

HOW THE EAST COAST ROCKS:
A HISTORY OF HIP HOP IN HALIFAX: 1985 - 1998

by

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DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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For Shooty Boo

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ABSTRACT

Between 1985 and 1997 a hip hop culture emerged in Halifax, Nova Scotia through rap music artists' live performances at various venues, and by releasing original music on commercial and non-commercial cassette tapes and compact discs. This thesis examines the evolution of this grassroots musical culture through the lenses of Halifax's geography, innovative musical and technological trends, ever-present racial politics, and a strong "do-it-yourself" ethic.

This thesis argues that hip hop in Halifax during these years can be divided into two eras distinguished by dynamic racial and stylistic changes. While the 1980s saw a predominantly Black hip hop community take root around Uniacke Square and Gottingen Street, the 1990s saw a geographic and demographic shift as the rap music scene expanded and competed with the mainstream music scene of the city. In doing so, the integrated downtown hip hop community produced a significant amount of work, overcoming institutional opposition to what was perceived as Black music and navigating long-standing racial politics. Where no institutional support was offered, the hip hop culture in Halifax grew on the strength of its own community networks, and through the technological means that created a physical record of its creative output. This thesis chronicles this historical period to capture the beginnings of a cultural phenomenon of the musical interest and experience of inner city youth - rap music in Halifax.

Glossary

16: Rap lyrics are typically constructed in four-bar groupings. The most common format for a verse is four sets of four bars, and those verses are referred to as 16s.

Battle: A contest between two or more rappers, DJs, b-boys/b-girls, or graffiti artists vying for stylistic supremacy.

B-boy/B-girl: a hip hop dancer.

Beatbox: Percussive music making using only a human voice.

Beats: Instrumental serving as a platform for rapping.

Boom Bap: An onomatopoeic description of East Coast rap beats from the Golden Era derived from the prominent use of kick and snare drums.

Break/Breakbeat: The part of a song where all of the instrumentation ceases with the exception of the drums, which play a syncopated rhythm.

Cipher: A circle of three or more MCs rhyiming in turn.

Commercialization: Before the release of “Rapper’s Delight” in 1979, rap music was a live phenomenon, with songs frequently lasting 10-20 minutes. As rap music started to be recorded, the length of songs was reduced to radio standard length, dramatically altering rap’s original format and marking the end of the Old School and the beginning of the New School.

Crates: Taken from the plastic milk crates some DJs used to carry their record in, a DJ crates refers to his or her collection of music. To have ‘deep crates’ is to have a vast and diverse collection. It is worthy of noting that, in Canada, the adoption of the metric system saw the size of milk crates shrink slightly – making them too small to hold records. As such, pre-metric milk crates are highly prized items.

Crew: A group of people affiliated through a common activity or interest. In hip hop culture, it can refer to a group of rappers, dancers, DJs, graffiti writers.

Cut: Scratch a record.

Digging in crates/record digging: The search for records containing breakbeats and samples.

Dis: To disrespect. A perceived slight; also, a song directed at a person or group attacking their character or skills.

DJ: Disk Jockey. The original foundation of hip hop culture as DJs like Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash were at the centre of the parties where breaking and rapping became art forms.

Drum Machine: Essentially a sampler, but programmed to recreate drum patterns.

Flow: the cadence and delivery of a rapper

Gangsta: A sub-genre of rap featuring lyrics depicting gang life.

Golden Era/ Golden Age: Roughly between 1985 and 1994, a time when rap music developed numerous sub-genres and began achieving significant commercial success. Widely considered to be the heyday of hip hop culture.

Head: A person identifying with hip hop culture.

Jellybean Square/The Bean: Northbrook Housing project in Dartmouth

Loop: A break, sample or programmed pattern that, when played continuously, creates a seamless pattern that can play indefinitely.

MC: Originally, Master of Ceremonies. A debate exists within hip hop culture about the difference between a rapper and an MC - where anyone can be a rapper through the act of rapping, only the most skilled can be a true Master of Ceremonies, who Makes a Connection and Moves Crowds.

New School: Beginning with the commercialization of hip hop and extending into the early years of the Golden Age; the early years of recorded rap music, including groups like Run-DMC and Kool Moe Dee.

Old School: The period before commercialization, when rap music consisted of live rapping over a DJ spinning breaks.

Park, the: Mulgrave Park Housing Project in Halifax.

Posse Cut: A rap song featuring several rappers.

Programming (drums): To arrange individual drum samples (kick drum, snare drum, hi-hat, etc.) into a rhythmic pattern.

Pubs, the: The Public Housing Project in Halifax bordered by Bayers Road and Connaught Avenue.

Rhymes: Lyrics.

Sample: A small amount of recorded audio, extracted from an existing source to be recontextualized; the basic building blocks of rap beats.

Sampler: A machine used to record and play samples.

Sequencing: Arranging samples and loops to build the structure of a song.

Sleep/slept upon: To sleep on someone/something is to pay it no attention.

Square, the: Uniacke Square Housing Project in Halifax.

Synth: A digital keyboard capable of producing and recreating a variety of tones.

Terfry, Richard: From Mount Uniacke, currently known as Buck 65, but previously also known as DJ Critical, Haslam, Stinkin' Rich, Uncle Climax, Jesus Murphy, Achilles, and more, a cast of characters he refers to as the Certain Others. For the purposes of this thesis he will be referred to by whichever name is appropriate in a given context. If none is available, he will be referred to as Richard Terfry.

True School: A philosophical notion signalling a devotion to the ethical tenets of hip hop, including the Old School and the New School; authentic.

Turntablist: A DJ with advanced skill in manipulating records with turntables and a mixer.

Wack: distasteful, unpleasant.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

From the Crucible of Bondage

*"I am... yes I am... the descendant of those folks whose backs got broke
who fell down inside the gunsmoke, chains on they ankles and feet
I am descendants of the builders of your street, tenders to your cotton money
I am hip hop"*

- Mos Def, "Rock and Roll," *Black on Both Sides*, 1999.

This is a story about hip hop. It is a youthful culture born in a burned out ghetto landscape that gave the voiceless something to call their own. It is a new way of thinking about music, art, and dance, and the culmination of countless intersecting traditions. Hip hop grew out of the Bronx in the 1970s and took root in cities all over North America, recreating itself anew each time. Adaptable by design and ruled by a code of authenticity, its strong focus on personal and geographical representation forced stylistic permutations within the broader cultural structure. Essentially, anywhere that hip hop culture was reproduced, everything from the types of records available in local shops to the kind of slang used by young people in the area to municipal politics plays a role in differentiating one region's expressions of the culture from another's.

Halifax, Nova Scotia seems an unlikely wellspring for hip hop. The focus of its tourism campaigns are the city's nautical heritage, folksy Celtic roots, and seaside charm. Musically speaking, the artists receiving enough support to venture into national and international markets have traditionally been fiddle players, folk singers, and family

bands from Cape Breton, the by-products of what historian Ian MacKay deems an institutional cultural identity rooted in quaint, folksy, and stereotypically Maritime ideals.¹ On the other end of that spectrum, not many touring bands venture east beyond Montreal, leaving Halifax as something of a cultural backwater – rich in tradition, but not part of the mainstream. Halifax nevertheless got its first taste of hip hop culture in the early 1980s and the city was primed to receive it. Hip hop’s road to Halifax was a long one, going back much further than the Bronx in the 1970s.

The musicological roots of hip hop culture can be traced to the bardic traditions of West Africa. Cheryl Keyes has observed that bards, acting as both story tellers and historians, frequently made use of “formulaic expressions, poetic abstractions, and rhythmic speech, all recited in a chant-like fashion that prefigures rap.”² It was, however, when this tradition was imported to the Americas through the slave trade that it truly began to create the foundations of a culture that would manifest itself hundreds of years in the future. On plantations throughout the southern United States, Black slaves were housed separately from Whites, creating a primary home environment where African traditions could be observed in secret and could develop as a distinctly Black culture independent of White influence. Keyes continues, “Although the institution of slavery ended officially with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, African-derived locution, phraseology, and musical forms forged in the crucible of bondage continued to survive and evolve into newer modes of expression. The

¹ Ian MacKay, “The Quest @ 2006,” *Acadiensis*, XXXV, volume 1, Autumn 2005, Date accessed: 05 Jul. 2011, <http://journals.hil.unb.ca/index.php/Acadiensis/article/view/10626>.

² Cheryl Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 20.

southern-based expressions that provided the foundation for rap are storytelling, ritualized games (i.e. “the dozens” and signifyin’), blues songs and preaching. Ethnomusicologist Richard Waterman identified another factor, a “metronome sense,” that has informed the rhythmic nature of Black musical forms.³ It is a sensibility instilled by early exposure to musical clapping and call-and-response games and the rhythmic influence of Jazz, Blues, and Gospel forms that creates an innate knowledge of the central beat, regardless of how sparsely, disjointedly, or polyrhythmically it is stated. Rap music, built on rhythms and rhyme structures that incorporate call-and-response and signifyin’, is a culmination of these experiences. Black musical forms from the late nineteenth century like Blues and Gospel derive their mourning and their hope from that “crucible of bondage”, imbuing their expression with significance deeply rooted in the Black experience.

Cultures adapt technologies available to its practitioners and are disseminated through contemporary media which often serve as a lasting record. Technological innovation in the twentieth century allowed for the preservation of cultural history in a way that had never previously been possible. Recording and reproduction, and the music industry that the technology produced, documented a tumultuous society – Blues from the Jim Crow South, union songs from the Dustbowl, post-war jazz, Beat Generation be bop, ‘race records’ and their White counterparts, R&B and soul from the Civil Rights era, and rock & roll that tried to stop the war in Vietnam. When the Civil Rights movement began in the 1950s, it coincided with another dramatic shift in

³ Richard Waterman, “African Influence on the Music of the America,” *Acculturation in the Americas*, ed. Sol Tax, 207-218. New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1967.

American society: the postwar boom put televisions in the homes of most Americans who could now see what the Civil Rights struggle was about. Segregation worked in much the same way as slave quarters had a century prior; Black cultural expressions were observed in the absence of White people, who had their own social spheres to frequent. As images of snarling dogs and firehoses brutalizing Blacks were broadcast into people's living rooms, however, the legacy of slavery and segregation was no longer invisible to White America. Race became a central social issue, as rights and freedoms were weighed against generations of racism, fear and distrust. Progressives were gunned down, including President John F. Kennedy in 1963, the firebrand Malcolm X in 1965, the peacemaker Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy in 1968, and Black Panther leader Fred Hampton in 1969, leading to a polarization between progressives and conservatives that has shaped North American society since.

Mark Anthony Neal, a historian of Africana studies, has explored this notion further, uncovering the social connection between Black culture and musical expression, particularly as this connection applies to rap music. In *What the Music Said*, he writes, "Hip hop's best attempts at social commentary and critique represented traditions normalized and privileged historically in the Black Public Sphere of the Urban North. Arguably the most significant form of counterhegemonic art in the Black community over the last twenty years, the genre's project questions power and influence politically in the contexts of American culture and capitalism, the dominance of Black middle-class discourse, but most notably the 'death of a community' witnessed by African-American

youth in the post-industrial era.”⁴ The power of rap music, like earlier forms of Black musical expression, is rooted in its awareness of difference - specifically in the socio-economic spheres inhabited by North American (and, increasingly, global) Blacks – and of separateness from White-dominated mainstream culture. In providing a voice to individuals, allowing their perspective to be documented and disseminated, society as a whole is reflected. Neal continues, “the ‘party and bullshit’ themes of most early hip hop represented efforts to transcend the dull realities of urban life, including body-numbing experiences within low-wage service industries and inferior and condescending urban school systems.”⁵ Essentially, the content of hip hop expression moves beyond literal lyrical interpretations and the art form itself becomes a challenge to existing social assumptions about Black culture. The post-Civil Rights era brought some change to Black America, but conditions for many continued to be deplorable and with the advent of hip hop culture in the 1970s, Black youth created a framework for representation and social criticism that would eventually lend a similar voice to dissatisfied youth the world over. Before it’s globalization as a form of youth culture, however, from the Black communities of the rural South, to the densely populated urban centres in the North, Black music continued to be forged from the crucible of bondage.

⁴ Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (Routledge: New York, 1999), 136-7.

⁵ *Ibid*, 140.

New York State of Mind: Urban Renewal

*“Don’t push me ‘cause I’m close to the edge
I’m trying not to lose my head.”*

- Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, “The Message”, 1982.

In his history of the hip hop generation, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*, Jeff Chang describes how a decision made in 1929 contributed to the culture. The New York Regional Plan Association had designed the Cross-Bronx Expressway, a transportation corridor intended to expedite traffic flow into Manhattan from Queens and New Jersey.⁶ Quoting historian Robert Caro, he adds, “The path of the great road lay across 113 streets, avenues and boulevards; sewers and water and utility mains numbering in the hundreds; one subway and three railroads; five elevated rapid transit lines, and seven other expressways or parkways.”⁷ Aside from the infrastructure, the people of the Bronx were in the path of the project and 60,000 were displaced, offered a paltry \$200 per room for the homes they were forced to leave. Those with the means to do so - in the case of the Bronx mostly lower middle class Italian, German, Irish, and Jewish residents – left the area for the suburbs, while those with limited means, facing a housing shortage, gravitated to the housing projects of the South Bronx.⁸

⁶ Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2005), 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

Urban renewal was an idea that spread throughout metropolitan areas all over North America in the 1950s and 60s.⁹ Richard Plunz' *History of Housing in New York City: Dwelling Type and Social Change in the American Metropolis* describes the goals of urban renewal in the Bronx as slum clearing, a name borrowed from the Mayor's Committee on Slum Clearance.¹⁰ Famed architect Le Corbusier was praised for his vision of towers in parks as a solution to urban overcrowding and, for the New York City Housing Authority, it was an idea that would become a central aspect of the city's urban renewal plan. In the Bronx, Chang writes, "the Bronx River Houses and Millbrook Houses opened with 1,200 units each, Bronxdale Houses with over 1,500, and Patterson Houses with over 1,700 units."¹¹ These were massive structures, sprawling groupings of low and high rise buildings, surrounded on all sides by flat open areas, optimistically called parks.

Chang adds to this a bleak economic overview that included the loss of more than half a million manufacturing jobs in the South Bronx, a per-capita income for residents that was half of New York City's overall average, and a youth unemployment rate that hovered somewhere between 60 and 80 percent.¹² The idea behind this type of urban renewal was the unsound belief that the loosely defined park areas balanced the density of the buildings, creating affordable housing in a park-like setting. In reality,

⁹ Jennifer J. Nelson, *Razing Africville: A Geography of Racism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 4-5.

¹⁰ Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City: Dwelling Type and Social Change in the American Metropolis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 257.

¹¹ Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, 12.

¹² *Ibid.* 13.

the parks became overridden with crime that escalated as the density and population of the housing projects rose.¹³

Racial tensions became exacerbated as Black and Latino families moved into formerly Irish, German, Italian and Jewish neighbourhoods. Initially, gangs of Whites harassed new arrivals, but they were soon outnumbered, and large numbers of gangs, divided along ethnic, neighbourhood, or housing project lines, sprang up throughout the Bronx. The film *The Warriors* (1979), offers a fictionalized take on the Bronx at the time, showing a seemingly endless number of different gangs controlling various parts of the city.¹⁴ This was essentially accurate, albeit less cartoonish than the film's costumed goons. In 1973, police and media reports estimate that there were 100 gangs operating in the Bronx, containing some 11, 000 members.¹⁵

The slums that the city of New York sought to clear were neglected by their landlords, forcing out the last of the tenants. Arson became a regular occurrence in the Bronx as vacant buildings were burned down by hired gangs for insurance money at a staggering rate. By the mid-1970s, Chang writes, "the South Bronx had lost 43,000 housing units, the equivalent of four square blocks per week. Thousands of vacant lots and abandoned buildings littered the borough. Between 1973 and 1977, 30,000 fires were set in the South Bronx alone."¹⁶

¹³ Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City*, 272.

¹⁴ *The Warriors*, directed by Walter Hill, Paramount Pictures, 1979.

¹⁵ "Execution in the Bronx," *New York Times*, June 17, 1973. in Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, 50.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 14-15.

Urban renewal benefited Manhattan and the suburbs while the residents of the Bronx suffered a cascading decline in social support. In 1970, New York Senator Daniel Moynihan had urged President Nixon to impose a period of benign neglect upon the Bronx, citing fires and radical Black groups like the Black Panthers as reasons to leave the community to handle its own affairs as a means of pacifying what he called the 'race issue'¹⁷ President Nixon agreed. The Bronx became a sea of vacant and burned out lots. Gangs with names like the Savage Skulls, the Javelins, the Seven Immortals, and the Black Spades were among the countless others who wore their gang colours openly, fought to control of neighbourhoods and the underground economy, and were easily offended or provoked. It was a wasteland just a few miles from one of the financial capitals of the world. Nevertheless, it was a place that many people called home. Children grew up in the South Bronx with very few options available to them and the lure of gang life, which afforded a sense of family, protection, dignity, and empowerment, was strong.

Back in the Day: The Origin Story

*"Now way back in the days when hip-hop began
With Coke La Rock, Kool Herc, and then Bam
Beat boys ran to the latest jam
But when it got shot up they went home and said 'Damn!'"*

- Boogie Down Productions, "South Bronx", Criminal Minded, 1987

¹⁷ Geoffrey Hodgson, *The Gentleman from New York: Daniel Patrick Moynihan* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 157-158.

The history of hip hop culture has been retold often enough to take on mythical proportions. Sources are ample, however, as the culture's beginnings in 1973 have benefited from technological innovations and living participants who have committed hundreds of personal recollections to the public record. The story has been rendered in detail, with emphasis on different aspects in each case, in Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, Dan Charnas' *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip Hop*¹⁸, Cheryl Keyes' *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, Charlie Ahern and Jim Fricke's *Yes Yes Y'all: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip Hop's First Decade*¹⁹, and as introductory passages in countless other investigations of hip hop culture.

The simplified version of the story is as follows. In 1973, hoping to raise money to buy new clothes for school, a young girl named Cindy Campbell threw a party in the recreation room of her building at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue and asked her older brother Clive to play records.²⁰ Clive had grown up in Jamaica watching disk jockeys tote around enormous sound systems and throwing parties. Dub music had become popular in Jamaica in the 1960s, and its stripped down, rhythmic, manipulated instrumental sounds, called riddims, were frequently accentuated by toasting - "comedy, boastful commentaries, chants, half-sung rhymes, rhythmic chants, squeals, screams, and rhymed storytelling."²¹ After relocating to the Bronx, he made money as a disk jockey for parties and had access to the most powerful public address (PA) system in the

¹⁸ Dan Charnas, *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip Hop*, (New York: New American Library, 2010).

¹⁹ Charlie Ahern and Jim Ficke, *Yes Yes Y'all: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip Hop's First Decade*, (Seattle, WA: Experience Music Project, 2002).

²⁰ See Figure A.1, p. 154.

²¹ "Deejay Toasting", Rhapsody.com., accessed May23, 2011, <http://www.rhapsody.com/world-reggae/reggae/dj-toasting>.

borough (from his father, who managed a band). He adopted the name DJ Kool Herc, and his sister's party was a rousing success. The DJ had a friend who, though out of sight of the crowd, toasted in a Jamaican style while Herc played records. More importantly, Kool Herc had noticed that the young people he had been playing records for over the years waited for the break of a song – where the vocals and instrumentation drop out of the arrangement, leaving the drums to play a syncopated rhythm as a solo – to demonstrate their best moves. For his sister's party, he devised a technique he called the Merry-go-Round: by taking two copies of the same record, and two turntables, he could cue the break on one while the other played, extending the break's rhythmic pattern indefinitely²². The act was revolutionary. It was, however, a sloppy process.

Kool Herc parties quickly outgrew the recreation room at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue and moved into nearby Crotona Park. To power the sound system, Kool Herc and his crew - the Herculords - would break into street lamps and tap into the wiring, a fact which dimmed the lights, but allowed the music to play long into the night. After a few shows Kool Herc's merry-go-round became a popular attraction, his friend adopted the name Coke La Rock and, in combining Kool Herc's breakbeat DJing with short rhyming stanzas, unknowingly created rap music.²³

Another young DJ named Joseph "Grandmaster Flash" Saddyler had attended Kool Herc's parties and was inspired by the Merry-go-Round. An electronics wizard,

²² Robert Ford, Jr., "B-Beats Bombarding Bronx: Mobile DJ Starts Something with Oldie R&B Disks" in *Billboard*, July 1, 1978, 65.

²³ Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, 78.

Flash sought out a way of perfecting the system. He had seen another DJ named Pete Jones seamlessly mix disco records with the use of two turntables and a cross fader, which, when moved from side to side, provides a smooth transition from one sound source to another, seamlessly blending the sounds coming through the speaker. Flash added a headphone cue to the cross fader, allowing him to hear exactly where the record not being played through the speakers was being cued. Flash went further and innovated several other techniques which have become standard practice for DJs, including the use of Clock Theory (visualizing the spinning record as a clock with twelve representing the start of a break or sample, allowing it to be cued visually by counting the 'minutes' of its rotation) and scratching (Grand Wizard Theodore is credited with discovering scratching, but Grandmaster Flash honed it into a performative art.) With these new approaches to playing records, the DJ stopped being passive players and the manipulation of the records became central to the DJs job.²⁴

The first term used to describe what Coke La Rock was doing was 'talking DJ.' While Kool Herc was establishing himself, another disk jockey, DJ Hollywood, had been making a name for himself by treating live DJ gigs like radio broadcasts, picking up a microphone between songs and, evoking the slick rhyming banter of popular radio hosts, made up rhymes about himself, the venue, the crowd, and the music.²⁵ The trend caught on. A *Billboard* article from 1979 described the emerging scene as follows: "Rapping DJs reminiscent of early R&B radio jocks such as Jocko and Dr. Jive are making an impressive comeback [in New York City] – not in radio but in Black discos where jivey

²⁴ *Ibid*, 112-113.

²⁵ Dan Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 20-21.

rap commands as much attention as the hottest new disk. Young DJs like Eddie Cheeba, DJ Hollywood, DJ Starski, and Kurtis Blow are attracting followings with their slick raps. All promote themselves with these snappy show business names.”²⁶ To the people doing it, however, it was rapping – a word that existed long before this incarnation that was defined as “speaking freely and frankly.”²⁷ Initially, raps were predominantly about the DJ – highlighting their skills or urging a connection between the DJ and the audience.

A third DJ is credited, along with Kool Herc and Grandmaster Flash, with helping to establish hip hop culture. Kevin Donovan was a leader with the Black Spades, a gang from the Bronx River Houses with a sizeable membership. As a youth, he won a trip to Africa through a school essay contest and became interested in South African Zulu culture, deciding that the solidarity they exhibited in the face of colonial oppressors was a desirable alternative to the gang warfare that plagued the Bronx. He returned home, adopted the name Afrika Bambaataa, and, following what he had seen Kool Herc doing, began DJing parties of his own. His idea was to draw youth away from gangs through his parties – which were always advertised with the caveat *Come in Peace* – and into the Universal Zulu Nation, an organization he devised to unite the youth who had adopted the emerging culture.²⁸ Bambaataa believed in inclusiveness, and sought to make unity a central aspect of his parties. He is also credited with giving the culture its popular name. Taken from a bit of rhyming scat first uttered by Keith “Cowboy” Wiggins from Grandmaster Flash’s crew (and adopted by countless others in the earliest days of

²⁶ Robert Ford, Jr., “Jive Talking N.Y. DJs Rapping Away in Black Discos”, *Billboard*, May 5, 1979, 3.

²⁷ “Rap”, *Merriam-Webster*, accessed June 4, 2011, available online <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rap%5B5%5D>.

²⁸ Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*, 89,91, 94-101.

rapping), hip hop became the name ascribed to the culture and its four elements.²⁹ In all of the narrative re-tellings of hip hop's origins, Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, Afrika Bambaataa, Coke La Rock and DJ Hollywood are counted as the culture's most fundamental founding fathers. While this account is simplified for the sake of brevity, it nonetheless conveys that hip hop culture emerged when young people with few opportunities and few means of personal expression created their own environment, their own way of doing things, and their own style.

The Elements

*"I'm the king of rock, there's ain't none higher
Sucker MCs should call me Sire
To burn my kingdom you must use fire
And I won't stop rocking til I retire"*

- Run-DMC, "King of Rock", King of Rock, 1985.

Hip hop culture has grown into an international phenomenon that encompasses a highly profitable portion of the music industry, popular fashion labels, and endorsed and branded products, and its influence can be seen everywhere from children's television programming to high end car advertisements. At its core, however, are the four elements, as they are called: DJing, MCing, breaking and graffiti.

DJing, as previously discussed, is widely considered to be the primary element or aspect of hip hop. When extending breakbeats through the use of two records became popular, followed by scratching and other techniques, the manipulation of records into

²⁹ Jorge Pabon, "Physical Graffiti: The History of Hip Hop Dance," in *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip Hop*, ed. Jeff Chang (New York: Basic Civitas, 2006), 19.

beats became an art unto itself. The records in a DJ's collection are as important as the way in which they are employed. Much of Afrika Bambaataa's early appeal came from the fact that he had records other DJs didn't have and he blended styles of music that other DJs did not have the depth of musical knowledge to attempt. DJing became a truly post-modernist expression as the performer (the DJ) was not playing a traditional instrument, instead transforming already recorded music into new compositions through recontextualization, rearrangement, and the manipulation of the physical recorded medium.

The DJ played for the dancers. It was the dancers who originally inspired Kool Herc to extend the breakbeat and, while DJ techniques were developing, dance was the primary stylistic expression of the culture. The popular term breakdancing, literally dancing to breaks (breakbeats), betrays the diverse styles practiced by b-boys and b-girls or breakers, the preferred names for dancers. Historian Sally Banes writes, "[It is] a style of competitive, acrobatic, and pantomimic dancing. It began as kind of a game, a friendly contest in which Black and Hispanic teenagers outdid one another with outrageous physical contortions, spins, and back flips, wedded to a fluid syncopated, circling body rock done close to the ground. Breaking once meant only dancing on the floor, but now its definition has widened to include electric boogie, up-rock, aerial gymnastics and all sorts of other fancy variations."³⁰ Individuals and crews would engage in battles – contests between sides for stylistic supremacy, but also for "control of the streets, for neighbourhood fame, or to win your opponents 'colours' (t-shirt with

³⁰ Sally Banes, "Breaking," in *It's the Joint: The Hip Hop Studies Reader*, eds. Murray Foreman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York Routledge, 2004), 13.

crew insignia).”³¹ Personal expression – or style – is fundamental to all b-boys and b-girls. In an environment where opportunities for success were scarce, the ability to earn respect and a reputation through dance allowed for both conflict resolution and social advancement.

While graffiti – writing on public walls – has existed for centuries, its modern incarnation can be traced to 1971 when “TAKI 183” began appearing in New York City subway cars. The cryptic message seemed to be everywhere, leading the New York Times to investigate. In “The Politics of Graffiti”, Craig Castleman writes, “The results of [the] search, published July 21, 1971, reveal that Taki was an unemployed seventeen year old with nothing better to do than pass the summer days spray painting his name wherever he happened to be.”³² Taki was portrayed in the New York Times article as a novelty, a young man with an unusual but curious hobby. Writing names in subway cars, called tagging, was later traced further back, to Philadelphia in the late 1960s, but the exposure that the TAKI 183 article generated inspired hundreds to take up tagging.³³ By the end of the year, artists like PHASE 2, MARKO and SUPER KOOL had taken the basic premise of tagging and turned it into an illicit art form, covering the exteriors of train cars with colourful top to bottom paintings, some several train cars long. Viewed by the City of New York as vandalism (and trespassing in train yards while painting), graffiti became the target of an aggressive public campaign to clean up the city. However, criminality was not the point. A name or painting on a train would travel

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Craig Castleman, “The Politics of Graffiti” in *That’s the Joint: The Hip Hop Studies Reader*, eds, Murray Foreman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), 21.

³³ Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 74.

throughout the city, displaying the writer's (as graffiti artists are called) work on a broad scale. Names or paintings on several trains increased the exposure. The apex of notoriety came with being declared All City – meaning that the writer's work was represented in all parts of New York City on rolling steel canvasses. While some aimed for quantity, others aimed for quality and new styles emerged with words and letters beginning to stretch, bend, and contort into the abstract form that came to be known as wildstyle. Graffiti, and its philosophical underpinnings in personal representation, fit well with the other elements that followed. It had regional representation, as well: TAKI 183 lived on 183rd Street, just as JULIO 204, another well-known tagger (someone who tags, as opposed to doing large scale paintings, which are called pieces or throw ups, depending on their complexity), lived on 204th Street.³⁴ Graffiti was another expression of self in a place devoid of opportunity, and through its ubiquity quickly became the burgeoning hip hop culture's visual element.

