
Book Review: *Breaks in the Air: The Birth of Rap Radio in New York City*

John Klaess. *Breaks in the Air: The Birth of Rap Radio in New York City*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022. 232 pages.

Years ago, when I interviewed for a job at Amoeba Music's San Francisco store, a manager explained that one issue with people claiming musical expertise in hip hop is that they tend to know only about hip hop and no other genres. This might sound like a dubious mischaracterization since hip hop's musical compositions have historically been predicated on the knowledge and sampling of previously released songs. Where the genre's foundations may be rooted in soul and funk (e.g. James Brown and Parliament Funkadelic), many of its most celebrated beat makers have broken boundaries with regard to source material, techniques, and imagination. Nevertheless, over a lifetime of movement in and out of hip-hop corridors, I have witnessed a level of truth to the store manager's claim and, at times, would even count myself among the (semi-)siloed.

It is with this paradox in mind that I consider the expansive contributions of John Klaess's *Breaks in the Air: The Birth of Rap Radio in New York City*. In the opening pages, Klaess describes his book as "a history of the broadcast of rap music in New York between 1979 and 1987" (3). Immediately, then, *Breaks in the Air* offers the promise of expanding two understudied topics in hip-hop scholarship. The first is the period between the 1979 release of the Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" (considered by many to be the first rap record) and what is commonly regarded as hip hop's "golden era" (circa 1987 to the mid-1990s). While a handful of scholarly works have examined these early years of the rap music industry, the formative significance of all that was happening often gets eclipsed by the star power and seminal albums appearing in the late eighties. The second under-researched topic is the significance of radio—the site from which rap was first broadcast and, for most of us not present at those legendary parties and clubs, the channel through which we were introduced to the genre.

These are both important topics for any serious hip-hop historian. Yet the notable contributions of *Breaks in the Air* go beyond this. Although radio broadcasts provided initial exposure to rap music, this limited programming—relegated to late-night hours and, at times, pay-for-airtime stations—was largely dispersed through cassette tape recordings. Indeed, Klaess's sonic archaeology involves accessing these recordings, most of which are now available as online mp3s. Accordingly, he seriously reckons with cassettes as an essential medium for both the 1980s circulation and contemporary preservation of rap radio broadcasts—in the process, enriching the reader's understanding of cassettes' role in hip hop's international growth.

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Whereas both hip-hop-specific historians and more general scholars of popular music will find value in the abovementioned themes, beginning with Chapter 1 (nineteen pages into the book), *Breaks in the Air* takes a formidable departure from hip-hop specificity to discuss the deregulation of the radio broadcast industry and then, in Chapter 2, the context through which one Black-owned radio station, WBLB, sought to navigate competing incentives around Black political uplift and appealing to emerging Black youth aesthetics. Though some of these discussions cover 1979–1987, Klaess’s presentation of deregulation includes communications acts spanning the entire twentieth century. Similarly, to properly contextualize WBLB’s founding, political directive, and 1982 decision to hire Mr. Magic (the origin of its famous *Rap Attack* radio show), Klaess spends considerable time in the 1960s and 1970s presenting the biographies of Manhattan borough President Perry Sutton and larger-than-life radio personality Frankie Crocker, as well as discussing Black radio’s precarious position amidst the intricacies of radio formatting. While this indeed does affirm that scholarly expertise in hip hop should cover more than just hip hop, my concern is for the singular minded hip-hop scholar who is excited by *Breaks in the Air*’s proclaimed promise of topic and period as well as by the wonderful photo of Mr. Magic and engineer all-star Marley Marl on the book’s cover. Simply put, forty-three of the book’s first sixty-two pages only minimally discuss hip hop. This is both a strength and a weakness depending on what readers expect.

If *Breaks in the Air* risks losing some readers sixty pages into the book, the subsequent chapters provide the personal histories and deep reflections on interconnected industry dynamics that our imagined hip-hop experts will crave. The names Mr. Magic, Marley Marl, and Red Alert all signify 1980s hip hop. Each DJ has been commemorated through countless shout-outs and name checks—some of the most notable surrounding the infamous “Bridge Wars” pitting KRS-One and Boogie Down Productions against Marley Marl’s Juice Crew. Still, those who did not come of age in 1980s New York might fail to appreciate the extent to which these legendary battles were rooted in rival radio broadcasts.

