



## “Don’t Let Me Fall”: Hip-Hop in the Age of Austerity

By **Jonathan Tjarks** *9 February 2012*

Last year, a few thousand protesters in New York’s Zucotti Park have captured the attention of the nation. Occupy Wall Street’s slogan, “We Are The 99%”, has tapped into mass public discontent over [the widening amount of income inequality](#) in the United States.

On their [tumblr page](#), people have been posting stories of their struggles with student loan debt, inadequate medical coverage and a lack of job opportunities. Many of these young college graduates grew up listening to rap, and the changes in their economic situation mirror the changes in rap music over the last few years.

While Rick Ross and Lil’ Wayne are still near the top of the charts, in the last five years, an eternity in hip-hop, there hasn’t been a single gangster rapper to emerge as a mainstream star. It’s too soon to say who from the latest generation of rappers—Drake, Kid Cudi, Wiz Khalifa, B.o.B., Big Sean and J.Cole—will remain relevant, but the themes of their music, much different than the violence and drug-dealing of their predecessors, reflect the same underlying social trends that created Occupy Wall Street.

Gangsta rap entered the mainstream in 1988, with NWA’s groundbreaking album “Straight Outta Compton”. Before “F\*\*\* The Police”, [as PopMatters’ Shan Foster wrote](#), commercial rap hits like “Parents Just Don’t Understand” and “Bust a Move” were mostly “slapstickery and cartoonland costumes favored by the mostly male rappers chasing tail and pouring drinks in fast-motion.” The album’s success, which

became a national controversy when the FBI criticized it, paved the way for most of the next 20 years of rap.

Ever since, the vast majority of successful mainstream rappers have claimed they had a criminal history. [They used the names of famous criminals](#) as stage names: from Kelvin Martin, a notorious stick-up boy in the Brooklyn projects who went by "50 Cent", to Freeway Ricky Ross and Manuel Noriega.

Artists who had never been part of that lifestyle adopted it enthusiastically: Tupac attended a performing arts high school and got his first break as a back-up dancer for Digital Underground; Jay-Z's first music video appearance came in the 1989 pop-hit "Hawaiian Sophie", seven years before he released "Reasonable Doubt".

Rappers often say their music is merely a reflection of their environment, growing up in the inner-city during the height of the crack boom in the 1980's. And while they were committing a mind-boggling amount of felonies in their lyrics, they saw the rampant crime and poverty they rapped about as ultimately a criticism of the broader society around them. As Kanye West said on "Crack Music": "How we stop the Black Panthers? / Ronald Reagan cooked up an answer."

Gangsta rap, then, is merely the CNN of the hood: "I give you the news with a twist / it's just his ghetto point of view," Jay-Z said on "Renegade". "I penetrate pop culture, bring `em a lot closer to the block."

But as Jay-Z alludes to in the song, middle-class suburban teenagers, not the ghetto, have been rap's biggest audience for a long time. It's the fundamental contradiction at the heart of the genre: they have been rapping about the 'realities of inner-city life' to listeners who might go their entire lives without ever stepping foot in any of the inner cities they claimed to represent.

For over a generation, nearly [70%](#) of rap CD's have been purchased by suburban teenagers. The mid 90's were one of the most prosperous economic eras in American history, and for those coming of age in it, the violent content of rappers like Biggie,

Snoop Dogg and 50 Cent [represented a vicarious sense of danger and rebellion](#): “[Eazy-E] was selling a fantasy life of endless transgression without consequences. This was the fantasy that made gangsta rap music the music of choice for disaffected white suburban youth throughout the subsequent decades.”

But now, in a strikingly different type of economy, the economic prospects of middle-class teenagers have changed for the worse, changing their musical sensibilities.

There’s no better example of how the baton is being passed than Young Money Records, where gangsta rap’s last great star (Lil’ Wayne) has launched Drake’s career, a rapper whom the R&B singer Estelle dismissively [called](#) “an emo singer.” On their collaboration “Right Above It”, Drake raps about “fake friends who write the wrong answers on the mirror for me” while Wayne drawls about how he “got a gun in my boo purse / and I don’t bust back, I shoot first.”

When asked about the rise of emo rap, with rappers candidly discussing their insecurities and anxieties over lives with little to no connection to urban poverty, Drake [said](#): “I don’t know how to make generic songs about the struggle. I do know what its like to drive around at night and think about life; I just make music for kids doing that.”

