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From Rap to Slam: Music and Speech Intertwined

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David Querrien and Kevin Vrolant in conversation with Anne Querrien

David (aged 30) and Kévin (aged 21), from Paris, have been involved in the rap movement since the age of 12, like many young people from the banlieues or from the outskirts of the big [French] cities.

What changes have you noticed in the way rap has developed since you first discovered it?

David: Seventeen years ago, when I started to become interested in rap, the leading bands in the United States were Run DMC and Public Enemy. They were rivals and set themselves apart both musically and by the clothes they wore. Run DMC dressed completely in black – black hat and white Adidas trainers with three black stripes. Public Enemy were more political and were accused of being racist against white people; the dancers dressed as soldiers and the lead singer Chuck D always wore a baseball cap. There was a sort of will-o'-the-wisp character in the band called Flavor Flave, who wore a big clock round his neck. But – if we

leave aside the cotton fields – the real pioneers of rap were the Sugarhill Gang and Grand Master Flash and the media coverage they got. In the US, Run DMC, NWA and Public Enemy have established rap as a music that makes political demands, as the music of a generation. Similarly, IAM and NTM have positioned themselves as bands working to establish a new kind of songwriting in France. At the same time, there was a movement led by Afrika Bambaataa, the (Universal) Zulu Nation, which demanded the emancipation of black people throughout the world. In the United States at that time, rap was an exclusively black thing. There were black women on whom Afrika Bambaataa had conferred the title 'princess'. A girl was "crowned" princess in France, Princess Erika. Her role was to ensure that rap and the Zulu movement would remain permanent by fighting for black people's rights and for the widespread recognition of hip-hop culture (which includes break dance, graffiti art and street murals as well as rap). The fashion for starter jackets (a type of blouson jacket) sporting the names of American football or baseball teams helped to establish the movement. The starter jacket was worn by the handboy, someone who is a member of the movement. There were also Kangol hats and caps, and the big gold-plated chains worn around the neck with car mascots as pendants, which meant that young guys used to steal car mascots a lot to wear around their necks and the Mercedes badges were the most popular. That happened everywhere, in Paris, everywhere. Music was made very simply with drum machines. But you needed real talent to get a good rhythm going. Today, with music programming, you can use computer software to work out the rhythms. Before, the music was less sophisticated but, from the point of view of the beat, it was really good.

Like any culture, rap has developed, and hip-hop culture and rap have each brought something to the other, with the result that they're both still around. Hip-hop culture attracts the youngest members; recognized graffiti artists and street artists are making it into an art form in its own right. Hip-hop and rap culture is very avant-garde. In today's bohemian yuppie *bobo** milieus, people dress like the rappers used to dress twenty years ago, in old Adidas sweaters, etc .... The *bobo* movement is really about reclaiming the past. People who listen to rap are ahead of fashion and they listen closely to what's coming over from the United States. You very quickly become a has-been if you're not quick off the mark to try out new things.

Public Enemy and Run DMC were militant bands like IAM and NTM in France whereas the messages are far less carefully wrought now. The bands who followed them are more interested in making money and there are bands proliferating in every country, whereas in the beginning they were limited to the US, Britain and France. Each of the leading bands has one or more benchmark songs for this generation's young people. Public Enemy's song "Fight the Power" is on the soundtrack of Spike Lee's film *Do the Right Thing*, one of the first films to deal with problems between the generations and communities of immigrants. The song "Walk this Way" by Run DMC is the first to bring together rockers (Aerosmith) and rappers; before that, they were pretty well in opposite camps. It opened the doors of rock music to rap and gave rock an entry into rap. One of French rap's benchmark songs is a song by NTM, *Le Monde de demain*. The text "*Le monde de demain quoiqu'il advienne nous appartient, la puissance est dans nos mains*", when translated, means "Whatever happens, tomorrow's world is ours, the power is in our hands." Certain NTM songs described the riots in the French *banlieues* in 2005 ten years in advance of the

actual events. Also, IAM, always presented as rivals of NTM, were their counterparts in Marseilles (NTM were based in the *département* of Seine-Saint-Denis in the Ile de France). They wrote a song called "Red, black and green", the first words of which are "Why all the hatred, it's really not worth it, Shuriken will tell you that people are all the same"[1]. IAM have always engaged in a discourse of appeasement; it's reflective, sometimes a bit mystical. NTM have a more radical discourse. For purists, NTM is the most hip-hop band in French rap.