Klaess provides a fascinating accounting of how early New York radio DJs leveraged their positions at the intersection of record label, artist, and audience. How Chuck Chill-out, for example, broadcast an unsanctioned reel-to-reel of a new song called “Pee-Wee’s Dance” or was the first to play (a test pressing of) Public Enemy’s “Rebel Without a Pause” (111–13). The following day(s), these songs could be heard throughout the city via cassette recordings of the show(s). Similarly, Klaess highlights the Awesome 2’s role in bringing hip hop to the famed NYC club Latin Quarter (154–55), and how a 1987 Kool Moe Dee live performance in the Latin Quarter resulted in a released single (159). These are just a few examples of the remarkable stories relayed throughout the book.

Breaks in the Air is at its best when it pushes readers to recognize the crucial role radio stations played in defining hip hop’s sound and in shaping the infrastructural dynamics of a nascent rap music industry. To the extent that listening practices are key components of hip hop’s musical virtuosity—a point most sampling producers should agree with—by regularly listening to Marley Marl mix records in the WBLB studio, a generation of up-and-coming producers envisioned (or audialized) new sonic possibilities for the genre. Klaess asserts that “the radio studio acted as a musical laboratory just as primed for

experimentation as the recording studio” (81). Through his capacity to put different musical elements “in combination and conversation” (79), Marley Marl exploited the liminal space within the mix, thus enhancing rap music’s sonic sophistication and helping to legitimize the genre despite many radio executives’ and record labels’ distastes for it.

Breaks in the Air helps bring two more important themes to light. It emphasizes how radio shout-outs and dedications were important instruments of community building, a point I address in my work on rap and college radio.¹ The book also highlights the critical parts that labor, informal economies, and (what is referred to as) “the hustle” played in supporting early pay-for-airtime programming. Regarding the latter, Klaess dedicates a chapter to discussing the longest-running radio show in rap history, *The Awesome 2 Show*, hosted by Special K and Teddy Tedd. By detailing the “small enterprises and quotidian labors” that both DJs engaged in to secure sponsorship for their program, this final chapter could serve as hip-hop scholarship’s standalone contribution to the sociology of work (145). What is more, Klaess debunks popular images of rags-to-riches hip-hop entrepreneurship, showing that many of these entrepreneurial efforts were primarily successful in supporting the genre as opposed to making lots of money.

The numerous stories and accounts found in *Breaks in the Air* are both entertaining and instructive. Acknowledging that a good book should not have too many indulgent side stories, I nevertheless was surprised not to read about the connection between Mr. Magic’s *Rap Attack* and the renowned rap group Whodini; the show’s involvement in the celebrated “Roxanne Wars” (including a familial connection back to Whodini); Red Alert’s many cameo appearances in hip-hop songs, most notably in classics by Boogie Down Productions, the Jungle Brothers, and A Tribe Called Quest; Special K and Teddy Tedd’s late-eighties affiliation with the legendary duo Nice & Smooth; or Chuck Chill-out’s (and Kool Chip’s) and Donald D’s albums from the same period.

John Klaess’s *Breaks in the Air: The Birth of Rap Radio in New York City* is an engaging book that at once offers more and less than one would expect. The book contextualizes the arrival of rap radio and succeeds in initiating and/or furthering several generative lines of thinking. Through personal interviews with notable DJs or culled information from other sources, Klaess provides an illuminating accounting of this period. I imagine that many readers can do without the confessional ambivalences appearing towards the end of the book, and more attention should be given to the gendered dimensions of these technologies and spaces. Nevertheless, *Breaks in the Air* offers a novel glimpse into many under-appreciated elements of rap music’s pre-golden-era formation through radio broadcasts coming out of New York City.

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1. Anthony Kwame Harrison, “Black College-Radio on Predominantly White Campuses: A ‘Hip-Hop Era’ Student-Authored Inclusion Initiative.” *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* 9, no. 8 (2016): 135–54.