanted*, came out in 1990. Ice Cube has since converted to Islam and moved to New York. He is the head of the hip-hop production team Lench Mob. He starred as Dough Boy in John Singleton's film *Boyz N the Hood*, and currently appears with Ice T in the film *Trespass*. Ice Cube records on the Priority Records label.

of those drums so narrowing a sound that it becomes only one instrument. Then you have another whole set of drums playing. You know, a good example of that, I guess, would be “Mama Said Knock You Out”<sup>11</sup> by LL Cool J. He’s got a change of ground drum track under the humpty beat drum track. You know it’s two completely separate drum tracks, and one is the main drum track and the other is just the accent. It just breaks the music down to its barest form. That’s what the samplers do—break the sound, the music, down to its barest essential, which is the sound....

*OT:* What about the gestures, the dancing, in performance? How significant are they?

*DJR:* I think it’s a learned thing. People saw Run DMC<sup>12</sup> doing it and subconsciously, whether they knew it or not, they started doing it. Because Run DMC couldn’t dance, they couldn’t move very well, so they just started doing all this [gesticulates]. And so that became part of it. But I think it’s a credit to people like MC Hammer, people like [Freedom] Williams of C&C Music Factory,<sup>13</sup> that they’re changing that. You can’t just go out and hold a microphone. You can’t do that any more. You have to provide the visuals. Even if you’re not dancing, somebody needs to be dancing. There needs to be some animation to the show. Otherwise, all you have left is your music, and if your music is not up to par then you’re not going to win any people.

*OT:* Do you think the emphasis on this kind of performance diminishes the importance of rap’s origins—people standing around rapping on street corners—or do you think that’s just a romantic notion?

*DJR:* I think that’s pretty much just a romantic notion now. Because when I started rapping I never stood on a street corner and rapped. A lot of times I can be somewhere and someone who knows that I rap will ask me for one.

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<sup>11</sup> LL Cool J also records on Def/Columbia label.

<sup>12</sup> Moves can be seen on the videos *Walk This Way* and *King of Rock*.

<sup>13</sup> Like MC Hammer and Marky Mark, C&C Music Factory with Freedom Williams and Zelma Davis presently enjoys huge popular success.

I can be at a party, a house party, and somebody who knows I rap will ask me to rap, front me off.

### **Freestyling and the Formula**

*OT:* When someone fronts you off, asks you to rap, do you create something new, depending on what surrounding you are in and depending on your audience at that party?

*DJR:* That's called "freestyle." Freestyling is coming up with a rap off the top of your head.

*OT:* That's what intrigues me.

*DJR:* That is hard to do. You have to be inspired and you have to work on it. I find when I don't do it [often] I don't do it very well. But when I do it, I get to the point where I can rap about anything; it's just a practice thing. Or I can drink a couple of beers and start. It's definitely the gauge of a true rapper. It shows the talent; I respect people who can do that....

*OT:* How can you tell when a rapper is freestyling?

*DJR:* I met a girl a week ago Saturday night and she knew that I was DJ Romeo. She came up to me and she was pretty bold. She just started rappin' to me. She was, like, "Well, I do raps like..." and then she just started flowing into this lyric. It's hard to tell whether or not she was freestyling. She didn't make any mistakes. However, some of the direction of her rap was getting trivial at points. It was as if she was saying anything at times, but she basically stuck to the point she had. She had great inflection and she had great possibilities as a rapper. I could tell that she could probably freestyle if she wasn't freestyling already.

Freestyling, a lot of times, involves just seeing something. Whatever you see while you're freestyling may be a part of what you are about to say. And a lot of times what you see are events from the past. You know—situations and people, feelings and personalities seem to come out in what you say. If I was freestyling against somebody and they said something about me in their freestyle, then I would incorporate what they

said. I would make reference to what they said—or at least try to—and I’d look at them and if there was anything that I wanted to talk about—as far as how they looked—I’d incorporate that.

Freestyling is a very spontaneous, ultra-spontaneous, process. A lot of times you’ll use formulas that help you maintain or help you get that spontaneity. There are certain end-line words that are easier to rhyme with. Obviously, “lay,” “he,” the vowels “a,” “i,” “o,” and “u.” And then there’s other tools like suffixes, “-tion”—“prediction,” “resurrection,” “persecution.” You can throw all that kind of stuff in there, “reiterate,” “exasperate,” whatever. You use those kinds of words as often as you can.

