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“Alexander Hamilton embodies hip hop.”: The Words That Sparked a Revolution

Abstract

This paper focuses on Alexander Hamilton, one of the most influential founding fathers, and how he embodies a genre of music known as hip hop. There are many aspects of hip hop culture that Alexander Hamilton embodied. The examples of hip hop culture used in this article are the Tupac Shakur and Biggie Small rivalry, Nas writing his way out of the Queens housing project, the “Ten Crack Commandments”, and “Fight the Power” by Public Enemy. Examples from Alexander Hamilton’s life consist of his rivalry with Aaron Burr, writing his way out of poverty, the duel code of honor, the Federalist Papers, and the Reynolds pamphlet. Research was done through New York Times articles, Rolling Stones articles, and Alexander Hamilton, a biography by Ron Chernow that was used as the inspiration for Hamilton the Musical. Genius, a website where readers can find lyrics of songs and different references in to hip hop, was also used. This website was used to compare Biggie Small’s “Ten Crack Commandments” to Lin Manuel-Miranda’s “Ten Duel Commandments”. Rolling Stones articles were used to explain the importance of hip hop culture as it relates to political writing. The New York Times articles were used because they went into depth about comparisons of Hamilton to hip hop. The biography by Ron Chernow was used to explain Alexander Hamilton’s life, rivalries, and writings. Research was also taken from Hamilton the Musical, quoting songs that summed up Hamilton’s personality, written by Lin Manuel-Miranda.

Keywords

Alexander Hamilton, hip hop

“Alexander Hamilton embodies hip-hop”: The Words That Sparked a Revolution

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on Alexander Hamilton, one of the most influential founding fathers, and how he embodies the music genre hip hop. He embodied hip hop through the way he wrote his way out of an unfortunate situation, his rivalry with Aaron Burr, and how political writing was utilized to influence the public. The examples of hip hop culture used in this article are the Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls rivalry, rapper Nas, the “Ten Crack Commandments” by Biggie Smalls, and “Fight the Power” by Public Enemy. Research was conducted using the New York Times and Rolling Stone to develop ideas about influential hip hop music. Alexander Hamilton: A Biography by Ron Chernow that was used as the inspiration for Hamilton the Musical was used to gain insight into Hamilton’s childhood.

Alexander Hamilton was a man whose true life was stranger than fiction. As one of the founding fathers of America, he is forever immortalized in history books. Now, he is immortalized in another way—by being the subject of one of the most successful Broadway musicals of the 21st century. When Lin-Manuel Miranda performed the first song of *Hamilton the Musical* at the White House, he prefaced his performance by saying that he was working on a hip-hop concept album about, “somebody who I think embodies hip hop: Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton.” He was met with laughter but when he finished performing the entire crowd awarded Miranda a standing ovation. Although the audience members didn’t know it at the time, they were witnessing another kind of history. Lin-Manuel Miranda’s groundbreaking musical is revolutionary in that it took two things, a founding father and hip hop, that seem to have absolutely nothing in common and combined them seamlessly. Alexander Hamilton embodies hip hop in that he used his writings to make a difference and lived in a rushed, hurried time period that mirrors the culture of old school rap.

Hamilton was born into a situation that many others would have accepted as fate.

Instead of accepting it, he used his exceptional writing talents to write his way out of the impoverished place he called home and into America. He was born in the West Indies, in a “brutal world of overnight fortunes in which slavery proved indispensable” (Chernow 8). Nevis was filled with criminals and the general filth of society. It was a place that truly represented the gross underbelly of British colonization. Alexander Hamilton learned to write in an informal way as a clerk at Beekman and Cruger, an export-import business. He learned the ins and outs of business and politics at this job. Even as a 14-year-old, Hamilton had unparalleled ambitions to be a hero and a martyr. He wrote and published a few poems at the insistence of his first mentor, clergyman Hugh Knox (Chernow).

