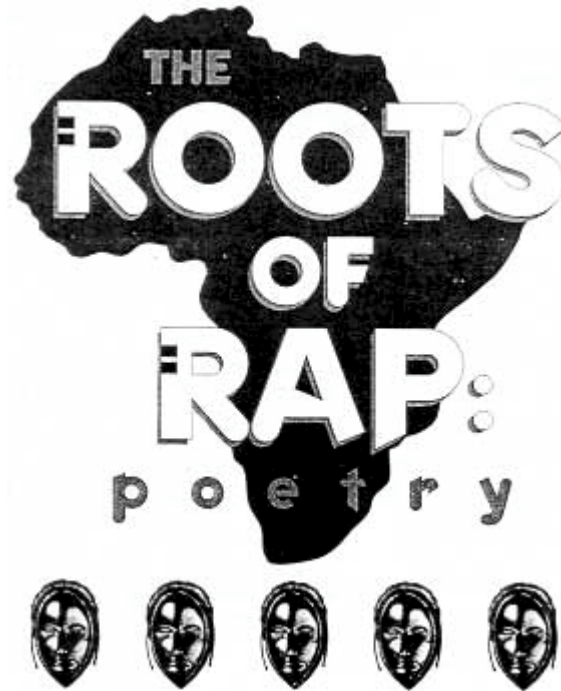


INTERBOROUGH REPERTORY THEATER

STUDY GUIDE FOR



The art of putting words to rhythm can be found in many cultures. In China they call it Qin Songs; the Ashantes of Africa call their version opo verses/ in Jamaica it's called chatting and in Trinidad it's dubbing or mamaguy. In Western Europe it is called poetry.

But rap is an African-American invention. Just as African-American culture developed its own recognizable musical heritage in jazz music, a new literary style seems to be emerging. Rapping takes the poetic literary style and combines it with African roots creating this new sound: rap.

Discussion

What other "new" trends have been developed by combining the knowledge of different cultures and points of view? (Example: tap dance is derived from Irish clog or step dance and African dance.)

ACTIVITY:

Have the students focus on one aspect of their school day (example: morning announcements) and challenge them to accomplish the same goal by using a different style. (Example: perhaps they will choose to sing or act-out the announcements instead of simply reciting them.)



RAP AND HISTORY

Thousands of years ago African storytellers memorized the history of their tribes and put it to words and song. These storytellers called themselves Jollees.

Kings would provide housing, food and shelter for these special storytellers, who were also called upon to settle disputes and give advice to the rulers.

When Africans were brought to this hemisphere as slaves in the 1500s, they brought with them an ancient tradition of talking to the beat: what we would call rapping today.

Slaves in the United States, influenced by the rap of their African heritage, sent coded messages in the form of songs and drumbeats. Using words in rhythm to deliver messages (either secret or public) is a very effective use of language.

Even today people use chanting and slogans when they demonstrate politically. Advertisers harness the power of that technique in commercial jingles.

Rap music is often controversial and hard hitting, making full use of the power of words and rhythm honed by centuries of use.

ACTIVITY:

Using the chapter in history which the class has most recently completed, have the students tell pieces of story in rap.

Using the newspaper, pick out a recent story and put them into a specific rhythm.

Discussion:

Rap is a controversial musical style. Many people love it, while others hate it. What are some of the reasons that people feel differently about it? Is it good to respect different opinions?

A Partial list of the Poetry used in THE ROOTS OF RAP: POETRY

All is Loud (pigmy rhyme)
Sangaree (slave song)
Negro Speaks Of Rivers (Langston Hughes)
I Myself (Angel Gonzales)
We Wear the Mask (Paul Lawrence Dunbar)
Strong Men (Sterling A. Brown)
Runagate I & II (Robert Hayden)
On Judgment Day (Sepho Sempamla)
Weary Blues (Langston Hughes)
Heritage (Countee Cullen)
Still I Rise (Maya Angelou)
Little Brown Baby (Paul Lawrence Dunbar)
But He Was Cool (Don L. Lee)

ELEMENTS OF POETRY

Like rap, conventional poetry uses words and rhythm to convey image and meaning in an artistic and memorable way. The elements of poetry we explore in THE ROOTS OF RAP: POETRY include: symbolism, point of view, meter, rhyme, and dialect.

Symbolism uses every-day images to describe something that is not concrete: "My rhymes are sharper than the needles of a porcupine." Often times the words "like" or "as" set up a comparison which makes the meaning clearer. Traditional poetry and rap use symbolism extensively.

Meter & Rhyme immediately comes to mind when we think of poetry, although many poems use neither. Rap uses complex and varying meters to accomplish its goals. It often requires pauses in the flow of the rhyme or added pulses in the meter. This helps it to be more musical and easier to listen to.

Point of View makes it so we know just what the poet or rapper thinks about the issue or event they are speaking about. Every poem or rap presents a point-of-view; sometimes it is very obvious, and sometimes it is not so obvious.

Dialect can be used by the poet or rapper for a number of reasons. Sometimes it helps us tune into the musical nature of the words, showing how the poem flows and helping us find where the poet wants stresses on the words. At other times it sets the mood of the poem, so we can understand its meaning better.

ACTIVITY:

Using the poems in this study guide have the students identify the elements of poetry discussed above. Then have them write their own poems making as much use of those elements as possible.

THE NEGRO SPEAKS OF RIVERS

Langston Hughes

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as
the world and older than
the flow of human blood in
human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns
were young
I built my hut near the Congo
and it lulled me
to sleep
I looked upon the Nile and raised
the pyramids above it
I heard the singing of the Mississippi
when Abe Lincoln went down to
New Orleans, and I've seen its
muddy bosom turn all golden in
the sunset.

I've know rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like rivers

WE WEAR THE MASK

Paul Lawrence Dubar

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks
and shades our eyes—
This debt we pay to human gile;
with torn and bleeding hearts we smile
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be overwise
In counting our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
we wear the mask

We smile,
but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing,
but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!

STRONG MEN

Sterling A. Brown

They point with pride
to the roads you built for them,
They ride in comfort
over the rails you laid for them.
They put hammers in your hands and said-
drive so much before sundown.

You sang:

Ain't no hamma is dis lan'
Strikes lak mine, beddy, strikes lak mine.

They cooped you in their kitchens,
They penned you in their factories,
They gave you the jobs that they were too
good for.
They tried to guarantee happiness to
themselves
By shunting dirt and misery to you.

You sang:

Me an' muh baby gonna shine, shine,
Me an' muh baby gonna shine.

The strong me keep a-comin' on
The strong me git stronger.

Discussion:

- 1) Have the students discuss which elements of the show they liked or didn't like and why.
- 2) How is seeing a live show different than watching a movie or television? What are its advantages and disadvantages?
- 3) How is MTV similar to the staged presentation of poetry? How do they both use body language and imagery to their advantage?
- 4) Using the program given to the adults at the performance, show the class how to read a theatrical program. How do you figure out who played each part? Where do you find out about these people?

ACTIVITY:

Have the students look up the poets and rap artists of their choice and create a rap or a poem about them.

When discussing rap, point out the differences between conscious rap and commercial rap. Commercial rap is often sexist and violent. Conscious rap is socially responsible and attempts to bring people together. Monie Love and Queen Latifa are good examples of conscious rappers.