Rap, instead of being a way out of the drug game and ghetto poverty suburban teenagers had never experienced, is now another route out of the type of poverty they can see all around them. It’s the same cultural environment that makes *American Idol*, with its open auditions that promise everyone a chance to become a superstar, the most popular show on TV.

In the ‘90s, perhaps the biggest disconnect between rappers and their audience came in the world of education. Nas dropped out of middle school, while Jay-Z and Biggie didn’t make it through high school and Cam’ron boasted of buying a GED for \$600. College, seemingly the golden ticket to a middle-class lifestyle, wasn’t even on their radar, as Jay-Z raps about on “American Dreamin’”: “Mama forgive me, should be thinking about Harvard / But that’s too far away, n\*\*\*\*\* are starving.”

Now, [with the skyrocketing amount of college debt](#) among recent graduates one of the driving forces behind "Occupy Wall Street", choosing whether to finish college has replaced choosing whether to deal drugs as rappers' existential dilemma. It's no coincidence that Kanye, one of the most important figures in bringing "conscious rap" into the mainstream, titled his debut album "College Dropout".

Partly in response to this growing discontent, President Obama recently proposed a system to ease the student loan burden of recent college graduates. Some of the most pointed criticisms have come from libertarians, like Neil McCuskey of the Cato Institute, [who wrote](#) "that it would let millions of students who paid too little attention to costs, or the earning prospects of their majors, get off scot free."

Or, as Kanye rapped about on 2004's "All Falls Down": "She has no idea what she's doing in college / That major that she majored in don't make no money / But she won't drop out, her parents will look at her funny / Now tell me that ain't insecure / The concept of school seems so secure / Sophomore three years ain't picked a career."

Nor is Kanye, the middle-class child of a college professor, the only rapper to obsess about his college decision in his music. Big Sean, one of his artists at G.O.O.D. Music, devotes much of his 2011 debut album "Finally Famous" to justify his decision to not enroll at Michigan State: "Said I'm throwing away my life if I drop out of school / Want me to come back and speak to the kids, the point I got to prove / Is I did everything they told me not to do / After I went down the road they told me not to cruise."

B.o.B., the child of a pastor, made a similar choice to ignore school to concentrate on music, and his 2010 debut album "The Adventures of Bobby Ray" [is a fairly melancholy look at his desperate economic situation](#) as he waited years for it to finally be released: "Let's pretend like it's '98 / Like I'm eating lunch off of Styrofoam trays / Trying to be the next rapper coming out the A / Hoping for a record deal to ignore my pain."

On songs like "Don't Let Me Fall" and "So Much More", their desperation is palpable. They've realized that drug dealing isn't the only way to add pathos to an album.

Today's rappers are more likely to use drugs than sell them. Marijuana is central to the persona of both Kid Cudi and Wiz Khalifa: the first single off Kid Cudi's "Man on the Moon" tells the story of a "lonely stoner", while Wiz Khalifa spends most of "Rolling Papers" in a marijuana-fueled haze of partying.

On 2004's "Tough Luv", the Young Gunz, two of Jay-Z's artists at Roc-A-Fella Records, said "God forbid this rap s\*\*\* don't even work out / Still know the coke route, still get our moms out." In contrast, on "College Boy", J.Cole, one of Jay-Z's artists at his new label Roc Nation, said "Eligible bachelor, finna get my bachelor's / And if this rap s\*\*\* don't work out, I'm going for my Masters."

Rappers have always wrestled with the existential concern of how to make something of themselves in a society where the odds are stacked against them. The biggest difference now, as opposed to in the '90s, is that many of their listeners have the same worries.

Middle-class kids today are graduating in the teeth of the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, with [85%](#) of the Class of 2011 planning on moving back in with their parents after college because of a lack of job opportunities. Faced on one hand with skyrocketing amount of student loan debt, which isn't dischargeable in bankruptcy, and on the other without the available jobs to pay that debt off, many economists have warned that they could become ["a lost generation"](#).

Occupy Wall Street has been criticized for a lack of a coherent message or spokesman. But if you wanted one statement that sums up their concerns, you could do worse than a Cam'ron rant from 2005: "My whole life I heard: 'Go to school, get an education, go to college.' What the f\*\*\* for? So I could get a job making \$30,000 a year, pay back my f\*\*\*\*\* student loans? Plus, how the f\*\*\* am I gonna buy Lamborghini Ferraris and go to Miami 10 times a year doing that?"