Kévin: It all started for me with Secteur A, with Ministère Amer, Passy, Doc Gynéco, Stomy Bugsy on the French rap side of things; I got into American rap almost immediately with Doctor Dre, Snoop Dogg, Tupac, Eminem; I listened to that for a long time and then I got into writing for about two years; after that I began to rap my words and I've been doing that for five years now. For three years, I've been attracted by music from all over and no longer just by American music. I want to draw from all sorts of music so I can mix them with rap. The trend nowadays is going more and more towards bringing a rapper with a different style of music into a band and so generating even more connections. I think the female rapper Keny Arkana is the most promising talent in contemporary French rap, both artistically and morally speaking. She says aloud what a lot of people think but never voice and she does this in words that everybody can understand. She describes reality and doesn't talk about a personal utopia, but looks for the one that everybody can share; she tries to raise people's awareness by telling them what's really happening. She is part of the Zapatista movement in South America, and refers to the earth as Mother Earth. She highlights the artificial and oppressive nature of our world: "Mental slavery, but nobody gives a damn because freedom just doesn't pay ... It's never too late to make the most of your life,

To make up for the delay it all starts today ... Make the most of your life before it's worn out by time, make the most of your life before it's gone with the wind"[2]. In France, she leads a movement inspired by the Zapatistas called *La Rage du Peuple* ("The People's Rage").

Rap has the reputation of being a macho movement …

David: There have always been women in rap because there were the Zulu Nation princesses who had equal status with the others as rappers. But it's very hard for a woman to make it in rap because the competition is tough. Women have taken a long time to come through. They used to occasionally guest on compilation albums (a collection of songs on a theme record) until it's got to the stage where a few of them have just kept going. They've emerged after being in the shade for about ten years. They have a very interesting angle on things, their words are often more mature, more reflective. Diam's was a rapper for years before she made it big. Keny Arkana too was rapping for five years before she became famous. Girls listened to rap and wrote words but they wouldn't appear in public to rap.

The move towards a much wider audience with greater media exposure means that rap loses its political edge; it's only material without any edge that gets the media coverage.

For many people, their teenage years were punctuated by rap, by both the records and the various fashions created by the music. IAM is the intellectual aspect of rap, with finely wrought lyrics, references to the pharaohs, to world culture, sometimes to the detriment of a very hip-hop beat. IAM is music to listen to. NTM is more for dancing to than for listening to. Assassin is the most

hardcore rap; it doesn't get much publicity but it's very militant. The lead singer was originally called Rockin'Squat and came from a middle-class background. You find out about the singers' lives from the hip-hop press which is targeted at a readership who can afford it so it operates at a remove. It sells an image.

Kévin: Rap is an outlet, like painting, to bring hope by sharing something in a group. In rap you find people who think like you but who express it in a different way; everybody can find a space for him or herself in rap, in French rap in particular.

David: For some people, rap has replaced personal diaries. Rapping means that you're part of rap even if you rap on your own; you're already part of the movement by doing it alone in your room. It's a movement made up of a few well-known bands and a mass of anonymous individuals who rap and are part of it.

The aim of the movement is not to make money for the grassroots, but to exchange words. It's like *slam*, you say words at random purely for the pleasure, without making money from it, without it being written down. Rap is free, it's the search for the phrase, for what will give the right rhyme for the beat. It's boxing with words: people who want to fight, we tell them to face off against each other using rhymes. It's called *clash.* There are *clash* gatherings in local halls, in low-cost venues. Sometimes rap is made when walking back home at night; you look for words to make people laugh, you turn everyday hassles into rhyme. The aim is not to complain but to laugh, to use words to transform things. Rap is accessible to everyone and at the same time very selective in the end. Now there are so many people rapping out there that you have to be really good to carve out a space for yourself.

Kévin: You mustn't just be good, you have to know how to fit into a whole world with its own rules. There are certain things you have to do to build up contacts and create a structure for yourself. You won't get very far on your own or without the right kind of support network.

