



BREAKS

IN THE

AIR

JOHN
KLAESS

THE
BIRTH OF
RAP RADIO
IN
NEW
YORK
CITY

B R E A K S

I N T H E

BUY

A I R

THE BIRTH OF

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

BREAKS IN

RAP RADIO IN

DURHAM + LONDON

THE AIR

NEW YORK CITY

2022

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

JOHN KLAESS

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Marley Marl on air at WBLS-FM

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I wrote most of this book while listening to the radio. Public radio has been a constant companion, a sober voice in our increasingly insane times. And the dial—yes, it’s still a dial—in my car was reliably tuned to Hot 97, a way of keeping up with hip-hop radio in the present as I plunged deeper into its past. But I wasn’t always listening to radio in the sense we tend to imagine it. Just as often it was MP3s of historical broadcasts of rap radio, downloaded or ripped from the internet or acquired from tape collectors generous enough to share their quarry. Other times it was live web streams from the outskirts and undergrounds of New York or London or Los Angeles or Manchester or any of the burgeoning world capitals of dance music, uncanny in the resemblance they bear to the underground programs of the 1980s. It’s been a long time since radio was limited to the canonical form it takes in our imagination, if it ever was just that. Still, one thing connects these disparate broadcasts: they all express their time and place in sound, inimitably.

This book is the story of one such time and one such place, New York City in the 1980s. It’s about how a group of DJs, entrepreneurs, and fans took an art form rooted in vinyl, aerosol, and the body and converted it into FM waves. All historians think their time period is exceptional, and I’m no exception. Few places have hosted a convergence of so many of their era’s defining themes as New York in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Individuals and institutions; policy and politics; race and space; class and status; sound and subjectivity—it’s all there. Historians have variously described the 1980s as a period of “fracture” and as a period of “synthesis.” The history of rap radio shows that both characterizations are true.

Listening to the history of rap radio can show us how, for better and for worse, popular culture and politics collided in 1980s America.

What I want to demonstrate by examining radio is something that, on the surface, seems obvious: that rap didn't enter the recording studio a fully formed genre. Its success was never predestined and, as intrinsically appealing as rap can be, its audiences were constructed over time, not present from the jump. The argument that I make throughout this book is that radio played an instrumental role in the aesthetic, social, and commercial development of hip-hop. It helped make the genre what it is. The horizon of this argument might be expressed simply: no radio, no rap. In practical terms, unpacking a formulation as nebulous as "rap radio" means looking outside and around both rap and radio. Radio, like few other mediums, is impacted by the tides of the times. National politics matter. Radio is heavily regulated by the federal government, meaning that who can access radio and what can be broadcast is limited by rules the FCC and legislators establish during any given administration. Further, radio is a cutthroat industry, and audience demand for particular kinds of music and types of information determines what goes on the air. A station's life and death can be determined by how well its management and programming staff understand the tastes and desires of those on the other end of the receiver. And radio is public in ways that few mediums are. For the last century, radio has been one of the most widely used communications mediums in the world, found in the homes and automobiles of the richest and poorest in America alike, in the largest cities to the most remote outposts. Which is all to say that writing a history of radio—no less rap radio—means cueing in to how all of these forces bore on those sending breakbeats through the air.

What does this mean in practice? It means that the history of rap radio isn't just one of DJs and MCs in the studio—though most of this book is devoted to following them into the studio and to listening closely to their broadcasts. It's also a history of Reagan-era regulatory policy. It's a history of post-civil rights activism. It's a history of the music industry and the deep historical will to commodify Black sound and Black expressive labor. It's a history of individuals finding a public source for self-expression in the fecund ruins of postindustrial New York City.

I want to take this time set the stage for the stories that follow for two reasons. First, one of my goals has been to expand what histories of radio and histories of hip-hop can be. This book would not be complete without attending to the unique mix of social, musical, technological,

political, commercial, and individual histories all converging on the radio studio. I want this history to be a model of the kinds of stories that are available when we place the medium at the center. The second reason is to set expectations. This book is about hip-hop in the 1980s. That's why we're all here. But in order to tell the story I wanted to tell, I had to take the time to outline the social and political stakes of the era. So, while a chapter-length treatment of, say, broadcast deregulation might not seem relevant, to leave it out would be to ignore a force that inarguably shaped hip-hop (it also seemed particularly appropriate to our current moment to linger on the incipient merger of information and entertainment in American mass media). Same goes for the passages detailing radio ratings methodologies and advances in broadcast marketing strategy. It's obvious to the point of meaninglessness to say music never exists in a vacuum, but it bears repeating.

I also need to acknowledge that this history is not "complete." Old school hip-hop heads and information fiends will notice some glaring omissions: the World's Famous Supreme Team doesn't get nearly enough attention; Hank Love and DNA are in the background, but never the fore; the students who broadcast hip-hop at New York University's WNYU-FM, as well as students at Columbia University's WKCR-FM, Hofstra University's WRHU-FM, and Fordham University's WFUV-FM, and the rest of the students who brought their energy and talent to putting rap music on college radio are conspicuously absent; the underground post-punk and downtown mix shows that incorporated rap barely missed the temporal cutoff point; I only gesture at the fact that Public Enemy, among many other artists, got their start in radio at Adelphi University's WBAU-FM, and the group's Bomb Squad credit radio as an inspiration for their production strategies. No doubt readers and fans will find others. And this is just where radio hosts are concerned. When you start expanding the field of omissions out to the station workers, the friends, the mothers, and everyone else who played midwife to hip-hop, the field of possible histories expands infinitely. Not to mention that this history played out differently in cities across the United States and across the world. At an early stage in writing, I was drawn to this project as one of "completing" hip-hop history, of adding new voices and individuals to the mix, only later to realize how naïve that was. Still, histories of rap have privileged recording artists and gravitated toward a few highly public figureheads. Those without lengthy discographies or cultivated public personas didn't always receive as much credit as they

deserved—all in all a different kind of historical distortion. In one of our first conversations, DJ Chuck Chillout told me that he would consent to an interview because “a lot of guys are getting left out.” He’s right. Rap has a pantheon and a canon. I hope this history has broadened, if only a little, the kinds of stories that constitute hip-hop and radio history.