Hamilton’s big break came in the form of a hurricane. On the night of August 31, 1772, a hurricane destroyed St. Croix (Chernow). Hamilton wrote a letter to his father, detailing the extent of the hurricane’s damage. Knox read the letter and was inspired to convince Hamilton to publish it in the *Royal Danish American Gazette*. He was only 17 at this time, and readers were amazed at his eloquence and ability to articulate his thoughts. The published letter

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brought him so much attention that the governor of St. Croix even asked about Hamilton. This hurricane letter was his way out. A subscription fund was started by local businessmen to send Alexander Hamilton to North America to receive a formal education. In October 1772, Hamilton left to go to America and thus began his rise to the top (Chernow). He wrote his way out of St. Croix, where he would have been doomed to a life without intellectual stimulation and without the war Hamilton craved so deeply. St. Croix was similar to a modern ghetto in that it was a place where people who were born there typically didn't have any other option except to stay. They didn't usually leave to go onto bigger and better things.

Many hip hop artists were also born into rough conditions. Like Hamilton, they refused to accept their fate, being “scrappy and hungry,” as Miranda wrote, for success. Nas was a rapper who reached fame in the late 1990s and early 2000s. He was born in a massive Queens housing project but was never content to stay there. When he was young he drew comics and wrote short stories about his life in the projects. Where Hamilton's mentor spearheaded the quest to raise money for Hamilton, Nas had a similar mentor in MC Merch (*Rolling Stone*). He selected Nas's rap song “Halftime” to be included on the soundtrack of the independent film *Zebrahead*. This was Nas's big break, and he soon engaged in an upwards spiral towards fame. He released groundbreaking albums like *Illmatic* and *I Am...* which reached commercial and critical success.

Nas is a perfect example of a hip-hop artist whose life and qualities mirror Alexander Hamilton's. Lin-Manuel Miranda recognized this and asked Nas to sing on *The Hamilton Mixtape*. This is an album of songs from *Hamilton*, remixed and reworked

by popular artists. In the musical, the song “Hurricane” is sung by the character Alexander Hamilton. He is reflecting about how a hurricane destroyed his home and he wrote his way out, and “wrote his way to revolution” (Miranda). It's more than fitting that Nas reworks “Hurricane” on the *Hamilton Mixtape*. His reworking of Hurricane is called “Wrote My Way Out,” and in Nas's verse he compares himself to the founding father. He raps,

*I picked up the pen like Hamilton
Street analyst, now I write words that try
to channel 'em
No political power, just lyrical power
Sittin' on a crate on a corner, sippin' for
hours
Schemin' on a come up, from evenin' to
sun up.* (Miranda).

Alexander Hamilton and Nas may have been from exponentially different time periods, but what they share is their ability to use their unparalleled talents to make their own fate. They both wrote the futures that they imagined for themselves, and through luck and sheer will, they achieved success.

A large part of the hip hop narrative is rivalries. Tupac and The Notorious B.I.G., Jay Z and Kanye West, DMX and Ja Rule are a few of the infamous feuds in hip hop history. Many hip hop rivalries were lighthearted territorial disputes that rarely, if ever, resulted in violence. The East Coast/West Coast rivalry, represented by Tupac and Biggie, was different. Tupac worked on the West Coast while Biggie worked on the East Coast. Tupac was more of an artist, weaving lyrical poems into his raps. His mother was a Black Panther, so revolution was a part of his genetics (Reeves). Biggie's rap leaned more towards gangster rap, as Biggie was a crack dealer in his early life. Both Biggie and Tupac wanted to break hip hop out of the underground

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world it resided in and into the mainstream. In November of 1994, Tupac was shot five times in a recording studio in Manhattan. He survived the shooting but suspected Biggie of arranging the shooting (Lynskey). This resulted in an escalation of the West Coast/East Coast rivalry. Biggie and Tupac publicly insulted and threatened each other with violence.

Tupac and Biggie were the 20th century versions of Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr, respectfully. Tupac was similar to Hamilton in that he did not possess the quality of simply knowing when enough was enough. *Rolling Stone Magazine* said about Tupac, “his life was a tapestry of often contradictory images” (Reeves). Tupac rapped about the violence of thug life while also rapping about his innermost feelings. The scrappiness and intensity of both Tupac and Hamilton led to both their success and ultimately, their untimely demise (Mead).

Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr engaged in a rivalry that lasted much of Hamilton’s adult life. In the early days of their rivalry, they were always opposites, but their differences were good-natured. They ate dinner at each other’s homes and Burr’s wife visited Eliza (Chernow). Burr and Hamilton in their early adult lives most likely would not have dueled, but their rivalry did not remain as civil. They were different in every sense of the word. Both were orphans, but Burr was raised with pedigree and status, while Hamilton had to write his way out of the cruel and godless St. Croix. Burr had impeccable self-control, whereas Hamilton was very reactive. The culmination of the rivalry occurred when Burr ran for the governorship of New York state. Hamilton remarked that Burr was a traitor, and this was printed in a newspaper (Chernow). The editor of the newspaper pitted the two men against each other, which

aggravated Burr more and more. The absolute cause of the duel is unknown, but what is clear is that Burr challenged Hamilton to a duel, and the rest is history.

The Burr/Hamilton duel sent shockwaves through the colonies. Dueling was a savage act, but people adhered to unspoken rules. Much like dueling, rap culture has its own set of unspoken rules. Biggie wrote “Ten Crack Commandments”, about the rules of dealing crack. He raps,

*I've been in this game for years, it made me a animal
There's rules to this shit, I wrote me a manual
A step-by-step booklet for you to get
Your game on track, not your wig
pushed back. (The Notorious B.I.G.)*

Biggie sees himself as the God of the drug trade, knowing and seeing all. Where Biggie raps about illegal activities of current day, Miranda wrote “Ten Duel Commandments” about the illegal activities of the 1700s. Dealing crack and dueling with handguns may not seem like the same thing, but each possesses a unique code of honor. Dueling is fast-paced, instinctive, and purposeful, just like hip hop. Hamilton and Laurens rap,

*Number one!
The challenge: demand satisfaction
If they apologize, no need for further action
Number two!
If they don't, grab a friend, that's your second
Your lieutenant when there's reckoning
to be reckoned. (Lin-Manuel Miranda)*

Rap culture abides by a code of honor, as exhibited by Biggie Small’s “Ten Crack Commandments,” that is similar to the dueling code of honor that was so prevalent in Hamilton’s life. Charles Kubrin claims that the “street code,” a set of rules and

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rituals that inner city youths abide by, is a product of rap music (Kubrin). Social identity and respect are the most vital parts of this code, and these two factors essentially rank members (Kubrin). This street code connects with hip hop, just as the dueling code of honor connects with Hamilton and his culture.

Rap artists don't just rap about drugs, girls, and violence. Rap artists write politically about things that matter, about systemic injustices that they face every single day. A perfect example of this is the 1989 song "Fight the Power" by Public Enemy. The song was revolutionary. Public Enemy sang about the adversity they dealt with and how they always felt like the system was rigged against them. The lyrics state, "Our freedom of speech is freedom or death/We got to fight the powers that be" (Grow). "Fight the Power" is widely renowned as one of the top rap songs that actually truly meant something. In order to make a stand, you must stand for something. In regard to hip hop, this typically means protesting against institutions. Hamilton "took intense pride in standing against the crowd" (Chernow). "Fight the Power" is reminiscent of the anger found in pre-Revolutionary War colonists who stated their grievances about the British government. A *New York Times* article stated, "Hip-hop was the perfect musical style for describing the American Revolution, because it is 'the language of youth and energy and of rebellion'" (Paulson). Rap is this generation's version of political writing, and Lin-Manuel Miranda saw this.

Alexander Hamilton was no stranger to political writing. Much of the musical revolves around the fact that Hamilton is non-stop, writing like he's running out of time. Hamilton was a chief contributor of the Federalist Papers, a series of essays that expanded on and explained the Constitution. There were 85 essays in the Federalist Papers and Hamilton wrote 51 of them. He wrote passionately, defending the Constitution (Chernow). The Federalist Papers were an integral part of the ratification of the Constitution and is one of Hamilton's most important lasting legacies. Most of Hamilton's most important works were written in the middle of a controversy, much like rap music that reflects the time it's written in.

Alexander Hamilton, one of America's founding fathers, had a larger-than-life personality and a life story that almost seems too far-fetched to be true. He embodied the musical genre of hip hop through the way he lived his life fast, driven, and harsh. He wrote political writings that took a stand and used words to influence others. Hamilton was a master of political writing, as exhibited by the Federalist Papers. He was Aaron Burr's rival, which led to his demise. He wrote his way out of a situation that less talented people would have been doomed to stay in, much like rap artists who "started from the bottom" but used music to make their own destiny. Lin-Manuel Miranda may have been met with laughter when he first made his bold statement, but now it is simply a fact that Alexander Hamilton truly embodies the music, rhythm, and culture of hip hop.

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