

Rap Rights - The Offing

 theoffingmag.com/insight/rap-rights

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July 21, 2022





Photo by Leo Wieling

For all intents and purposes, I'm good in every Hip Hop room.

Black men say “yes, bro” when I riff about the golden days of boom bap and show them rappers I love to bump. All the side-eyes and “sit this one out”s I used to get have turned into affirming grunts and syntax. It feels oddly endearing to finally fit in with conversations about a genre I've loved since I was ten, sneaking a burned copy of *Pimpalation* into my Barbie backpack.

On car rides my mama wanted me to pay attention to directions. Instead, I played and replayed Pimp C, Z-Ro, Bun B, and all the other Texas king talking of tits, purple drank, and doing some kind of violence to women. Hip Hop was (and still is) a male-dominated genre, so the problematicness was plentiful; still, I somehow felt *real* listening to Hip Hop.

Hip Hop was my first love, and it didn't love me back.

Every man or masculine Black kid on the eastside of Fort Worth wanted to be a rapper. I was no exception, and at 14 I started to stay up late just to memorize lyrics and write to “UGK Type Beats” on this new app called YouTube. The men and boys — the perpetual target audience of Hip Hop — I rapped around tried to tell me I had to write a certain way, a respectable way, to gain respect as a Black woman rapper. “That vulgar rap shit should have ended with Kim” was a common line spit by homeboys and uncles.

I wanted to rap about girls and being gay, mostly. After all, since coming out, I had all this desire and loneliness that needed to go somewhere, so why not in the blank space of drum and bass? Regardless of what I rapped about, though, guys loved to talk over my ideas about the music I wanted to make. When I was too tender, too vulnerable, and too queer, they ridiculed my verses and hooks.

“I keep trying so she can sense my sincerity / she said you're nice but your intentions lack clarity,” I rapped in a recording booth that was really someone's closet.

“Too wordy,” my friend said. “Unless you're tryna make boom-bap, maybe do something else here.”

The guys I rapped alongside picked and picked until I changed my message to keep the faux-community of Hip Hop lovers and doers I had. It was tiring, and my love for Hip Hop — an expansive genre stifled by inexpensive masculinity culture — waned because of it.

Any bar I spit after revisions was wack if I'm being honest. It wasn't poorly written; I could easily keep up with the freestyles and lyrical magic of my peers. But, what ended up coming out of my mouth was just shallow as hell with no substance.

"If you lookin like Nicki? Minaj is what I'm tryna do," I rapped. Those types of lines were loved by my peers. Though non-serious verse is important to any genre, it should at least have some meaning. I was emulating all the other misogynists, and I was doing it well.



In an alternate timeline some 260 miles away, Megan Pete was on her own journey through Hip Hop. In many interviews and tweets she's discussed how sexist folk have been against her as she's come up (mostly saying her lyrics are "too sexual"). Many grown adults critiqued my music for being queer — as if young people shouldn't have a sexuality, or as if they don't know that young people know what sex is. But, I know that the real reason is that misogyny doesn't like when sexuality is talked about on a girl's, or a woman's, terms. Megan's story felt familiar.

She also had the specific plight of being a brown-skin Black girl, which is, unfortunately, the type of Black girl that people love to poke and prod for their man-like features. I was a Black girl whose girlhood was poked and prodded, too. "You look like a man," a Black kid that wanted to hurt me would say. Often, I would ignore it, but I remember being too inquisitive once.

"What does that even mean?"

"It means that you got tits, but that don't make you a girl. You also got a mustache!" A bevy of Black boys laughed with whatever Black kid wanted to put their insecurities on me. It was haunting.

According to their limited views of womanhood, I had looked "like a man" my whole life. I never fit in with beauty standards, or men's desire, or Hip Hop. When I saw Megan being treated the same way — "Megan? That's Marcus" being one of the many corny-ass jokes ashy social media users love to hurl — it hurt even worse. It meant that no one who looked/talked/*was* like me could have a place in Hip Hop.