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No rap radio show was complete without shout-outs. Fittingly, I have a few of my own:

I want to first thank all of those who shared their time and stories with me. Shout-out to Chuck Chillout, Teddy Tedd, Special K, Daddy-O, Kool Keith, Wanda Ramos, Jay Dixon, and Dutch. These interviews are the core of this history, and I hope you all recognize your experiences in the text. I want to give special thanks to DJ Chuck Chillout, who granted an interview to a clueless graduate student in the winter of 2014, and whose generosity propelled this project forward at a crucial crossroads, and to Teddy Tedd, who provided insight, constructive criticism, and conversation about the project over a period of several years.

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Introduction

Breaks in the Air

June 1982—2 AM, and receivers tuned to 105.9-FM anywhere in the greater New York metropolitan area return a low, steady hum of static. The previous hour's program of Jamaican roots reggae and dub versions has ceased transmission, and the next broadcasters have yet to populate the airwaves. White noise: signal in the form of absence laden with possibility. Radio silence: an intermission potent with the desire for presence, communication.

Moments pass, and the static abides. From within this tensing anticipation, a voice comes over the airwaves, stumbling before finding its cadence:

"It's world . . . this is the *World's Famous Supreme Team Show!* My name is Just Allah the Super Star here with my main man. . . ."

"And y'all know who I am. It's Se'Divine the Mastermind. And that's right, you get up *right now* and wake up everybody you know. Even if you don't know them, still wake them up! Knock on everything, because we got something we got to tell you all tonight so be . . . up. . . ."

Anyone listening closely to this broadcast may have heard a slight "click" coinciding with Se'Divine's enunciation of "tonight." Just as well, most probably missed it. As the DJ urges his listeners to rouse their households and relations, he sets a cassette in motion.

The tape dispenses a heavy groove, and the transmission comes alive, pulsates along with the kick drum and low-string vibrato. In form, the Supreme Team could be at any park or club jam in New York, exhorting an audience into action over a disco arrangement repeated back onto itself. In delivery, however, their address is tailored to radio, implicitly commanding their audience to listen across space. The groove lingers, and Just Allah continues with an enthusiasm at odds with the late hour:

“So everybody get up and let the world know that the World’s Famous Supreme Team is on the air!”

Se’Divine adds, “If you are incarcerated at this time, don’t you forget that we are still thinking about you! So send us some letters in here at 80 Riverside Drive. . . .”

“And get your tape recorders ready because the Supreme Team is going to rock the house tonight, for you!”

2 Animated by the insistent beat and the imagined presence of an audience tuned in from bedrooms, backrooms, and in-between spaces across New York, the duo continues their introductory remarks. Shout-out “to all of the Gods and Earths.” All you artists out there, keep sending your tapes because “four or five studios” are monitoring the broadcast. And if you’re tuned in “only to find fault,” “you ain’t going to find nothing.”

“How about some World’s Famous enlightenment?” Se’Divine asks, and the mix show begins in earnest with the first cut of the evening, an original sung-rapped setting of the 5-Percenter credo “The Enlightener” to a mid-tempo disco groove à la “Rapper’s Delight.”

“Welcome to the *World’s Famous Supreme Team Show* on WHBI 105.9-FM. . . . We are officially on the air.”¹

Sign-On

At the time of this 1982 broadcast, Se’Divine the Mastermind and Just Allah the Superstar of the World’s Famous Supreme Team counted among a small cohort of DJs and independent radio hosts who adapted live hip-hop to the sound medium. Leasing one to two hours each week on New York’s open-format WHBI-FM, DJs like the Supreme Team brought the street to the studio, so to speak, converting the full range of hip-hop’s musical, verbal, and social stylings into broadcast programming.

Yet the DJs and hosts on WHBI were hardly the only broadcasters captivated by the ways rap music and hip-hop culture might be adapted to radio. Between 1979 and 1987, an unlikely assembly of individuals

sought to present rap and hip-hop within the strictures of broadcast sound. These individuals came from divergent positions in life (from vaunted civil rights activists to investment bankers to hip-hop crews from the Bronx River Houses to kids from the Jersey suburbs); they maintained contrasting relationships to the broadcasting industry (from station owner to DJ to program director to independent broadcaster); and they upheld distinct, often incommensurable attachments to the music and culture that proved the source of so much energy and investment during 1980s. Despite these differences, these individuals shared visions of prosperity in which the broadcast of rap music represented both a means and an end. Their efforts turned the radio studio into a space of possibility and conflict, a site for community representation and zone of encounter across difference. Their reimagination of hip-hop through broadcast media fractured the bedrock of popular music and created new possibilities for African American cultural and political expression in the late twentieth century.