*OT:* Does freestyling have its own history?

*DJR:* I don’t think freestyling necessarily gets its roots from—but perhaps reared its uniquely rap-oriented head—when people would get together and someone would be playing piano—they’d just be playing a plain old blues riff—and people would just come up with little one-verse or two-verse ditties. People would just alternate, trade off, and come up with little things on the spur of the moment.... That was one of the ways that people were freestyling in the blues. It happened around campfires during slavery. There were songs that people would just take turns coming up with. “Ditty” wouldn’t be the word, “song” wouldn’t be the word. I’m sure that there were names for these songs that were created out of this process. That’s not part of my personal experience. However, I would like to know more about those things. I am aware of their existence and how they fit into the transition from the *griot*<sup>14</sup> to the rapper....

*OT:* So freestyling is a characteristic of an especially good rapper?

*DJR:* Yes. And another characteristic of a good rapper is to have some continuity to a rap. A lot of times people who will start rapping about one thing here and then later on in the song they’re rapping about something else—they get off on a tangent. People with talent can stick to a theme and

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<sup>14</sup> *Griots* were specifically selected individuals who were entrusted with reciting and passing on their society’s oral history from one generation to the next. In West Africa *griots* were chosen as young children and taught to perform centuries of tribal history, stories, and songs while accompanying themselves on musical instruments.

take it from A to B and bring it back and keep the continuity to it.

*OT:* Are you talking about a story line?

*DJR:* Those are very hard raps to do. Like, Slick Rick did one called “Children’s Story”<sup>15</sup> where there are no breaks in the vocals, there is no chorus, there’s just a story line. Those are some of the best raps. I know a guy who did one. He’s from Kansas City. It’s called “Under Pressure,”<sup>16</sup> and he talks about standing on a corner, obviously selling drugs, and a cop comes up, he blows the cop away and he starts running and he just goes through this whole scenario and the rap never stops until close to the end of the song. The continuity of it keeps you listening.

*OT:* Now, can he change the story each times he tells it if he wants to? Depending on his audience, is it going to have the same elements concerning this character? Does he always just blow one cop away or can he blow two cops away? Can he elaborate on it depending on who his audience is?

*DJR:* Unless you’re doing a freestyle, your lyrics are written down and structured.... Some [rappers] don’t write them down on paper, but I always wrote mine down on paper to organize them. Just getting them onto cassette—even in the crude and most raw form—kept the progression of the song moving. As opposed to just getting it on paper and rappin’. I have a studio friend that says, “Well, if you can’t do it studio quality, why do it at all?” My answer to that is that you have something that you can *hear*. The written paper is something you can *see* and the lyrics in your head are just something that you *feel*. When you’ve got something you can play back and hear, then you know what everything sounds like together. It aids in the progression of the rap as a finished art work....

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<sup>15</sup> Def Jam developed a following on *The Show* with Doug E Fresh on Reality Records. Slick Rick’s solo LP was *The Great Adventures of Slick Rick*. Slick Rick wears an eye patch and raps with a British accent.

<sup>16</sup> Struggling local artist Ray-Dec. DJ Romeo produced some of Ray-Dec’s work at Red Line Studio in Columbia, Missouri. “Under Pressure” is a dialogue about a young man who shoots a cop and his subsequent pursuit by the police.

*OT:* You definitely write them down?

*DJR:* Yes. And anybody who's ever recorded anything and everybody who's ever done any serious rap always writes their lyrics down. And you don't just write them. I've seen people write lyrics and at the end of one statement they start the next one. And it just looks like one big piece of paper. There're no stanzas, there're no verses. And when I see that, that's a good gauge of how well they're going to do the rap. From recording in the studio, if someone goes into the vocal booth with a piece of paper to do their rap, I usually go, "Oh, my goodness." Because I don't do that. I've only seen one person be able to rap off of paper. And evidently he knew the rap anyway. Whenever somebody raps off paper, it sounds just like they're reading it off the page. You can hear it. I can hear it. Like, I can hear in Marky Mark, I know he did that off paper. That "Walk on the Wild Side,"<sup>17</sup> his rhythm, there's disjointed rhythm, a lot of things he could have said a lot better than he said them. And I can't believe the song's number one. I just cannot believe it. There're just too many good rappers who have done the exact same theme, not the same music and not the same lyrics but the exact same theme and did it well and it didn't make it to pop radio....