The job of the first rappers was to promote the DJ. With personal style being such a strong aspect of graffiti and breaking and DJing, rappers would come up with rhymes to draw attention to their DJs skills, directly addressing the dancers and the audience. They were hype men, guiding the party and coaxing the room with chants like “Yes, yes, y'all! Freak, freak, yall! To the beat, y'all! And you don't stop!” and “Throw your hands in the air, and wave them like you just don't care.” Eventually, rappers grew into a more substantive role, rhyming their way through songs that were twenty minutes long, or more. Once again, personal expression lay at the centre, with each

³⁴ *Ibid.*

rapper vying to have the best rhymes and the best way of delivering them. Battles between rappers were also common, initially decided on whose rhymes could best move the crowd. Later, rappers would dis (short for disrespect) their opponent -, attempting to win by calling out the other's skills, appearance, neighbourhood, or crew - or by rhyming about their own physical, geographical, or intellectual superiority.

Hip hop culture has been, from its earliest beginnings, a do-it-yourself culture. Born in the basements and parks of the gang-controlled South Bronx, the elements of hip hop gave youth a voice – be it through the rhymes they speak, the tags they spray, the moves they execute, or the records they repurpose – when few other opportunities to be heard and acknowledged existed. The ability to take personal pride in representations of self and community was a tremendous outlet, bridging art and artist and making them one in the same. So powerful was the lure of the culture that conflicts between rivals, once the cause for a cycle of violence and retaliation, started to be settled with dancing, rhymes, and spray paint. Technology played a strong role, as well, with hip hop changing the way turntables were perceived. It was a post-modernist paradigm shift; an artist no longer needed to play an instrument to perform music, the ingredients for a new composition were the sounds recorded on other artists albums. Rap music, as such, is built upon the bones of all the recorded music that preceded it. Rather than playing a guitar or a drum, an endless number of previously recorded guitars and drums exist to be sampled. In a similar vein, graffiti took the idea of painting off of canvasses and applied it to the moving and static environment, turning the physical geography of the city into a forum for cultural expression. Creative innovation,

including these new approaches to musical composition and personal and geographical representation, was the driving force behind the culture in its early years. As the culture caught the attention of outsiders, however, it would frequently be taken out of its own context to entertain commercial desires.

In 1979, a woman named Sylvia Robinson, who had gotten into the music industry as part of the group Mickey & Sylvia in the 1950s, realized that she could make a profit by recording rappers. She assembled a trio who, in reality, had little experience and dubbed them the Sugar Hill Gang. Using a notebook of rhymes borrowed from a rapper named Grandmaster Caz, they recorded "Rapper's Delight", hip hop's first record. It had a profound effect and was the beginning of the commercialization of rap music. First, the song was a mere fourteen minutes long, incredibly short when compared to the rapping that was happening in the parks and clubs. Second, the rappers hadn't penned their own rhymes – one even refers to himself as Casanova Fly (a Grandmaster Caz alias) because it was part of a verse he had appropriated, violating the unspoken code of personal representation. Third, on a recording, there was no way to see what the DJ was doing. In fact, Robinson had hired a band to recreate the endless loop – a riff taken from Chic's "Good Times" - eliminating the DJ altogether. Many declared the recording to represent the death of the culture. Regardless, it brought about a sea change. With the role of the DJ radically minimized, the recorded medium shifted the focus to the rappers, and the rappers shifted their focus away from the DJ. There was a rush to record rappers (and DJ routines, as well, though less frequently) and rap music entered into the larger music industry. Lyrical content began to diversify and

ranged from the boastful party and battle raps to storytelling. Given the landscape and the socio-economic reality that early rappers came from, it is not surprising that stories soon came to depict those origins. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five released a song called “The Message” in 1982 featuring lyrics that strayed from the braggadocios party and battle raps that had previously dominated the purview of rappers, “Broken glass everywhere, people pissing on the stairs, you know they just don’t care. I can’t take the smell, I can’t take the noise, I’ve got no money to move out I guess I’ve got no choice...”³⁵ Rappers, in their central role on rap records, became the primary focus of media, as they were the culture’s most visible and outspoken practitioners, and rap music became what Public Enemy frontman Chuck D would later call “the Black CNN” – a chronicle of life in the Black community.³⁶

In the years since they were codified as the essential elements of hip hop culture, all of the forms have expanded and metamorphosed into more complex and more dynamic expressions. It has been suggested that the production of beats by a hip hop producer or the art of beatboxing constitutes a fifth element, but the core of hip hop culture has always been the original four. To analyze the development and history of all of these elements would be a massive undertaking, and has been done through specialized investigations in books, journal articles, essays, and through expressions of hip hop culture itself. As such, a limited scope will be employed in this case, and the expressions of hip hop culture in Halifax, Nova Scotia that will be covered are primarily

³⁵ Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, “The Message,” *The Message*, Sugar Hill Records 310953, 1982.

³⁶ Murray Foreman, *The Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip Hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 67.

restricted to the musical spectrum. In looking at the emergence of DJs, MCs, a live performance scene, local recordings, and the city's direct connection to New York hip hop through imported bootleg cassettes, the core of the Halifax hip hop community is revealed and can be tracked through its development from street side freestyle ciphers to major label record deals and national attention.

Methodology

*"Let's trace the hints and check the file
Let see who bit to detect the style
I flip the script so they can't get foul.
At least not now it'll take a while"*

- Eric B & Rakim, "Don't Sweat the Technique." *Paid In Full*, 1987.

Very little has been written about hip hop in Canada. With most media coverage and journal articles focusing on larger metropolitan centres like Toronto, Vancouver, and the unique Francophone hip hop culture in Quebec, popular and academic assessments of hip hop culture and rap music in Canada regularly focus on the same themes. A 1999 article in the Ottawa Citizen titled "Kinder, Gentler Rap, Eh?" examines on the commercial viability of Canadian rap music, its level of recognition by the Juno Awards – Canada's domestic music industry awards – and questions of how to, and who might, be successful in the larger United States music industry.³⁷ Another article, posted by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in 2005, again discusses commercial aspects

³⁷ Nick Krewen, "Kinder, Gentler Rap, Eh? Canadian's hip hop onto centre stage," *The Ottawa Citizen*, March 7, 1999, accessed October 30, 2010, available online <http://www.octopusmediaink.com/CitizenHipHop.html>.

of Canadian rap music and its relationship to the more popular American rap music industry.³⁸

The most comprehensive study of hip hop culture in Canada to date is Rebecca J. Haines' "Break North: Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture in Canada."³⁹ Haines takes a multi-faceted approach to the subject, with the role of race at the centre of her inquiry. Focussing on issues of access, institutional racism, and the often overlooked "critical interpretation of Whiteness" espoused by bell hooks for White academics studying Black culture (far too frequently, hooks argues, Blackness is the central focus while Whiteness is ignored), Haines' investigation reveals that hip hop, and to a larger extent Black culture in Canada, is a passed over aspect of the national cultural narrative.⁴⁰ There is a tension inherent in hip hop that resonates with Canada's tumultuous history of race relations. As hip hop swept across Canada's multicultural landscape, it found followers and new practitioners in diverse communities. This was an uneasy progression; the culture's Black roots made some Black artists protective and leery of non-Black involvement and representation. Further, institutional prejudices within law enforcement and Canada's metropolitan music scenes made it difficult for Black artists to establish themselves, as many performance venues comply with police pressure to discourage rap and other Black music.⁴¹ Conversely, non-Black proponents were faced

³⁸ Matthew Mackinnon, "Border Block: Canadian Hip Hop vs. America," *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*, March 25, 2005, accessed October 30, 2010, available online <http://www.cbc.ca/arts/music/canadianhiphop.html>.

³⁹ Rebecca J. Haines, "Break North: Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture in Canada," in *Ethnicity, Politics, and Public Policy: Case Studies in Canadian Diversity*, eds. Harold Troper and Morton Weinfeld (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 54-88.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 56.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 62.

with lyrics that ostracized them from the community, peers not accepting the adoption of a Black cultural form by a member of their own perceived cohort, and questions of identity stemming from the acquired sympathetic relationship to Blackness – all notions that cultural historian Jason Tanz has articulated in his book *Other People's Property: A Shadow History of Hip Hop in White America*.⁴² Hip Hop was born out of racial politics and cannot escape them, particularly in a country where, as Haines concludes, “The fact that rap is mainly limited to community radio stations and a few commercial stations suggests that it is not considered to be an important part of ‘Canadian’ music.”⁴³

The significance of race, as it relates to the arts in Canada, cannot be understated. A study published in 1995 describes the extent of its relevance, citing the forms of cultural expression chosen to represent the national character through theatre, television, music and film and which groups and individuals receive federal or provincial funding⁴⁴ The study enumerates several manifestations of racism in cultural institutions that affect the arts that include: Lack of access to funding; Marginalization of the cultures of people of colour; cultural appropriation; Eurocentric aesthetic views; negative images and stereotyping; invisibility of images, narrative and voices of people of colour; and lack of representation on boards, art councils, unions, and professional organizations.⁴⁵

⁴² Jason Tanz, *Other People's Property: A Shadow History of Hip Hop in White America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007).

⁴³ Rebecca J Haines, *Break North*, 85.

⁴⁴ Frances Henry, Carol Tator, Winston Mattis, and Tim Rees, *The Colour of Democracy: Racism in Canadian Society* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 209.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

It is important to remember that, in a youth-based culture like the hip hop community in Halifax, the participants and proponents are growing up within the context of institutional discrimination and are not, in most cases, part of the institution itself. In Nova Scotia, the spectre of historical and institutional racism formed the social backdrop for the developing hip hop scene. Even when motives were driven by a passion for rap music and a desire to create, race crept in. It is difficult to determine, at times, the extent to which race was a factor in any given event, particularly where practitioners may or may not have been aware of the broader ramifications and interpretations of their actions at the time. Regardless, in Halifax, race is a factor that cannot be undervalued, a fact that has been addressed in studies of Africville by historians Jennifer Nelson (*Razing Africville*, 2010) and Tina Loo (“Africville and the Dynamics of State Power in Postwar Canada,” 2010), and in official reports from the City of Halifax and the Halifax Regional Police Department (Clairmont, 1992) that focus on issues of relocation, urban renewal, and tense racial relations throughout the 1980s and 1990s. These documents will help to illustrate the social climate in Halifax that served as a backdrop for the development of the local hip hop community in Chapters Two and Three.

Outside of articles written for local media, few authors have focused on Halifax, Nova Scotia’s hip hop community. Occasionally an article will appear offering a snapshot of the Halifax scene – a few names of who is currently active and what projects or performances they have underway – but few have performed more than a cursory survey. One of them, Thomas Quinlan, who moved to Halifax in the mid-1990s to

attend university, wrote about the scene in Halifax and its members in Boognish, an independent zine he published after leaving the city for Toronto, and later as a staff writer for Exclaim. Articles have also appeared in Vice, though they are written in a provocative style and favour some artists over others. These have become invaluable resources, but they are not in-depth studies and are designed for a casual or already knowledgeable readership.

The only other author to have written specifically about Halifax in an academic study is Roger Chamberland in “Rap in Canada: Bilingual and Multicultural,” as part of a book examining hip hop as a global phenomenon called *Global Noise: Rap & Hip Hop Outside the USA*.⁴⁶ He begins by explaining the relationship between artists and technology, and with their own communities, citing the popularity of easily recordable cassettes and subsequent distribution through peer groups that helps young, independent artists to engage creatively with the culture. Further, he acknowledges that, unlike the United States, “rap soon moved away from Canadian Black communities and had a reverse ‘integration’ effect, its fashions, slang, and behaviour adopted by predominantly White, middle class youth.”⁴⁷ This is a significant observation, particularly in examining hip hop culture in Halifax because, in the 1990s, the local scene underwent a demographic shift that saw the production and performance of rap music move away from the Black community and into the hands of a predominantly White group of artists. After briefly mentioning the early success of MC J & Cool G in the late

⁴⁶ Roger Chamberland, “Rap in Canada: Bilingual and Multicultural,” in *Global Noise: Rap and Hip Hop Outside the USA*, ed. Tony Mitchell (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 306-325.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 309.

1980s, Chamberland focuses on how the emergence of a do-it-yourself mentality has resulted in the production of several albums from a number of groups, but relates Halifax's particular sound to hard rock band Rage Against The Machine and the traditional Celtic music that Nova Scotia exports, two claims that reveal the author's lack of information, as neither are particularly true. Moreso, the author suggests that DJ Witchdoc Jorun is the scene's sole rap pioneer - neglecting to mention several important people in the process - he provides an incorrect year for the release of a pivotal album, and he provides no context for the string of stage names and groups he lists as relevant. In short, Chamberland barely scratched the surface of a scene he did not fully understand and, in doing so, committed an error-laden account to the record that has resulted in a great deal of misinformation about the development of hip hop culture in Halifax.

This study seeks to break through years of accumulated rumours and contradictory accounts, and to establish a history of hip hop in Halifax from 1985 through 1997. These dates have been chosen to reflect two distinct periods in the Halifax hip hop community. The first begins in 1985, when locally based rap groups began performing in and around Gottingen Street, the heart of Halifax's Black community, and ends in 1991, when a duo called MC J & Cool G signed a major label record contract and rose to national stardom. The second period begins in 1991, when the scene began to move away from the Black community through a group of young rap artists who formed a powerhouse collective in response to the pop sensibilities that MC J & Cool G's successful 'double R&B' sound had associated with the city's urban music

scene and ends in 1997, when the group fell apart but left many of its members primed to progress within the music industry. All research is derived from primary source documents: recordings, media coverage, interviews from the period, and memorabilia and unreleased recordings held in the private collections along with posters, album artwork, press clippings and photographs from that time. In 2008 noted hip hop scholar Tricia Rose gave a speech at Cornell University and argued that knowledge of hip hops origins alone was not the elusive fifth element (as a panel of hip hop pioneers had suggested prior to her lecture), but that it was also about knowledge of the context in which the culture operates. Essentially, she says, the intellectual challenge facing hip hop culture “is not really about knowledge of origins anymore as much as it is about the politics of knowledge in [a given] moment.”⁴⁸ With this idea acting as a guideline, this study seeks to move beyond the raw facts of the origins of the hip hop community in Halifax, and to place them into a deeper context.

In her first book, 1994’s *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Tricia Rose outlines several points of inquiry for critical investigations of hip hop culture.⁴⁹ By applying this approach to Halifax, this thesis will outline a history of the scene’s development, augmented with assessments of the institutional and contextual factors that helped to shape it. Rose’s lines of inquiry are as follows:

- 1) The history of rap and hip hop in relation to the post-industrial urban terrain;

⁴⁸ Tricia Rose, in *Hip Hop Futures*, Cornell University, 2008, accessed January 31, 2011, available online <http://www.cornell.edu/video/?VideoID=397>.

⁴⁹ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University, 1994), p, xv.

- 2) Rap's musical and technological interventions;
- 3) Rap's racial politics, institutional critiques and media and institutional responses.⁵⁰

Rose includes a fourth, focusing on rap's sexual politics and, in particular, the feminist debates that surround women in rap music. In the case of Halifax, however, sexual politics are difficult to examine for a lack of sources. Every attempt has been made to identify the role of women in the Halifax hip hop community. There were several women involved, particularly during the late-1980s, but information giving that involvement proper context is unavailable. Masculinity is another avenue of investigation, particularly with rap music's penchant for boastful posturing. This too, however, is an aspect of the scene that is difficult to fully discern through available sources. Instead, the role of technology and the do-it-yourself approach that sustained hip hop practitioners will form the fourth aspect of this study's focus.

In following Rose's lead, this thesis establishes a framework that filters the history of a music scene through a critical lens, allowing it to be understood in a way that goes beyond a mere telling of a tale. Rap music's relationship with the post-industrial urban terrain, from the seemingly casual disruption of urban renewal to the social realities of benign neglect is undeniable, and is evident in both New York City and Halifax, Nova Scotia. Further, Halifax's geographical politics, tied to Canadian ideas of regionalism and identity, shape the nature of representation in Halifax's cultural expressions. Technological interventions ranging from cassettes and portable playback

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

devices to commercially-available home studio equipment changed hip hop culture as a whole and its reach as they, themselves, changed, facilitating the dissemination of cultural products from Halifax rap artists through a model more closely tied to North American independent rock music labels than the New York-based rap music industry. Racial politics are inherent in hip hop, particularly in an area like Nova Scotia, which has a history of poor relations between its predominantly White institutions and the Black community.

With these questions this study aims to find answers that shed light on the development of the scene in Halifax, along with its significant players and occurrences, while focusing on themes of community and place, race, technology, and the do-it-yourself approach that Halifax's limited opportunities for Black cultural expression demands of practitioners. This will reveal a fundamental basis in social networking, strong links to the epicentre of hip hop culture in New York, and a narrative that belies racial and stylistic changes within the Halifax hip hop community as it grew from the Gottingen Street area in the 1980s into the downtown music scene in the 1990s.

CHAPTER TWO: GOTTINGEN SIDE 1985-1990

City of Broken Homes: Urban Renewal in Halifax

“Black culture is here and it will never die
But they stole souls when they bulldozed homes
They took some pride, with no reparation
Relocated to public housing 800, 000 for expropriation

The next generation is here coming from Mulgrave Park and Uniacke Square”

- Ghettochild, “Welcome to Nova Scotia,” *In The Making*, 2010.

If urban renewal and benign neglect in the 1960s and 1970s provided the Bronx, New York City with the socio-economic ingredients to produce hip hop culture, then it is not surprising that Halifax, Nova Scotia’s inner-city was quick to adopt it. Just as the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway had displaced thousands, driven all but low-income residents into suburbs, and pushed those who remained into sprawling concrete housing projects, the City of Halifax adopted a federally sponsored program of urban development that was attempting to revitalize and modernize cities across Canada.⁵¹ The best known example of this program was the destruction of Africville in the 1960s.

Halifax waged a long war with Africville, almost from the community’s beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century. For the first fifty years of its existence, Africville bore the brunt of city officials’ unspoken racism. Rail lines were laid through the middle of the community, passing at times within metres of people’s homes. Rockhead prison, the city’s Infectious Disease Hospital, an abattoir, oil storage tanks, and a septic refuse depository were all built next to the community.⁵² In the 1950s, the city carried this tradition forward with the construction, just a few hundred metres away from houses, of an open refuse dump. Despite this industrialization of the northernmost tip of Halifax’s peninsula, the city declined to extend water and sewage

⁵¹ Bruktawit Melles, “The Relationship Between Policy, Planning and Neighbourhood Change: The Case of the Gottingen Street Neighbourhood, 1950-2000” (Master of Urban and Rural Planning thesis, Dalhousie University, 2003), 20.

⁵² Silver, Jim, “Public Housing Risks and Alternatives: Uniacke Square in North End Halifax”, Halifax: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, February 2008, p 11.

services to Africville or pave its roads.⁵³ These additions to the North End landscape can hardly be described as the benign neglect that the Bronx was faced with; it was a history of aggressive subjugation.

In 1964, writes historian Jennifer Nelson, the Rose Report – commissioned to assess the city’s approach to Africville – indicated that city officials were acutely aware of what was happening with the community and made recommendations in line with the existing approach.⁵⁴ Pointing to problems that, in most cases, the city itself had created (and ignoring a number of positive aspects of the community), the report called for the relocation of Africville residents – approximately 400 - to make way for industrial development in the city’s North End.⁵⁵ What is, perhaps the most distressing aspect of the proposed relocation was how little was said about the issue’s racial implications. Local newspapers, though they reported on the proposed developments, did not perceive the racial aspect or, at very least, made no effort to cover it. The South End, traditionally the home of the wealthy industrialists who employed the North End’s predominantly blue-collar residents, remained virtually silent on the issue. Racial discussions seemed secondary to progress and development and were likely viewed by interested parties in the city’s public and private sectors as a distraction from their true aims, modernization, land development, and progress. As would remain the case for

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Jenifer J. Nelson, *Razing Africville: A Geography of Racism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 77.

⁵⁵ James W. St. G. Walker, “Allegories and Orientations in African-Canadian Historiography: The Spirit of Africville”, *Dalhousie Review*, 77 2, Summer 1997, 160 and Tina Loo, “Africville and the Dynamics of State Power in Postwar Canada,” *Acadiensis*, XXXIX, Summer 2010, accessed, 6 July 2011, <http://journals.hil.unb.ca/index.php/Acadiensis/article/view/18419>.

decades to come, issues of race played a large role in Halifax, whether they were intentional or not.

Though significantly smaller than its Bronx counterparts, Uniacke Square, a 184 unit public housing project, was built along Gottingen Street to accommodate some of the displaced residents. When construction was completed in 1966, the city reportedly sent dump trucks to Africville to forcibly relocate remaining residents. While the destruction of Africville is, perhaps, the best known aspect of the reorganization of Halifax's North End in the 1960s (and a point of long standing racial tension in Nova Scotia), it is one of three elements that made Gottingen Street what became was in the late 20th century.

The North End of Halifax has traditionally been the home of industrial, blue-collar workers, while the city's South End has been the home to white-collared industrial capitalists, and the way in which each part of Halifax was treated by City officials reflected a deep seeded disparity that favoured the wealthy.⁵⁶ While the residents of Africville were being evicted from their homes at the northernmost part of the North End, the southerly North End residents around Jacob Street were handed the same fate. Their homes were bulldozed, as well, to make room for the new Scotia Square shopping mall, and the Cogswell interchange, which would connect the expressway planned to run through Africville, with the downtown core. In total, 1600 people lost their homes

⁵⁶Paul A. Erickson, *Historic North End Halifax* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing Limited, 2004), *xiii*

and were relocated to another new housing project, Mulgrave Park, to the north, along Barrington Street which opened in 1962.⁵⁷

These two instances of forcible relocation were accompanied by a third factor: the de-commercialization of Gottingen Street. In 1950, the same year the city voted to send its garbage to Africville, Gottingen Street was thriving. At the southern end of the street, there were 130 retail and commercial services, including restaurants and cafes, movie theatres, physicians, dentists, lawyers, and other professional services.⁵⁸ When Africville and the Jacob Street community were removed, construction began on the A. Murray MacKay Bridge and the Cogswell Interchange, respectively, and Gottingen Street was repurposed to accommodate the city's new traffic design.

Much like the Cross-Bronx Expressway, Gottingen Street's new role was to funnel traffic in and out of the downtown core from the suburbs and Dartmouth via the MacDonald Bridge, which opened in 1955, and eventually the MacKay bridge, which would open in 1970. Parking on Gottingen Street was removed to keep the roadway clear and traffic moving. The city, not wanting to limit access to the Gottingen commercial district entirely, opted to build a series of off-Gottingen parking lots. Unfortunately, this was accomplished by evicting another 660 people from their homes, and bulldozing a number of buildings to the east of Gottingen Street.⁵⁹

Whatever the intent behind Halifax's urban renewal plans, the effect was startling. More than 2,500 people, mostly low income and predominantly Black, were

⁵⁷ Jim Silver, *Public Housing Risks and Alternatives*, 13.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 12.

⁵⁹ Melles, *The Relationship Between Policy, Planning and Neighbourhood*, 39.

displaced from their homes and pushed into housing projects along a street the city suddenly considered more of a thoroughfare than a destination. As Bruktawit Melles noted in his 2003 study of the Gottingen community since 1950, “The city neglected... to examine the effect its actions had on the neighbourhood. Purposely, Gottingen Street became a strategic route connecting the two cities of Halifax and Dartmouth, and in effect the redevelopment study worked against the neighbourhood’s existence.”⁶⁰ The decline of Gottingen Street is documented in Jim Silver’s 2008 policy paper *Public Housing Risks and Alternatives: Uniacke Square in North End Halifax*. Silver’s statistical analysis reveals two indicators – population and commerce – as the roots of a dramatic change in the area following the relocations. With employment, tenancy, and income rates for both the Gottingen Street community and Halifax as a whole from every decade since the 1950s, numbers suggest that people with means were leaving the North End for the suburbs. Between 1961 and 1981, the population dropped from 13,070 (7.1percent of Halifax’s total population) to 5,194 (1.9percent), and the average income and employment rates dropped with it.⁶¹

Melles describes a commercial exodus from Gottingen Street. Through a decade by decade enumeration of retail, financial, and professional services, restaurants, entertainment venues, community/social services, and vacancies, Silver describes a community that was falling apart. In 1960, 104 retail shops lined Gottingen Street, a number that shrank to 49 by 1980 and further, to 28, by 2000. Vacant buildings, of which there were 9 in 1960, more than tripled with 30 reported in 1980. Community

⁶⁰ *Ibid* 31.

⁶¹ Silver, *Uniacke Square in the North End*, p12.

and social services were non-existent on the street in 1950. By 1980, there were 10, and by 2000 there were 19.⁶²

These factors produced a population around Gottingen Street that was predominantly low-income, Black, pushed into housing projects without the means to do otherwise, and left with a neighbourhood that was running away from under them. This was the true cost of the city's new mall and roadways - a housing project on the edge of the downtown core filled with displaced residents. As Stephen Kimber writes in a 2007 article on Uniacke Square, "even before the end of the '60s...a federal task force concluded [that] such large-scale public housing projects only created "ghettos of the poor" ...[and the] report effectively ended future experiments and discredited the theory [that] massive public housing complexes represented either sound urban planning or healthy social policy."⁶³ Halifax's priorities turned to suburban expansion and the downtown business district while the poor treatment of the city's Black community continued unchecked.

In the years that followed, there were two Uniacke Squares in Halifax. To outsiders, the stigma that plagued many inner city communities in North America was easily, if unfairly, applied. With limited opportunities for social mobility, increasing numbers of social service offices, and shops closing their doors, many viewed the drug dealers, drug addicts, homeless people, and sex workers frequenting the area as grounds to condemn the neighbourhood as a whole. As with Africville and the

⁶² *Ibid*, 13

⁶³ Stephen Kimber, *Inside the Square*, March 1 2007, StevenKimber.com, accessed October 21, 2010, <http://stephenkimber.com/2007/03/uniacke-square-mar-1-2007>.

construction of undesirable industrial facilities around it, the influx of social and community services offices along Gottingen contributed to the localized stigma by drawing in people collecting social assistance, those with addictions, fleeing abuse, struggling with mental illness, and homeless to the community.⁶⁴ Also similar to Africville, however, was the sense of community that residents felt.

Community alone, however, could not counteract the racial tension that existed in the city. Black musicians, in particular, had a difficult time finding venues at which they could perform. A *New Works Magazine* article from 1985 highlights the problem in interviews with Jeremiah Sparks and Corey Adams, two musicians who would later go on to respectable careers in music but faced significant adversity at that time. They speak of the lack of venues willing to hire Black musicians, something one anonymous club owner vaguely attributes to “the following they might attract.”⁶⁵ In response to the opposition presented by downtown club owners, many Black musicians began organizing their own performances. Sparks’ funk-powered group, Flexx, adapted what they played to the audience, willingly straying from their intended sound for the sake of finding work, but also performing at Gottingen Street’s Club 55 and community events, where crowds were more in tune with their style of music.⁶⁶ In turn, Adams describes the need for Black owned venues, saying that “Black musicians [in Halifax] have to make their own opportunities.”⁶⁷ For a time, this was facilitated in part by afterhours clubs

⁶⁴ Kimber, *Inside the Square*, 2007.

⁶⁵ Craig Benjamin, “Music In Halifax: Is There Room For Good Music in Halifax?” *New Works Magazine*, September 1985, accessed October 21, 2010, http://www.tranquileye.com/fog/music_in_halifax_1985/5_music_in_halifax_1985.html.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

that “flourished in basements in the North End”⁶⁸ to challenge the existing musical establishment. However, with the last of these clubs closing in 1984, artists still had to rely on themselves, and the community, to provide performance venues, something that would become increasingly important for young people, who had started to have musical ambitions of their own.

Planet Rock Landed on Us: Rap Comes to Halifax

“We didn’t land on Planet Rock!

Planet Rock landed on us!”

- Jesse Dangerously, “Get Fresh,” *Eastern Canadian World Tour 2002*.

In the early 1980s hip hop music had started to gain mainstream attention and export its distinctive styles of music, dance, and dress beyond the borders of New York City. Popular records like the Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight”, and “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five found their way into the crates of DJs in Halifax. While the new music boomed into the night from afterhours clubs along Gottingen Street, many young people in the city were exposed to hip hop music through a roller-skating rink known as Wheelies.⁶⁹ Its all-ages locations in Dartmouth and Lower Sackville drew crowds of youth wanting to hear the latest hip hop singles mixed in with the popular disco and R&B records.

In the early days of hip hop, breaking was regarded as second only to DJing as the central focus of the burgeoning culture. Breakdancing battles and ciphers were the

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *The 902*, videocassette, directed by Warren Jeffries, independent, 2008.

original showcase for style and expression. Although its prominence waned after the rise of the MC, breakdancing's association with hip hop music was the impetus for rap music's being played in roller rinks like Wheelies. It is what the youth were dancing to, and so it was played alongside the other hits of the day. In fact, breakdancing had gained such a foothold in Halifax that, by 1984, dance crews formed in Uniacke Square, Mulgrave Park, Jellybean Square, Sackville, the Pubs. These early expressions of hip hop in the city emerged predominantly in housing projects that share a number of socio-economic and cultural similarities with hip hop's birthplace in the Bronx, and evolved in a natural progression as Black culture throughout North America transitioned from the R&B and soul era of the 1970s into the electronic sounds of the 1980s.

