



African American Literature and Racial Conduct

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Advisor: Herman Beavers

This summer, I worked with Dr. Herman Beavers on his project on African American literature and racial conduct. Dr. Beavers and I wished to compare the black community's initially negative reception of jazz music with the community's initially negative reaction to the emergence of hip-hop music. To begin, I searched through archives of historical black newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *Amsterdam News* and the *Afro-American* for criticisms of jazz in the late '20s and '30s. I also looked at YouTube clips of films from the '30s, '40s and '50s in which jazz music was central to the plot to contribute to my cultural analysis. I compiled these articles and film clips into a database of materials on the subject that I was helping to build.

The second part of my project focused on Hip Hop music, its origins in the streets of New York and its slow development into an accepted countrywide phenomenon. To construct a narrative of the rise of this new cultural trend, I searched through archives of alternative weeklies based in New York such as the *Village Voice*. As labels began signing hip-hop artists and hip-hop spread outside of New York in the early '80s, I searched through newspapers from the east coast and California for early articles published on this new trend.

I found interesting parallels between the rise of hip-hop music in the '80s and that of jazz music in the '30s. Much of the criticism of jazz music stemmed from the idea that untrained musicians who could not read sheet music could become successful jazz musicians because jazz relies less on technique and more on musical tricks and improvisation. Jazz was incredibly ill received, inspiring headlines such as "Jazz Age Threatens America," and "Jazz Demoralizing, Creators Should Be Ashamed." Other headlines made compared jazz to "primitive jungle music" and masses of discordant noises. Hip-hop music received similar negative receptions for its

“unpolished” style of dance, its connection with the growing graffiti movement in New York, and its connection with gang violence. Both jazz and hip-hop music were expected to lose popularity quickly. Just as popular television channels refused to play hip-hop, early radio stations refused to broadcast jazz. Both musical trends slowly garnered widespread acceptance and respect as forms of expression that arose from limited economical opportunities in the black community and lack of acceptance among black students in “more refined” schools of art.

This experience gave me valuable research experience and patience. I learned how to search through databases efficiently and generate conclusions. Because of the freedom I was given to craft my own project in accordance with that of Dr. Beaver’s, I also learned how to take a broad idea, tailor it into a specific inquiry, and find materials that inform me about my study. Finally, I learned how to communicate my findings effectively. As a result, I have gained valuable analytical skills that will contribute to my educational pursuits moving forward.