*OT:* One of the things we study in oral tradition is something called the formula. In the Homeric poems, for instance, the dawn is always "rosy-fingered." Are there similar formulas in rap music, groups of words that are commonly repeated under similar circumstances, that help you remember the lyrics when you're not writing them down? When this all first started, a lot of the kids in New York who were involved couldn't read or write. How did they compose and remember their lyrics?

*DJR:* I find that many of the lyrics and the lyrical content in rap—especially the New York rap—relies heavily on "I know what this means so I'm cool. And if you don't know what it means you're not." So they're always coming up, just like when I say we have to come up with new sounds, they're always trying to come up with new catch phrases that everybody's going to have to do research on to find out what it means.

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<sup>17</sup> "Walk on the Wild Side" was recorded by Marky Mark on his first LP; it was recorded over a sample loop from Lou Reed's tune "Walk on the Wild Side."

*OT:* Well, I would have to do research because it's not part of my tradition.

*DJR:* Oh, it's not part of my tradition either. Possibly in those circles they use that terminology, but I'm sure that a lot of times they don't. They're coming up with new ways to say things that get their origins from songs, and then everybody starts using them. Sometimes that's not the case, like in "24-7," that means "all the time." There are a million of them, some of them that I don't think—like "say O.P.P."<sup>18</sup>—I'm sure that's not used. That wasn't used widely in any circles but he just tapped into it and got it. Like "word up."

*OT:* Or "word to your mother"?

*DJR:* Yeah, exactly, "word to your mother."

*OT:* What does that mean?

*DJR* [laughs]: I don't know.

*OT:* I've read some things that imply that "word" means "truth."

*DJR:* Right. "Word" does mean "truth." And that probably came about—well, if Cameo<sup>19</sup> got it then it must have been used by those guys, and they don't have their fingers on the pulse of what's happening on the street. But "word to the mother"—I don't know, possibly. And so when they come up with new phrases like that, a lot of times it's to stay on top of the lingo or the slang, whatever you want to call it.

*OT:* Do you think that sometimes we may be trying to read a little too much into the lyrics? Is it possible that certain words are used simply

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<sup>18</sup> "O.P.P." is glossed as "other people's property/pussy/penis."

<sup>19</sup> Cameo is a rhythm-and-blues group from the Earth, Wind & Fire era of the mid-to-late 1970s. They achieved huge success with their *Word Up* LP and single in the mid-1980s. Cameo was headed by Larry Blackman on Polygram Records.

because they rhyme, or sound good?

*DJR:* There are a lot of rappers who, when you listen to their whole album, everything becomes apparent. If you just listen to one song and they're using all the terminology that they use, you are going to come away with nothing. Like X-Clan,<sup>20</sup> they have a rapper named Brother and he's African, very African—you know that's the opening line to the first song. He uses a lot of language like "mystical," "magical," and "stone crib" and "scroll," "weights of the scale." When I first became aware of their music I was, like, "yeah, get out of here." But he's basically on a back-to-Africa platform; he's not to the point of wanting to go back, but he's to the point of wanting to acknowledge his heritage and wanting to educate his listeners about some of the things he feels have been overlooked....

### **The Social Function of Rap**

*OT:* Why do you think so many people feel threatened by rap?

*DJR:* I think a lot of times people are threatened by what they don't understand. It's like being afraid of the dark. But it's the same: our grandparents were afraid of rock 'n' roll, and I hear a lot of people—who loved the Beatles and loved all the music that was done then and that was so controversial—dissin' rap. And rap is exactly the same thing that was happening twenty years ago. And I find a lot of it quite humorous, the way people can be so jaded and have double standards.

*OT:* So you think basically that they feel threatened because they don't know what it's all about?