JB and the Cosmic Crew was a travelling hip hop extravaganza that was organized by John Bruce, the titular JB. A breakdance group, fronted by JB, also included a DJ and a young rapper named James McQuaid. Together, they would travel to shopping malls and other public venues around the Maritimes, performing before many people who had only experienced breakdancing through its brief inclusion in the popular film *Flashdance*, released in 1983. Upon setting up, breakbeats would rattle from the PA system, dancers would square off in acrobatic contortions and James would freestyle, improvising lyrics to accompany the scene. With those performances, hip hop stopped being something imported from afar and became something that could be produced locally. In a 1984 article in Maclean's magazine, Cosmic Crew member Roger

Kelsie effectively summarizes the role of the group, “People gather around and clap on the sidewalks; we do it just to show we *can* do it.”⁷⁰

Hip hop can be conjured out of thin air, even in the most poorly equipped of environments. Nowhere was this more evident than in the freestyle ciphers that broke out in Uniacke Square in the early 1980s. Young people without many options for passing their time would congregate in breezeways and on stoops. To provide a canvas for freestyling in the absence of a stereo, human beatboxing supplied the rhythm, accentuated by feet stomping and crunching gravel and concrete, hands pounding on walls, and jacket zippers opening and closing to mimic record scratching. Once a beat was established, anyone who wanted to rap could jump in, either with written material or, in a display of advanced skill, impromptu freestyle lyrics. All these ciphers required was people with a shared desire to rap; they were not limited by the need for instruments, as was the case with so many other musical forms. Hip hop was accessible and continued to spread and capture the attention of Halifax’s inner city youth.

There is a peculiar twist in the rise of hip hop culture in Halifax chronicled in the 2008 documentary *The 902*.⁷¹ While many smaller urban centres were left to consume whatever rap music trickled down through major label department store distribution and network television programming, Halifax had a direct pipeline to the source. In 1984, Eric “Rico” Malbranche , a teenager living in Gerrish Towers (located between Brunswick Street and Barrington Street, near Uniacke Square), travelled to New York

⁷⁰ Jackie Carlos, “A twirling, whirling dance revolution”, *Maclean’s*, March 19, 1984, 57.

⁷¹ *The 902*, videocassette, directed by Warren Jeffries, independent, 2008.

City to visit relatives. While he was there, he used blank cassettes to record broadcasts by pioneering rap radio DJs Marley Marl, Red Alert, and Mr. Magic.⁷² These shows, on stations including WHBI, WBLS, and WKRS were the launch pads for countless careers, with the DJs showcasing the hottest new material fresh from the streets of New York's cutthroat rap music scene. They also appealed to the roots of hip hop by playing block party styled sets, composed of R&B and funk records that, while not hip hop music by definition, were the tools of the DJs trade. Malbranche returned to Halifax in the summer of 1984 with these recordings, and they spread quickly through Uniacke Square.

Cassette technology in the early 1980s had turned music into something more portable and personal. The ability to dub one cassette from another – through a fairly common dual cassette deck feature on home and portable stereos – meant that copies of tapes could be made quickly, while the ability to listen to cassettes on handheld devices with earphones freed people from the stationary nature of home stereos, and from disturbing public space with loud portable models. Foreshadowing the internet file sharing systems that would increase copying and sharing of single source media twenty years later, cassette dubbing allowed people to take the music they liked wherever they liked and share it with anyone they desired.

Malbranche's tapes echoed out of the shoebox he kept them in. The originals bore a glued on sticker that read: "Malbranche Productions." Copies were made, and copies were made of the copies, degrading exponentially in fidelity with each

⁷² *Ibid.*

generation. Swapped between friends and classmates, the tapes introduced cutting edge New York hip hop to anyone with a connection to the supply line. Through school, friends and family connections, copies traveled out of Uniacke Square, into the rest of Halifax, and beyond. Malbranche returned to New York in the summer of 1985 and returned once again with a collection of recordings, a process he would repeat several more times in subsequent years. It is likely that other people may have had similar connections and direct access to New York, but Malbranche serves as an example of how a relatively isolated community in a relatively isolated city can tap into a culture unfiltered by corporate influence, though arguably at the whim of the DJ's whose shows were recorded and the radio stations who employed them. As hip hop flowed out of New York City and into the rest of the world, it was introduced to different communities in different ways. For some, the first impression of hip hop and rap music came from pop rap stars such as MC Hammer and Vanilla Ice or from television programs like The Fresh Prince of Bel Air (a prime time vehicle for Philadelphia-based rapper Will "The Fresh Prince" Smith that first aired in 1990). Halifax, however, was introduced to the culture's origins well before mainstream influence made rap music widely available in North America. In years to come, the tapes that arrived in Halifax would play a critical role, but, in the years that they were being traded and absorbed, hip hop culture in Halifax was starting to be expressed through the joyful rebellion of its inner city youth.

Uptown Era: Hip Hop in North End Halifax

*"When we started out we were only punks
Just rappin on the corner, and all that junk"*

- New Beginning, "In Effect", unreleased, 1986.

In 1985, a duo called the Care Crew, consisting of teenagers William “Papa Lokie/Beatmaster P” Lokie and Dino “Dino B” Beals, formed in Uniacke Square and began performing wherever they could. Age, genre, and, arguably, race, kept them from downtown bar venues, but high school talent shows and community festivals provided an outlet for their work. Care Crew produced homemade recordings, among them a song called “Money” with an electronic funk styled synthesizer beat and the MCs alternating two bar stanzas about getting paid “big, big money.”⁷³

At a Queen Elizabeth High School talent show in 1986, the Care Crew performed, along with Nadine and Tanya Grey, as the hip hop dance group The Finesse Ladies. When the Care Crew came out a second time, to close the show, they performed what is affectionately introduced by the show’s host as “their famous song, We Are the Care Crew.”⁷⁴ With uptempo back and forth rhyming, and the turntable scratching of Troy “DJ Scratch” Foran from a group called the US Posse (for Uniacke Square), Care Crew exemplified the classic block party style of hip hop, with call and response interplay with the audience, motivational lyrics and the repeating assurance that “the Care Crew cares.”⁷⁵ In the audience, a student named Joseph Serra was coming to understand the potential for rap music on a local level.

One day, while sitting in a classroom at Queen Elizabeth High School, Serra noticed that someone had written rhymes on his desk. He, in turn, contributed some,

⁷³ Care Crew, “Money”, unreleased independent recording, author’s private collection, 1985.

⁷⁴ “We Are the Care Crew”, Care Crew, video recording, Queen Elizabeth High School Auditorium, Halifax, author’s private collection, 1986

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

and as the school year wore on, the desk's surface filled with rhymes, back and forth, with neither author knowing the other.⁷⁶ During the following summer, at a party in the Pubs, the two finally met. Patti "J.R.O.C." Jones (an acronym for Just Respect Our Culture⁷⁷) was a rapper and bonded quickly with Serra, who had been practicing his turntable skills with Tony "DJ Digby D" Diggs and Bernie "DJ Groove" Schultz in the DJs' respective basements.⁷⁸ The two decided to form a group, and settled on a name taken from a song by a member of New York's Juice Crew, MC Shan's "Down by Law." Jorun lived across the street from Uniacke Square and was intimately familiar with the rap culture that was spreading through the neighbourhood. Two of his friends joined Down By Law soon after the group formed. Steve "Steb Sly" Sim owned a drum machine, and Findley Toliver, Fiz to his friends, was a beatboxer. Together with Jorun, they forged a four-dimensional sound, with programmed drums and samples filled out with human beatbox, turntable scratching, and vocals. They did not rush to the stage, however, choosing to take the time to hone their craft in private rather than risking a sloppy performance.

This group was not alone. In the mid-1980s there were a number of young people around the Gottingen Street community who had grown up among the Malbranche tapes, the breakdancers, and the ciphers, who contributed publically to the

⁷⁶ Serra, Jo, need to locate exact source

⁷⁷ Deborah Odhiambo, "Home Bass", *The Coast*, vol 1 no 6, September 9, 1993, 11.

⁷⁸ Jorun Bombay, January, 11, 2010 (10:42 pm), comment on "In Depth Atlantic hip-hop article - Throwback from May 2000", *HipHopCanada.com* January 10, 2010, accessed October 18, 2010, <http://www.hiphopcanada.com/phpBB3/viewtopic.php?f=63&t=9492512>.

scene. While the groups established a hip hop presence in the city, the addition of a number of minor characters that helped to create a hip hop community. There were, for example, DJs like Luke “DJ Doc Fresh” Jeffries and DJ Eric Mendez who, along with Digby D, Jorun and Scratch, provided music at parties, community gatherings and, on occasion, at Club 55 and Club Flamingo on Gottingen Street. There were rappers and dancers, as well: the Wright Brothers, Derek and Barry, who were sometimes known as the duo Mice of Men; The Finesse Ladies; and Anne-Marie Woods, in a tongue-in-cheek nod to the Roxanne Wars, performing as Oxanne.⁷⁹ In Dartmouth’s Jellybean Square, a housing project not far from the MacDonald Bridge, Paul “DJ LC” Smith formed the LC Posse (Leather Cap) with Jerome “Chief Poet Baby Ice” Smith. Young people throughout the metropolitan area were writing and performing raps, while hip hop was still widely understood to be “a Black thing.”

If hip hop culture is understood to be derived from an earlier lineage that reaches back through a number of Black musical traditions, then, regardless of inclusiveness or appropriation, it can be described fundamentally as a component of Black culture, and was nurtured as such during the 1980s. The Cultural Awareness Youth Group (CAYG) was founded in 1983 by David Woods as a way of reaching Black youth, and providing them with the cultural education and support that the Halifax Regional School Board would not. There were Black student associations at all of the Halifax area high schools, networked via the CAYG, that fostered a sense of community, promoted shared interests, and, through regular newsletter magazines written by and

⁷⁹ Roxanne Shanté and The Real Roxanne are New York City rappers whose protracted feud was played out across as many as 100 songs during the mid-1980s.

for students by each of these groups, a means of having their voices heard. In a Dartmouth High School publication from 1984, Chief Poet Baby Ice (as Jerome Smith) contributed a diagrammed article on how to breakdance.⁸⁰ In contrast, in early 1985 an Associated Press article appearing in the Chronicle Herald warned its readership away from the 'breakdancing fad,' citing its potential to cause serious physical injury.⁸¹ This sceptical and dismissive view is reminiscent of rock and roll's public reception during its early years in the 1950s. Wary of the new music's corruptive potential, critics derided the sound (their racism thinly veiled through terms like 'jungle music') and the kinds of dancing that accompanied it. While breakdancing can certainly result in injury, the same can be said of countless other styles of dancing, turning the Associated Press' article into a seemingly selective targeting of a young, Black, street-based culture.

By the mid-1980s, hip hop had established enough of a presence in Halifax that local practitioners were actively and publically engaging in the culture. Several groups emerged, but it is misleading to consider them as entirely separate entities. The majority of these groups hailed from Uniacke Square, and the sense of community that bound its residents together through hardships endured at the hands of the city carried over into the young hip hop community. These were the offspring of hip hop's earliest appearances in the city, and they represented the diverse elements that had arrived with it. It was not uncommon for these performances to include a DJ, one or more MC's, dancers, or a beatboxer.

⁸⁰ Jerome Smith, "Breakdancing", *Black Youth*, Dartmouth High School student magazine, North End Branch Library Archive, 1984. See Figure A.2, p.155.

⁸¹ Associated Press, "Serious injuries risk of breakdancing fad", *Chronicle Herald*, January 19, 1985.

The Cultural Awareness Youth Group provided Halifax's young Black population with encouragement, support, and outlets for cultural expression in a city that had historically neglected to extend equal opportunity to the Black community. David Woods' Uptown Connection, for example, was a CAYG school program that placed artists-in-residence in Halifax's inner city schools to teach children the fundamentals of rap, dance, videography, and performance art.⁸² Throughout the 1980s, the CAYG responded to its members' interest in rap music with workshops to help build recording, performance, and compositional skills, and through performances that the group organized or arranged. Essentially, if you were a young, Black student in Halifax in the 1980s who had an interest in hip hop, the CAYG could help you pursue it.

When opportunities came up for hip hop artists to perform in public, like the annual Uptown Festivals that operated in the latter half of the 1980s, there were enough performers primed through their affiliation with the CAYG to piece together a cohesive hip hop show, enough demand, and enough people paying attention to push those with genuine musical aspirations further in honing their craft. For example, in 1987, the Uptown Festival's opening night was a concert line up of local hip hop artists. The Care Crew, Oxanne, Tanya Gray of the Finesse Ladies, Giselle "MC Shyluv" Cunningham, the Wright Brothers, and Rock On Productions were given a two and a half hour prime time slot at the party that kicked off the community festival.⁸³

⁸² Wendy McGuinness, "Artists to teach children rap, dance, video, drama", *North End News*, January 25, North End Branch Library Archive.

⁸³ "1987 Uptown Festival Brochure", Gottingen Street Business Association, Joseph Serra's private collection, 1987.

This growing hip hop community was not exclusively Black. Both Jorun and Scratch are White, as were others, but in the 1980s the hip hop community was predominantly Black. It developed in Black communities from Black musical and cultural traditions and, in Halifax's Black community, much of the high level of youth involvement can be attributed to the existence and influence of the Cultural Awareness Youth Group. There were not many opportunities for young people with an interest in hip hop, but the CAYG helped to create some and to prepare for others, and the regular performers, fans, family, and friends that emerged formed the first hints of a hip hop scene in Halifax.

Afrika Bambaataa was the first major hip hop artist to perform in Halifax. When he played to a meagre crowd at the Casino Theatre on Gottingen Street in September of 1985, a local group, aptly named New Beginning, debuted as the opening act. The group was amorphous, with membership extended to a number of people within the social circle of the group's core, but there were consistent central figures. Among them was DJ Digby D, who had established himself as a respected turntablist around Halifax. Filling the MC role were Eddie "EZE" Johnson, from the US Posse, and two rappers who had been a part of the Cosmic Crew, Michael "Michael Fresh" Doyle and James McQuaid who had, by this time, adopted the name MC J. There was also Shawn "Shawn-ski" McMillan, Wade "Dunk C" Simmons, Dennis Clayton, and beatboxer Joey "Joey C" Clayton. New Beginning had evolved, along with the rap music industry, out of the dance oriented days of the Cosmic Crew into a group of young rappers, intent on displaying their skills wherever possible.

New Beginning soon found itself at the center of Halifax's hip hop community. Well-connected through friends and family within Uniacke Square and the larger Gottingen Street neighbourhood, they drew a significant following and earned a reputation built on both skill and respect. The group's skills were firmly rooted in the elements of hip hop, and, while rapping may have been the driving force, the group continued to express the cultural diversity their backgrounds afforded. When they performed, they had DJ Digby D, they had MCs, and they had dancers. Much like the Cosmic Crew before them, New Beginning personified many aspects of hip hop culture, a fact which solidified their prominent role in the scene.⁸⁴

Case Study: New Beginning, *In Effect* (1986)

Hip hop music spread in stages, aided in part by technological innovation. In the earliest days of commercialized rap music (i.e., when singles were released and distributed in physical formats by record labels), many young people outside of New York City learned to rap by memorizing the words to songs like Rapper's Delight and The Message. In doing so, they learned the fluid cadence, syncopation, and rhythmic structure of rap lyrics, which, taken together, are referred to as a rapper's "flow." Eventually, rap instrumentals were released, typically being included on the b-side of 12" singles, which gave aspiring MCs a blank canvas on which to try their own lyrics. By the mid-1980s, the tools of hip hop production – turntables, drum machines, and

⁸⁴ Quinlan, Thomas, Interview with Witchdoc Jorun (January 11, 1996), *Boognish #5*, Thomas Quinlan, editor, accessed October 20, 2010, <http://handsolorecords.com/boognish/witchdoc-jorun/>.

samplers - had become relatively affordable.⁸⁵ Combining these tools with small, portable 4-track recording systems (initially becoming available in 1979 and allowing users to record up to four separate tracks on a standard cassette tape), rap music became something that could be produced in makeshift studios located in basements and bedrooms. *In Effect* by New Beginning is a product of this technological and evolutionary confluence.

The beat, produced entirely by New Beginning, is completely synthesized, beginning with electronic chords and a cloud of noise generated by a delay effect feeding back cymbal hits from a drum machine. As the drum machine, programmed by MC J, EZE and Shawn-ski, falls into a quick rhythm, Dunk C states the melody of the verses on a synthesizer keyboard, providing the bass and occasional flourishes of chords and electronic sound effects. During the choruses, the words “In Effect” are issued repeatedly from a sampler. The beat is sparse, but hard hitting and aggressive. This is a style popularized by Run-DMC, arguably rap music’s first international superstars, and found throughout the early releases from New York’s Def Jam Records.⁸⁶ For its time, it is a sophisticated composition comparable to the kind of production heard elsewhere in the world of rap music.

Lyrically, *In Effect* employs a back and forth rhyme style, with each MC contributing a few bars before ‘passing the microphone’ to the next. In later years, rappers began to adhere to more rigid structures, confining their verses to multiples of

⁸⁵ Suzanne McElfresh, “DJs vs. Samplers,” in *The Vibe History of Hip Hop*, ed. Alan Light (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), 170.

⁸⁶ A New York record label that grew out of a New York University dorm room into a hugely influential major player in the music industry.

four bars (8, 16, 20, 24, 32...), but here the structure is loose, and rooted in the earliest days of block party rapping.⁸⁷

When we started out we were only punks just rapping on the corner and all that junk
But now we're on top and we're number one the New Beginning career has just begun
The cold rhyme inspector, rap director and everyone knows we're women collectors
So clap your hands and just stop your feet and check out the New Beginning beat.⁸⁸

In the case of this song, stronger MCs are given more lines and a greater chance to be heard. This reflects the cipher tradition, wherein rappers who had more rhymes or a greater freestyle ability would be able to rhyme longer than those who only had a few to contribute. The entire New Beginning crew is represented on the track, and it serves as a fine example of the communal approach to hip hop in the mid-1980s. The content is also reminiscent of hip hop's earliest forays into lyricism. Each rapper, in turn, proclaims their prowess, or that of the group, while urging listeners to dance. There is no story being told or any central theme beyond the group itself, instead, the song reflects traditional party and battle rap styles of lyrics. The rhymes are simple, but delivered with style and energy allowing the personality of each rapper to take the lead in turn.

When we appear on stage everyone will freeze
We're in effect, but you're infected by a rapping disease
I think you need some help, but not by a doctor

⁸⁷ Four bar stanzas are the standard building blocks of rap lyrics. Typically the first three lines set up the final line, or punch line, which offers some resolution to the lyric. In multiplying these four bar sections into 8, 16, 20, 24, or even 32 bar segments, the lyrics maintain the rhythmic structure suggested by the beat.

⁸⁸ New Beginning, "In Effect," unreleased recording from Joseph Serra's private collection.

You need to be examined by a def hip hopper
So relax your nerves and control your brain
The beat's got to be funky, it can't sound the same
And our jam is played in the streets
So when we play the game you know we play for keeps⁸⁹

Ultimately, each rapper's role on the song is to introduce themselves and glorify the group as a whole: "Well, I'll pick you up if he slaps you around / Care Crew wanted me but I turned them down/ My name is EZE and I ain't no clown / I'm a devastating rapper and the best around."⁹⁰ In this example, EZE describes himself as a protector of women, and acknowledges the fact that rival Halifax group the Care Crew had tried to recruit him into their ranks. While it is difficult to determine to what degree, if any, the line is a dis toward the Care Crew, it serves as an example of how rap lyrics, though they frequently employ poetic devices, can also reflect real world situations plainly, without obscuring them through the use of similes and metaphors.

In Effect reflects of a number of trends in the culture of hip hop in Halifax in 1986. From the production quality to the boastful raps, the song is stylistically similar to rap music found anywhere else at that time. There is, however, an amateurish quality to the song, in the non-standard length verses, the inconsistent quality of the vocal recording, and the low-fidelity of the "In Effect" sample.⁹¹ These are not detracting factors, but rather help to illustrate the do-it-yourself nature that has always been a

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ The inconsistent quality of the vocal recordings may be attributed to degradation of the recording over time, but can also be a side effect of four track recording using low-quality cassettes.

staple of Halifax's hip hop community. Without professional guidance or outside assistance, the majority of artists wishing to make recordings taught themselves how to produce, engineer, and mix their own material. For New Beginning, recordings like In Effect, and the lessons learned during their creation, laid the groundwork for what came next.

How to Get A Record Deal: MC J & Cool G

"We're revealing our whole brand new concept
That we created while the others slept
And we stepped to the top of the ladder
'Cause what they say, It really doesn't matter"

- MC J & Cool G, "Back Ta Fax," *So Listen*, 1991.

As New Beginning solidified their presence in Halifax with performances in the Gottingen Street area and airplay on Dalhousie University's CKDU campus radio, two things happened. First, the group started learning about the music industry and, at a time when securing a record deal was the dream of almost every aspiring rapper, began considering ways that they could become more attractive to record labels. Second, as their stature rose, they became the target of other local groups who viewed New Beginning as their primary competition. As the 1980s wore on, New Beginning would eventually find a measure of success, but not without a cost.

Trends in hip hop evolved quickly throughout the 1980s, and Halifax's rap groups followed suit. In 1986, the same year that *In Effect* was recorded, Philadelphia rapper Schooly D released a song called *P.S.K. (What Does It Mean?)*, laying the groundwork for

what would come to be known as gangsta rap.⁹² At the same time, however, rap music was also expanding in the opposite direction, courting mainstream audiences with less aggressive, more dance friendly, positive material. While some have viewed this shift as the further commercialization of hip hop culture, hip hop music was dance oriented in its earliest days, and this growing trend can just as easily be viewed as a reclamation of the days before rap moved out of the park and into the studio, and the cultural focus shifted away from DJs and dancers toward rappers and producers.

New Beginning's roots in the Cosmic Crew and street-side ciphers around Uniacke Square, along with their representing of diverse elements in their performances, may have influenced them away from the stark production, gritty street tales, and aggressive machismo found in some aspects of the culture. A 1988 article in the Black United Front of Nova Scotia's newsletter *The Rap* describes New Beginning as looking to change their sound.⁹³ With Shawn-ski having relocated to Toronto, according to the article, MC J and EZE were looking to add an R&B or gospel feel to their music, something that would give their belief in hip hop as an uplifting and educational tool the proper sonic backdrop. They also sought out Delvina Bernard, of local acapella quartet Four the Moment, to help develop dance routines.⁹⁴ Finally, the group asserted, quite explicitly, that their music contains no foul language, refusing to exclude anyone from enjoying their work on the grounds of language.⁹⁵ In 1988, New Beginning was looking

⁹² Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 209.

⁹³ Mark Daye, "New Beginning for New Beginning", *The Rap*, Fine Print Publications, v.2 n. 4, April, 1988

⁹⁴ Anne-Marie Woods, who performed as Oxanne at Uptown Festivals and talent contests would later join Four the Moment.

⁹⁵ Daye, "New Beginning for New Beginning", 1988.

to grow from a group of rappers into a group of performers with a dynamic sound accessible to any and all audiences.

Unfortunately, by 1988, New Beginning had come to an end. As is the case with many groups, life outside of music, time commitments, and different levels of dedication to music as a career pulled the group apart. One member, James “MC J” McQuaid, had taken the groups musical ambitions seriously and, after studying the music industry as best as a young artist from Halifax could, he was not prepared to walk away. Believing in his vision of easily accessible hip hop fused with R&B and gospel sounds, he sought out Richard Grey, another former member of JB & the Cosmic Crew. Grey, who by this time had adopted the moniker of “Cool G”, was a rapper, but could sing with the kind of R&B feel that MC J was looking for. They formed a group, simply named MC J & Cool G, and agreed to pursue a career as hip hop artists.⁹⁶

Though they began writing songs and putting together routines in Halifax (originally working with Troy Foran, who had since changed his name to DJ Slice), MC J & Cool G decided that Montreal would be a better base for pursuing a music career and relocated there in 1988. Within a year they signed a recording contract with C.E.C. Productions, a subsidiary of Capitol Records. The record deal signalled two realities for the hip hop community in Halifax: It was possible for rappers from housing projects in Halifax to get a record deal; however, leaving Halifax for a larger metropolitan centre was a likely prerequisite. Regardless, MC J & Cool G were not entirely removed from Halifax.

⁹⁶ Roger Chamberland, “Rap in Canada: Bilingual and Multicultural,” in *Global Noise: Rap and Hip Hop Outside the USA*, ed. Tony Mitchell (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 310.

In Montreal, they worked with record producer Michael Brown to polish the style MC J had envisioned, one he started calling Double R&B, for Rap, Rhythm & Blues. But in 1989, MC J & Cool G returned to Halifax. Public Enemy, who were just beginning their rise to political rap superstardom, were slated to perform at the Dartmouth Sportsplex on October 22. The posters for the show read, “special guest: MC J & Cool G (from Montreal) – Down By Law – DJ Tuff (from Montreal).”⁹⁷ Despite the failure of the promoters to capitalize on the duo’s homecoming, the show gave a great deal of exposure to MC J & Cool G and to Down By Law. Much Music, Canada’s music video station, sent cameras backstage to speak with both camps.⁹⁸ The Chronicle Herald’s entertainment reporter Tim Arsenault was in attendance, and reviewed the concert the following day. In his article, Arsenault mentions that Down By Law “obviously has an avid following in the area,” a notion supported by the rawkus crowd chanting “Down By Law” at the beginning of Much Music’s coverage.⁹⁹ A late flight delayed Public Enemy’s arrival at the Sportsplex, and an hour passed after Down By Law’s thirty minute set before MC J & Cool G took the stage for a twenty minute “brief, but professional presentation.”¹⁰⁰ Another hour passed before the headliners took the stage. The stilted nature of the overall concert was, on a local scale, somewhat beneficial for Down By Law, whose unhindered performance garnered further press in the North End News in the days after the show. For MC J & Cool G, the lukewarm review mattered less than the Much Music coverage, the opening slot for Public Enemy, and the concert footage

⁹⁷ “Public Enemy Promotional Flyer”, Joseph Serra’s private collection, 1989. See Figure A.3, p.156.

⁹⁸ “Hip Hop in Halifax”, *Soul In The City*, Much Music, CHUM, Toronto, Ontario, October, author’s private collection, 1989.

⁹⁹ Tim Arsenault, “Public Enemy, late but ferocious”, *Chronicle Herald*, October 23, 1989.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

for the video of their impending single “So Listen.” A cable access video had been shot for an earlier, grittier version of the song during renovations in Uniacke Square, with crowds of Gottingen Street residents backing the duo that, when edited together with shots of their Sportsplex concert represented both where they came from and where they wanted to go.¹⁰¹

In 1990, after returning to Montreal, the group finished and released the album, named *So Listen* after the lead single, and the video with it. “So Listen” found its way into heavy rotation on both radio and on Much Music, bolstered by the inoffensive and easy to understand lyrics and the highly polished production.¹⁰² MC J & Cool G’s music was a Canadian counterpoint to the New Jack Swing style that was gaining popularity in the United States. New Jack Swing embodied MC J’s vision of blending rap and R&B styled vocals with dance pop production, and *So Listen* was released just in time for the duo to be swept along for the ride as its purveyors climbed the North American charts. This would include mainstream successes like touring as an opening act for MC Hammer and Vanilla Ice (two rappers whose dance friendly rap music placed them at the pinnacle of the top 40 in 1990 and 1991), appearing in a public service announcement rapping about the dangers of drinking and driving, and garnering three Juno nominations for their “So Listen” single.

For their part, MC J & Cool G tried to give something back to the local hip hop community that had nurtured them. Just as they had helped Down By Law gain

¹⁰¹ “So Listen” by MC J & Cool G, video clip, 1991, [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SfCEVd5eHBQ), accessed October 22, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SfCEVd5eHBQ>.

¹⁰² See Figure A.4, p. 157.

exposure through an opening spot at the Public Enemy concert, they provided a similar, albeit more substantial, opportunity for an all-female group called 2on2. Consisting of MCs ShyLuv and Terreia “Shell Rock” Robart, and Nicole “DJ Pounzi” Paris, the trio (who were occasionally joined by dancers and backing vocalists) were managed by Digby D and Shawn Ski, both formerly of New Beginning.¹⁰³ The group was a fixture in the Halifax hip hop community. They performed regularly at Club 55, Dalhousie, and Uptown Festivals, as openers for touring major label acts like 3rd Base and Ice-T, and at shows they organized themselves at Club Flamingo, an all ages club in what was formerly the Cove Theatre on Gottingen, which would include dancers and singers, and opportunities for other local rap acts to perform.¹⁰⁴ On one occasion, in 1990, MC J & Cool G joined the bill and forged a loose partnership with 2on2. This drew the attention of CEC Records, MC J & Cool G’s label, who took 2on2 to Montreal, where they performed for new audiences and recorded a song called “Seasons Change” at a studio in *Côte-des-Neige*.