Though these kinds of arguments aren't particularly new or interesting, they are constant. To be a Black girl is to be Hip Hop's punching bag, so my double existence — as a Black girl and as a girl confident enough to investigate rhythm and rhyme — made the vitriol I got that much worse.

To be *real* was to be as close to tradition as possible. If you step into Hip Hop, it often also means to measure yourself only by the Black male gaze. I made myself into that type of *real* every time I bent and morphed into a girl, or a *female rapper*. I made myself into something

other than myself every time I told an imaginary person's story and uploaded it to Soundcloud and every time I answered to the pronoun *she*.

It was almost deadly.

Black womanhood didn't choose me. I spent years trying to rap "like a girl," trying to be anything *woman* by wearing that label like a cloak every time someone accused me of wanting to be a man. I tried so hard to be chosen by a gender that others wanted me to be only to feel like I was doing it all wrong. So, I had to be something else.

As soon as I got the language of *nonbinary* and *transmasculine*, I knew those fit more of my existence. At the same time I made these revelations, I decided against continuing to rap. I could say that it's because poetry and essay feel like the more true-to-me mediums for making sense of my life, but the truth is that the genre is committed to queerphobia and limited views of masculinity. Even though it was hard to give up my first love, I had to be *real*. But, what makes me *real*? That meant transness. That meant recognizing that Blackness and queerness (in all its forms) deserve to live together, inside me. So Hip Hop and I transformed our relationship to a listener-only one. If I couldn't be an emcee, I at least wanted to be a consumer or spectator of rap—it's hard to give up your first love completely, even if it hurt you sometimes.



*Nigga, yo money don't excite me, my wrist is just as icy
That's why I got these CEO niggas beggin to wife me.*

I discovered the unmistakable flow and beauty of Megan Thee Stallion in 2019. Like many folks, I was scrolling and saw a snippet of the *Big Ole Freak* video. As soon as I heard her flow, the raunchy lyrics, and the alias Tina Snow (which immediately recalled Tony Snow, Pimp C's alter ego), I was reminded of that Black girl that begged her uncle to make her rap CDs. I was reminded of a past self, so I had to see what she was about.

To my surprise, Megan's history showed a progression I hadn't seen since the early 2000s. Years of cyphers, freestyles at radio stations, and mixtapes that brought her to this moment. She followed all the *traditional* steps to becoming famous in Hip Hop, and it was amazing to see that come back in the late 2010s, and from a Black woman from my neck of the woods no less.

In my deep dive of Megan's career, I discovered a video of her freestyling atop the legendary instrumental for Notorious B.I.G.'s *Big Poppa*.^[1] When I spotted a K104 FM emblem, I remembered convincing my mama to let me listen to that channel every time we were ridin' 'round town in her '93 Lincoln in my youth. I pressed play on the video with a quickness.

I recalled that they are generally generous with who they let on the mic, so I was so elated to see Meg exude confidence — the same confidence in *Big Ole Freak* — at my favorite childhood radio station. I had dreams as a kid of being on K104, and here I was, living vicariously through her. It's the confidence, equally matched with lyrical skill in the tradition of Texas rap, for me.

*I gotta type, I like a nigga with ice, I like a nigga with M's
I wanna nigga that's fuckin' with me so I know these bitches ain't fucking with him*^[2]

Megan's lyrical talent lies in her use of internal rhyme and witty, Instagram caption-like lines. *Type / ice, M's / him*; she knows how to make seven rhymes in 10 seconds, and say something that surprises you (even if it's about sex or scamming men for five songs in a row). What has kept me a fan all this time is her commitment to authenticity. Megan is the same inside and outside the booth, inside and outside of petty popularity contests. You can see that in interviews, visits to radio stations, and her online persona. I also love that she has a personality outside of the typical stuff that is expected from rap girls — material things and talk about guys — and lets us into that through her anime and cultural references (See “I'm runnin thru yo nigga house like the Tomb Raider,”^[3] and, “They really puppets so I really gotta go and Geppetto.”^[4]).