This book is a history of the broadcast of rap music in New York between 1979 and 1987, the period spanning the release of the first commercial single to feature rapping to the advent of what historians and fans alike refer to as the “golden era” of hip-hop, though the narrative necessarily extends back into the 1970s and forward toward the 1990s.² It’s helpful to think of this period as rap’s nascent commercial era, the aperture through which the expressive cultures of Black and Latinx teens intersected the music and media industries to explosive effect. During this interval, a few important things happened. For one, rap music emerged as a recognizable musical genre. Prior to the early 1980s, hip-hop was a live, embodied practice. When the first hip-hop artists went into the studios, there were no scripts for what a rap record should sound like. Though the genre remained unwieldy by mid-decade, it didn’t take long before trade publications, record labels, and the listening public understood rap as a coherent musical-cultural force. Not least because of these records, round about the mid-1980s rap became a viable commodity within the global music and culture industries, complete with a new wave of corporate sponsors and branding opportunities. Still, it’s one thing to press records and another thing to sell them. Across the 1980s labels and entrepreneurs proved you could do both. After years of experimentation and adolescent exuberance, by 1987 rap music had gained such commercial and creative momentum that the years that followed mark a coming of age. By the close of the 1980s, rap had reached a period of commercial, musical, and institutional maturity.

But this maturation didn't occur suddenly, and it was by no means inevitable. This stretch of hip-hop history is instructive in part because so much was up for grabs. A network of fine cracks crazed the surface of American culture. As Daniel Rodgers has aptly described, it seemed as if the social fabric and time were simultaneously "fragmenting and accelerating."³ Foregrounding these competing forces of dissolution and quickening helps us key into the contingency at work here. For example, multiple strains of hip-hop competed for a limited number of record deals and scant access to airplay, even as the long-term commercial prospects for the music remained uncertain. If we look outside hip-hop toward broader trends in telecommunications, profound transformations set in motion by deregulation destabilized a previously steadfast broadcasting industry. These transformations in the industry were themselves paralleled by neoliberal social and economic reforms that imperiled minority communities in new and pernicious ways, spurring the demonization of those same communities across a range of popular media (think, for example, of Reagan's "welfare queen," or the difference in crack vs. powder cocaine sentencing). At no point was it certain that this minority youth music would gain popular acceptance on its own sonic merits (unless, of course, you're a proponent of the argument that America will cannibalize any and all Black culture, that hip-hop was always already doomed to be the United States' most valuable twentieth-century export).⁴ Nor was it at any point certain what such a music would sound like. Radio, sitting at the nexus where these strains join, gives us a way of dramatizing the connections between the social, the sonic, and the technological. In short, radio provides a lens through which to reconsider the intertwined histories of sounds, institutions, communities, and legal formations converging in the post-civil rights conjuncture.

But what can radio tell us about this period that the canonical histories of hip-hop have not?⁵ While historians have helped us understand radio as a broad force in rap's commercialization, most histories simply take radio for granted in the same way that we take the medium for granted in our daily lives; it's both everywhere and nowhere, and thus not worth paying a lot of attention to. The practices, technologies, and institutions that supported every broadcast remain far from attention. What might happen if we place them in the center? Putting pressure on the medium itself allows us to tell new stories about this period in both musical and African American history. But finding these stories demands first that we listen. What opportunities did musicians and cultural brokers like the Supreme Team see in community radio? Similarly,

what about rap music appealed to the owners and managers of New York commercial radio institutions WBLS-FM and WRKS-FM? And what can we learn from the decisions they made, from the sounds and perspectives they privileged in their broadcasts?

The key here is to think of radio as more than a channel for the dissemination of rap records. Uncovering the significance of radio to early hip-hop necessitates attention to the set of musical, social, and economic adjustments stations and broadcasters made to convert the live performance culture of hip-hop into broadcast programming. To remain attuned to this process, I focus on how individuals adapted hip-hop to broadcast media rather than simply on rap radio—though, as a disclaimer, I use *rap radio* as shorthand throughout. This emphasis on process allows us to attend to agency and creative choices instead of getting stuck in the ontological morass; it allows us to cue into change over time instead of fixing a static object. Scholars have recently gone so far as to question whether radio is, in fact, a single, unified medium. Instead, they offer the terms *assemblage*, *constellation*, *site*, and *field*, a vocabulary that emphasizes the ad hoc and unsettled, a language tailored to the ways in which aspects of radio can be either durable or malleable across contexts, connected to or discrete from other technologies and practices. Daniel Fisher and Lucas Bessire are exemplary when they remind us that “radio’s boundaries . . . cannot easily be assumed *a priori*; its objectness is always potentially unsettled by shifting social practices, institutions, and technological innovations and by broader domains in which it finds shape, meaning, and power.”⁶ In foregrounding the process of adaptation in this book, I mean to query how broadcasters selected music for broadcast; how they altered it; what technologies aided and limited them; how they addressed the audience; the extent and type of audience participation; the vicissitudes of reception; what the public broadcast of this music and culture meant to young people of color in New York; and the tension between community and institutional aesthetic priorities. The histories entailed by these questions offer new perspectives on youth culture during the Reagan years, and provide an opportunity to revisit the timing and mechanics of rap’s transition from a community-based art form into a global commercial phenomenon.

Perhaps the clearest consequence of the emphasis on adaption is that we hear the evolution of rap music with fresh ears. For one, radio forces us to attend to what listeners actually heard every week. When we listen to tapes of broadcasts from the 1980s, we hear recent rap releases, sure. But we also hear classic breakbeats and deep cuts from personal

archives, snippets of live shows from tapes, amateur submissions, and the full range of community patter by all of the friends, girlfriends, fans, and family that nurtured this art form at a critical moment. Amid the social richness of broadcasts, radio allows us to evade the trap of discographic historiography and recuperate a shadow playlist lost to time—made as much of flesh and voice and magnetic tape as vinyl—forgotten in favor of a few tracks solidified in the amber of historical memory. Crucially, however, radio lets us hear the records DJs selected, as they played them. As the DJs I’ve spoken with repeated over and over, radio isn’t like the club. You don’t have to work a dance floor. On the radio, you can tinker. You can invent. What this means in practice is that radio DJs availed themselves of radio’s unique technological and social affordances to experiment with sound. Mixing techniques, virtuosic turntablism, novel combinations of recorded sound, the progression of moods and tracks over time—DJs treated the radio studio as a sonic laboratory. There was no shortage of experimental parameters to tweak each week. Radio lets us hear the evolution of hip-hop in real time, changing imperceptibly but indelibly week to week.