On returning to Halifax in January 1991, 2on2 continued their affiliation with MC J & Cool G. In April of 1991, both groups performed in Halifax at the Forum with Maestro Fresh Wes (who was arguably the most recognizable hip hop artist in Canada at the time), popular Ottawa group Ground Control, and a North Preston dance crew called Canada’s Most Wanted (Terry Dixon, Rico Willis, and Darren Simmonds).¹⁰⁵ After the Maestro Fresh Wes show, both 2on2 and Canada’s Most Wanted joined MC J & Cool G

¹⁰³ As Homeboy Productions, Digby D and Shawn Ski also managed Down By Law for a time.

¹⁰⁴ Among the singers who came to perform at the Cove was Jordan Croucher, years before he became a successful recording artist in his own right.

¹⁰⁵ “Performer All Access Pass”, Giselle Cunningham’s private collection, 1991.

for a tour of Nova Scotia, performing in places as varied as Sydney, Yarmouth, Truro, Weymouth, and Digby.¹⁰⁶

By the time of their Nova Scotian tour in 1991, MC J & Cool G had demonstrated their willingness to maintain their ties to the province. There were other opportunities for the group elsewhere, which were not passed over, but in returning to play shows with local acts at the Cove Theatre, opening for touring artists, and taking their music into parts of the province that had rare access to hip hop music, MC J & Cool G affirmed the possibilities available to young hip hop artists in Halifax. For the DJ's playing the "So Listen" 12" at parties, the fans at their shows, and the rappers writing rhymes in their bedrooms, MC J & Cool G were proof that entry into the professional recording industry was possible. The duo signed a record contract, toured, and had a video on Much Music - more than any other Halifax group could claim at the time. Beyond their own contributions, and the benefits gleaned from them, they helped bring attention to groups like Down By Law and 2on2. However, MC J & Cool G's reception in Halifax was not always positive and there remained an unspoken ambivalence between the group and others in the city they had left behind.

Case Study: MC J & Cool G, *Back Ta Fax* (1990)

Adopting a mainstream image can be a risky move for hip hop artists. In one sense, it opens doors within an entertainment industry that struggled with obscenity in the 1980s. In 1985, a group of American politicians' wives calling themselves the Parent's Music Resource Centre began a public campaign to chastise the music industry

¹⁰⁶ Giselle Cunningham, email message to the author, March 4, 2011

for releasing records that the group deemed to be vulgar and offensive. These claims, tied to what the group described as the decline of traditional family values, led to a congressional hearing in 1985, effectively calling artistic licence and the ethics of record companies into question in a highly publicized forum.¹⁰⁷ In spite of scathing rebukes of the PMRC's efforts from high profile artists Frank Zappa, Dee Snider (of Twisted Sister) and John Denver, the music industry relented somewhat, and agreed to label potentially offensive material with a sticker that read "Parental Advisory: Explicit Content."¹⁰⁸

In one sense, making music that could avoid such labeling meant that parents and radio programmers alike could, at a glance, know that the content of the recording was safe for all listeners. Record stores could use the stickers to impose age restrictions, as well, limiting minors to purchasing albums not marked by the Parental Advisory label or, in some cases, refusing to carry albums that bore it. For an up-and-coming group, this had the potential to open doors that might otherwise remain closed due to concerns over language. In another sense, though, it could be viewed as siding with those who sought to censor music. If hip hop was a reflection of life in the streets, and of disenfranchised youth, then attempting to limit rap's voice based on a sense of decency held by a portion of its audience (arguably a portion only loosely acquainted with rap music or hip hop culture, in general) goes against the quintessential rallying cries of the culture – don't front, keep it real, do you.¹⁰⁹ For some, such as rappers

¹⁰⁷ The PMRC later targeted vulgarity in rap music, pushing the issue back into Congressional discussions in 1992, following the "Cop Killer" controversy.

¹⁰⁸ Claude Chastagner, "The Parents' Music Resource Center: from information to censorship", *Popular Music*, vol. 8 no. 2, 1999, 179.

¹⁰⁹ All expressions which essentially mean the same thing – be honest about who you are, and represent yourself as such.

Chuck D, Ice-T, and Ice Cube who rapped about the issue on the 1992 song “Sticka,” the sticker became a mark of authenticity, an indication that the contents of the album were raw product, uncensored by outside forces.¹¹⁰

In a culture that places authenticity at the forefront of its aims, Parental Advisory stickers became one of the few visible lines in the grey area between what was viewed as authentic or real, and what was written off as contrived and artificial. This division, subjective though it may be, does play a role in hip hop culture. Cheryl Keyes writes, “While rap continues to cross over into wider acceptance, many rap artists strive to remain ‘underground,’ refusing to identify with a pop market and insisting that staying ‘real’ necessitates rawness, authenticity, and a continued connection with the streets.”¹¹¹ Hip hop culture adopted, almost at the beginning, the attitude that any performer whose skills or authenticity were questionable could be held to account. Pointing out the flaws in a rival, while asserting personal dominance is a hallmark of hip hop culture, be it in the form of a graffiti writer painting over a lesser work, a defiant b-girl glowering in the face of a competitor after executing a difficult move, or an MC picking apart their opponent in a rap battle. For a rapper or a rap group in the early 1990s, regardless of what the actual intentions or reasons for doing so might be, capitulating to the brand of morality touted by the PMRC brought with it the risk of being branded as soft, or worse, as sell-outs. There are many questions raised by this devotion to the idea of realness, and more surrounding the very notion of realness itself, but in the case of MC J & Cool G it is an issue that fuelled tension between the

¹¹⁰ Terminator X and the Godfathers of Threat, “Sticka,” *Super Bad*, Def Jam 314 523 343-2, 1994.

¹¹¹ Cheryl Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), p122.

group and the hip hop community in Halifax. While “So Listen” was the group’s best known song, another from their debut album, “Back Ta Fax”, addresses their upbringing in Uniacke Square and Mulgrave Park and illuminates the duo’s views regarding their hometown.

Well, G said to me, “It’s time we departed
It’s been a long time, since we started
To write our rhymes and rock to the beat
Doing the music we call Double R&B
Through the streets of Halifax
Is where we’re from, but it’s not where it’s at
Back in the days, we were singing and rapping
For a long time, but nothing was happening.”¹¹²

The song begins with an R&B chorus declaring the return of MC J & Cool G to Halifax, but quickly turns into criticism of unchecked crime in the city. Cool G speaks of the crime that existed within his peer group in Mulgrave Park and that, if those friends of his could “wake up”, they could organize their lives and find a better path, as Cool G himself had done. MC J takes the theme further in describing his own experiences in Uniacke Square, going so far as to identify one resident as a car thief and drug addict.

Gritty tales of the lives of Black youth in project housing were a common theme in rap lyrics in 1991. Two years earlier, a group called NWA (Niggaz With Attitude) from Compton, California gained massive media attention with the release of their debut

¹¹² MC J & Cool G, “Back Ta Fax,” *So Listen*, Capitol Records/CEC Productions, 1991.

album *Straight Outta Compton*. The first three songs on the record – the title track, ‘Fuck Tha Police’, and ‘Gangsta, Gangsta’ – featured unrepentant lyrics celebrating the gang culture of money, weapons, women, drugs, and open defiance of police authority. Their songs, “Fuck The Police” in particular, brought great attention to the tense relationship between the police and Black communities, in Los Angeles, and in metropolitan areas all over North America. The public debate that NWA (and, later, others) contributed to was waged into March of 1991, when the beating of motorist Rodney King by four Los Angeles police officers was captured on video, and the issue of police brutality against the Black community came to a head with the six-day Los Angeles riots in April and May of 1992.¹¹³ It was in that same year that rapper Ice-T drew the PMRC out of their slumber to fuel the protest over the song ‘Cop Killer’. Although the song was on an album by Ice-T’s heavy metal side project Body Count, rap music took the blame and gangsta rap became the center of yet another debate on decency and morality in music. In essence, despite the wide range of conceptual schools that fell under the banner of hip hop at the height of what would later be called its Golden Age (a period extending from roughly 1985 and 1994) - from Afrocentric rap to politically-driven conscious rap, dance-oriented party rap, East Coast street rap, and more - the aggressive and violent gangsta rap rose to the forefront of the culture’s social significance and lines were drawn between rap music’s supporters and its detractors.

MC J & Cool G in no way represented gangsta rap; in fact, their stylistic approach was very much the opposite. *So Listen* was free of foul language, something that had

¹¹³ Halifax experienced its own clashes between the Black community and police in 1991. These events will be covered in Chapter Three.

become increasingly prevalent in rap music. Further, the few times that the lyrics included any content that might be deemed gangsta (drugs, street life), they were critical of the effects of drug related crime in their community. The second song on their album, “Dope Enuff”, was a direct attack on problems associated with crack cocaine in Uniacke Square and implored the community to “stand up and fight back.”¹¹⁴ Their stance against drug and alcohol abuse was one that the group felt strongly enough about that it was included on their record, shared with audiences at shows, and broadcast through a Public Service Announcement about drinking and driving.¹¹⁵ While serving the community was something that had been engrained in hip hop culture, through its block party roots, community development interests, and countless reiterations of youth rallying to save their beloved recreational centre with a hip hop show in films and on television, popular trends in the culture had shifted their focus.

Crime is an often misrepresented aspect of life in housing projects. While many external critics are quick to label criminality a chosen lifestyle and condemn the young, minority population as dangerous and out of control, few give the issue proper context.¹¹⁶ Aside from the inherent racism in such claims, they fail to acknowledge the socio-economic reasons why the drug trade, sex work, and gang hostility are prevalent in housing projects (and other low-income minority neighbourhoods). As Tricia Rose argues in her book *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop*, the combined effects of urban renewal, the loss of affordable housing, high levels

¹¹⁴ MC J & Cool G, “Dope Enuff”, *So Listen*, Capitol Records/CEC Productions, 1991.

¹¹⁵ MC J & Cool G, Maestro Fresh Wes Concert, April, 1991, author’s private collection, and “Drinking and Driving PSA”, videorecording, author’s private collection, 1991.

¹¹⁶ Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What we talk about when we talk about hip hop* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2008) p46-47.

of unemployment, disproportionate incarceration rates for Black men, and longstanding racial tension between minority citizens and police have created an environment where criminal activity flourishes. The same political systems that disadvantaged minority populations under the guise of urban renewal gave rise to the underground economy that, by virtue of its illegality, had to be combatted. Rose does not excuse criminality, despite its seeming inevitability, but instead recognizes it as a fact of life in the wake of urban renewal policies implemented throughout North America in the 1960s.¹¹⁷

The pattern Rose describes can be seen in Halifax. When Gottingen Street was repurposed to accommodate Uniacke Square and community service offices moved to the area, the city had effectively centralised the low-income Black population, addicts, and sex workers in an area that could then be treated, as the Bronx was, with benign neglect. With limited opportunities for already stigmatized Black youth in Uniacke Square, selling drugs makes money, and money can support a family. According to Rose's interpretation, the drug trade then spurs the sex trade and competition breeds violence. This is a systemic reality that has existed in project housing everywhere in North America since the 1970s and it fosters a number of social conventions that merged with hip hop's traditional ideals as gangsta rap's harsh imagery grew in popularity in the late 1980s. Referred to in countless songs by various names, such as G-code (for gangster), hood code, street law, and others, it represents the frequently articulated code of respect for the underground economy based on the shared understanding of its existence. Essentially, everyone does what they must to get by, and

¹¹⁷ Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, p33-60.

how they go about it given the opportunities available is their business, a notion that has been expressed as simply as ‘respect the hustle’ and, more bluntly, through the widespread Stop Snitching campaign begun by popular American rappers in 2004.¹¹⁸

Aside from the ethical discussions about the social merits of accepting a certain level of criminality, it is a fact of life among a portion of the population of housing projects and, while it by no means reflects the values of every resident, it has influenced young Black men and, by extension, hip hop culture from its earliest days. MC J & Cool G, with their inoffensive, anti-drug Double R&B music, rose to popularity just as the tide was turning. The kind of music they made was popular and afforded them many opportunities, but as themes on the other end of the spectrum grew grittier and more diverse, the tastes of audiences shifted with them. In the early 1990s, dance music was less of a priority as rap music’s Golden Age reached its apex with the East Coast boom bap style of production and continuing innovation in lyrical construction. Anti-drug messages became quaint alignments with government and law enforcement interests and clean lyrics were seen as capitulation to censorship. For MC J & Cool G, finding their place amid the changing politics of the broader hip hop world proved difficult.

Just as the first verse of “Back Ta Fax” acknowledges that “nothing was happening”, the verses that follow the critiques of street life in Halifax go further in articulating the opposition that MC J & Cool G faced as hip hop artists.

It seems to be that you’re narrow minded

¹¹⁸ Daniel Schorn, “Stop Snitchin’ - Rapper Cam’ron: Snitching hurts his business, ‘Code of Ethics’”, *60 Minutes*, CBS Productions, August 12, 2007, accessed March 3, 2011, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/04/19/60minutes/main2704565.shtml>.

And nothing's wrong, but you still find it
So hard to believe that we're so smooth...
We're revealing our whole brand new concept
That we created while the others slept
And we stepped to the top of the ladder
Cause what they say, It really doesn't matter.¹¹⁹

These stanzas highlight two aspects of MC J & Cool G's existence. First, they focused on themselves, developed a sound, and operated on their own terms. Secondly, however, they were not accepted by everyone, and the lyrics to "Back Ta Fax" then take on a defensive quality.

Since the beginning, we had a hard time
Trying to get respect for our rhymes
But now I see, I thought it was me
But deep down inside, the problem was jealousy...
We lack support and try to ignore
But we're the MCs who were knocking on the door
Success – that's right I don't fess
I'm going to try to clean up this mess
Of confusion, we're not an illusion
We deserve respect that you're abusing¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*

¹²⁰ *ibid.*

This song, more than any other on the *So Listen* album, speaks to the role MC J & Cool G played in the Halifax hip hop community. They come from Halifax and are well acquainted with the problems that face the youth growing up in Uniacke Square and Mulgrave Park, so much so that they take an active stance against the drug trade and its harmful effects on the community. They also celebrate their own musical career, an arc that took them away from the streets in a way that, in their eyes, serves as an example for others of how they might escape the pitfalls of drugs and street life. They are also aware, though, of the fact that being a successful group can garner resentment from other, less successful groups within the scene. Whether or not they identify their clean language, criticisms of street life and exuberant positivity as points of contention, MC J & Cool G seem content to say what they want to say and focus on their own career path, both lyrically, and in the real world. “Back Ta Fax” is a revealing, if lesser known, song that provides great insight into the group and their place in the overall Halifax hip hop community, even after they moved away to facilitate their careers in music.

The B-Side

The physical changes that transformed Halifax between the 1960s and the 1980s were common in metropolitan areas throughout North America. In cities throughout Canada and the United States the emergence of housing projects produced strikingly similar effects, both positive and negative. Massive displacement and a housing project remedy broke down existing community bonds and, with governmental neglect limiting opportunities, essentially created an environment where both community and a black market economy were vital. The sense of community, borne of shared hardship at the

hands of urban renewal, fostered a strong sense of neighbourhood pride around the Gottingen Street area. This was beneficial for the residents of Uniacke Square who, by virtue of race and economic status, were not regularly embraced by the City of Halifax. Ostracized, and buttressed by the abundance of social services offices in the neighbourhood, criminal enterprises such as the drug trade, violence, and sex work became a regular, if undesirable, aspect of life in the neighbourhood.¹²¹ All of these factors combined and gave rise to a street culture among the youth of the Gottingen Street area that mirrored that which had produced what would later be called hip hop culture in the Bronx, New York.

With the physical space and socio-economic composition of the Gottingen Street neighbourhood sharing many similarities with the birthplace of hip hop culture, it is not difficult to understand why hip hop took root among Halifax's inner city youth. The ability to partake in cultural aspects like rapping and dancing without requiring costly equipment meant that hip hop was something that could be shared in living rooms and on street corners, just as it had been done in New York. The Gottingen Street community supported the youth's interest in the burgeoning culture by allowing them to participate in neighbourhood events like the Uptown Festival, allowing the beginnings of a hip hop scene to emerge. The Cultural Awareness Youth Group took this idea further, by organizing events where young Black students could share their voices and by helping to instil a deeper cultural understanding through workshops and school-

¹²¹ Jim Silver, *Public Housing Risks and Alternatives*, 21.

based programs. Hip hop was nurtured by the community because it was, in its earliest days in Halifax, an expression of the community.

New Beginning, and later MC J & Cool G serve as an example of how hip hop in Halifax followed larger trends in hip hop culture, and how communal the scene was in the city. MC J & Cool G, the first Halifax hip hop artists to sign to a major label, grew out of the city's first group, breakdance oriented JB & the Cosmic Crew. New Beginning rose to prominence in the hip hop scene, in part, due to their roots in the community and the social network that the community provided. Upon securing a record deal, and despite having left Halifax for Montreal, MC J & Cool G returned to the city that both praised and resisted them regularly and created opportunities for groups like 2on2 and Down By Law.

The hip hop community in Halifax between 1985 and 1991 was dynamic: both men and women were regularly active as performers, and performances were varied displays of dancing, rapping, DJing, and singing. Supported by the broader Gottingen Street community through organized events, and by itself through the CAYG and artist organized events in the area, it was relatively localized within the predominantly Black youth living in the city's housing projects. Few opportunities existed for artists to perform outside of the Gottingen Street area, with the exception of 'safe' material that was suitable for shopping mall passers-by and young radio listeners. James McQuaid, who devised artistic and business plans and succeeded in signing a record deal, proved that hip hop music from Halifax was commercially viable and brought attention to the city as a source of hip hop culture.

CHAPTER THREE: BARRINGTON SIDE 1990 - 1997

The Kids Are Alright: The Second Generation of Hip Hop in Halifax

You say that New Beginning is the best you ever saw

But if you come around me saying that I'll break your jaw

'Cause me and my homeboy LC is getting raw

Along with my other homeboys Down By Law

- Chief Poet Baby Ice, "No Messin Around" (unreleased demo, 1986)

While New Beginning, and later MC J & Cool G, rose to prominence in Halifax, in part due to the popularity and accessibility of the mainstream Double R&B sound, other groups steered clear of that style of rap music. The dance oriented, mainstream side of hip hop in the late 1980s and early 1990s was counter-balanced with the Golden Age of hip hop, as introduced in Chapter Two.¹²² Stylistically diverse, and progressive, it lasted from roughly 1986 to 1993 and is represented by a number of commercially successful and culturally significant artists. Public Enemy, the Beastie Boys, Ice Cube, KRS-One, the Native Tongues collective (A Tribe Called Quest, De La Soul, Black Sheep, and the Jungle Brothers), EPMD, Pete Rock, Gang Starr, Eric B & Rakim, LL Cool J, Queen Latifah, Ice-T, and Jazzy Jeff & the Fresh Prince, all of whom were notable artists of the time, represent just a fraction of the groups and individuals whose contributions to the genre defined the culture and helped in solidifying the place of rap music and hip hop culture in the

¹²² "Golden Age" allmusic.com , accessed April 11, 2011, <http://www.allmusic.com/explore/style/golden-age-d12014>

broader musical and social mainstream. Historian William Jelani Cobb says "what made the era they inaugurated worthy of the term golden was the sheer number of stylistic innovations that came into existence... in these golden years, a critical mass of [microphone] prodigies were literally creating themselves and their art form at the same time."¹²³ Eric Michael Dyson describes this period as one of political awareness, the pursuit of social justice, and prominent Afrocentric and Black Nationalist themes.¹²⁴ Jeffery Ogbar has further suggested that the discourse established between the socially progressive, Afrocentric, 'conscious rap' and the gritty, violent street tales found in 'gangsta rap', arguably the two most prominent styles of the Golden Age, "though [they] would embrace a somewhat narrow notion of authenticity, both engaged in a contest over what it meant to be 'real' in hip hop."¹²⁵ Halifax, with its direct links to New York City through the influential Malbranche Tapes, experienced a similar cultural dialogue. The manner in which hip hop culture in Halifax reflected its own geographic identity and the ways in which it was affected by long standing racial tensions in the province mirror the continuing development of the culture in New York City. Technological shifts, including reproducible media such as cassettes and hardware such as four-track tape recorders and samplers also inspired a do-it-yourself mentality that led to a surge in Halifax that was similar to the diverse and progressive Golden Age. The city grew as a microcosm of the greater hip hop community, though, as hip hop places a premium on personal and geographical representations, it was nevertheless unique.

¹²³ William Jelani Cobb, *To the Break of Dawn*, (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 47.

¹²⁴ Michael Eric Dyson, *Know What I Mean? Reflections on Hip Hop* (New York: Basic Civitas Press, 2007), 64.

¹²⁵ Jeffery O.G. Ogbar, *Hip Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2007), 105-6.

The Malbranche Tapes, as discussed in the Chapter Two, had a profound effect on the development of hip hop culture in Halifax. Bringing the music, the politics and the culture of New York hip hop into the city, some adopted them on a philosophical level. The tapes served as cultural instruction manuals, lessons on what rap should sound like, how rhyme schemes should be constructed, what lyrics should be about, and what kinds of issues were important. These tapes, and the increased interest in hip hop that they helped to produce in Halifax, had a ripple effect. As the tapes informed the youth of Uniacke Square, local groups emerged, a scene developed, demand for a greater selection prompted retailers to stock more diverse rap music, and Dalhousie community radio CKDU staff's desire and ability to broadcast rap music grew. These ripples reached far beyond Gottingen Street, into unlikely corners of Nova Scotia, such as Mount Uniacke and Truro.

Today, the sign that welcomes visitors on the road into Mount Uniacke, a small town outside of Lower Sackville, reads "Home of Buck 65."¹²⁶ Strange though it may seem for a rural Nova Scotian community to proudly claim a rapper as its own, it was the home of Richard Terfry, one of the most significant and influential figures in the history of hip hop in Halifax. As a child, Terfry's passions included baseball, the rock band Kiss, the tuba (which he played for five years as a member of his school band), and hip hop. The latter interest would often lead him to Wheelies, the roller skating rink where he could hear the latest rap music and work on b-boy routines with friends. In a 1996 interview

¹²⁶ Because Richard Terfry has performed under a number of different aliases, his proper name will be used for clarity, unless work specifically related to one of his personas is referenced. See Glossary for a complete list of aliases.

with Vice Magazine, Terfy says of his early years, “The only other guy in my school that wasn’t wearing a mullet and listening to Judas Priest was a guy named Michael Wiggins and we’d practise rhyming. The thing about growing up [in Mount Uniacke] is we don’t have a big brother complex, so instead of bullshit glamourizing I just write rhymes about riding my bike and getting beat up as a kid. It’s just honest.”¹²⁷ Around this time he began experimenting as a DJ and with beat production and, in the late 1980s, he combined all of these skills, recording his first songs in 1988.¹²⁸ Just as importantly as having made these recordings, Terfy knew exactly how to promote them.

CKDU began broadcasting as an FM station in 1985 with a 33 watt transmitter that roughly covered the city of Halifax. Hip hop was reasonably well represented on the station. In its inaugural year, DJs Bernie “DJ Groove” Shultz and Ursel “Bodysnatcher” Saunders hosted *The Groove*. The following year *Def Beat*, a popular show hosted by Herbie “MC Chill” Wilson and DJ Doc Fresh, went on the air, rounding out the station’s contingent of rap friendly DJs. At night, when the air cooled and the station’s broadcast signal was stronger, Terfy realized that it was possible to tune in from Mount Uniacke, if a receiver could be up high in the air, with as few physical obstacles to the signal as possible. As such, young Terfy made a habit of climbing trees, extra batteries and radio in hand, and perching high above the ground for the duration of the shows in order to

¹²⁷ Christi Bradnox, Interview with Stinkin’ Rich, “The Many Faces of Stinkin’ Rich”, *Vice*, 1996.

¹²⁸ Thomas Quinlan, Interview with Stinkin’ Rich (25 August, 1995), *Boognish #3*, Thomas Quinlan, editor, accessed October 20, 2010, <http://handsolorecords.com/boognish/stinkin-rich/>.

satisfy his interest.¹²⁹ Hearing rappers from Halifax on the radio, Terfry sent his own songs to the station where they received some airplay.

After finishing high school, Terfry moved to Halifax to attend Saint Mary's university (where he would earn the Bachelor of Science degree later immortalized in his song of the same name from 1997s *Vertex*). As a student, Terfry walked into CKDU and asked for a job. He was initially given a series of menial and mundane tasks, but after having the opportunity to sit in for an ailing DJ Groove, he was given his own timeslot and a chance to bring his love of hip hop culture to the Halifax airwaves in 1989.¹³⁰ He became DJ Critical and his show, *The Bassment*, became an important rallying point for the city's hip hop community and a reflection of the ways in which Halifax stayed abreast of larger trends in hip hop.

CKDU had long been a vital part of the local scene. Groups like the Care Crew, LC Posse, and New Beginning received airplay, promotion, and support from the station, and the shows that featured them imbued them a measure of local celebrity, helping to establish both a scene and a sense of competition among practitioners. In 1988, *Def Beat* hosted a battle between Spryfield rappers Paid In Full (Eddie "Eddie E" Parsons, Daniel "D-Finesse" Porrier, "B-boy Destruction", and Robbie "Rob Styles" Romans) and the Creighton Street Crew's David "Magic D" Adekayode, along with Nevada "Dizzy D" Johnson and Jason "Jammin J" Mercer, who were sometimes known as the duo Sonic

¹²⁹ *The 902*, videocassette, directed by Warren Jeffries, independent, 2008.

¹³⁰ Christi Bradnox, Interview with Stinkin' Rich, "The Many Faces of Stinkin' Rich", *Vice*, 1996.

Men.¹³¹ Vying to see who would win based on call-in votes, with an agreement that the losers would pledge \$25 toward the station's fundraising drive, the battle consisted of pre-recorded material from Paid In Full and freestyling over a beatbox from Magic D. When the freestyled lyrics proved more pointed than the recorded material, the situation intensified and Eddie E taunted Magic D with racial remarks, causing tempers to flare and the rest of the battle to be postponed. The following week the groups returned to the show. Eventually, it was decided that both sides would be declared losers and would each contribute half of the required donation. Scenes like this exemplify the role of the radio station in the local hip hop community, offering a platform for local performers in a variety of ways. It is also revealing of a deeper issue. While both sides offered on air apologies for the remarks, it is worthy of note that race came into play between two Black groups.

Black on Black violence, as it is often called, is one of the most significant issues connecting race and hip hop culture. Opposite the Afrocentric, unity-seeking 'conscious' rap was 'gangsta' rap which, at its core, frequently focuses on conflict between rivals operating within any number of nefarious activities. In Nova Scotia's majority White population, racial issues are often framed as tension between Blacks and Whites, but so-called "Black on Black issues" exist, as well. Within the context of hip hop, Blackness – a shared cultural awareness of oppression and dislocation within the Black diaspora -

¹³¹ "Paid in Full versus Magic D Jammin J & Dizzy D Live At CKDU," sound recording, Def Beat with MC Chill and DJ Doc Fresh, CKDU Dalhousie University Campus Radio, Halifax, NS: CKDU, author's private collection, 1988.

permeates the culture.¹³² For Whites engaging in the culture, coming to terms with this fact often means facing questions of whether they wish to be Black, or to what extent they are embracing something outside of their own experience. For Black practitioners, however, Blackness is not a foreign land; it is a central aspect of their identity. In the competitive culture of hip hop, calling another's Blackness into question strikes at the core of an individual – bringing their allegiance to the historical Black experience to the fore. It is, nevertheless, divisive and the degree to which is tolerated is reflected by the postponement of the battle on CKDU, and the subsequent apologies from both parties. Still, the issue of questioning Blackness did not emerge from hip hop, it has existed for a long time, and would continue to play a role in Halifax in the years to come.

In 1991, Joseph "Jorun" Serra of Mod'rn World Thang – formerly Down By Law – met Tallis "Talisman" Newkirk outside of the Maestro Fresh Wes/Ground Control/MC J & Cool G/ 2on2 concert at the Halifax Forum. Soon after, he was interviewed about Mod'rn World Thang on CKDU by Rich Terfry. After discovering a shared interest in record digging, Jorun and Terfry struck up a friendship and, upon discovering that they each had a prior mutual friendship with Tallis, began spending time with him. This was a significant confluence of players in the Halifax hip hop community. Jorun, as a member of Down By Law and Mod'rn World Thang (Down By Law split into Jorun and J.R.O.C.'s Mod'rn World Thang and Fiz and Voodoo's Black Season in 1990), had been involved in the scene since the late 1980s and had opened for such international groups as Public Enemy and Run-DMC. Tallis - who was then working on a recording called

¹³² Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Hutchinson, 1987)

Trumpet Blast Blow as part of a group called Product KVA with Richard “Pos Smooth” Lynch - owned a four-track recorder, the essential component of a home recording studio. Terfry was DJ Critical, host of *The Bassment* on CKDU and had some production experience of his own. All three were involved in the Halifax’s rap music scene, and all three had a profound love and respect for the culture.