*DJR:* They hear it, they hear some guy throwing lyrics into a microphone, they hear this beat that just stays the same, and I think a lot of times people become dependent on that. They identify a song by the beat, not just the beat of it but the sound of the drums. They both go hand in hand.

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<sup>20</sup> X-Clan's debut LP, *To the East, Blackwards*, was released in 1990 on 4th & Broadway Records.

*OT:* Do you think that people hear, for example, what NWA<sup>21</sup>—who get a lot of negative publicity—are doing and assume that all rap music is going to be like that?

*DJR:* That's definitely part of it. And not only that. People are looking for the bad part. They're looking for the bad—that's a fact of life....

*OT:* In our society, on what occasions or in what particular situations does rapping occur? And secondly, how does rap function in our society?

*DJR:* Some of the occasions that it happens informally are those that we discussed earlier—like the girl I met in a club. Some of the other occasions where rapping occurs? There are a lot of talent shows that go on—everywhere. Rap is a way for someone to perform at a talent show without the expense and hassle and effort required to get a full band or a complicated and dedicated music bed. When people go to sing at talent shows—these little small talent shows that I've seen around here—it's always the same situation. Somebody will sing to a record that already has vocals on it. Either you have to turn down the music so low that it's barely there—in which case you lose some of the aesthetic appeal of voice to music—or they'll just play the music and the person will sing and all you'll hear is a few notes here and there. Whereas, with rap, you don't need any particular song, all you need is a beat. With a song, you need a song in the right key, you need a song with the right chord progressions, you need the music for that song. When rappers want to do a talent show, they just come up with any beat. They can steal a beat from an instrumental version of a dance tune. When you buy the twelve-inch and the CD singles and cassette singles, there's usually an instrumental version. So they can do that and do a little rap and get busy and get some effect. It's an interpretation, a different interpretation of this beat. The audience will get the familiarity of the music because usually a rapper will choose some music that is slammin' already. It's associated with a song that's already a hit in everybody's mind. Rappin' affords the rapper more opportunity than the singer.

Rap is occurring in commercial and contemporary music all the time.

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<sup>21</sup> NWA consisted of Easy E, Ice Cube, McRen, DJ Yella, and Dr. Dre, of Compton, California. They pioneered gangster rap, extra hardcore, and explicit language. The group debuted in 1988.

Groups like Bell Biv Devoe, Boys to Men, Bobby Brown, High Five, even people like George Michael—he’s incorporating some of the flavor of rap in some of the things he does, like “Freedom.”<sup>22</sup> It has such a hip-hop beat that it’s slammin’. There’s a lot of music out there with these new hip-hop beats in them and there’s this new hip-hop sound that’s going on. Rappin’ is occurring all the time in commercial radio. If you turn on your TV on Saturday mornings, all you hear is rap beats on kids’ commercials and rap beats in kids’ cartoons. Rap is selling products, it’s selling records, it’s selling everything. Just turn on MTV. All these hair salons use rap beats to sell their hair products. All this stuff geared toward the cool set, it’s using rap. Rap is all around us.

*OT:* The rap beat or the language?

*DJR:* People are using the catch phrases from raps, too. In everyday language, you know, like “O.P.P.,” “I’m not down with that,”<sup>23</sup> phrases like that. In those respects it’s occurring all around us. Rap has been around since poetry—in some fashion. It’s just a merging of two emotionally steering art forms, combined to create a third form that’s unique in and of itself. Rap has so many of the things that we love about each individual aspect of art....

*OT:* Is there a definition of hip-hop culture? Is rap part of hip-hop culture?

*DJR:* A lot of people might have a different opinion. The word “hip-hop” came from the very first rap song. It was the very first lyric in the Sugar Hill song. And that’s where hip-hop came from. So to separate hip-hop from rap is kind of like separating rock from rock ‘n’ roll. There is definitely hip-hop culture and there is definitely a rap culture, and I find that rap is more closely associated with the street, whereas hip-hop is associated more with the upscale, like the college black experience, the middle-class black experience and the way you dress. People who dress rap-fashion might wear a Raiders hat and a while ago it was a fat gold chain,

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<sup>22</sup> *Freedom* (1991) was George Michael’s second LP.