Similarly, radio inflected the commercial trajectory of rap music in ways that are hard to account for and harder to quantify. Nevertheless, the harder you look, the closer radio is to the center of rap’s economies. As labels signed more acts and pressed more records, they all turned to the hip-hop DJs with access to radio to promote their product. For an artist early in their career, getting a tape or a record on air was a sure way to get work. But to stop here would be to stop at the discographic. When it comes to rap’s commercialization, radio helps us excavate the thousands of small enterprises that give birth to a genre. For hosts at WHBI, who funded their own programs, radio meant record pools, selling their audience to sponsors, and dozens of other hustles to keep their show on the air. Radio turns our attention to the inextricable link between the club and the airwaves, to the lines and connections that make a scene. And because radio in New York is big business, we see the pressures that any media organization faces start to bear on musical aesthetics. In short, radio lets us see all of the commercial activity that makes a musical economy, not just a record industry.

At its most basic level, radio is a communications technology. For as long as the medium has existed, folks have sent signals across the electromagnetic spectrum with or without hopes of reaching an auditor. Focusing on adaptation allows us to hear just how central radio audiences were to the evolution of rap music. While many histories of radio assume

that broadcasts are unidirectional, proceeding from an active host to passive listeners, recent research in radio has worked outward from the assumption that audiences are never passive, and that communication in broadcasting flows both ways. Elena Razlogova has observed that the earliest network radio programs “unfolded as if in intimate conversation with their audiences,” imbuing each program with the mark of the “listener’s voice.”⁷ For anthropologists Daniel Fisher and Lucas Bessire it is an axiom that radio presents “a channel for two-way dialogues.”⁸ But we need not look to radio in other contexts to understand the ways in which radio in 1980s New York facilitated, even depended upon, dialogue between broadcaster and audience. We need only listen more carefully to the *World’s Famous Supreme Team Show*. In the brief excerpt with which I opened this introduction, the Supreme Team suffuse their address with calls to action. The Supreme Team do not just ask their audience to listen, they ask them to record the program. They do not just shout-out their incarcerated fans, they also acknowledge their humanity and ask them to write letters. Throughout the broadcast, the Supreme Team implore listeners to call the station with their requests and dedications. They advertise an upcoming live performance, thus mobilizing populations across space, and remind fans that record labels are listening, providing an extra incentive to any artist with a demo tape to mail it to the station. Though comical in its overstatement, the Supreme Team’s opening incitement that all listeners do what they can to wake New York and spread the word is indicative of how all parties to the broadcast understood the relationship between listener and broadcaster. Listeners were integral to the Supreme Team’s broadcast programming and to the construction of the *World’s Famous Supreme Team Show* as a social forum. Lines of communication were fluid, emanating from the studio, returning to it, and escaping, as it were, into the ether. As a site for the broadcast of a community-made and -based dance music, as a mode of spreading information, and as a space for performing and reaffirming social bonds that existed prior to and beyond the moment of broadcast, rap radio might best be thought of as a collaboration between broadcaster and listeners, as a community aesthetic project.

If the Supreme Team’s opening gambit figures rap radio as a joint community undertaking, then how might we learn to locate this community within the sound of their transmissions? And what can we learn about the emergence and experience of rap music by emphasizing the participatory, social aspects of broadcasts? Just like the FM signal that carried their broadcasts, the Supreme Team were ambitious with regard

to the audience they hoped to reach, and indifferent to the physical and social barriers that segregated populations across New York's urban geography. Had we listened deeper into their broadcast, we would have heard the Supreme Team's listeners shout-out their neighborhoods and their relations. We would have found ourselves interpellated by their address, and drawn into their performances of affiliation as they rattled off dedications to Herbie Herb ("We don't have time to play your tape this week, but we will soon"), Chocolate City, and hip-hop notables Butchie Butch, Jazzy Jay, Davy D, and the All Mighty Fly MCs. We would have heard them plug, on behalf of one listener, a party at Harlem's PS 154 Harriet Tubman. Their dedications continued for nearly ten minutes, and as they wound down, Se'Devine let callers deliver their own shout-outs on the air. First Tanya from Mount Vernon, then Sonya in Bed-Stuy. Listener Nefertiti gave a shout to "the Nation," Tre sent a message to all the "Gods out in the Bronx," and a caller who forgets to identify himself as he's rushed by the hosts gave peace to his crew, the "Killer Four Connection," listening in Brownsville, Brooklyn. Tuning in to the dispersion of these listeners across space, a phenomenon Alex Russo calls the "human geograph[ies] of radio reception," warrants nothing short of a reconfiguration of the architectural and affective terrain of New York.⁹

Shout-outs demonstrate that radio has the power to remake space.¹⁰ The performance of shout-outs testifies to the ways listeners in New York used radio to load place names with emergent personal and community value, and to write and rewrite their communities into the urban landscape. But radio does not operate under the same logic as terrestrial communications. Within its broadcast range, radio blankets and penetrates built environments. Electromagnetic signals reside between and reflect off of the architectural spaces of urban environs, traversing with ease social and physical boundaries that inhibit human mobility. Radio, in a sense, is both omnipresent and nowhere. Though bound to the time of the broadcast, these signals are available to anyone willing to tune in to their frequencies. From this perspective, there is no center, and there are no margins, no metropole or periphery. There are instead spectral landscapes, layered atmospheres haunted by presences and absences that remap the city in ways that can upend hierarchies of spatialization and power.¹¹ Starting from the dispersed, ethereal geographies of radio signals saturating the rubble and wreckage that begins so many histories of hip-hop offers a new way of narrating New York. Communities come into being, effervesce, and dissolve nightly, serialized in the manner of weekly broadcasts. If window-shattering sound systems and graffiti

provide important perspectives onto early hip-hop's politics of visibility (and audibility), so too does the use of broadcast media to re-sound and reimagine minority communities in the postindustrial city.