Among their early topics of conversation was the lack of a cohesive scene since the departure of MC J & Cool G. The intermittent returns of the group as an opening act for larger acts helped to sustain the other groups active in the hip hop community, but the in the day to day life of the scene, MC J & Cool G’s departure left a void. As Jorun, Tallisman, and Terfry spent time together, they gravitated toward crafting beats with the four-track. Another friend from the hip hop community joined them, Jerome “Chief Poet Baby Ice” Smith, formerly of the LC Posse, who had since adopted the name Bonshah. As a group of similarly-minded friends, their time together was spent making beats, writing, and recording raps. These weren’t serious efforts, but rather the amusements of skilled individuals with access to a recording device.¹³³

The idea of a supergroup – similar to the large meeting of groups A Tribe Called Quest and Leaders of the New School on the former’s 1991 song “Scenario-”¹³⁴ had been jokingly tossed around, but after the recordings they made for fun turned out reasonably well, the notion started to become realistic, though Jorun’s previous commitments to Mod’rn World Thang made such a thing a difficult proposition. Jorun’s

¹³³ Jorun, comment on Haltown Projex “The First Haltown Recording Sessions 1991-1992”, Haltown Projex Blog, accessed October 20, 2010, <http://www.myspace.com/haltownprojex/blog#ixzz10xcgsL9M>.

¹³⁴ A Tribe Called Quest, “Scenario,” *Low End Theory*, Jive Records 1418-2-J, 1991.

longtime partner J.R.O.C., whom he had met through a rhyme covered desk as a high school student, felt that Mod'rn World Thang had earned their position at the top of the post-MC J & Cool G scene, particularly with their recent opening for Run-DMC and through their brief dealings with Halifax-based DTK records.¹³⁵ From J.R.O.C.'s perspective, Jorun's risking Mod'rn World Thang's position to work with a group of people who, despite their involvement, did not possess similar stature in the community, was a foolish move. Jorun countered that J.R.O.C.'s unwillingness to incorporate live DJ routines into their sets - and his increasing dislike of the kind of beats Jorun submitted to the group - was limiting his creative desires. Jorun agreed to remain with the group, but nevertheless returned immediately to Tallisman, Bonshah, and Terfry and told them he was in.¹³⁶ They were soon joined by another friend, Shingai Nyajeka, and began discussing potential names for their new project. As everyone involved was from a different part of Halifax, and where regional representation is a significant aspect of cultural expressions in hip hop (see Chapter One), suggestions from the group led them to the name Haltown Projex, and it stuck.¹³⁷

Initially, Jorun recalls being opposed to Terfry rapping on the songs that they were creating. Feeling that his contribution should be securing radio airplay through his show, and somewhat put off by the "Burt Reynolds moustache" that made him appear to be the antithesis of a rapper, Jorun avoided Terfry's requests to rap.¹³⁸ Tallisman's curiosity, however, led him to record a verse from Terfry one afternoon while Jorun was

¹³⁵ Steven Comeau, "Down By Law", *Painting A Room*, Summer 1991, 4-5.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

away from the studio. Upon his return, Jorun was impressed enough to consent to Terfry's involvement as a rapper and, in turn, Terfry adopted the name Haslam, distinguishing his rhyming persona from CKDU's DJ Critical. With a group fully formed, they each took turns rapping on the beats they created, just as New Beginning had done, and produced a demo recording consisting of three songs - "30,000 and Crusin'", "Haltown Chowder", and "Listen To the Man" – to submit to the CBC in response to a call for Canadian rap music.¹³⁹

While Haltown was coming together in Halifax, a group of teenagers living an hour away in Truro were organizing, as well. Hip Club Groove (HCG) formed in 1990. Cory "Cheklove Shakil" Bowles, Derek "The Glimpse" Mackenzie, Robert "C.L. S.C.A.R.R." Squire, Gordon "Gordski" Campbell, and Brian "DJ Moves" Higgins were young, boisterous, and well versed in hip hop culture. Four of the group's five members are White. At the time, the larger hip hop scene in North America had accepted the Beastie Boys, 3rd Bass, and House of Pain, all White groups, whose respect for the culture and the tenets of representation gave them legitimacy, while on the other end of the spectrum, Vanilla Ice represented an attempt by record label interests to put a White face on hip hop's Black street-based culture. In 1991, Vanilla Ice's record label SBK released *Ice by Ice: The Vanilla Ice Story in His own Words*, detailing the artist's upbringing among the gangs of Miami, Florida, claims that were quickly discredited.¹⁴⁰ As such, the role of White artists was hotly debated within the hip hop community as

¹³⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ James Bernard, "Why the World is After Vanilla Ice", *New York Times*, February 3, 1991, accessed May 24 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/02/03/arts/why-the-world-is-after-vanilla-ice.html>.

issues of Afrocentricity, authenticity, appropriation and appropriateness were weighed against the legitimacy of some White groups and the illegitimacy of others. The issue was irrelevant to Hip Club Groove in the beginning of their career, and it is unfair to call them a White group, as the term eclipses the role of the group's primary songwriter and MC, Cheklove Shakil. In the beginning, the members of Hip Club Groove knew who they were and where they came from, representing themselves fully without concern for debates about race. For Hip Club Groove, it was all about music.

Their union began when Bowles and Mackenzie met and discovered their shared interest. They started rhyming with each other to pass the time and went as far as organizing a Hip Hop Club at their high school – Cobequid Educational Centre (C.E.C.) in Truro, Nova Scotia - so that they could use the school's audio visual equipment to hone their performance skills. They created routines, incorporating rapping and dancing, and performed regularly with a local DJ company at school dances. The two met Squire, a recent transplant from Toronto's Jane and Finch neighbourhood (housing projects, a product of Toronto's own urban renewal programs), at a concert by Dartmouth's LCP at the Truro Exhibition in the summer of 1990. At the show, recalls Cheklove, the group was holding out the microphone for audience members to try their hand at rapping, but had no takers until they reached Squire, "They put the mic in his face and he took it right out of the cat's hands and started flowing better than [LCP]... He flowed hard – like really hard. They sat there stunned for a second and we all went nuts. They came and snatched the mic back, but the damage was done."¹⁴¹ After the show the three met,

¹⁴¹ Cory Bowles, email message to the author, June 4, 2011.

rapped for each other, and decided on the spot to form a group. Initially, Gordski was the group's DJ, but was replaced after a few months by DJ Moves, known to the others from around Truro, owned his own turntables, purchased with the money he had saved while working at a local grocery store.¹⁴² In their early days, Squire (who had gained some experience as a DJ in Toronto) showed DJ Moves how to use the equipment. Cheklove also recalls Gordski's assistance in production: "he lays down the tracks, he creates the music."¹⁴³ Beats were crafted using the 'pause button' technique (which had also been employed by groups like New Beginning) of recording a sample or break from one cassette to another, pausing the recording, rewinding the sample, and recording it again, building the beat piece by piece.¹⁴⁴ The group started recording regularly on 4-track machines and, along with the Hip Hop Club at C.E.C., and the regular performances, were engaging in rap music consistently, steadily polishing and elevating their skills. As had been the case with other groups from Nova Scotia – and many hip hop groups, in general – the young, aspiring rappers had no formative training or resources to draw upon, no guitar lessons or school bands to join, and relied on themselves and their friends to develop the skills necessary to be a functioning unit.

After coming together, the group honed their skills by performing throughout rural Nova Scotia, bringing live rap music to places as unlikely as Lunenburg, Bridgewater, and their hometown of Truro, where packed house parties provided them with performance

¹⁴² Melanie Moore, "HCG gets in the groove", *C.E.C. Cougar Chronicles*, 1991, 8.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Lyle Owerko, *The Boombox Project: The Machines, the Music, and the Urban Underground* (New York: Abrams Image, 2010), 49.

opportunities and a loyal, youthful fan base.¹⁴⁵ “When we didn’t have a show out of town,” recalls Cheklove, “we performed every weekend at Keddy’s hotel in Truro. We rented the room and threw teen dances. We played fairs, summer festivals, anything.”¹⁴⁶ Without a significant hip hop scene around them, they played shows with bands of every stripe. Early Hip Club Groove performance flyers show them playing all ages shows with punk bands like Lunenburg’s Madhat and Halifax up-and-comers Hardship Post and Thrush Hermit.¹⁴⁷

Their performances were engaging. MCs Cheklove, a newly renamed M88kenzie and C.L. S.C.A.R.R. (Criminal Lyricist Smooth Caucasian Always Rough and Ready) rhymed over beats provided by DJ Moves, and were occasionally joined onstage by Gordski who would entertain the crowd with a yo-yo, adding another playful element to Hip Club Groove’s shows. In doing so they earned young fans through their all ages appearances and made important connections within Nova Scotia’s broader music community. The group played wherever they could and grew into a cohesive unit, developing a chemistry that was evident in their performances and in their songs. In the summer of 1992, Hip Club Groove performed at a street festival in Halifax. Jorun heard the group from the window of his home and, after the group won a first place prize of recording time at The Centre for Art Tapes in Halifax, visited them while they recorded what would be their third tape.¹⁴⁸ *The Art Tapes* (alternatively known as Straight Steady Swingin’) – four songs on a cassette with cover art hand-drawn by C.L. S.C.A.R.R.

¹⁴⁵ Jamie Lindsay, “Getting into the Groove” *The Coast*, 22 September 1994, 13.

¹⁴⁶ Cory Bowles, email message to the author, June 4, 2011.

¹⁴⁷ See Figures A.5 and A.6, p.158-9.

¹⁴⁸ Cory Bowles, email message to the author, June 4, 2011.

featuring “Straight Steady Swingin”, “Pull A Rabbit Out Tha Hat”, “Red Red Wine”, and “Throw In The Towel”, all high energy East Coast boom bap style beats with braggadocios battle lyrics resembling contemporary New York rap.¹⁴⁹ Not long after the recordings session, while visiting Gordski at Dalhousie University, the group heard one of their songs on the radio and made their way to CKDU, in search of the man who was broadcasting their music to the city.

DJ Critical’s Bassment Show was quickly becoming a vital part of the Halifax scene. Aside from his own involvement with Haltown Projex, the show allowed him to play local, independent recordings, giving artists like Hip Club Groove the chance to have their music heard. In a 1995 interview, Rich Terfry recalled his first meeting with the group, “They walked in and they were these, like, kind of cocky kids that I instantly didn’t like when they first came in, but I played their song and it was pretty cool. And then they started hanging around more and more and, you know, basically after just sort of seeing them around we got to talking and I got to see what they were all about... We all became pretty good friends pretty fast. So, you know, we hung out, we did shows together and stuff like that...”¹⁵⁰ Shared experiences in hip hop and hometowns outside of Halifax helped to form a bond between them that, along with the formation of Haltown Projex, reignited the hip hop scene in Halifax.

¹⁴⁹ See Figure A.7, p. 160.

¹⁵⁰ Quinlan, Thomas, Interview with Stinkin’ Rich (25 August, 1995), *Boognish #3*, Thomas Quinlan, editor, accessed October 20, 2010, <http://handsolorecords.com/boognish/stinkin-rich/>.

Studios & Stages: Expressive Avenues in the Early 1990s

*"Haltown Projex, how ya gonna rock the jam?
We do it carefully by hand."*

- Haltown Projex, "Carefully By Hand," *Haltown Meltdown*, 1993.

As hip hop culture's Golden Age blossomed in the late 1980s, numerous styles of rap emerged, diversifying the sound of the music as it varied from the hard hitting East Coast sound to the laid back funk fuelled West Coast sound and countless permutations in between. In Halifax, the style of rap music that was starting to be made by groups like Haltown Projex and Hip Club Groove had a discernable East Coast sound. In the documentary *The 902* (2008), Jorun recalls a conversation he had with Rich Terfry early in their friendship. Despite Terfry's relative isolation in Mount Uniacke, Jorun discovered that he had copies of some of the original Malbranche tapes in his possession. Barely audible over the hiss of a tenth generation recording, they both understood the importance, whatever the quality, of being able to hear the songs.¹⁵¹ As a result, the aforementioned notion of these recordings serving as cultural instruction manuals is reflected in their influence on these two major figures of this period. From the sound of the drums to the types of samples used and from lyrical content to the underlying philosophies of hip hop culture, the tapes served as a template for Terfry and Jorun in formulating their own creations. Warren Jeffries, director of *The 902*, explains their profound influence, "You take these guys, they get this old scripture [the Malbranche tapes] ... like the blueprints of a prototype... and then while everybody else

¹⁵¹ *The 902*, videocassette, directed by Warren Jeffries, independent, 2008.

in the rest of the world is moving on, they're still making music according to this blueprint."¹⁵²

In his time on the air at CKDU, DJ Critical did more than play rap records. The records he chose were carefully selected for reasons that he frequently shared with his audience. The sounds of the Malbranche tapes, and the other recordings the tapes steered him toward, had instilled in him particular sensibilities that were rooted in the old school, East Coast hip hop tradition. His devotion to that tradition was profound to the point of being comparable to religion, so much so that in *The 902* he describes the "Ten Commandments" of hip hop that he feels represent a code of ethics established during the culture's formative years.¹⁵³ This code of ethics informed his choices as a radio DJ, as an MC, and as a fan of the music, and was subsequently shared with his listeners, both live and on the radio, and with fans of his own music.

The list consists of ideas that were present in the early New York hip hop community and formed the philosophical foundation for much of the rap music that came from there. This philosophy was the basis for DJ Critical's on air persona and became equally foundational in Halifax. The commandments he outlines are: Keep it real, no sell out (placing authenticity above all else); Don't turn your back on the b-boys (respect that dancers were originally the prominent figures in the culture); Don't bite (be original and do not plagiarize beats, rhymes or style from others); Don't front, be yourself (genuine personal representation is at the heart of the culture); All disputes

¹⁵² Warren Jeffries, interviewed by Mark Molaro, *The Alcove with Mark Molaro*, November 27, 2006, accessed November 10, 2010, <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-4101850123970077146#>.

¹⁵³ See inset, p.84.

should be settled in battle (as a means of conflict resolution, hip hop culture favours a match pitting one rival's skills against another in a given element, e.g., a rap battle, a DJ battle, a b-boy battle.); Pay your dues (put in the work necessary to hone your skills as an artist, both in the studio and as a performer.); Respect and honour the pioneers (learn the history of hip hop's origins and respect its traditions); Recognize the elements of the culture (embrace the culture, rather than a single form); Represent where you come from (regional representation is as important as personal representation on the culture); and The DJ comes first (hip hop started with the DJs, they are the keepers of the beats, and should be honoured).¹⁵⁴

This code of ethics includes several ways in which practitioners should be true to themselves – Keep it real, Don't front, Represent where you come from – and others that urge practitioners to seek deeper understanding and respect for the various aspects of the culture as they existed when a unified notion of Hip Hop took hold. Representing where you come from was an idea that was especially significant in Halifax. Rap lyrics, in their attempt to convey the perceived reality of their author, contain more personal and geographical information than lyrics in almost any other genre of music. References to self and the physical space and landmarks that surround the author give rap music much of its authenticity, rooting it in a place and a perspective.¹⁵⁵ For example, if a rapper from Halifax wrote a song about an issue affecting residents of The Bronx, New York, it would not be relatable to Haligonians, and in failing to represent the authors

¹⁵⁴ Richard Terfry, in *The 902, videocassette, directed by Warren Jeffries, independent, 2008.*

¹⁵⁵ John Connell and Chris Gibson, *Soundtracks: Popular music, identity and place* (New York: Routledge, 2003, 27.

own experience, loses authenticity. A rapper from Halifax writing a song about an issue that is recognizable to other Haligonians, however, would be both relatable and authentic, according to the code of ethics established in Terfry's 10 Commandments. Terfry took from his personal immersion in hip hop culture an understanding of the value placed on authenticity and that being yourself while observing tradition was the way to achieve it. This informed the tenor of DJ Critical's Bassment Show, his involvement with Haltown Projex and, as he became an increasingly prominent figure, the scene as a whole.

The 10 Commandments of Hip Hop by Rich Terfry	
1 – Keep it real – no sellout	6 – Pay your dues
2 – Don't turn your back on the B-boys	7 – Respect and honour the pioneers
3 – Don't bite	8 – Recognize the elements of the culture
4 – Don't front, be yourself	9 – Represent where you come from
5 – All disputes should be settled in battle	10 – The DJ comes first

Figure 1 - The 10 Commandments of Hip Hop by Richard Terfry¹⁵⁶

Terfry's last Commandment was The DJ Comes First, and in Halifax in the early 1990s, the DJ was Jorun. As one of the first recipients of the original Malbranche tapes - and as an active participant in the Halifax hip hop community since the mid-1980s with Down By Law/Mod'rn World Thang - the tapes' influence on him was profound. While the tapes may not have made as codifiable an impact as they did with Terfry, they did instil a deep, mechanical passion in Jorun that helped to create the sound of Halifax's

¹⁵⁶ Richard Terfry, in *The 902*, videocassette, directed by Warren Jeffries, independent, 2008.

hip hop scene as it moved away from MC J & Cool G's Double R&B in the early 1990s. For Jorun, the beats were the heart of hip hop and, while he rapped, being a DJ and a producer was his primary interest. Having spent the latter half of the 1980s working with Down By Law, he had honed his craft – in private, in performance, and in the studio – to the point where, upon establishing Haltown Projex with Tallis Newkirk and Rich Terfry, he had all the requisite skills to hold the musical and technical sides of the group together.

In its earliest form, hip hop music was made by extending the break portions of funk, soul and R&B songs, a fact that led aspiring DJs to any place that sold records in pursuit of breaks that had been previously employed to good effect or, preferably, breaks that had yet to be rediscovered by the hip hop generation. As hip hop music moved into the studio with the formation of Sugar Hill Records in 1979 and the DJ (whose showmanship is lost in an audio only format) found competition from producers (who arrange samples without necessarily resorting to traditional DJ techniques), samples of previously recorded songs that could be looped and combined with breakbeats added to the rush to find the records that contained them. This was the birth of record digging. While collectors have compulsively sought to fill their collections since the advent of portable media, record digging, in the hip hop vernacular, refers specifically to the pursuit of records containing breakbeats or samples relevant to the production of rap music. Jorun is a record digger. In 1986, after hearing a recording of Run-DMC's "Peter Piper" on a tape fresh from New York, he traveled to Toronto for the sole purpose of finding a

copy of the Raising Hell album that contained it.¹⁵⁷ Recently, Jorun has been profiled on websites devoted to DJ culture for his notoriety as a producer and for records he holds in his collection that are highly sought after by well-known record aficionados.¹⁵⁸

Through a laboriously-built knowledge of breakbeats and samples, and the dedication to seek them out and put them to use, Jorun epitomizes a cultural subset of hip hop devoted to beats and the two practical applications of that interest within hip hop culture – DJing and producing. Jorun recalls the purchase of an Akai 614G four-track recorder as being a pivotal moment in the history of Haltown Projex in a blog entry from October 2006, “I already owned a sampler and a beat machine as well as [Technics SL 1200] turntables. The Akai 614 would be the final piece needed to be a studio.”¹⁵⁹ This was an essential step for Halifax hip hop, because the cost of traditional recording studios was prohibitive, especially for young artists working in an unsupported field. In fact, the tools necessary for the production and performance of rap music have always been expensive. Historian Dan Charnas describes how, in the early years of the culture, some young people overcame this obstacle on July 13, 1977, when lightening caused a massive blackout in New York City, “For the young fans of the new DJ and MC culture, the blackout was an unprecedented opportunity to get into a game that had a rather high cost of entry. The price of two turntables and a mixer. Audio electronics stores across the five boroughs were emptied of their wares. Nightclubs weren’t spared,

¹⁵⁷ *The 902, videocassette, directed by Warren Jeffries, independent, 2008.*

¹⁵⁸ Murphy, Paul, Interview with Jorun, “Jorun’s Way”, Skratcbastid.com, accessed May 2, 2011, <http://www.skratcbastid.com/joruns-way/#more-1976>.

¹⁵⁹ Jorun, comment on Haltown Projex “The First Haltown Recording Sessions 1991-1992”, Haltown Projex Blog, accessed October 20, 2010, <http://www.myspace.com/haltownprojex/blog#ixzz10xcgsL9M>.

either.”¹⁶⁰ For Jorun to have saved to purchase his equipment legitimately was a mark of dedication, and an important step in the development of hip hop in Halifax.

There were also small studios in Halifax, such as Adinsound and Deep 9, that catered to independent artists, and their services were often offered as prizes in CAYG rap contests and other talent shows. Still, in the early 1990s, Jorun and his studio became essential elements of the scene, enabling the production of hip hop music on an completely independent scale. Prior to this, artists had few economically feasible options, but with the acquisition of the final components for a hip hop production studio, the scene changed; if an aspiring artist wanted to make hip hop records in Halifax, their best bet was to seek out Jorun.

Of course, Jorun was not the only beat digger or DJ in the city. After the studio was built, Rich Terfry began spending a lot of time with Jorun, often bringing records from his own collection to be sampled and remixed. Benefiting from Jorun’s technical knowledge, Terfry would often show him what he wanted, and watch as Witchdoc Jorun (an apt descriptor he adopted around 1992) mixed it all together. Often the musical output was the result of a collaborative effort. Jorun recalls the creation of a track that would be released on Haltown Projex’ first album, “On ‘Kick The Poop’, [Terfry] thought of using the ‘Free Your Mind’ loop ‘cause he owned the 45. I came up with the ‘Action’ break, the [Grover Washington, Jr.] organ and the horns. He thought of the ‘kick that shit’ cut from Public Enemy, but got me to cut it up on the chorus.”¹⁶¹ There were many

¹⁶⁰ Dan Charnas, *The Business of Hip Hop: The History of the Business of Hip Hop* (New York: New American Library, 2010), 24.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*

people with ideas, and Jorun's studio was one of the few places in Halifax where those ideas could become a reality.

Jorun's bedroom studio at his home in Brunswick Towers (now Ocean Towers, 2309 Brunswick Street) was the hub of activity in Halifax in the early 1990s. By the time all of the requisite equipment was assembled, however, Tallisman had moved to Toronto, leaving the ideas he had shared with Jorun and Rich Terfry at the outset of Haltown Projex in their hands. For his part, Tallisman found interesting projects of his own after relocating. Product KVA became Plains Of Fascination and released *Join The Ranks* in 1996; the following year he formed the duo Nelstar with a singer who had featured on *Join The Ranks* named Nelly Furtado, and later he joined RaggaDeath with respected Canadian MC Michie Mee. As soon as the Akai four-track was plugged in, Jorun and Terfry went to work, recording eight songs within the first two days. They were soon joined by Hip Club Groove and J.R.O.C. of Mod'rn World Thang, collectively filling cassette after cassette with beats and rhymes.¹⁶² Jorun, at the centre of this activity, passed on much of the influence of the Malbranche tapes, as DJ Critical did, by allowing it to form the basis of his own style, and through his willingness to share that with other, like-minded people, free of charge, as a way of building a scene.

By 1992, the scene in Halifax was growing rapidly, and the Cultural Awareness Youth Group continued to play a foundational role in Halifax, educating the Black student population in their cultural heritage through workshops, conferences, and performances well into the 1990s. One hip hop themed workshop, held at the North End Branch

¹⁶² *Ibid*

Library in February of 1992, featured Jorun and J.R.O.C. from Mod'rn World Thang¹⁶³), Sylvia Hamilton's 1992 documentary *Speak It! From the Heart of Black Nova Scotia* focused on Hallow rapper Shingai Nyajeka's experiences with the CAYG as he explored his Black Nova Scotian identity in a city with a long history of racial discrimination.¹⁶⁴

As previously discussed, race is a theme that hip hop cannot escape. It is also difficult to dissect; for groups like Hip Club Groove, Rich Terfry and Jorun, it was the desire to make music and be a part of the culture – not appropriation or racist entitlement – that drove them. Nevertheless, while their motives may have been simple and genuine, the overarching thematic role of race is worthy of examination. The hip hop community in Halifax, like the hip hop community at large, though predominantly Black through the 1980s, began to see an influx of White involvement in the 1990s. While Jorun had long been a part of the community, Rich Terfry, DJ Moves, M88kenzie, Gordski and C.L. S.C.A.R.R. from Hip Club Groove, and others like the group 212all from Bedford, were new additions to the scene and were all White males from suburban and rural Nova Scotia.¹⁶⁵ This represents a significant cultural and demographic shift within the scene that differs from the broader hip hop community in North America. While some rap groups, such as 3rd Bass, the Beastie Boys, and House of Pain had been accepted as legitimate artists, the majority within mainstream rap music rested with Black artists and, increasingly, through the entrepreneurial efforts of Black label bosses

¹⁶³ Kevin Reid, "North Branch Library books 'rap' session for kids" *North End News*, February 7, 1992.

¹⁶⁴ *Speak It! From the Heart of Black Nova Scotia*, online video, directed by Sylvia Hamilton, National Film Board of Canada, 1992, accessed May 5 2011, http://www.nfb.ca/film/speak_it_from_heart_of_black_nova_scotia.

¹⁶⁵ As previously noted, Robert Squire came to Nova Scotia from Toronto in 1990. However, it was from there that he began his involvement with the Truro and Halifax scenes.

such as Teddy Riley, Russell Simmons, and Jermaine Dupri, who ensured that the public face of the business of hip hop remained Black.¹⁶⁶ Between DJ Critical's Bassment Show and Jorun's home studio – and the studio and venue owners in the city - the means of production and dissemination in Halifax were controlled by White practitioners. Though there is no indication that racism played any role in either case, racial dynamics continued to develop within the hip hop community and would linger in the years ahead as the scene tried, as a whole, to move forward.

Hip hop culture has been immersed in racial politics since its first days. Though the culture itself grew out of the racially charged Bronx landscape, it was part of a larger Black cultural experience that survived the era of 'race records', White artists remaking Black music for the Top 40, appropriation, and exploitation. Essentially, where Whites had appropriated other Black musical forms for mainstream audiences, rap music resisted such advances and stayed Black. When rap, and with it hip hop culture, was inevitably adopted by White youth, debates began to rage around issues of Blackness, cultural appropriation, and whether White practitioners had the ability to understand or create authentic hip hop in their own communities.¹⁶⁷ Although groups like the Beastie Boys and 3rd Bass had legitimized White artists to a degree within the hip hop community, Vanilla Ice remained the face of White involvement in hip hop outside of it. The Golden Era saw a concerted assertion of Blackness that ran the gamut from Afrocentricity to Black Nationalism and gangsterism that treated ideas of Whiteness

¹⁶⁶ See Jason Tanz, *Other People's Property: A Shadow History of Hip Hop in White America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007) and Bakari Kitwana, *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2006).

¹⁶⁷ Jason Tanz, *Other People's Property*.

within the culture as a foreign incursion worthy of suspicion. Subway vigilante Bernhard Goetz' shooting of four Bronx youth in 1984, the 1989 murder of Yusef Hawkins in Bensonhurst, New York, and the death of Michael Griffith at Howard Beach are just three examples of events in the post-hip hop world that continued to bring racial tension to the forefront of cultural concern.¹⁶⁸ The beating of motorist Rodney King by White Los Angeles Police Officers in March of 1991 and the riots that followed after their acquittal sparked the consciousness of the hip hop generation in the same way other racially motivated incidents had. As hip hop's cultural influence spread, there seemed to be regular reminders of the problems plaguing race relations in North America.

Halifax had its own reminders. From Uniacke Square and the city's relationship with Africville, to the contemporary issues raised in *Speak It!*, race continued to play a troublesome role in the lives of Nova Scotians. For the hip hop community, having originated in and around Uniacke Square in the 1980s, the integration of White artists and fans came at a time when the public dialogue about race was intense. In 1991 there was an incident in the streets of Halifax chronicled in a report commissioned by the Atlantic Institute of Criminology called *Policing the Uptown: Inner-City Community Policing Challenges and the Halifax "Race Riot" of 1991*. According to its author, Donald Clairmont, Halifax police were well aware of discrimination against Blacks by downtown

¹⁶⁸ Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, 136, 292, 235.

bars and clubs, and the issue had grown publicly to the point where a march was held to protest the disparity.¹⁶⁹

The level of discrimination was such that Black entrepreneurs opened clubs on Gottingen Street, including the Derby and the Motown, as an alternative to the downtown bars. These clubs nevertheless fell victim to the city's prejudice. Clairmont writes, "In the fall of 1990 a major confrontation occurred and a major battle was barely avoided when police raided the newly established Motown club in the Uptown apparently searching for drugs and illegal liquor."¹⁷⁰ Tensions were high on 17 July 1991, when a fight broke out between Black and White patrons at an unnamed downtown venue. Interviews with the people involved indicate that there was no racial motive with regards to the fight. Following the altercation, however, the club barred the Black combatants from re-entering, while allowing the Whites to do so. When police arrived on the scene the young Black men were visibly agitated, refused to answer questions, and taunted those inside with threats of returning the next evening.¹⁷¹

On 18 July, the DJ playing records at the Derby announced that it was time to go downtown, sending a group of approximately fifty young Black men into the street.¹⁷² Fuelled by alcohol and frustration, they ran as a group from Gottingen Street toward Argyle Street, attacking White bystanders along the way. Upon arriving at their destination they were met by police. The crowd was driven back toward Gottingen

¹⁶⁹ Donald Clairmont, *Policing the Uptown: Inner-City Community Policing Challenges and the Halifax "Race Riot" of 1991*, Atlantic Institute of Criminology, July, 1992, 32, 80, accessed October 3, 2010, available online http://sociologyandsocialanthropology.dal.ca/Files/POLUPTN_Final.pdf.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 105.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, 80-82

¹⁷² *Ibid*, 101.