This is the kind of tradition — freestyles, confidence, everything else that Megan exudes — is the tradition Black men and masculine people around me loved to say was *real*.



Immediately, I sent the K104 link to back-home bros and trans guys I knew. Some were as excited as me, but most others were indifferent at best, and straight up problematic at worst.

“This is mid,” some said dismissively. Others said it's too sexual, too unladylike, as if we didn't grow up idolizing a man that that said stuff like “I ain't payin' for the pussy but my dick ain't free.”^[5] It's fascinating because I've lived it — the double standard of men getting to be as graphic and sexual as they want, and people perceived as women having to be “classy.” It's wack, and I got tired as hell of hearing it.

The resistance that men and masculine people in Hip Hop have toward Megan is rooted in many things: misogynoir, yes; rigid ideas of what the genre can do, yes. It's also rooted in the same thing it was rooted in when I was starting out: a hefty resistance to healthy masculinity. Why else would Megan — a clearly talented Black woman with every checkbox that Hip Hop purists love — not be welcomed by all with open arms? Why else would I — a Black trans kid that just wanted to spit metaphors about Black girls and queerness — be told constantly that I wasn't doing rap (or womanhood) right? Megan even grew up in proximity

to another emcee, her mother.^[6] She even based one of her personas on the well-loved and revered Pimp C. She had already proved herself worthy, and so had I just by being a connoisseur of Hip Hop.

I like to imagine what new heights the art of Hip Hop could reach if its gatekeepers and fans didn't stand so firmly on the antagonism of women and queer/trans folk. Imagine how many more Megans (or people like me) are in the world that we refuse to elevate. Imagine all Black kids being able to listen and see themselves represented like me, and many other folks who have weathered the storm Hip Hop's forefathers caused, saw myself in Megan.

As the catcalls I got on Fort Worth streets get replaced with "handsome," and as the curves in my stature flatten into muscle, my opinion on Hip Hop — a genre I've loved since middle school — all of a sudden holds weight. Womanhood, the main reason Black men discredited my childhood CD collection or my knowledge of the craft of an 8-count and a rhyme, is gone. And so when I hear problematic shit, I can more easily call it out, but I — a Black queer trans masculine person — can only do so much without being hate-crimed.

The current state of masculinity in Hip Hop isn't fair to anyone. It's not fair to Megan, or Cardi, or the number of other folks in Hip Hop showing us alternative ways of being masculine. The people who spew vitriol at Megan need to sit with themselves and question their archaic beliefs that are hurting themselves and others.

What would Hip Hop be if we allowed all Black people to be whoever the fuck they are? What if we did not measure someone by how good they could use women as props, or how much violence/vulgarness/sinister disses straight men could dish out to their exes in the confines of 32 bars? What if we let Hip Hop artists bend the confines of gender through attire, subject matter, and the queering of how the genre sounds or if the people already doing this could be accepted, and supported by Black people?^[7] What would become of Hip Hop if Black queers and trans people didn't have to leave, and if Black cis men — the engine of Hip Hop — joined me in calling -isms and phobias out? What if the genre was something freer?

I don't know, but that sounds *real* to me.



[1] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3gptJO1WVtI>

[2] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3gptJO1WVtI>

[3] From the song "Freak Nasty" by Megan Thee Stallion

[4] From the song "Thot Shit" by Megan Thee Stallion

[5] From the song "In My Pockets" by Pimp C and Lil Boosie

[6] <https://www.vulture.com/2019/04/megan-thee-stallion-profile-big-ole-freak.html>

[7] <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/lil-nas-x-bet-awards-1371612/>

Every year after, I never forgot what my father said. This is for us. This is for us. This is for us.

He dreamt I was bodybuilder Kay Baxter. A bikinied beauty, yes, but not the figure I would have wanted to represent me at age 10, especially as the new girl in school, Black and visibly other.

She is a history of black girlhood distilled by time and brutality.