What's the connection between rap and verlan** *and the street language of the* banlieue*?*

David: Rap is a street art that uses everything that happens out there as material, all the languages – *verlan* among others – that you find there, like everything that comes from the street, but there isn't a linear relationship. *Verlan* can be used much like anything else mixed by rap, but it's not about doing something that will be totally incomprehensible to other people. It's not a secret code; on the contrary, it's a song everyone can sing. There are different types of rap, all of which have different styles. There are slang words, but no systematic use of *verlan.* It depends on the message you want to put across. Rap is about getting out of the housing estates so you can reach other people.

Rap is not a product of the housing estates; it's open to young people from any background. First-generation rap was pretty militant and ideological. This generation draws its inspiration from a whole range of sources and young people in the estates have been identified with this music, which can help them try to break through and become known.

Kévin: Like any art form, rap totally absorbs everything it takes from other sources and that it mixes. It's the music of a generation of young people who refuse to be confined to specialized areas or restricted by norms. There are also bands that play up rap's image,

playing the bad boys. The production companies use them for their own ends. For example, there's a rapper called Booba who's doing quite well at the moment. He translates American rap into French. He fits well within the system and what it wants rappers to express and he's very much the successful boss in terms of his image. He describes the kind of reality the public wants to hear about.

David: Rap draws from all the different kinds of music in the world; it takes *samples*. People say that's really easy, but you have to do it to know what's involved; you have to know how to combine the right things, how to select the good sequences. The instruments of rap are very simple but they require wide-ranging musical knowledge and an understanding of a large cross-section of musical styles in order to be able to mix them well.

Rap is present throughout society now. In terms of ethnicity, sexuality and culture, rap is where people mix most. Millions of young people are rapping at the moment. Whereas within Zulu Nation, girls and boys were in separate camps, now there's a mixture of everything and people aren't interested in a writer's origins any more, but in the quality of their words. Rap is thought of as a musical form and practice that originated among black people; in fact people from all backgrounds are involved in this music. And some of them, like Akhénaton or Eminem to name some very famous examples, aren't black. Rap is not an ethnic music: it's a music open to people who all have in common a similar sensitivity to rhythm.

Rap music is a music whose origins are the most mixed in the world, and in *slam* (rap poetry) it's a music that relies entirely on voice and rhythm. This music is becoming more and more feminized and is opening up to all the other kinds of music, even to what's happening right now. The goal of rap is to bring

together, to arrange together, to create using what you have all around you, and to work it so that what is all around you generates life, generates a rhythm. People used to slam or rap in the cottonfields, with nothing but words to make something of their lives. Today, *slam* is the subject of open sessions in certain cafés, with grading systems like the ones you find in sporting championships. *Slam* improvises because it's *a capella* and isn't contained by a rhythm, whereas rap has to work within a system of four-four time. The *slam* sessions bring together people who've been doing it for years. *Slam* is free, it's a drink someone buys for you in a bar where you come to recite what you've just written or improvised. *Slam* is philosophy.

What's most interesting about rap is the collective movement that brings together people from successive generations, who all had very different ideas from each other. Rap is of its time and moves with its time.

Kévin: Rap says a lot more than a French pop song does. Today the music that takes a really close look at words and their meanings is rap. The strength of this music is that it listens to those who listen to it; it's also the fact that it succeeds in breaking out of the loop with those who listen to it. Many musicians turn to rappers now when they're writing their own music. A lot of rappers get their inspiration from great singers like Brassens, Piaf, Brel, Barbara or other singer-songwriters, but they think that musical expression today is routed through the mixing of music types and words, through a collective arrangement that draws inspiration from all sorts of different sources. Today songs are formatted, pre-prepared, including certain rap songs. Specialists write the texts and the focus is not free expression but the showbiz element. The world of rap is opposed to this art of stage performance.

* Translator's Note: *bobo,* an acronym for *bourgeois-bohème*.

[1] Pourquoi tant de haine, c'est vraiment pas la peine , Shuriken te le dira les hommes sont les memes.

[2] *Esclavage mental, mais tout le monde s'en tape, car économiquement la liberté n'est pas rentable … Il n'est jamais trop tard pour cueillir sa vie, Rattraper le retard tout commence aujourd'hui… Cueille ta vie avant qu'elle soit abîmée par le temps, cueille ta vie avant qu'elle soit emportée par le vent .*

** Translator's Note: In the French language, verlan is the inversion of syllables in a word which is found in slang and youth language. It rests on a long French tradition of permuting syllables of words to create slang words. The name verlan is itself an example: verlan = lan ver = l'envers (meaning the inverse).