Street, where their numbers swelled to more than one hundred and an hour long standoff between young Blacks and police took place. During this time the crowd split, with one clashing with police at the southern end of Gottingen Street and the other causing property damage along the street behind them.¹⁷³

Early the following morning, parents and respected figures from the neighbourhood had dispersed the crowd, but police later cracked down on the residents of Uniacke Square, continuing a cycle of distrust and tension between the Black community and police. With the media ignoring that the major players' insistence that there was no racial component to the initial altercation and reporting the event as a full-fledged 'race riot,' relations between the Black community and the rest of the city remained tense, as well.¹⁷⁴ Issues of race are inseparable from the roots of hip hop culture, and Halifax's existing problems, regardless of whether race is a legitimate factor in a given situation or it is inflated by media reports and prejudicial assumptions, ensured that the local hip hop scene would grapple with them.

Nevertheless, with the growing popularity of rap music in the mainstream, the diversified hip hop community was drawn into the broader music scene that resided in the downtown clubs. This was not an easy transition. Historical prejudices were reinforced by the events like those of July 1991, and Black performers and patrons continued to make some venue owners hesitant to book rap music. There were, however, venues like the Double Deuce, which were willing to host hip hop shows. A

¹⁷³ *Ibid*, 80-88.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 88-91.

video recording from 1993 shows Witchdoc Jorun DJing for much of the night while Bonshah, Haslam, Hip Club Groove, Universal Soul (Fiz and Voodoo - formerly of political jazz rap group Black Season), and Shingai rhymed for the crowd.¹⁷⁵

There were other groups performing around Halifax, as well. Using the Bassment Show as a carillon call to the community at large, DJ Critical and Jorun announced that they were putting together a compilation of Halifax hip hop artists and urged people to bring their best material to the station for consideration. Joe “Jay O Smooth” Schroeder, who began co-hosting the Bassment Show in 1993, brought his group Bassment Unit - consisting of himself and Robbie “Rob Styles” Romans (formerly of Spryfield’s Paid In Full) – to their attention. Two others, Gary “Papa Rosta” James (he soon changed his name to Papa Grand) and Nathan “Ruffneck” Colley, fifteen year old cousins who started performing together in 1986 when they rapped in a variety show at the East Preston Recreation Centre, also appeared, hoping to be considered.¹⁷⁶ They were all immediately brought into the Haltown Projex circle, rounding out a formidable roster of members and collaborators under the Haltown banner.

Just as much of Halifax’s hip hop community in the mid-1980s had been an amorphous collection of groups and individuals with New Beginning as their nucleus, much of the post-MC J & Cool G hip hop community revolved around Haltown Projex in the early 1990s. Between Jorun’s studio and CKDU, hip hop in Halifax had a degree of support, albeit mostly self-generated, but live performances in the city remained

¹⁷⁵ *Haltown Projects [sic] In The House*, digital video, directed by Mike Clattenburg, independent, 1993.

¹⁷⁶ Sara Reid, “Papa Rosta and Ruffneck set sights on big time” *North End News*, March 5, 1993, p7.

sporadic, approximately one show per month (with the exception of Hip Club Groove who performed at diverse venues and alongside diverse acts on a regular basis), making it difficult for rap artists to build a fan base. The aforementioned Double Deuce was one of several bars at the heart of the Halifax alternative music scene in the early 1990s but, as a licensed venue, its patrons and its performers represented a demographic that was both older than the hip hop scene, and significantly more focused on the city's independent rock scene, which included up and coming bands like Sloan, Thrush Hermit, and Jale.¹⁷⁷ Club Flamingo, once a Gottingen Street all ages venue that regularly accommodated the hip hop community, moved downtown and acquired a liquor license, nullifying its earlier clientele. There was, however, an alternative. Café Ole opened by Condon Macleod in 1992 on Barrington Street as an all ages venue that catered to the interests of young people, giving youth-oriented musical genres with little mainstream acceptance, particularly punk and hip hop, a place to perform.

The entire Haltown collective began receiving attention from local media in 1993. In March the North End News, ran a two page spread with articles on Mod'rn World Thang, Universal Soul, Papa Rosta and Ruffneck, and on the unifying movement that Haltown Projex represented.¹⁷⁸ Filmmaker Mike Clattenburg, who would later go on to create the popular television show *Trailer Park Boys* – a show heavily influenced by his experiences with the Halifax hip hop community - produced a short documentary on

¹⁷⁷ It would be reasonable to count Hip Club Groove among these bands, as they had been performing together for years. HCG was a rare exception in hip hop, a rap group who fit in with the indie rock scene.

¹⁷⁸ Reid, S., Bond, M., and Roy Thorpe, "Feel The Beat!" *North End News*, volume 5 number 12, March 5, 1993, 6-7.

Haltown Projex, focusing on the group and a performance at Café Ole.¹⁷⁹ (He would later make music videos for a number of Halifax rap artists, including Hip Club Groove and Spryfield's Local Dre, formerly Eddie E of Paid In Full.) Another article, in CKDU's earcandy publication shortly after the release show, praised scene elders Mod'rn World Thang for their leadership, celebrated the skills of Haslam and Hip Club Groove, marvelled at the youth of Shingai and Ruffneck, and ultimately applauded the group as a whole for struggling to find a place in a rock-oriented music scene and for being an integrated collective, when race relations in Halifax had so frequently been a source of tension.¹⁸⁰

Just as CKDU's community radio format had supported local hip hop through airplay, independent media offered its support through coverage. In 1993, a bi-weekly alternative newspaper called The Coast started in Halifax, and performance listings began appearing regularly in the paper's back pages. These listings, combined with existing promotional flyers for events, provide a frame of reference for the live performance aspect of the hip hop community. Rap shows were, on average, a monthly occurrence in Halifax, but they did happen often enough to attract a following. Café Ole hosted many hip hop events, allowing local artists to connect with their local fan base, both young and old. Jorun recalls that, by the time they were performing at the Double Deuce, the groups under the Haltown banner had enough material to put on a three hour show, perfect for a venue like Café Ole, which operated between 9:00 pm and

¹⁷⁹ *Haltown Projects* [sic] *In The House*, digital video, directed by Mike Clattenburg, independent, 1993.

¹⁸⁰ Chris Trombridge, "Haltown Projex", *earcandy*, volume 3 number 3, 1993.

12:00 am.¹⁸¹ Haltown Projex, though its affiliate ranks were sizeable, did not constitute the entirety of the hip hop community. For example, a flyer from 1993 advertises a March 27th performance by Bassment Unit, Universal Soul, and an unaffiliated group called Rhythm + Rhyme at Café Ole. Another, from July 16th of that year, is billed as Halifax Rap Fest, and features the same three groups alongside Local Dre , Dat Korrupshun, Left Word, Aw-fufu, and Haltown Projex' Shingai.¹⁸²

The most significant show of 1993, however, took place on Friday, 25 June, again at Café Ole. Having gathered together an impressive roster of rappers and groups, and having the means to record material at Jorun's studio, Haltown Projex held a release party. A press release had circulated prior to the event that read:

"Eroded Fly & Phunky Lobster Record

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

HALTOWN MELTDOWN

Local Hip Hop Producer **Whichdoctor Jo-Run** (of **Mod'rn World Thang**) and **Phunky Lobster Records** have just released the first Halifax-based Rap Music compilation *ever*. The ten band, 20 song LP will be distributed nationally through Phunky Lobster and Eroded Fly Music.

For more information, photographs, biographies, interviews, Please contact Joseph Serra at 422-5902 or call Richard at 454-6963

PHUNKY LOBSTER, 2309 Brunswick St. Apt #T-24, Halifax, NS, B3K 2ZI, (902) 422-5902"¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ Jorun Bombay, January 29, 2010, (5:40 pm) comment on "From the video vaults of east coast Canadian hip hop: 1992", Hip Hop Canada, January 19, 2010, <http://www.hiphopcanada.com/phpBB3/viewtopic.php?f=63&t=9493785>.

¹⁸² See Figures A.8 and A.9, P.161-2.

¹⁸³ Joseph Serra, "Haltown Meltdown Press Release", Joseph Serra's private collection, 1993. Note: *Haltown Meltdown* was not the first compilation of Halifax hip hop artists. Digby D had overseen a similar

The compilation itself, entitled *Haltown Meltdown* was put together by Jorun and Rich Terfry, with assistance from CKDU DJ Robert “Ricky Pluto” Jeans.¹⁸⁴ *Haltown Meltdown* brought together a large portion of Halifax’s hip hop community and solidified the notion that, in the absence of institutional support from the Halifax music scene, or from record labels, a hip hop community could be built on the efforts of its members.¹⁸⁵

The show, billed as *Halifax’s Hip Hop Explosion*, featured a diverse line-up, consisting of the various permutations of Haltown’s broader membership: Haltown Projex, Hip Club Groove, Mod’rn World Thang, Universal Soul, Bassment Unit, Ruffneck, Shingai, Haslam, Bonshah and Witchdoctor DJ Jorun.¹⁸⁶ Halifax’s young hip hop community had bridged the gap left by MC J & Cool G’s relocation to Montreal and, continuing a tradition established in the scene’s early years, acted as a community in creating their own opportunities and recording their own projects. Much of this can be attributed to Jorun, whose studio’s open door policy, and its effect, are described in a profile on the DJ that appeared in the North End News in 1993: “[Jorun] makes four-track tape recordings for rap artists for free. In return, they do live shows with him at various alternative venues in the city, such as the Double Deuce and the Khyber Café. His generosity helps artists get their distinctive sound recognized – a vital factor for

project that was recorded at CBC Radio’s Studio H in the late 1980s, see: Charlene Sadler, “Words from the Underground”, *the Daily News*, September 10, 1994.

¹⁸⁴ “Too Much, Too Young”, *earcandy*, volume 3 number 3, 1993, 4.

¹⁸⁵ See Figure A.11, p. 164.

¹⁸⁶ Joseph Serra, “Haltown Meltdown Release Party promotional flyer”, Joseph Serra’s private collection, 1993. See Figure A.10, p.163.

success in the underground.”¹⁸⁷ The hip hop scene flourished as Haltown Projex solidified its presence with *Haltown Meltdown* and brought attention to its members, and to others who were part of the extended community. This was a victory for Jorun who, in 2010, recalled that groups like Mod’rn World Thang and Black Season, whose members had been involved in the hip hop community since the mid-1980s, “got tired of opening up for rock bands all the time due to the absence of hip hop groups during [the early 1990s].”¹⁸⁸

Not everyone, however, had reached that point. Hip Club Groove, accustomed to diversified playbills from the days before they arrived in Halifax, continued playing shows with rock bands as frequently as possible. According to Cheklove, “We were already playing the Double Deuce with rock bands... because there were no hip hop bands playing... and we weren’t interested in waiting around a month or two for hip hop nights, we wanted to play every night.”¹⁸⁹ In one example from August of 1993, the group shared a bill at the Green Room in the Dalhousie Student Union Building with Thrush Hermit (led by frontman Joel Plaskett), Bunk, and Plumtree, bands which were at the heart of an independent rock scene that was having its own renaissance. In 1992, a four-piece band formerly known as Kearney Lake Road emerged on the scene as Sloan, releasing the catchy indie pop song “Underwhelmed,” first on the *Peppermint EP* and on their debut album, *Smearred*. They did this through an independent record label that they started called *murderecords*.

¹⁸⁷ Jennifer Peddle, “Beware! Pop radio can kill”, *North End News*, 1993, 8.

¹⁸⁸ Jorun Bombay, January 29, 2010, (5:40 pm) comment on “From the video vaults of east coast Canadian hip hop: 1992”, Hip Hop Canada, January 19, 2010, <http://www.hiphopcanada.com/phpBB3/viewtopic.php?f=63&t=9493785>.

¹⁸⁹ Cory Bowles, email message to the author, June 4, 2011.

MC J & Cool G set out to get signed to a major label and crafted a sound and an image that would make them a viable act to sign to a contract. In contrast, the early 1990s saw a shift in attitude. Though lack of opportunities and a shared desire to create a scene where none would otherwise exist motivated their efforts, and though a record contract would be a welcome offer to anyone in Halifax, it was the do-it-yourself approach that was central to the city's musical identity. The Halifax hip hop community followed a model established by independent American labels, quite different from what was happening in New York. New York's vast talent pool and its reputation as the hometown of the culture saw artists vying for the radio play or concert bill that would bring them to the attention of record companies offering lucrative deals. Halifax was different. The opportunities were few and far between, so the approach changed; making it was placed before making it big. The independent record company model, however, as exemplified by the following case of Seattle, Washington in the early 1990s, was one that could allow Halifax artists to have complete control over their music and work on their own terms.

The latter years of the Golden Age of Hip Hop coincided with the mainstreaming of independent rock culture (indie, as it would come to be called). At the beginning of the 1990s, Seattle, Washington became the centre of what was dubbed the 'grunge' music scene. Bands like Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, and Alice In Chains played hard rock that maintained independent credibility while being commercially successful. The biggest band to come out of the Seattle scene was Nirvana, a rock trio with a punk ethic and a charismatic frontman in Kurt Cobain. As Nirvana and the other Seattle bands shot

to international stardom, the independent record label Sub Pop, which had fostered the scene in the years before it was discovered by major labels, reflected an alternative to major label music distribution. Sub Pop was not alone; most major urban centres had some form of grassroots music scene and, with it, some form of independent industry. Kaya Oakes describes how this came to pass in *Slanted and Enchanted: The Evolution of Indie Culture*, "Indie's history can be traced back to the fifties and sixties, when many artists established the tenets of networking, making art outside of the mainstream, valuing creativity above profit, and working at the grassroots level, which were revived in the eighties indie scene. In this later version of indie, zines, tape trading, comics, flyer art, [skateboarding], and many other creative genres rose up out of the punk underground and were embraced by millions of people seeking a way to express themselves."¹⁹⁰

Independent labels existed all over North America, releasing albums from artists recording in bedroom studios and garages. Indie's do-it-yourself ethic, from production to distribution, brought about a flood of new artists, many of whom had little more than minor regional recognition or access to a recording device. Oakes continues,

Across the country...music was an opportunity for expression, for growth, and for experimentation, as evidenced by the growing number of scenes in off-the-radar towns. As the fanzine culture began to grow along with the music community, reports of bands... starting their own labels and touring on miniscule budgets inspired untold numbers of people to... try to do the same. In many cases, those

¹⁹⁰ Kaya Oakes, *Slanted and Enchanted: The Evolution of Indie Culture* (New York: Holt, 2009), 12.

new groups of musicians, writers, artists, and scenesters didn't come from New York or Los Angeles... they came from out-of-the-way towns that existed in the shadows of their bigger and more glamorous neighbours.¹⁹¹

As Seattle prospered, the music industry and its media counterparts sought the next musical epicentre among these countless active scenes, and for a moment, they fixed their gaze upon Halifax.

Canada has historically been divided into geographically and culturally distinct regions that have defined the character of the country. Though Halifax is not an insignificant city among Canada's provincial and territorial capitals, it is removed enough from the perceived centres of metropolitan culture. Aside from occasional mainstream interest in displays of Celtic or Acadian heritage, Halifax, and the Maritimes in general, are an often overlooked thread in the country's cultural fabric.

Much like Seattle, Halifax's geographic and political remoteness from larger metropolitan areas (and its intermittent climate fit for staying indoors during part of the year) were conducive to the development of a particular sound and a DIY based music scene. This is evident in the creation of murderrecords and other independent labels in the city like Cinnamon Toast and No Records, as well as smaller entities such as Phunky Lobster (later Jorun Records) and Ceasefire Records, who released cassettes from Local Dre including 1994's *Gun Play*.¹⁹² The scene in Halifax, whether hip hop or indie rock, operated outside of the major label system and thrived. When attention focused on

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, 39-40.

¹⁹² Local Dre, *Gun Play*, Ceasefire Records, 1994.

Halifax, it coincided with a cultural boom in both camps. Artists were recording and releasing their music, putting them in a good position when the labels did take notice. The names of Halifax bands crossed the lips of music journalists and cultural tastemakers everywhere. There was Sloan, a mop-haired foursome from Clayton Park. Eric's Trip, a brooding low fidelity psychedelic trio from Moncton, New Brunswick. Jale, arguably Sloan's female counterpart. There was Hardship Post, Thrush Hermit, Plumtree, and the Superfriendz, all highly regarded bands. There were others, as well, all part of Halifax's blossoming indie rock community and all operating under the watchful eye of the music industry. In 1993, Sub Pop released the *Nevermind The Mollusks* EP featuring Sloan, Jale and Eric's Trip, and signed the two latter bands, while Sloan signed with the significantly larger Geffen Records, Nirvana's post-Sub Pop label after being featured in a showcase produced by the East Coast Music Association – the group responsible for handing out the annual East Coast Music Awards.¹⁹³

Unlike MC J & Cool G's experiences with major labels, the interest in Halifax's indie rock scene did spread to others in the community. The cachet of labels like Sub Pop allowed artists to keep producing their own recordings in Halifax, sustaining the musical community's existing structures, while providing greater attention, distribution and promotion. In this manner, the hip hop community did not follow the path laid out by hip hop artists in other city centres, one that placed getting noticed and signed to a

¹⁹³ John Demont, "Read All About It: Halifax is hip", *Maclean's*, volume 106 number 43, October 25, 1993, 50. Hip hop would not be recognized by the ECMA until 1997, when the first award for hip hop was given to Cape Breton fiddler Ashley MacIsaac for his fusing of traditional Celtic music with electronic production. In comparison, the American Grammy Awards gave their first hip hop award in 1989, with the Much Music Video Awards adding a rap category in 1990, and the Canadian Juno Awards following in 1991.

major label (or one of their subsidiaries) as the first step toward legitimate success. Instead, Halifax's hip hop community operated in a fashion similar to the independent music scene in the United States.

According to this model, artists produced their own works (independently or with the assistance of others within the community) and either sold them at live performances or through consignment at local retailers. The next step up from that level was to sign with an independent label – typically locally owned and operated, with some access to distribution, and some means of helping the artists with the costs associated with reproducing cassettes, CDs, and vinyl. These deals were not especially lucrative, but being connected to an independent label provided a network of artists, fans, booking agents, music journalists and other non-major label operators who played an active role in the various scenes that existed in the city, and throughout the country. This hierarchy of indie artists is diagrammed by Zachary Scribe in *Underground and Independent Rap*, “The innermost circle (1) is DIY obscurity. (2) represents underground respect; (3) stands for major label credentials. (4) intersects with (3) and (5) and signifies a combination of indie cred and major-label validity. (5) means minor stardom, whereas (6) means major stardom.”

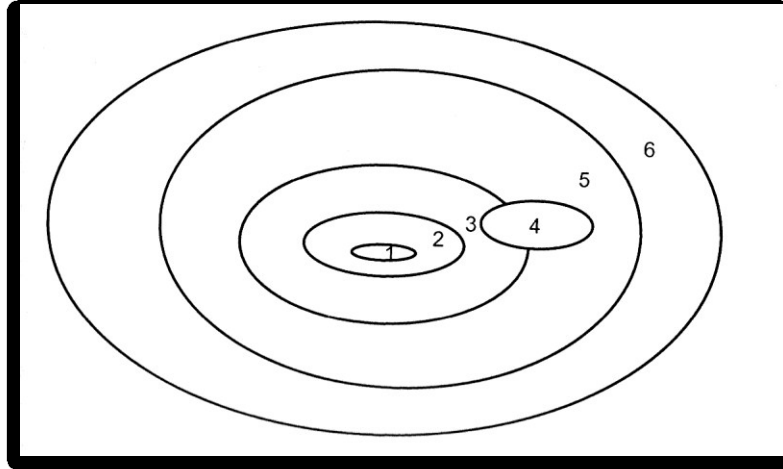


Figure 2 - The Six Spheres of Hip Hop Authenticity¹⁹⁴

In the early 1990s, independent, do-it-yourself music was popular. Halifax, with its socio-economic regional identity and history of making its own opportunities – particularly within the hip hop community – was ideally suited to take advantage of this popularity. Barrington Street became the hub of activity within the scene. Café Ole stood next door to the Khyber Café, a building that, over the years, existed as a club, an art space, a studio, movie theatre, and a performance venue. On occasion, shows that ended at Café Ole at midnight simply moved next door and became after-parties for patrons of legal age. Record stores were also nearby, with Sam the Record Man a block away and Groove Records on the second floor of the Green Lantern Building. Music was being made, played and sold in Halifax, and anyone interested in partaking could find something to suit their taste along Barrington Street in those years.

A few months after the release of *Haltown Meltdown*, The Coast ran a cover story on the group in their widely read back-to-school issue, profiling their efforts and

¹⁹⁴ Zachary Scribe, *Underground and Independent Rap*, 13.

introducing the people at the centre of the hip hop community to the paper's readership.¹⁹⁵ The group was working on recordings for a second Haltown Projex album, but things were already beginning to change. Robert Squire had left Hip Club Groove in 1993, adopted the name Sixtoo and, for a time, eschewed the hip hop community altogether as he fronted One Inch Punch, a hardcore punk band with Jon Hutt on drums, Craig Thibault on bass, and Dan MacDonald on guitar. Terfry started referring to his rapping persona as Stinkin' Rich and picked up the name Buck 65 to represent his production work. Like Hip Club Groove, he also began appearing regularly in The Coast's entertainment listings alongside non-hip hop acts.

By 1994 Haltown Projex seemed to have held to the local hip hop tradition of being a community in the truest sense, working together to create and sustain a scene. After the release of *Haltown Meltdown* a productive and varied scene had emerged and, with the attention the indie scene brought to Halifax, there was hope for the future of hip hop in the city. The fledgling indie label No Records, owned and operated by Wayne Mason, had released a compilation of high school bands in 1992 called *No Class* that featured Hip Club Groove ("Straight Steady Swingin'") and Shingai ("Blackness I Hold"), along with several of the bands that HCG had played with in their early days. In 1993, the same year that *Haltown Meltdown* was released, the label released the *Cool Beans EP*, a collaborative indie rock meets hip hop project with Hip Club Groove, Zoltar, and

¹⁹⁵ Deborah Odhiambo "Home Bass", *The Coast*, volume 1 number 6, September 9, 1993, 10-13. See Figure A.12, p. 165.

Marc and Sharon Costanzo - a brother and sister group called Len.¹⁹⁶ No Records also released a self-produced 7" vinyl EP from Stinkin' Rich called *Chin Music*.¹⁹⁷ These projects solidified Hip Club Groove's longstanding connections with the indie rock scene, and helped the other small labels that supported it to take notice of the city's hip hop community.

The releases on No Records gave Hip Club Groove and Stinkin' Rich something that others in the Haltown circle did not have: access to support and distribution outside of Jorun. This is not to say that they wanted to free themselves from their Haltown affiliations - Hip Club Groove worked with Jorun on their first official release - but for the majority of Haltown Projex rappers, their only opportunity to make music and have it released was with Jorun at the helm of the four-track and handling the majority of production duties. Further, few rappers from the Haltown crew performed independently outside of hip hop shows that involved other members of the collective. For those that did, particularly Hip Club Groove and Stinkin' Rich, the willingness to work with the booming indie rock community afforded even greater opportunities.

When approached by Hip Club Groove about joining an upcoming tour, Chris Murphy of Sloan saw potential in their well-seasoned, energetic rap – which, time had proven, worked well with indie rock - and signed Hip Club Groove to murderrecords. The label signed Stinkin' Rich, as well, on the strength of *Chin Music*, his live performances with Haltown Projex, and from his first show as Stinkin' Rich - a KISS tribute show

¹⁹⁶ Hip Club Groove, Zoltar, and Len, *Cool Beans*, norecords, NOC 005, 1993. Len would eventually add DJ Moves and M88kenzie (then D-Rock) to their group, and scored a massive hit in the summer of 1999 with "Steal My Sunshine" from their album *You Can't Stop the Bun Rush*.

¹⁹⁷ Stinkin' Rich, *Chin Music*, norecords, 1993.

attended by Chris Murphy.¹⁹⁸ Terfry recalls the development of his approach to performance, “When I first went solo... it’s gonna be one person on stage not playing any sorta instrument or anything, how am I going to keep people’s interest; especially considering that, unfortunately, at this stage of my career a lot of times I’m going to be performing for audiences that aren’t strictly hip hop audiences... I just gotta give people something to look at, so I just use a lot of props or I would come up with a little theme... and it just snowballed from there... a big huge production or spectacle.”¹⁹⁹ By the end of the year, murderecords had released Hip Club Groove’s *Trailer Park Hip Hop* (on cassette, CD, and vinyl), Stinkin’ Rich’s *Game Tight* (cassette only), and a 7” vinyl single from Stinkin’ Rich called *Stolen Bass*.²⁰⁰

Sloan’s label was not the only one showing interest. Truro based Ant Records, operated by J. La Pointe of The Motes (and later North of America and Instruments), released *Hiss* - a cassette by DJ Moves that featured Cheklove Shakil, M88kenzie, Sixtoo and Stinkin’ Rich – in 1994, the same year that Jon Hutt, formerly of One Inch Punch, released the sonically experimental *Smock* (ANT004) as Recyclone. In 1995 Ant Records released two more from Recyclone, *Warping Solid Snakes* (ANT008) and *Dementia 5* (ANT016) and planned to release Sixtoo’s upcoming project.²⁰¹ That album, *Superstar Props*, was produced by Jorun and Buck 65 (Terfry) and marked Sixtoo’s first rap release

¹⁹⁸ Quinlan, Thomas, Interview with Stinkin’ Rich (25 August, 1995), *Boognish #3*, Thomas Quinlan, editor, accessed October 20, 2010, <http://handsolorecords.com/boognish/stinkin-rich/>.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ Hip Club Groove, *Trailer Park Hip Hop*, murderecords, MURBD 010, 1994; Stinkin’ Rich, *Game Tight* murderecords, 1994; Stinkin’ Rich, *Stolen Bass*, murderecords, MUR009, 1994.

²⁰¹ J. LaPointe, “Ant Records Promotional Flyer”, Brian Higgins’ private collection, 1994.

(One Inch Punch released the *High Five Eye EP* on No Records in 1993²⁰²) as a solo artist.

The album featured a 'posse cut' that would eventually be released on two other albums and reflects the sound and style of Halifax's hip hop community in the mid-1990s, and offers some indication to the extent of New York's stylistic influence on Halifax rap artists.

Case Study: Shakinawakinabreakinemup (1995)

Much of the rap music coming from New York between 1991 and 1995 followed a similar sonic template. 'Boom Bap', an onomatopoeic allusion to the prominent kick and snare drums, is commonly used to describe the East Coast sound from that era. Breakbeats and samples mined from dusty crates, blended together in pulsating loops was the basic recipe, but the approach had changed on all fronts in the years since hip hop culture became part of the mainstream. From a production perspective, record digging and an explosion in the number of rap acts on major labels increased the level of competition significantly. In order to be successful, a producer's songs had to be created from samples that were not overused – ideally from samples no other producer is aware of – or, if a classic sample (one used previously to popular effect) is used, then sufficiently rearranged, or chopped, to improve on its previous iteration. The market was flooding with sample-based rap music, the products of a generation raised in the post-hip hop world, which turned to the vast physical history of recorded music and remixed it.

²⁰² One Inch Punch, *High Five Eye E.P.* norecords, NOD003, 1993.

From a lyrical perspective, the competition was fierce as well. While Old School rhymes tended to be simply structured, with a single rhyming word binding the end of each couplet. With New York rapper Rakim's popularization of internal rhyme schemes in the mid-1980s, the construction of rap lyrics became increasingly complex.²⁰³ Literary techniques borrowed from poetry pushed rap lyricism into internal rhymes, multisyllabic rhymes, increased speed and focused breath control.²⁰⁴ Traditional rhyme schemes (AABB, ABAB, ABBA) are not equipped to adequately represent the kind of work that was being created as MCs strove to pen the perfect rhyme. The competitive streak that drives MCs to rap about their superiority also increased the level of complexity in rap lyrics.

The changes in the production and writing of hip hop music are displayed in "Shakinawakinabreakinemup," as it differs from earlier case studies (New Beginning and MC J & Cool G). There are similarities, however, to New Beginning's "In Effect." The posse cut approach that was employed to showcase the diverse voices in New Beginning has been used to great effect by larger hip hop groups since the early days of rap music. A posse cut, essentially a song with more than two or three rappers, is similar in approach to jazz music. In the 1950s, it was not uncommon for a number of players to retire to a studio afterhours and record songs together, sometimes featuring several legendary figures taking turns with solos around an established theme on a single recording. In rap music, virtuosity is less the domain of the instrumentalist – who, in the case of hip hop, is usually the DJ or the producer – and more of a lyrical endeavour. The

²⁰³ Adam Bradley, *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2009), 40-1.