<sup>23</sup> “I’m not down with that” means “I disagree.”

and hip-hop is more or less a trendy pseudo-African type of dress, where up until about this summer they were wearing African pendants a lot and African cloth—the woven cloth with a mosaic type of print, and black is definitely a big color. Lots of red, black, and green. And a lot of head gear. Lot of jewelry, whereas three years ago the gold kind of symbolized turning the chains of slavery into chains of gold. Now the jewelry is more or less saying that “I have riches without money, so I don’t need gold.” You see a lot of beads, and that kind of thing. But hip-hop, I like hip-hop fashion. A lot of times they go to the extreme, like with Tracy Chapman and the braids. They laughed at her and now everybody has them....

*OT:* Do you feel that rap is both an educational tool and an art form?

*DJR:* Yes. And I think a lot of times the education we get is not the education that was intended. It’s a roundabout education because we become painfully aware of some of the problems that we don’t really want to be aware of. Like NWA, Easy E, Ice T, Ice Cube. I think Ice Cube is the most positive because he’s not just glamorizing the gates to a subculture. There’s a positive pain that shines through in his stuff. Whereas people like Poison Clan<sup>24</sup> and NWA—I love NWA’s stuff—I wouldn’t let my daughter listen to.

*OT:* Do you think NWA uses a shock element in what they are trying to do?

*DJR:* I think that, yeah, but I don’t think they’re using that shock element in a positive way. You can use a shock element to get someone’s attention, but they’re getting the attention and then not doing anything with it. They’re just saying, “Hey, look, this is the problem! And we’re part of the problem.” And it wouldn’t influence me, but I’m sure there are some young minds out there who aren’t getting a good education, who aren’t getting a good deal in life, and they’re saying, “Yeah!”

*OT:* Then they’re not really offering an alternative.

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<sup>24</sup> Poison Clan is noted for being very hardcore in the Miami style, similar to Luke Skywalker, whose music was banned in Dade County, Florida.

*DJR:* No, not at all. They're saying if you got a problem with somebody, ice them. They use "bitch" probably 10,000 times an hour and they don't ever let up on it, and they don't acknowledge the beauty in the women, period. It's kind of sad, too.

*OT:* Let's talk about the themes of rap music. There are certain themes that keep coming up, like racism and gang violence, and women aren't really considered in a positive way.

*DJR:* By some people.

*OT:* There aren't many female rappers either.

*DJR:* It's just like everything else. The male got into it and from the males doing it so much it started looking like a masculine thing, so that if a female did it and she didn't look quite as feminine as she should.... I never had a problem with seeing a female artist. As a matter of fact, women singing and doing it is ultra-feminine to me. So that wasn't part of my experience....

### **The Future of Rap**

*OT:* Do you think rap has a future?

*DJR:* Yeah. I think rap's about as much a passing fad as rock 'n' roll. If there's a chance of rock 'n' roll running its course, then there's a chance of rap running its course. There're people who won't listen to anything but rap. There's another whole subculture of rap that is oriented around a \$3000 car stereo system and a tape that just hums. People buy systems just for that. Because if you played loud rock music it wouldn't be the same. There's a low frequency bass that just shakes the walls and windows when they drive by. I've done parties before when some of my people have pulled up outside and you can hear them over the music inside....

*OT:* Finally, what about your own future in rap?

*DJR:* The raps that I'm doing now are, I feel, more mature. I'm twenty-

seven years old, be twenty-eight next month. I'm kind of old for a rapper. I've got a lot of songs that I'm getting ready to do and that I've done that aren't raps, that are songs. And I want to be able to do those as well. The experience of living in St. Louis in my youth and my teen years had a lot to do with the way I was rapping then. Since I got to Columbia I've had to take on certain levels of responsibility and mature as a person. I feel that my music has done the same. As far as the lyrical content of what I do, it's a lot more relevant and that probably has a lot to do with the fact that I am recording and feel I have a social responsibility since my things are played on the radio. I have a responsibility to inform and educate wherever possible. I love doing that. I love sitting down with somebody and telling them things I know, especially someone who I can see is listening and who will benefit from those things. I don't feel like I could go to any public school and sit for eight hours a day and teach a bunch of kids. I like the one-on-one thing better, and the voluntary thing I could do.