With this emphasis on audibility comes an important question: How can we move beyond metaphor and actually hear hip-hop's early communities? Christine Ehrick expresses a common sense of historiographical longing when she writes, "Those of us interested in radio's sound qualities often face the dilemma of analyzing and discussing voices that we may never get to hear. . . . We grope for ways to use words to tap the reader's aural imagination."¹² Despite a lack of institutional archives, the history of rap radio is an exception to this silence. Thanks to the efforts of fans, collectors, and artists over time, the history of rap radio in New York is exceptionally well represented by extant recordings of broadcasts. A quick internet search can return dozens of examples of the voices of Mr. Magic, Special K, or Afrika Islam. Anyone can enjoy hours of broadcasts by Chuck Chillout and Red Alert with a few clicks. Across the 1980s, listeners actively recorded transmissions of rap radio programs to cassette tapes. Many recorded these tapes as a means of always having the most recent music available to them, either taping full programs or creating mix tapes out of recordings of their favorite segments from several different programs. Others taped broadcasts of live performances in order to duplicate and sell the recordings, or to mail them to kin located outside of New York. Still others recorded programs in order to capture a shout-out they delivered over the air, to hear their name registered in another's shout-out, or to save an advertisement or event announcement for later reference. Over time, many fans kept their cassette recordings, with some amassing large, thorough collections, recalling Andrea Bohlman and Peter McMurray's observation that tape is, first and foremost, a storage medium, and cassettes themselves "things to keep."¹³ Among collectors, these tapes became important aesthetic and economic objects, sold and traded within niche markets operating on their own logics and protocols for valuation, scarcity, and exchange.¹⁴

With the advent of file sharing and internet archiving technology in the late 1990s, many collectors and fans converted their cassettes into digital MP3 files and uploaded them to the Web. For almost twenty years, collectors have stored and exchanged recordings of rap radio over the internet, and several large-scale repositories of tapes have been born and died since 2013, when I began collecting tapes myself. At the time of writing, significant collections of MP3 recordings of rap radio still reside in the less-trafficked corners of the internet. As Jonathan Sterne notes,

MP3s appear to be the perfect medium for “‘end-to-end’ networks like the internet,” a format designed for the storage and movement of audio files from user to user across a frictionless infrastructure.¹⁵ The internet itself, in this view, is understood as a stable, timeless space in which files, once uploaded, remain. Still, the same mechanisms that make the internet such an ideal space for uploading and sharing also make it prone to loss and ephemerality.¹⁶ Sites go up and down, files are lost, and entire collections disappear, daily. Many of the sites I had turned to for rare tapes were gone upon later search; there were always new ones in their places. Further, the MP3 format often masks what Sterne calls its mediality, or “the complex ways in which communications technologies refer to one another in form or content.”¹⁷ In facilitating access to new files, and in hiding the many *remediations*—from vinyl to 8-track to reel-to-reel to electromagnetic wave to cassette and back, to name one particularly tortuous path—MP3s falsely promise to give us access to the content of a recording.¹⁸ They hide the dense webs of practice and sociability that were part and parcel of 1980s cassette culture. With cassettes of hip-hop programs, the picture is complicated further by competing archival practices. Some collectors act on a preservationist impulse, sourcing, storing, and cataloging anything they can get their hands on, and sharing their tapes freely. Others are less ready to share and stricter about what enters the archive. For these collectors, controlling access to tapes represents a means of giving credit where they believe credit is due. Restricting trade to an inner circle is their way of policing boundaries between the committed and the tourists. When evaluating the tapes that are available to listeners and historians in the present, we’d do well to remember Regina Kunzel’s observation that archives are “less depositories of documents than themselves historical agents, organized around unwritten logics of inclusion and exclusion.”¹⁹

In order to treat recordings of early hip-hop with the sensitivity and sophistication they deserve, I propose thinking of each cassette recording and its MP3 doubles as an archive in and of itself. Any work with them must find a way to reconcile a given recording’s individual histories of production and transmission through time and space with its status as dehistoricized content stored and circulated through the internet; writing about tapes must acknowledge the material world in which a recording was made, valued, and disseminated while understanding the transhistorical resonance of the events to which it attests. To accomplish this, I ask that we listen to the numerous, imbricated histories present in each recording, to the ways in which these tapes are themselves repositories of

past action as well as present sites of intentional remembering. First, I treat each recording as an inscription of an event, replete with all of the lived-ness and liveness implicit in any performance. These tapes tell us something about what was performed, what was heard, and what it may have meant to those involved. By this I mean to think of these recordings as an archive in the sense that performance theorist Diana Taylor understands it, as embodied performances sounding the “lived and the scripted and the citational practices that exist in both.”²⁰ Second, as inscriptions of events, these tapes are also suitable to exegesis as texts. Although I attempt to be sensitive to the fact that no source provides a conduit to an “unalloyed view of historical reality,” many of the chapters of this book attempt to develop a hermeneutics for reading community, labor, and aesthetic codes from these recordings.²¹ The readings I offer in these chapters move between material world and recording, attentive to the unexpected and surprising ways that life gives meaning to sound. Finally, these recordings had and continue to have lively social existences. Though their precise routes of transmission and alteration are unknowable, they came to us after long histories of valuation, trade, discard, and remediation. They each bear the trace of those who have encountered them, be it in direct ways such as the editing and splicing of a tape or subtle ways like the adding of a single tick to the number of downloads tallied in digital metadata. When possible, I have attempted to make the social and material histories of tapes central to my treatment of them. When not possible, I at least acknowledge the fullness and messiness of the worlds in which they participate. As archives, each of these tapes are partial, unruly, idiosyncratic assemblages of bodies, sounds, material, and affect.