²⁰⁴ Adam Bradley, *Book of Rhymes*, 3-48.

way rhymes are constructed and delivered in rap music operates in a fashion similar to, for example, the way a trumpet player would lead a band, soloing around a basic musical structure and letting the interplay of the notes, the pauses, the emphasis, and the tone create the focal point of the song. In a posse cut, the MCs take turns, essentially as soloists themselves, playing off of the other MCs and pitting their respective styles against each other in a collaborative setting.

In “Shakinawakinabreakinemup”, the beat itself is a hypnotic blend of samples – a repeating bar of stand-up bass, bubbling electronic keyboard, reverberant guitar shimmering in and out of the mix and a hard hitting classic drum break from a song called “It’s A New Day” by a group called Skull Snaps (Jorun’s first verse explicitly mentions the use of the break in this song). The song’s lyrics are accented by short vocal samples taken from other rap songs that, properly placed, interact with the lyrics by completing rhymes or bridging one MC’s verse with another. The song’s title is derived from the chorus which is a chopped and reworked “Shaking em up, waking em up, raking em up, breaking em up” sample from “Know The Ledge” by Eric B & Rakim.²⁰⁵

Appearing on the song are Jorun, Ruffneck, Sixtoo, Gerald “Flexman” Saunders, and Papa Grand. In the first round of verses, each MC is given an extended amount of time to showcase their skills, defining each as individuals. In subsequent rounds, however, each MC gets two bars, tightening the interplay between vocalists and bringing the song to a dynamic cipher style finale. As the MCs come together, they each

²⁰⁵ Eric B & Rakim, “Juice (Know The Ledge)”, *Juice: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*, MCA, MCAD-10462, 1991.

begin to contribute to the whole, doubling other MC's vocals, while samples are used to fill out certain lines. Altogether, the effect of "Shakinawakinabreakinemup" is the culmination of a classically designed Golden Era, East Coast beat, meticulously crafted from, and accentuated by, samples and the interplay of MCs showcasing their own rhyme skills in a fashion that suggests a larger ability to work intimately and intricately with others from the Haltown collective. It serves as a fine example of collaboration and progression in Halifax's hip hop community in the mid-1990s, but also the beginning of a new era in the city, one marred by accusations, apprehension, and the individualization of the community's do-it-yourself work ethic.

The Business of Art: Haltown's Meltdown

*"I'm on the run and I'm going somewhere
I won't get lost in the shuffle if I'm playing solitaire
So, I've got to make that move the best way I know how
So, I'm going to be in total control starting now"*
- Stinkin' Rich, "All About Me", *Chin Music*, 1993.

Community played a large role in hip hop culture in New York and in Halifax. During its developmental phase it was supported by community festivals, the CAYG, and the personal friendships and connections that existed between practitioners. In the early 1990s, after the era of New Beginning and MC J & Cool G when the scene had passed into the hands of Haltown Projex, community continued to play a role, with the scene operating in a largely collectivist fashion, recording and performing together to sustain rap music's presence in Halifax. In 1994, however, there was a shift. As some

practitioners learned how to produce their own material, the scene at large in Halifax became a factionalized community of individuals.

The signing of Hip Club Groove and Stinkin' Rich to murderecords did not sit well with everyone involved in Haltown Projex and became a catalyst for the fragmentation of the hip hop community in Halifax. Overall, things were progressing in 1994: Jorun proved with *Haltown Meltdown* that independent rap music was viable in Halifax; Stinkin' Rich and Hip Club Groove were expanding their fan base and bringing Halifax hip hop into other scenes; three shows on CKDU regularly played independent rap recordings. Performances were being held regularly, often in rented space and entirely run by the performing artists like Jorun and Hip Club Groove, who, like the culture's Bronx pioneers, organized shows and found opportunities when none were readily available.²⁰⁶

For all the progression, however, relationships began to strain, and the release of Hip Club Groove's murderecords debut brought tensions to a head. *Trailer Park Hip Hop* was released in 1994, the liner notes read: "Engineered by: Brian Higgins (DJ Moves), C. Bowles (Cheklove Shakil), Marc Costanzo, Steve Comeau, (thanks to Jo-Run)."²⁰⁷ The band's acknowledgements mentioned people and venues and bands that had helped them along the road to making the record, including Jorun, but he nevertheless felt slighted. *Trailer Park Hip Hop* had been created prior to the group's signing with murderecords. After the release of *Haltown Meltdown*, pre-production for the album

²⁰⁶ Charlene Sadler, "Words from the Underground", *the Daily News*, September 10, 1994.

²⁰⁷ Hip Club Groove, *Trailer Park Hip Hop*, murderecords, MURBD010, 1994.

began at Jorun's studio. Samples came from both Jorun and DJ Moves, and Jorun produced several songs. The group then took some of those versions and remade them on their own, adding or leaving out samples, and produced some entirely new beats, readying the overall production for release. Hip Club Groove had been asked to create theme music for a Halifax-based consumer and media awareness program on CBC Television called *Street Cents* (another benefit of their hard-earned exposure) and, with the money they were paid, the group recorded all but one of the final versions of the songs with Steve Comeau at Adinsound Studios during April and May of 1994. When the group signed with murderecords, the album was ready to be released.

In a 1996 interview with Thomas Quinlan, Jorun explained why the release had bothered him:

When Hip Club Groove put out their album I produced it, like 80% of the Hip Club Groove album, and I didn't get any credit and I felt really bad cuz [sic] I would be at parties and people would be playing 'Rugged Operator', which, like, the majority of the song was dug up from my record collection. And their DJ was getting all the credit. Like, he was such a genius to take that beat with the bassline. But we don't have anything against each other, we already solved that. But at the time it was a question of not even mentioning me.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁸ Quinlan, Thomas, Interview with Witchdoc Jorun (January 11, 1996), *Boognish #5*, Thomas Quinlan, editor, accessed October 20, 2010, <http://handsolorecords.com/boognish/witchdoc-jorun/>.

Indeed, Hip Club Groove would eventually concede that Jorun was deserving of a more substantial credit, but after the album's release, the issue contributed to strain relationships within the scene.

The signing of Hip Club Groove and Stinkin' Rich to *murderecords* also struck a nerve in the Haltown camp because some felt there were racial implications. Jorun recalls, "The *Haltown* tape – the first one – came out, and before that there was no, absolutely no, rappers in Halifax, like 1990 to 1992. And then we all started coming up, we all on the *Haltown* tape had known each other. When *Murderecords* saw the *Haltown* tape, they all of a sudden became interested. And they took all the White groups and signed them and left all the other groups behind. Every time they did a tour we weren't invited... People were just not acknowledging the *Haltown Meltdown* tape. And it just really insulted me."²⁰⁹

For Hip Club Groove, race had been an issue from the time they began working with Haltown, though it was not the advantage some claimed. While the group was embraced by some in the hip hop community, others were less enthusiastic.²¹⁰ Some members of the Haltown collective, and some of the audience at shows, dismissed HCG as a White group because two of its members were. The racial allegations, when Hip Club Groove arrived in Halifax and when they signed with *murderecords*, ignored several factors. Most notably, Cheklove Shakil is Black. Light-skinned, he was subjected to ridicule from Black artists within the community who openly questioned his

²⁰⁹ *ibid.* It should be noted that Hip Club Groove was active during 1990 and 1991, though not as part of the Halifax scene.

²¹⁰ Cory Bowles, email message to the author, June 4, 2011.

Blackness.²¹¹ Aside from mocking references to Hip Club Groove as a White group from their peers in Halifax, a 1995 article in the Globe and Mail titled “White on black: the rap on rap”, ostensibly about White rappers in Canada, focuses on White dancehall artist Snow and Hip Club Groove, but does acknowledge the inappropriateness of the latter’s inclusion: “Even this early in their career there are... indignities they have to endure, like being dissed by fellow bands for having a record deal and by insensitive press reports, like the one that called them a White hip hop band. (“Obviously they weren’t looking,” says Moves, “‘cause Cory is Black.”)”²¹² The issue, however, was mostly apparent in Halifax, “We weren’t a ‘White’ band on the road,” remembers Cheklove, “Far from it. We were considered a hip hop crew and we had respect. That respect stopped when we got home.”²¹³

In the case of Hip Club Groove and Stinkin’ Rich, long-standing suspicions overshadowed the years of hard work and connection building that both had undertaken and labeled their successes as the benefits of an institutionally racist system. The problems Black artists faced in the 1980s, as discussed by Corey Adams in the 1985 New Works Magazine interview referenced in Chapter One, and which carried into the 1990s and manifested themselves through events like the July riot of 1991 discussed earlier in this chapter, continued to be a problem in Halifax but as Stinkin’ Rich

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² Elizabeth Benzetti, “White on black: the rap on rap”, *The Globe and Mail*, Arts & Books, March 11, 1995, C1 and C6.

²¹³ Cory Bowles, email message to the author, June 4, 2011.

and Hip Club Groove found crossover success – regardless of what they had done to earn it – they found themselves at the centre of something much larger than hip hop.²¹⁴

In a broader context, 1994 also saw the City of Halifax doing battle with Africville once again. Jennifer Nelson describes the Africville Genealogical Society’s attempts to have the issue of Africville re-evaluated by the city’s municipal government as going largely ignored.²¹⁵ It was also the year that Victor and Eddie Carvery, former Africville residents, set up a camp on the site of their former home and vowed not to leave until an equitable deal was struck with the city. She writes, “News reports of the time reflect a daily preoccupation with the presence of the Carverys in the park and cite complaints from other Halifax residents who claim that the protest ‘interferes with their enjoyment of [Seaview Park]. Mayor [Walter] Fitzgerald had already threatened to evict them by force if necessary, although no law existed to justify this. The city had also locked the park’s only washroom. Some Haligonians angrily expressed a belief that the Carverys were receiving special treatment because of race, ignoring the absurdity of such a remark given how Africville had been ‘specially’ treated because of race in the past.”²¹⁶ As such, Halifax in 1994 was a hotbed of racial politics, from the water coolers at City Hall to the stoops in Uniacke Square, and true motives in both municipal dealing and hip hop were easily obscured by the lingering question: to what extent was race involved?

²¹⁴ Craig Benjamin, “Music In Halifax: Is There Room For Good Music in Halifax?” *New Works Magazine*, September 1985, accessed October 21, 2010,

http://www.tranquileye.com/fog/music_in_halifax_1985/5_music_in_halifax_1985.html.

²¹⁵ Jennifer J. Nelson, *Razing Africville: A Geography of Racism*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 133.

²¹⁶ *Ibid*, 134.

There is nothing to suggest that race played any overt role in the signings to murderrecords (or to Ant Records, though no such claims were levied regarding DJ Moves, Recyclone, or Sixtoo), and much evidence chronicling the involvement of Hip Club Groove and Stinkin' Rich in the musical community that spawned Sloan and murderrecords. Nevertheless, race continued to be a sensitive topic in Nova Scotia in the 1990s, and for the young members of Halifax's hip hop community, many of whom were disregarding such notions to work together for the betterment of the scene, racism was a looming spectre. Historical tensions, though they contributed, were not the only aspect of the issue, as some Black artists sought to protect hip hop as a Black expression and scapegoated Hip Club Groove in the process.

The reality was that that Halifax hip hop scene was thriving and that there were opportunities available. On 12 August, 1994 the Cultural Awareness Youth Group presented another rap contest. The all-ages show, billed as The Big Showdown, was held at Dalhousie University and featured a diverse line up: Pooch From Da Coope, Foot Soldiers, and Ruffneck, all hailing from East Preston; Pantha, a young woman formerly known as Previous MC, from Cherrybrook; Peach Fuzz from Waverly; G Mac LVP from Lucasville; 212all from Sackville; Malaya from Spryfield; Papa Grand from Dartmouth; and Shy Luv, Universal Soul, Flexman, and Lester "MC Skillz" Powell, a former dancer with Universal Soul, all from Halifax.²¹⁷ Just as the culture had flowed out of the Bronx, into the rest of New York City, and, ultimately, across North America and the rest of the world, drawing in the curious and the committed, hip hop outgrew its origins in Halifax.

²¹⁷ See Figure A.13, p.166.

Hip hop culture in Halifax was no longer just a Gottingen Street thing, nor was it just a Barrington Street thing; it was an East Preston thing and a Spryfield thing, a Truro thing and a Mount Uniacke thing. The show was hosted and judged by MC J & Cool G, who were visiting the city prior to the release of their second album *Dimensions of Double R&B*.²¹⁸ The contest itself was filmed by Mike Clattenburg, his second documentary project focusing on the Halifax hip hop community.²¹⁹ At the end of the night, Pantha was declared the winner. Notably, all three rap contests held by the CAYG were won by women, with Oxanne and the Finesse Sisters taking the previous contests. As it had done since its inception, the CAYG created opportunities, open to all, which gave rap music a place to be heard outside of age restricted bars and Café Ole's downtown scene, where marginalized young people from outlying Black communities could come and feel welcome.

There is little extant written information regarding the status of women in the Halifax Hip Hop community. In the days of the Uptown Festivals, women were represented by Oxanne, the Finesse Sisters, ShyLuv, and eventually her group 2on2 with DJ Pounzi, but the involvement of women diminishes as the scene moved downtown. In their rap contest victory, recalls David Woods, the Finesse Sisters won on the strength of a hastily written song he had penned for them called "Beat Up Men."²²⁰ The tongue-in-cheek empowerment proved successful at the CAYG contests, but few women ventured

²¹⁸ MC J & Cool G, *Dimensions of Double R&B*, Dynamix II Records, DCD 9021-2, 1995.

²¹⁹ *Rap*, digital video, directed by Mike Clattenburg, independent, author's private collection, 1994. Clattenburg's popular television series *Trailer Park Boys* was heavily influenced by his interest in hip hop in Halifax during the early 1990s.

²²⁰ David Woods, email message to the author, May 28, 2011.

beyond those confines and into the downtown scene. ShyLuv continued to be a regular performer, though she was not a part of the Haltown collective. After 2on2 opened for Maestro Fresh Wes and MC J & Cool G at the Forum, ShyLuv went on to open for 3rd Bass and Ice-T's Rhyme Syndicate at their appearances in the city.²²¹ She would later win an African Nova Scotian Music Association (ANSMA) award for Best Hip Hop recording in 1999, and an East Coast Music Award (ECMA) in 2002 for Urban Recording of the Year, but was not an active participant in the downtown rap scene in the 1990s. Pantha, winner of the final rap contest in 1994, appears in a 1990 recording of performances at the Black Cultural Centre, playing to youth with a message of positivity, suggesting that, aside from the scene, there were opportunities in different settings, including cultural demonstrations and community events, where women did play a role.²²²

Two months after the CAYG rap contest, Hip Club Groove and Stinkin' Rich were scheduled to play at the grand finale of the Second Annual Halifax Pop Explosion. Sharing the bill with them was Eric's Trip and The Superfriendz, two of the most popular bands in the city.²²³ The Pop Explosion was started as an organized celebration of indie culture in 1993 by Peter Rowan and Greg Clarke, when interest in Halifax's indie scene coincided with a surge in the number of local bands (including Hip Club Groove, who

²²¹ ShyLuv, January 4, 2010, (8:40 pm) comment on "In Depth Atlantic hip hop article – Throwback from May 2000", Hip Hop Canada December 6, 2009, <http://www.hiphopcanada.com/phpBB3/viewtopic.php?f=63&t=9492512&start=0>.

²²² "King Fly/MC Chill/Previous MC", digital video, from the author's private collection, 1990.

²²³ "Halifax Pop Explosion Schedule", *The Coast*, September, 22, 1994.

headlined during the festival's inaugural year).²²⁴ Coast reporter Kyle Shaw notes that it was a high exposure show, and a successful one, even with Hip Club Groove and the Superfriendz arriving at the venue direct from a twenty hour drive from the previous night's performance with Sloan in Saint Catherine's, Ontario.²²⁵ At the end of the night, writes Shaw, the Superfriendz returned to the stage to play live beats for the rappers, an act that reflected the level of cohesion between the two scenes.²²⁶ Before the year ended, both Hip Club Groove and Stinkin' Rich would be featured on the cover of The Coast.²²⁷ While the article that accompanied Hip Club Groove's cover appearance did include a brief appraisal of *Trailer Park Hip Hop* (released 18 November 94 at the Khyber Club with Universal Soul²²⁸), the focus of the coverage was the group's struggles and successes in the years before they came to the attention of murderecords.²²⁹ The article accompanying Stinkin' Rich's cover (where he appears wearing a skeleton costume in a graveyard), entitled "Why I Hate Myself for Loving Baseball", ignores his music altogether and focuses on his love of baseball and how, until he moved to Halifax for university, he expected baseball to be the focus of his life.²³⁰ Neither group were being featured simply as rappers, they were being hailed as important figures in the Halifax music scene, personalities worthy of notice.

²²⁴ "History", halifaxpopexplosion.com, accessed May 14, 2011, <http://halifaxpopexplosion.com/about-us/history-of-hpx/>.

²²⁵ Kyle Shaw, "Big Bang Theory", *The Coast*, 10 October 1994, 11.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

²²⁷ *The Coast*, September 22, 1994 (HCG) and *The Coast*, October 20, 1994 (Stinkin' Rich)

²²⁸ *The Coast*, November 17, 1994, 14.

²²⁹ Jamie Lindsay, "Getting into the Groove" *The Coast*, September 22, 1994, 13.

²³⁰ Christine Oreskovich, "Why I Hate Myself For Loving Baseball", *The Coast*, October 30, 1994, 10.

In 1995, with the controversy surrounding the production credits for *Trailer Park Hip Hop*, allegations of racism surrounding the murder records deals, tours with other acts on the label, and jealousy and resentment over The Coast's coverage hanging over their heads in the hip hop community, Hip Club Groove and Stinkin' Rich maintained a high level of involvement. Tensions ran high on May 12th, at a Café Olé show that featured Universal Soul, Ruffneck, Witchdoc & Flexman, Hip Club Groove, Stinkin' Rich, Sixtoo, and MC Skillz. A last minute addition was made to the bill – two White teenagers from Endfield, Nova Scotia: Luke "Classified" Boyd and Jolly Green (real name unknown), as Keltic Rebels.²³¹ The night was recorded on a four-track by Jorun (Stinkin' Rich and Classified used their own tapes to record their respective performances), and serves as a record of a rich and diverse hip hop community in Halifax, and perhaps, the moment when it split in half.²³²

With the majority of the Halifax hip hop community performing there were some concerns about allowing the unknown and unproven Keltic Rebels to perform. In an attempt to lay those concerns aside and move forward, the show began with the night's host, Shingai, calling rappers up to the microphone for an impromptu cipher. With Jorun working The Tom Tom Club's "Genius of Love" on the turntables, Hip Club Groove's Cheklove Shakil, rhyming second, freestyled proudly and defiantly that his record is being sold across the country.²³³ Stinkin' Rich, soon after, opened with "Let's get down to brass tacks, these lower-class macks get dropped on their ass cracks. Me

²³¹ See Figure A.14, p.167.

²³² "Haltown Live at Café Ole May 12, 1995 (Jorun on the wheels)", *Haltown 2*, Jo-run Records, 1995 and "The Original Battle", *Haltown Live*, Jorun Records, 1996.

²³³ ²³³ "Haltown Live at Café Ole May 12 1995 (Jorun on the wheels)" *Haltown 2*, Jo-run Records, 1995.

and my gasmask, immune to any vapour fume, I'll maintain integrity despite the snakes."²³⁴ Also recorded during the cipher is the first stage appearance of Classified - who would consistently apply Halifax's DIY model to his own releases into the late 2000s when he became one of the most successful hip hop artists in Canada - and a young rapper named Tyrone "Little T" Thompson - who would later change his name to Tachichi and become another significant player in the Halifax hip hop community - and Mike "Kaspa" Betts who would go on to collaborate with a number of Halifax artists.²³⁵

For the last song of their set, Haltown Projex performed "Red Rova", produced by Jorun and featuring himself, Ruffneck, Sixtoo and MC Skillz. In the song's second verse, Jorun starts, "Don't strain your retinas, you can't see me, like trying to find my credits on the Trailer Park CD."²³⁶ MC Skillz' verse at the end of the track was an outright attack on Hip Club Groove, with lines including, "You make me vexed, put down the mic and leave that shit alone. How can you be hip hop if you do tours with Sloan? I never dissed another man to boost my own rep, but out of all the niggas in Halifax how can you say that you're the best?", and, "They be sounding wack like the rhymes on Bust A Move. You might be hip in the club, but you still can't make me groove."²³⁷ Keltic Rebels were sent quickly to the stage to diffuse the tension in the room, but Cheklove was furious and challenged Skillz to a battle as soon as their last

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

²³⁶ Witchdoc Jorun, Ruffneck, Sixtoo, and MC Skillz, "Red Rova", *Haltown 2*, Jorun Records, 1995.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

song ended. With Shingai moderating, the two battled acapella, no beats, before a crowd of three hundred in Café Ole.²³⁸

The battle itself was released in 1996 on *Haltown Live*, documenting the conflict within the scene at its apex.²³⁹ The rules, laid out by Shingai, were simple, “Each MC gets a mic... come out swingin’, don’t cut the man off between his rhymes, and if you lose, take your sorry ass on home.”²⁴⁰ Cheklove begins the first round by stating for the audience that the battle is in response to comments about him “not being real hip hop” but falters after a few rhymes, flustered at trying to build a rhythm in the absence of beats to rap over. After Skillz offers a verse touting his microphone prowess, but avoiding any personal attacks, Cheklove finds his footing and proceeds to pit his track record as a rapper – in both performance and on records - against Skillz relative inexperience, earning a great deal of applause with the last line of his verse, “On a scale of one to ten I lost you somewhere under zero.”²⁴¹ Skillz responds by drawing Stinkin’ Rich into the fray, “Hip Club Groove, you can’t make me groove. [Stinkin’] Rich is in the back sounding real wack. You know what I’m sayin? You can’t bust a stitch. You’re not Stinkin’ Rich, you’re a stinkin’ bitch.”²⁴² Further, Skills proclaims himself to be an underground artist, insisting that he will remain so. This was said in response to Cheklove’s previous verse, when he addressed being called a sell out by his peers. As

²³⁸ “The Original Battle”, *Haltown Jr*, Jorun Records, 1996 and Sean Flinn, “Sleeping With The Turntable”, *The Coast*, June 29, 1995, 8.

²³⁹ See Figure A.17, p.170.

²⁴⁰ “The Original Battle”, *Haltown Jr*, Jorun Records, 1996

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

²⁴² *Ibid.*

Cheklove said at the beginning of the battle, authenticity was the issue at hand, and it is through lines like these that that conflict flows through both rappers.

Skillz' lines about Stinkin' Rich drew loud cheers from the crowd, who seem in tune with the tension in the room. Cheklove fires back, "What can I say? I could have been slightly offended, could it be we've sold out 'cause we're still independent? Wake up and smell the lyrical device. Oh, my mistake, you've had a live show once or twice."²⁴³ Skillz then lays bare what Hip Club Groove and Stinkin' Rich had previously identified as a streak of jealousy, "You're making videos and shows, what's that all about? Hammer doesn't sing, but he didn't sell out. Come on now, who you tryin to fool? With the shit that you're pumping, you know you niggas really ain't that cool. The shit that you're pumping is kind of weak, I caught your video on Much Music just the other week. Lookin like it was taped live at home, you should have kept it in the garage and keep that shit alone."²⁴⁴ When Skillz derided HCG's video for looking like it was shot "at home", Cheklove proudly interjected "It was!" and the crowd erupted in support of the local recognition.²⁴⁵

The last verse of the battle fell to Cheklove, who reiterated his experience and notoriety in the larger Canadian hip hop community and stressed that he is who he is and doesn't need to put up false fronts before closing with the line, "Your mom blasts

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁵ There is no way of knowing if Skillz' use of a racial slur was intended to be derogatory, or merely the vernacular employed by a Black artist in the course of a live battle.

my tape when she's at the laundromat."²⁴⁶ At this point, Ruffneck storms the stage, citing an unspoken rule forbidding comments about another person's mother, and the battle is declared to be over. Shingai asked the audience to vote by applause, and though sound levels in the audio recording indicate that Cheklove received a louder response, the battle was declared a draw, to the audible disapproval of some in the room.²⁴⁷

On June 23rd, 1995, roughly one month after the battle, Haltown Projex released their second cassette, *Haltown 2*, at a show with an almost identical lineup, including MC Skillz, Hip Club Groove, and Stinkin' Rich.²⁴⁸ Things had changed, however, as was evident on the album itself. A far cry from the scene-encompassing *Haltown Meltdown*, the sequel was entirely produced by Jorun and featured Flexman, Ruffneck, Sixtoo, Papa Grand, Universal Soul, and MC Skillz. With the exception of a single track, taken from the opening cipher of the May 12th show, Stinkin' Rich and Hip Club Groove were conspicuous in their absence. They nevertheless performed at the release. An article appearing in The Coast in the week following the release show about Jorun and the release of *Haltown 2* quickly descends into questions about murderecords, inconsistent support for hip hop in Halifax, and a low turnout at the June 23rd show, placing the spotlight on the negative aspects of the scene.²⁴⁹ Just two years after The Coast published its first article on the community-minded Haltown Projex and the potential

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁸ See Figure A.15, p.168.

²⁴⁹ Sean Flinn, "Sleeping With The Turntable."

future of hip hop in Halifax, the newspaper was turning its attention to the group's problems.

Hip Club Groove had a new album, as well, *Land of the Lost*, which they released on 11 July 1996 at the newly opened Birdland Cabaret with Madhat and Sixtoo. Where *Haltown 2* had "Red Rova", *Land of the Lost* had "Sucker Salad," a song blatantly directed at Jorun and his claim of having produced 80 percent of *Trailer Park Hip Hop*. It began with Cheklove Shakil rhyming, "Don't be taking credit for my songs, since you never liked the shit I was makin all along...What's this I hear about percentage?"²⁵⁰ The song goes into great detail, articulating Cheklove's views on the situation while DJ Moves repeatedly shouts his own jabs in the background, among them the oft repeated, "This was produced by DJ Moves" to make the group's point clear.²⁵¹ The issue was addressed further in the liner notes of the album, with DJ Moves writing, "Approximately 6 out of 48 samples were the result of our CO-PRE-PRODUCER [emphasis in original] putting his two cents in (which is what any good producer/engineer would do). But 6 out of 48 is 12.5% not 80% Not all songs were even pre-produced [at Jorun's studio] - 6 out of 10 were. So, in conclusion, there is no way 80% of our last record was produced by someone else. Any way you look at it, the number 80% still falls short."²⁵²

For all the controversy that the deal had brought, *Land of the Lost* was not released on murderecords. In an interview from July 1995, Cheklove says, "Everybody

²⁵⁰ Hip Club Groove, "Sucker Salad", *Land Of The Lost*, Funtrip Records TRIP 2, 1995.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

²⁵² Brian Higgins, *Land of the Lost*, Funtrip Records TRIP 2, 1995.

who likes Thrush Hermit should thank us because the money that was made off our album was what put out Thrush Hermit and we didn't get paid nothing for our album.”²⁵³ The album was instead released through Funtrip Records, an independent label run by Marc Costanzo from Len. The brother and sister fronted indie pop group and had relocated to Halifax during the scene’s boom years in the early 1990s. Costanzo, having worked with Hip Club Groove on the *Cool Beans EP*, remained friends with the group and, through them, with Sixtoo and Stinkin’ Rich.²⁵⁴ Funtrip was in an advantageous position; the Halifax hip hop artists who had shown the most crossover appeal, all of them friends of Costanzo, were feuding with their prior collaborators.

The murderrecords signings in 1994 began alienating Jorun and Stinkin’ Rich, as well, though the reasoning is more difficult to ascertain. There was the claim that murderrecords had chosen White artists over Blacks, a charge that was not likely to sit well with Terfry, who was a card-carrying member of Afrika Bambaataa’s Zulu Nation and a tireless advocate of hip hop and, by proxy, Black culture. However, on *Man Overboard*, a 1999 album released as Buck 65, he asserts that “Doing what I do has never really been a racial issue.”²⁵⁵ Other possible reasons can be gleaned from a number of sources. In the plainly autobiographical “Memories of the Passed” from 1995, Stinkin’ Rich rhymes, “Man, the vibe was dope, and I was writing rhymes like crazy for myself but the philosophy was getting Isaac hazy. All of us had worked as a producer

²⁵³ Wittchen, Tara, Interview with Hip Club Groove, “Murphy gets dissed by HCG and friends”, SloanNet, July 20 1995, accessed January 20, 2011, <http://sloannet.yupislyr.com/msg01/msg01370.html>.

²⁵⁴ Michael Ligon, “re: Len” SloanNet, 15 January 1996, accessed January 20, 2011, <http://sloannet.yupislyr.com/msg02/msg02428.html>.