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Listening to the ways these communities adapted their musical and cultural practice to radio thus provides a means of narrating the development of a musical form, the hopes and aspirations of a community, and a pivotal moment for a city. And it is with these interwoven strands in mind that I call this history one of “breaks in the air.” In a literal sense, the history of rap radio is one of breakbeats transduced and transmitted across the electromagnetic spectrum: of breaks cut, as it were, through the air. Yet I also invoke “the breaks” in the sense that MC Kurtis Blow did on his landmark record of the same name. Throughout his rhymes, Blow puns on the word “breaks,” deftly moving between homophones (“brakes on a bus, brakes on a car”) and toast-style exclamations (“break it up, break it up, break it up!”) as he spins his tale.²² But the crux of his rap revolves around tough breaks, situations of low luck, disadvantage, and

poor circumstance. We might think of the period covered in this history as one of exceptionally tough breaks for New York and its minority communities, characterized as it often is by budget crises, community disintegration and displacement, the deterioration of the physical environment, real estate speculation, and the tandem rise of the HIV and crack epidemics. Like Blow, I try to see these breaks as a generator of novel forms of expression and affiliation, the blasted landscapes of the Bronx as a source of creativity and fecundity rather than unmitigated despair. The final sense in which I invoke breaks signifies something perhaps less obvious. Theorists and historians of African American history have riffed and troped on the many meanings of the *break* or *breaks* in order to better understand the vagaries of Blackness in the United States. For these writers, the breaks are grooves and cuts capaciously defined, those places and subjectivities that, much like a broadcast signal, are present yet obscured, invisible or subterranean, always slightly behind the beat but nevertheless in anticipation of it.²³ I offer this period in hip-hop history as an extended break, one resisting the teleological gravity of the golden era and its distorting allures in order to hear the history of hip-hop as it was and as it might have been. Throughout this book I ask what we can learn by listening to these forms of life carried on errant frequencies. To hear these breaks, we need only tune our receivers.

12

Chapter Overview

Writing a history of radio presents some unique challenges. There are more characters, events, and broadcasts than could possibly be accounted for. Further, the sources I have to work with make telling a strictly chronological story tricky. Some time periods at certain stations are exceptionally well represented, while others are characterized by silent archival gaps. In order to overcome this, I've organized this history of rap on the radio in New York around portraits of three radio stations with distinct sonic and business profiles: WBLS-FM 107.5, WRKS-FM 98.7, and WHBI-FM 105.9. I chose these stations to organize the narrative for several reasons. First and foremost, these stations were the first to air rap music, and offered programming by hip-hop DJs for the better part of the 1980s. Just as important, however, these stations were owned, operated, and programmed by three organizations with radically different operating models and media philosophies. Yet it is precisely

these differences that help us understand just why so many actors in the media industry were drawn to rap music at this moment.

For one, WBLS was owned and operated by a consortium of New York's Black elite. Headed by Manhattan borough president Percy E. Sutton and funded by a who's-who of African American professionals under the banner of the Inner City Broadcasting Corporation, WBLS was the crown jewel in a portfolio of media properties acquired in the service of building a national Black media network. Sutton and his associates sought to reimagine Black life and call Black folk across the world into a new political consciousness, and mass media was the tool of the times. They were also the first commercial station to program a rap radio show. It's impossible to understand the first rap radio programs in New York without seeing them within this context. In contrast, WRKS was a commercial media property par excellence. Operated as part of the national RKO network of broadcast properties, the station was run and programmed by a team of radio professionals—the highest achievers in their domain. This group came to rap through musical savvy, a close connection to club culture, and a small fortune's worth of market research. Contrasting how these two powerhouse FMs approached rap, and how they positioned rap after identifying each other as competitors, helps us understand what broadcasters and DJs stood to gain, and just how high the stakes were for this new music.

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Situated between the dial from these two juggernauts was WHBI. The Big “H,” as listeners affectionately referred to it, differed substantially from WBLS and WRKS in one important way. Broadcasters on WHBI paid for their own airtime. For most hours of the week, WHBI specialized in multilingual and community programming. This was evident as early as December 1984, when the *New York Times* reported that, thanks to WHBI, “nearly everybody in the Greek-American neighborhood of Astoria, Queens knows [radio host] Tina Santorineou . . . everybody's sister, mother, or sweetheart.” The same was said of Gilda Miros and Puerto Ricans in the South Bronx, Art Raymond and the Jewish enclaves of Borough Park and Flatbush, and Bob Law and Bed-Stuy's Black community. In 1987, *Radio and Records* magazine boasted of “WNWK's Tower of Babel: 35 Languages Broadcast Weekly.”²⁴ What this meant in practice, however, was that enterprising DJs could buy airtime each week and play whatever they wanted, without any of the politics, financial considerations, or jockeying for position that came with a show on commercial radio. As a result, shows on WHBI gives us a closer look at how aspiring

hip-hop icons wanted to present their culture and their music. Through the broadcasts of the *Zulu Beat*, *The Awesome 2 Show*, and the *World's Famous Supreme Team Show*, we can hear how those closest to hip-hop selected and mixed elements of their culture for a listening audience.

Broadly, the chapters in this book track these stations over time, moving from the large-scale and structural to the intimate. Chapter 1 sets the stage for 1980s radio by reviewing the deregulation of the broadcast industry. This, more than any other force, transformed broadcasting at the moment rap became a commercial music. During the 1970s, widespread sentiment in favor of broadcast deregulation swept through the radio industry. In part, this “deregulation fever” was a response to perceived Federal Communications Commission (FCC) overreach. Career broadcasters in the 1970s rejected what they felt were onerous and inconsistently enforced licensing requirements and railed against limitations on programming that could only have been written by bureaucrats. Support of deregulation was also the product of a more general, society-wide naturalization of neoliberal ideologies that saw unregulated markets and self-sufficient individuals as the engines and ends of economic activity. By the 1980s, a broad coalition had organized with the aim of reducing and simplifying the regulatory framework that structured all aspects of broadcasting. United in this coalition were Republicans and Democrats, some minorities and the white majority, broadcasters and legislators alike. The power they exerted collectively emboldened ongoing legal and administrative efforts to alter broadcast regulation at fundamental level. Referred to as *deregulation*, the consequences of this reauthoring of broadcast industry regulation were manifold and difficult to quantify. An important result, however, was an infusion of capital into radio, and a subsequent explosion in the industry’s profit potential. The new regulatory regime created a corporate-legal climate in which investments and revenues in radio skyrocketed, and barriers to corporate consolidation diminished, if not disappeared outright. At the time when rap emerged as a radio-ready music, the industry became more competitive than at any point in its history, with broadcast property values increasing each year across the 1980s, and total advertising revenues increasing, in some markets, tenfold across the decade. In a media market like New York City, rap’s controversies were therefore not simply aesthetic or racial. They had profound economic implications as well.

The next chapters shift attention to WBLS. If deregulation altered the broadcast landscape at the highest level, parallel developments in American racial politics also impinged on the broadcast of rap. Specifically,

rap became a public music during a vexed moment in the history of the reception of Black music. In the early 1980s, African American musical genres counted among the most popular and profitable in the world while African Americans themselves witnessed the previous generations' civil rights gains erode before their eyes. Accompanying a slate of regressive policies—including but not limited to school resegregation, mandatory minimum sentencing, and the decimation of social services—were pathologized representations of Black sounds and bodies in popular media. R&B, neo soul, funk, electro, post-Motown, and other African American musics topped charts and enjoyed unprecedented “crossover” success. Yet the representations that fleshed out perceptions of African American artists were often fabrications rooted in stereotypes. In disco's wake—the widespread 1979 disavowal of which is itself a study in the mechanics of the appropriation and cannibalization of African American and queer culture—a new radio format surfaced to account for the widespread appeal of Black music and the continuing reticence to engage racialized cultural production as such on high-stakes popular media. Called “urban contemporary” (UC), stations espousing this format adopted a style rooted in a politics of respectability and a rhetoric consonant with incipient 1980s multiculturalism. Where stations like WBLS had, as recently as 1979, suffused their broadcasts and marketing with signifiers of African American culture, UC radio preferred to couch its decidedly Black cultural production in a language of color-neutral universality. Hip-hop, a quintessential African American music, found itself introduced to a media market that both demanded and refused Black cultural production. This chapter situates the first broadcasts of rap within a station committed to, on the one hand, a nationwide project of Black political awakening through mass media and, on the other, a new Black youth music that chafed against its founders' self-image.

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Rap's ascendance to radio was, as one might guess, a rocky path, and one made all the rockier by the station owners' and managers' disdain for rap music. Still, WBLS programmed hip-hop shows for the better part of the 1980s. Chapter 3 provides a close reading of a number of broadcasts of *Rap Attack with Mr. Magic*, arguing that the resources WBLS provided to host Mr. Magic and his DJ Marley Marl, along with the imperative to create mixes specifically for consumption by radio, changed, in subtle but indelible ways, the aesthetic trajectory of hip-hop. WBLS's studio enabled Marley Marl to experiment with new and different styles of mixing, offering the outfitting necessary to combine recorded sound in previously unimaginable ways as well as the opportunity to do so.

Foregrounding the importance of listener attention and sonic detail, I argue that radio did as much to influence the sound of the genre as did studio record production, and that the two existed in a deeply responsive feedback loop.

Stations never broadcast in isolation, however. In a media market like New York, wherever there's money to be made, there's competition. Chapter 4 shifts the focus across town to WBLS's main UC competitor WRKS. Not long after completing their transition to the UC format, WRKS unveiled a marketing campaign that equated their music with the "sound of the streets." For years, KISS-FM pursued a strategy that cast the station's brand as the sound of New York. In this chapter, I put pressure on this messaging to narrate the pains the programmers, DJs, and management at WRKS took to live up to their own hype. Despite their location within a corporate broadcasting giant, the staff at KISS-FM did a remarkable job localizing their programming and targeting their offering to a young, opinionated New York audience. By looking at how different individuals at WRKS found, selected, prepared, and mixed music for broadcast, I look at the ways in KISS-FM sounded the streets of New York.

16 The next chapters turn away from commercial radio. Instead, I give extended accounts of two shows on WHBI: the *Zulu Beat* with DJ Afrika Islam, and *The Awesome 2 Show*. Chapter 5 narrates the broadcast run of the *Zulu Beat* from the perspective of community. Drawing on theories of broadcast publics, I show how rap radio programs offered listeners a means of affirming communities that existed in the world and built new, serialized communities that emerged from the act of collective listening. Here, I am interested in how listeners interacted with the *Zulu Beat*, provided content for each broadcast, and used the one-to-many structure of broadcasting to send messages, perform kinship, and overlay different locales with affiliation and affect in a manner not possible through other modes of communication. In this regard, shout-outs become an important practice, and I use this chapter as an opportunity to query the work they do in the world.

The final chapter draws on a series of long, detailed interviews and exchanges I had with DJ and radio duo the Awesome 2 between the winters of 2016 and 2018. I approach this chapter from the perspective of work and labor. The Awesome 2, like many DJs at the time, paid for their airtime. Doing so required them to hustle, and, in their recollections, they were as much entrepreneurs as they were radio hosts. In describing how they funded and programmed their show, I shed light on the transformation of hip-hop's economies, marking the shift from the largely informal

networks of production and exchange into the tightly controlled formal economies of the music industry. I do so to push back against histories of rap's commercialization that ascribe too much agency to record labels, and against rags-to-riches narratives that rely on a telos of wealth and fame. Instead, I ask what we might learn from an account of early hip-hop that eschews success as an organizing principle and instead focuses on the uncertain.

The logo for Duke University Press, featuring the word "DUKE" in large, bold, white capital letters on a dark gray rectangular background. Below this, the words "UNIVERSITY PRESS" are written in smaller, gray capital letters on a white rectangular background that is partially overlaid by the dark gray one.

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Introduction

- 1 This exchange appears on a digitized recording of the *World's Famous Supreme Team Show* accessible in many different locations on the internet. Given the complications involved in determining provenance of recordings, as well as the assumptions required to provide complete citations, I reference all recordings of radio broadcasts as MP3s, using the data and metadata available to me on the recordings available. The version referenced here is indexed with the following metadata: World's Famous Supreme Team Show, "Tape 118 Worlds Famous," aired June 1982, downloaded from oldschooll-hiphoptapes.com (accessed May 11, 2018).
- 2 As a historical period, the "golden era" is said to begin the sonic and commercial maturation of the rap album. This places its beginning somewhere between the 1985 release of Stetasonic's *On Fire*, the 1986 release of Boogie Down Productions' *Criminal Minded*, Eric B. and Rakim's 1987 *Paid in Full*, Public Enemy's 1988 *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, Ultra-magnetic MCs' *Critical Beatdown* of the same year, and De La Soul's *Three Feet High and Rising*. This, of course, can be debated, and is. The golden era is said to end—on no particular date, with no particular album—in the mid-to-late 1990s.
- 3 Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, 221.
- 4 For one articulation of America's ever-shifting yet durable, deep historical fascination with Black sound, see, Radano, *Lying Up a Nation*, 3–13.
- 5 I'm thinking here, of the foundational works: Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*; George, *Hip-Hop America*; Rose, *Black Noise*; Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*; and Toop, *Rap Attack*.
- 6 Bessire and Fisher, *Radio Fields*, 3.
- 7 Razlogova, *Listener's Voice*, 9. See also Simmons, "Dear Radio Broadcaster," 444–59.
- 8 Fisher and Bessire, *Radio Fields*, 2, 34–35.
- 9 Russo, *Points on the Dial*, 195.

- 10 For radio's effect on notions of space, see Bronfman, *Isles of Noise*, 47, 124–26. For how radio reconfigures public and domestic spaces, see Ehrick, *Radio and the Gendered Soundscape*; and Smith, *Vocal Tracks*.
- 11 McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 145.
- 12 Ehrick, *Radio and the Gendered Soundscape*, 28–29. Many historians have remarked upon his irony of how little documentation remains of radio operations given the scale of bureaucracy involved in running a station. See Squire, “Communities of the Air,” 1–35.
- 13 Bohlman and McMurray, “Tape,” 7.
- 14 Armstrong, “Cassette Culture with Stretch Armstrong,” Medium, accessed February 27, 2021, <https://medium.com/cuepoint/cassette-culture-with-stretch-armstrong-73e1a14652ea>.
- 15 Sterne, *MP3*, 16.
- 16 Sterne, “Preservation Paradox in Digital Audio,” 59–63.
- 17 Sterne, *MP3*, 9.
- 18 To this point, Lisa Gitelman has recently observed that capital “M” Media such as print, film, and, here, radio, are always supported by “an embarrassment” of ancillary and supplementary “material forms” and practices. Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge*, 6, 19.
- 19 Kunzel, “Queering Archives,” 211.
- 20 Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire*, 32–33.
- 21 Rohy, “In the Queer Archive,” 344.
- 22 Blow, “The Breaks.”
- 23 There's more than enough work here to fill a book in itself. The works that I converse with directly are present in citations throughout. Some works that have been particularly formative but aren't citationally present include Fred Moten's classic theorization of the break in *In the Break*; works by Sylvia Wynter including but not limited to Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being” and “On How We Mistook the Map,” as well as the formidable contributions to her intellectual project in McKittrick, *Sylvia Wynter*; Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*; Sharpe, *In the Wake*; Glissant, *Poetics of Relations*; and Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*.
- 24 WHBI's call letters changed to WNWK after a change in ownership in the mid-1980s.

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Chapter 1. Deregulating Radio

- 1 McKee, “Radio Regulation,” 5, 35. On the raucous initial reception of “Rapper's Delight,” see Charnas, *Big Payback*, 39–40; Arthur and Harrison, “Reading Billboard,” 309; George, *Hip Hop America*, 41; Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 129; and Rose, *Black Noise*, 56.
- 2 “Notice of Inquiry and Proposed Rulemaking,” FCC 733 FCC 2d 457, September 6, 1979.