²⁵⁵ Buck 65, (track three*), *Man Overboard*, Anticon Records ABR0015, 1999. *Songs on this release were untitled. Later releases of the album gave it the titles “Battery In Pieces” and “Up The Middle.”

in the past and we were all getting lost as a member of the cast with no identity, and things were moving too slow and desperate, days passed and so we all chose to go our separate ways.”²⁵⁶ This lyrical account was scrutinized by Vice, a skateboard and urban culture magazine started by Marc Costanzo,²⁵⁷ who sought clarification in a 1997 interview with Stinkin’ Rich. “The underlying thing with this whole song,” Terfry says, “is people have to focus on the music and not get caught up in all the politics and jealousy. The people out there screamin’ keep it real are the people who are the most full of shit.”²⁵⁸ In the same interview, however, he accuses Jorun of being “a crazy angel dust addict that disses [him] all the time,” indicating that he might be caught up in it as well.²⁵⁹

Another Vice article, written in 1998 about the Halifax hip hop scene, suggests that Stinkin’ Rich’s increasingly unorthodox performances led to Jorun kicking him out of Haltown Projex for fear of the group not being taken seriously.²⁶⁰ The article calls race into question, arguing that Haltown saw “the North of Halifax (mostly Black and lead by Jorun) getting along with the South (mostly White and lead by Stinkin’ Rich)” and its dissolution created a racial divide that led to “Jorun and his crew meeting Rich before his radio show and pound[ing] the shit out of him [while] holding microphones in their

²⁵⁶ Buck 65 featuring Stinkin’ Rich, “Memories of the Passed” *The Bassments of Bad Men*, Hand Solo Records HAN001, 1995.

²⁵⁷ Laura Hightower, “Len”, enotes, accessed April 14, 2011, <http://www.enotes.com/contemporary-musicians/len-biography>.

²⁵⁸ Bradnox, Christi, Interview with Stinkin’ Rich, “The Many Faces of Stinkin’ Rich”, *Vice*, 1996.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁰ Gavin McInnes, “The Fine Line between Genius and Insanity: Halifax Hip Hop Represents the Real East Coast”, *Vice*, December/January 98/99, 66-7, 109.

hands.”²⁶¹ While their first claim can be traced to Terfry’s own claims about his performances²⁶², the second is arguably accurate (although the article identifies White artists as the leaders of either side of the split), and the third cannot be verified outside of the article. Regardless of truth or intent, the Vice article hit upon issues that were at the core of the split. By the end of 1995, the Halifax hip hop community stood divided, with Jorun and the remains of the Haltown collective on one side, and Stinkin’ Rich and Hip Club Groove on the other.

It is difficult to determine the true role of race in the division of the Halifax rap scene, but it is undeniable that, as relationships soured, those divisions were visibly racial. To be sure, there continued to be collaboration between sides, friendships and working relationships among those unaffected, but race proved, once again, to be an issue. It is a matter of perception distorting reality: Ruffneck, Flexxman, Papa Grand, and MC Skillz are Black, from Gottingen, East Preston, and Dartmouth. Classified, Sixtoo, and Jorun himself notwithstanding, this portion of the scene was rooted in the Black community, and continued to deal with the stigma and prejudice that has always faced Black Nova Scotians. On the other end of the scene were the artists that had become part of the larger, and mostly White, indie scene. Some were university students (leading *Vice* to identify them with South End of Halifax), and most had come to Halifax from outside the peninsula, far removed from Gottingen Street. It does not

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*

²⁶² Quinlan, Thomas, Interview with Stinkin’ Rich (25 August, 1995), *Boognish #3*, Thomas Quinlan, editor, accessed October 20, 2010, <http://handsolorecords.com/boognish/stinkin-rich/>.

diminish their talents and skills to suggest that their ethnicity made some artists more accessible outside of the hip hop community than others.

Halifax has a long history of uneasy race relations. From the very beginning of Haltown Projex, media coverage they received in the city invariably brought up issues of integration and race, regardless of the fact that the group itself was evidence that race not an issue. After Haltown split, race was called out in Vice as a likely cause.²⁶³ Personal motivations aside, race played an institutional role in a hip hop community that tried to move beyond it and, as a result of existing prejudices in Nova Scotia, came to erroneously define the personal and stylistic differences that fractured the scene.

Permutations: Experiments in DIY

*"Iconoclastic magnetic mix tape or plastic
Hooking beats to make your head rock drastic
Sebutones is on some ill concepts from another dimension
We were sent, time to reinvent the art form
So here's the new standard called the norm
Be forewarned we got some shit in every aspect of production
Programming down to cutting
and lyrical creations that's equivalent to nothing
No equal. No equivalents. Only sequels earth peoples BC to Nova Scotian
I keep bombing on the lines of locomotion while flowing like the ocean"*

- Sebutones, "Sebutonedef," *Psoriasis*, 1996.

In 1996, a student named Thomas Quinlan started a small record label called Hand Solo Records with the release of *The Bassments of Bad Men*.²⁶⁴ It was a compilation and, much like *Haltown Meltdown*, represented a broad cross section of the

²⁶³ Gavin McInnes, "The Fine Line between Genius and Insanity, 66.

²⁶⁴ Various Artists, *The Bassments of Bad Men*, Hand Solo, HAN001, 1995.

Halifax hip hop community. For the uninitiated, it was an introduction to the city's diverse rap scene, but upon closer inspection, a number of the songs are disses directed toward other groups on the compilation, no longer acting as the unified community that had rallied under the Haltown banner to build a scene in 1993. Included were Hip Club Groove's "Sucker Salad", a response from Jorun on "My Life in the Sunshine", and a shot at Jorun and Classified from long time Hip Club Groove collaborator Gordski, with "Yuckmouth."²⁶⁵ Stinkin' Rich's "Memories of the Passed" was one of two selections credited to Buck 65, featuring Stinkin' Rich. (This was not unusual for Terfry - in 1994, as DJ Critical, he interviewed himself as Stinkin' Rich for 90 minutes on CKDU.²⁶⁶) The compilation, featuring the majority of active rap artists in Halifax, is a record of the diversity and creativity of the scene in the mid-1990s and at the same time, with old alliances broken and lines drawn within the community, reflective of the end of the Haltown Era.

One of the advantages of Jorun's policy of allowing people to record with him for free was that many artists paid attention to what he was doing and honed production skills, learned to engineer their own recordings, and, essentially, make records independently. Jorun continued to do this, sharing production duties with Classified on the young rapper's first solo album *Times Up, Kid* in 1995, producing an album for Nathan the Alien (formerly Ruffneck) called *Invasion* in 1996, an album for Kaspa called

²⁶⁵ JosephSerra, January 29, 2007., (2:29 am) comment on "New Pictures", Haltown Blog, October 27, 2010, <http://www.myspace.com/haltownprojex/blog>.

²⁶⁶ "Music In Exile with DJ Critical Interviewing Stinkin' Rich CKDU Halifax 199" CKDU Dalhousie University Campus Radio, Halifax, NS: CKDU, author's private collection, 1994, <http://livingunderwater.wordpress.com/2010/03/02/music-in-exile-with-dj-critical-interviewing-stinkin-rich-buck-65-ckdu-halifax-199/>.

The Apparition in 1997, and releasing several Haltown compilations with various artists in subsequent years. Buck 65 and Sixtoo both began producing their own material at a prolific rate; between 1995 and 1998, Sixtoo released eight projects and Buck 65 released nine. DJ Moves produced *Maximum Wellbeing* for Matthew “Maxwell” Kimber (later known as Josh Martinez) in 1996 and then formed Renegade Synapsis with Cheklove when M88kenzie moved to Toronto.

Access to recording and reproduction technology increased the output of independent artists considerably in all genres of popular music. Home studios, particularly with the advent of digital recording and software based editing, and small independent labels were a growing force in the music industry in the 1990s.²⁶⁷ By the end of the decade, independent hip hop labels like Anticon (Oakland, CA) and Definitive Jux (New York, NY) were internationally recognized and their artists were considered to be the avant garde of the underground.²⁶⁸ These labels have volume in common, with albums, EPs, and singles, buoyed by mixtapes, remixes, and collaborative projects, creating a release cycle that rivalled the output of major labels. The surge in content was fuelled by the technological shift that took music production out of expensive studios and into people’s bedrooms and living rooms. With constant access to equipment, artists could complete most aspects of a project by working in their free time in a familiar environment.

²⁶⁷ Oakes, *Slanted and Enchanted*, 12.

²⁶⁸ Hua Hsu, “Abstract Expressions: Definitive Jux and Anticon,” accessed June 02, 2011, http://www.emusic.com/features/spotlight/282_200608.html.

In 1995, Sixtoo released two cassettes on Ant Records, *Superstar Props* and *Four Elements*. Stinkin' Rich and Jorun produced the former and Sixtoo produced the latter. In an interview from that year he commented on the shift from collectivist to individualist expressions in Halifax, "That was fine, but it was a step for me. I feel like I'm confident enough in every area that I can do it well by myself. And I like to have the creative control over every process, you know, I think it represents more if I'm doing everything instead of, like, leaving it in the hands of other people."²⁶⁹ With Jorun, Buck 65, Sixtoo, DJ Moves, Gordski and other up and coming producers working independently, but with a shared history, Halifax rap developed a sound that was radically individual on its surface and inter-related at its core. Eventually, these producers started producing other people's projects as well, starting the cycle anew. An interview with the Sebutones in 1997 reveals that both members are in the process of producing for Little T, Noah "Kunga219" Haspary, and Jeff "Knowself" Hudson, pushing the Halifax rap sound into new places in the process.²⁷⁰ Sixtoo would later say, "The thing about hip hop in Halifax is they don't give a damn. No matter what happens in hip hop – if it goes all guitary[sic], or if it goes harder – whatever those ups and downs are they'll still be doing it the way they want to do it. That's why they'll always end up on top and that's why it's one of the few places in the world people are making real hip hop."²⁷¹

²⁶⁹ Quinlan, Thomas, Interview with Sixtoo (12 November, 1995), *Boognish #4*, Thomas Quinlan, editor, accessed October 20, 2010, <http://handsolorecords.com/boognish/sixtoo-2/>.

²⁷⁰ Quinlan, Thomas, Interview with The Sebutones (Spring 1997) accessed October 20, 2010, <http://handsolorecords.com/boognish/sebutones/>.

²⁷¹ McInnes, Gavin, *The Fine Line Between Genius and Insanity*, 67.

In 1997 there were two distinct hip hop scenes in Halifax. Split by personal disputes between the community's biggest players, the division nevertheless became an artistic one as well. Halifax's rap community, as a whole, was deeply influenced by the Malbranche tapes. East Coast, Old School and Golden Era rap music can be heard in the production and vocal styles coming from the Haltown camp in its prime. After the split, however, Buck 65 and Sixtoo turned their attention to more experimental work. Jorun, continuing to produce for the Haltown roster, maintained a purist take on hip hop, in its construction, style and sample choices. Buck 65 and Sixtoo, still firmly rooted in same hip hop production traditions as Jorun, began selecting and manipulating samples that lent an abstract quality to their work. Their lyrics grew more abstract, blending battle style raps with philosophical introspection, complex language, and unusual imagery. In 1996 the two formed a group called The Sebutones and released an album called *Psoriasis on Four Ways To Rock*, a sister label to Funtrip that was also run by Marc Costanzo.²⁷² As The Sebutones, the two pushed the boundaries of hip hop, on record and in performance. In keeping with Buck 65's earlier desires to make performance interesting, they sometimes performed in hazardous material suits, and in a music video for "To Mock A Killing Bird" they appeared in horned suits made of aluminum foil.²⁷³ In an interview with Vice, Sixtoo states, "What [the Sebutones] do isn't hip hop, It's more like some kind of adult contemporary rap jazz."²⁷⁴ Whatever it was, it differed greatly

²⁷² See Figure A.18, p. 171.

²⁷³ Thomas Quinlan, "Halifax Hip Hop Anticipates the Big Bang", *Exclaim*, May 2000, accessed October 12, 2010, <http://exclaim.ca/articles/multiarticlesub.aspx?csid1=4&csid2=779&fid1=1014>.

²⁷⁴ Gavin McInnes, *The Fine Line Between Genius and Insanity*, 67.

from the popularly understood idea of hip hop and helped guide a portion of Halifax's hip hop community into uncharted territory.

The split in Halifax reflected a larger trend in hip hop at the time. In *Protest into Pop: Hip Hop's Devolution into Mainstream Pop Music and the Underground's Resistance*, Lavar Pope discusses what he describes as a split between rap music and hip hop. He writes, "Once hip hop music became available to mass audiences – namely, a suburban, middle-class, teenage audience – a great divide occurred in subject matter, topics, and musical style. During this period, a split in hip hop culture began: rap music, a facet or by-product of hip hop culture was broadcast to the general population while underground hip hop music continued to remain outside of the mass market system."²⁷⁵ Pope continues, "Rap music that is directed toward a foreign, sympathetic, and mass audience ceases to be revolutionary or politically significant and relevant. Mainstream rap is now directed toward this audience. In contrast, hip hop that remains largely underground, authentic, and untouched by the market still remains a form of political expression and cultural resistance."²⁷⁶

Pope's semantic contention of a difference between hip hop and rap music is a popular debate. Rapper and hip hop philosopher KRS-One has argued that "rap is something you do and hip hop is something you live," though the sentiment is vaguely defined.²⁷⁷ If hip hop signifies the overall culture and rap is associated with the act of rapping, then all music that contains rapping is, in effect, rap music. The divide that

²⁷⁵ Lavar Pope, *Protest Into Pop: Hip Hop's Devolution into Mainstream Pop Music and the Underground's Resistance*, (Soulmatic Studios, 2007), Amazon e-book.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ KRS-One, *D.I.G.I.T.A.L.*, Front Page Entertainment CLP 1323-2, 2004.

Pope describes is nonetheless real, though more appropriate labels for defining it would be mainstream and underground. On one side, there is music that caters to commercial and mainstream tastes which, in the case of rap music tend to downplay progressive, political or revolutionary themes in favour of what Tricia Rose calls “the ascendance of the Black gangsta, pimp and ho in commercial hip hop.”²⁷⁸ Institutional racism has fuelled a system where the accepted mainstream identity of rap music is associated with gang/drug culture and related violence, a pursuit of material wealth that excuses a surrender to capitalist influence, and a hyper-masculinity that breeds misogyny and homophobia. That this accepted view depicts Black culture as both criminal and dysfunctional is overlooked by artists who, in catering to form, hope to follow the lead of artist/entrepreneurs Sean “P. Diddy” Combs or Shawn “Jay-Z” Carter and become rap’s next multi-millionaire entertainment mogul. Pope explains, “Popular rappers like 50 Cent offer controversial, but ultimately politically safe, versions of rap by talking about immense wealth and glorifying gangster drug-pushing; these rappers offer a message of rebellion to teens and young adults while remaining within the safe boundaries of expression.”²⁷⁹

On the other side is music that is not created in pursuit of commercial interests, but rather for its own sake as a form of artistic expression. Without the pressures of adapting to mainstream narratives and identities, artists are free to explore alternative concepts in both lyrics and production. Social and political criticism, in particular, goes unchecked in the absence of major label profit-seeking. The lack of commercial

²⁷⁸ Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 73.

²⁷⁹ Pope, *Protest Into Pop*

censorship, itself a product of artists whose expressions are tailored to popular standards, gives underground rap a much higher degree of authenticity. Pope argues that, “most underground hip hop artists come from indie labels... [and] have more control and influence over the promotion, sale, and packaging of their music.”²⁸⁰ He also notes, however that, as a result, underground hip hop does not come close to the mass market reach of its mainstream counterparts, and operates, for the most part, within the confines of its own sub-culture.

There is no inherent racial divide between mainstream and underground rap music. Though mainstream is rooted in a narrowly construed notion of Black culture, there is an abundance of White artists who cater their style and content to that market. Underground rap, however, allows artists of all ethnicities to speak to their own experiences, issues, and identities, and to remain true to the tenets of hip hop culture. In this sense, White rap artists following the cultural traditions of genuinely representing self and place generally find themselves on the underground side of the divide. White appropriation of the manufactured mainstream Black identity, from language to styles of dress, remains a difficult issue in mainstream circles. Within underground hip hop, however, at local, national, and international levels, issues of race are overshadowed by valuing genuine personal expression over conformity to established norms.

In Halifax, the divide in the scene reflected the greater schism between mainstream and underground, though as a result of the city’s strong indie culture, underground rap proved to be more successful. While many of the Black artists were

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

creating music that was stylistically mainstream, institutional resistance to Black culture in the city and the implausibility of Jorun shouldering the production and engineering duties for collaborative works and each artist's respective solo projects caused most to fade into inaction and obscurity.

The ability to produce a project independently is a vital skill in Halifax. Haltown Projex was a de facto independent venture, albeit one that was too ambitious to be sustainable. Nathan The Alien (formerly Ruffneck), widely considered within the community to be the best rapper in Halifax in the mid-1990s,²⁸¹ found it difficult to promote himself because the production of his music was out of his hands. In a 1997 interview, he explained his decision to stop working with Jorun, "I couldn't work with somebody that I can't trust, right. And everything was always on his time. That's why it took so long for me to put my tape out, right. Every time I wanted to do some shit he was always busy, and every time he wanted to do shit, I was busy. So, it was dragging out too far. So, when I got my tape and stuff done, I just gave up."²⁸² Nathan the Alien continued to make music under the names Nay C, Nathan Cruise, and Quon Pedar, but his frustration in this situation belies the reason independence is important. For all of Jorun's generosity in producing for such a large and diverse group of rappers, time simply did not allow for everyone to receive the benefits of his work. Those who could produce on their own did not need to wait in line and could handle their work in their

²⁸¹ In interviews with *Boognish*, Jorun, Stinkin Rich, Sixtoo and Hip Club Groove all name Nathan when asked who the best MC in Halifax was.

²⁸² Quinlan, Thomas, Interview with Nathan the Alien (Spring 1997), HandSoloRecords.com, accessed October 20, 2010, <http://handsolorecords.com/boognish/nathan-the-alien/>.

own way, in their own time. For those that did wait, there was the possibility that coordinating schedules and striking a creative balance between rapper and producer could prove frustrating and difficult.

The other end of the scene – the White, or South End side, as it is inadequately described by *Vice* – was made up of self-producing artists who were able to create and release their own output which, in turn, gave them a higher profile and respect within broader indie/underground communities. Embracing underground philosophies, these artists set about making the music they wanted to make without regard for outside influence or convention. DJ Moves collaboration with Maxwell yielded “Deny”, a nine-minute Holocaust epic that rejected traditional form and structure.²⁸³ Sixtoo delved into jazz records and created intricate and breakbeat heavy low fidelity rap on releases like *Progress* (Ant Records, 1997) and *The Crystal Senate* (Hand Solo, 1997), while continuing to feature members of the Haltown crew on his songs. Buck 65 started the Language Arts series in 1995 with the release of *Weirdo Magnet*, a 90-minute cassette showcasing his skills as an MC, turntablist, and producer. He continued in this approach with *Language Arts* (Metaforensics, 1997), the 12” single *Wildlife* (Hand Solo, 1997), and *Vertex* (Four Ways To Rock/Metaforensics, 1997). The Sebutones released a full length album, *50/50 Where It Counts* (Metaforensics 1998) that sounded nothing like the New York rap they had grown up listening to but retained every aspect of traditional production.

²⁸³ Maxwell, “Deny”, *Maximum Wellbeing*, independent, 1996.

With each release in Halifax, style and form started pushing traditional rap boundaries: the verse/chorus foundation of much modern music was frequently discarded; spoken samples from obscure sources were used alongside the classic rap acapella samples favoured by popular DJs and producers; samples were warped and bent using pitch shifting and effects; and record scratching became less complimentary as experimental techniques were moved to the forefront. As a relatively small, but productive, alternative hip hop scene, active artists were friends who, through collaborations, mutual experiences, and the sharing of production equipment and techniques, created a community of their own.

In Halifax, mainstream rap has to compete with the output of the larger Canadian mainstream scene – centred in Toronto, Ontario - and, to a larger extent, with the American mainstream as a whole, making it very difficult to be discovered and, ultimately, successful as an artist. Indie rap, however, exists on its own terms, and adheres to the culture's central tenets of personal representation. Its novelty, in comparison to public perceptions of rap music, allowed artists like Hip Club Groove, Buck 65, and Sixtoo to find audiences among fans of other genres and elevated their status within the underground. Zines including Thomas Quinlan's *Boognish* and Ryan "Fritz tha Cat" Somers's *In Search of the Divine Styler* introduced Halifax's rap underground to other hip hop communities in Canada and the United States, broadening their networks and connecting them with a larger underground hip hop movement.

The Halifax sound that emerged in the mid-1990s was grounded in classic East Coast rap from New York, the blueprints derived from the Malbranche tapes. Its audio fidelity was commensurate with whatever technology could be acquired, unabashedly experimental, devoutly traditional, and as individual as those who create it. It is not a sound that is forged in large, expensive studios or by hired gun producers, nor is it the sound of some distant regional hotbed. Halifax succeeded in taking a culture that was imported in the early 1980s, and within 15 years, making it entirely its own. Through the efforts of the entire community, and through the efforts of diligent individuals, a rich and productive scene existed by the mid-1990s that was self-reliant and highly skilled. The DIY ethic bred versatility, fostered collaboration, and, in contributing to a hip hop identity in Halifax that balanced True School traditionalism and a penchant for experimentation, fulfilled the idea that hip hop culture lives wherever genuine personal and geographical representation transcends appeals to the mainstream. Ultimately, those who wanted to create rap music did and did so in a way that could only exist in Halifax. The hip hop community in Halifax, a confluence of urban and rural youth operating under Nova Scotia's unique legacy of uneasy racial politics, mirrored the development of the culture in the Bronx and, in passing through similar stages in its evolution, effectively grew into a uniquely Haligonian manifestation of the art.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

Between 1985 and 1997, the hip hop community in Halifax, Nova Scotia developed through changes that reflect larger trends in hip hop culture. In examining four critical aspects of this culture – first, its relation to what Tricia Rose calls the post-industrial urban terrain; second, musical and technological interventions; a do-it-yourself approach to creating, performing and distributing rap music; and, finally, its racial politics – a significant change over time is revealed. From breezeway ciphers to bedroom studios, from uptown to downtown, rap music in Halifax grew and evolved through the efforts of individuals to create and sustain a hip hop community.

The physical environment played a large role in the development of hip hop in the Bronx, New York, through the displacement of citizens, slum clearance, and urban renewal projects. These factors influenced to the socio-economic make-up of the population. Consequently, it created limited opportunities for recreation, jobs and further education. This fostered antagonistic sentiments between residents, the municipal government and its law enforcement agencies. Consequently, hip hop emerged from benign neglect. Reclaiming space, whether through late night parties in the park with stolen power or representing with a spray can on the side of a train car, is fundamental. Due to the representational nature of rap lyrics, a rapper's personal geographic reality becomes a point of reference and a point of pride.

On a smaller scale, Halifax followed a path that was very similar to that of the Bronx. With the destruction of Africville, the Jacob Street community, and the repurposing of Gottingen Street after moving displaced residents to Uniacke Square and Mulgrave Park, conditions were created that strongly resembled those in the Bronx. The same social factors that shaped the birthplace of hip hop existed in Halifax when the music made its way to the city, and contributed to the development of the scene. In dealing with similar issues, rappers in Halifax built a hip hop community from the ground up. Bars and clubs in the city had notoriously treated Black patrons with suspicion, leaving the young hip hop community to grow, as it had in New York, among Halifax's inner-city youth. Rooted around Gottingen Street and Uniacke Square, an area stigmatized by longstanding prejudices toward the Black community in Nova Scotia, aspiring rappers had to find their own opportunities.

From the early days of hip hop in the city, when the Uptown Festival and the Cultural Awareness Youth Group gave youth a chance to perform, Halifax's *de facto* rap music scene was based on the fact that performers, audience, and organizers were all from the same neighbourhood and shared friends and family connections. It existed because it was what the young people were interested in, and community organizers helped them create their own opportunities. In the 1990s, local practitioners did the same by working to create a more legitimate scene - one rooted in regular public performances and the release of recordings. For some, this community expanded

further, with local indie labels granting them new audiences, broader distribution and alternative networks.

After 1989, when MC J & Cool G, a duo from Uniacke Square and Mulgrave Park who signed a major label record deal and relocated to Montreal, the hip hop community expanded to accommodate artists from Truro and Mount Uniacke. Consequently, the physical landscape of the scene changed as its epicentre shifted from Gottingen Street to the downtown bars and clubs along Barrington Street. The physical spaces where rap music is created changed, as well, with ramshackle bedroom studios becoming the norm by the mid-1990s. The city's rap community expanded and grew in the same manner as the Bronx. Just as the culture spread to new parts of New York City and, eventually, into the rest of North America, so too did it grow beyond Halifax's uptown neighbourhood, attracting new devotees and practitioners wherever it could.

This shift from space to space was also derived from the technology that helped disseminate the culture. The Malbranche Tapes (and those just like them) were dubbed on the same kind of boombox stereo that youth carried with them to listen to the music with friends. Portable cassette players with headphones allowed listeners to take music with them wherever they went. Tape trading, an analog precursor to digital peer-to-peer file sharing, saw rap music spread within the close knit Gottingen community, straight from New York through copies and copies of copies. Cassette technology also allowed rudimentary beats to be made using the

'pause break' method, giving eager rappers a way of making music without expensive professional equipment.

There was, however, production equipment, as well. Samplers and drum machines, allowing sounds to be lifted from existing recorded sources, re-sequenced, and arranged, raised the quality level of rap music in the city to the point where locally produced material is sonically indistinguishable from the production styles found in other urban centres. In this capacity, New Beginning, and later MC J & Cool G, were able to gain a degree of prominence within the city, and were able to achieve the polished sound that they hoped would earn them a record contract. They did, and much of that can be credited to MC J who learned how to work with industry politics but, more importantly, also learned how to produce his own material and bring his ideas to fruition by mastering the tools of the trade.

Four-track recorders, like the one acquired by Jorun in 1991, were tremendously important in the development of hip hop in Halifax. In the 1990s, an entire scene was built around Jorun's studio. The reason this was possible is simple – he had the necessary equipment. Turntables, drum machine, sampler, a hard-earned knowledge of music and potential sample sources, and a four-track. It was a studio where friends gathered and shared in the creation of music. Hip Club Groove, in Truro, had their own equipment to work with, resulting in a cohesion that made them the scene's most active group of the early 1990s.

These types of equipment allowed rap music to be made in a very personal fashion. Where the objective of the city's first period, as evidenced by New Beginning/MC J & Cool G and 2on2, was to pursue success within the larger music industry, the focus in the second period shifted toward the creation of music for its own sake. From the reactionary position of Haltown Projex to experimental compositions from the Sebutones, Halifax rap music in the 1990s came from a creative drive to produce what did not otherwise exist, be it a certain style of production, new approaches to form and subject matter, or the making of a music scene in general.

Contributing to a cultural phenomenon, a hip hop community, for example, requires perseverance. In a city like Halifax, far removed from major label offices in Toronto, New York, and Los Angeles, the incentives to produce records were few. In the absence of record deals, Halifax artists produced and released their work on their own, or through an extended network within the Halifax music scene. Further complicating matters are club owners in downtown Halifax who have been historically hesitant in dealing with rap music, denying rap artists opportunities that are available to those who play other kinds of music. Halifax, like the Bronx, offered few supports and a number of institutional challenges, but hip hop – descended from the crucible of bondage and born in a burned out gangland – endures. In the hands of skilled artists, recording equipment became the vehicle for a prolific body of work. Between 1985 and 1997, rap artists in Halifax released approximately forty albums. This was achieved without support from mainstream radio or the local music industry – it was entirely artist-generated, on an independent scale, through community networks.

There was, however, an underlying current of racial politics in the hip hop community throughout these years. The city's poor race relations, from Africville to the so-called race riot of 1991, created an adversarial tension that carried over into the hip hop scene. What started as an expression of the Black community based in the Gottingen Street community became an integrated downtown phenomenon and, ultimately, White artists found success that eluded most Black rap artists in Halifax.

The situation was far more complex than this superficial assessment implies. As discussed in Chapter Two, referring to Hip Club Groove as a White group was as much a questioning of Cheklove Shakil's Blackness as it was a condemnation of DJ Moves and M88kenzie's Whiteness. These criticisms came despite the fact that the group performed and recorded more than any other in the city; no matter what was achieved through hard work and concentrated effort, race was an issue that permeated all. The preserved historical record of Halifax's hip hop history – the recordings, flyers, newspaper articles, performance listings, internet discussions, and bits of memorabilia – can only present a selected account. Those who made recordings and released them are more visible than those whose roles were predominantly performance based. Further, the physical history is limited to what was saved by individuals and what was available on a large enough scale to be part of the public record. In the mid-1990s, when Halifax rap artists were highly productive, the releases which received the most attention, through *The Coast*, a weekly alternative newspaper, or from the larger music community, were from groups perceived by the hip hop community to be White artists.

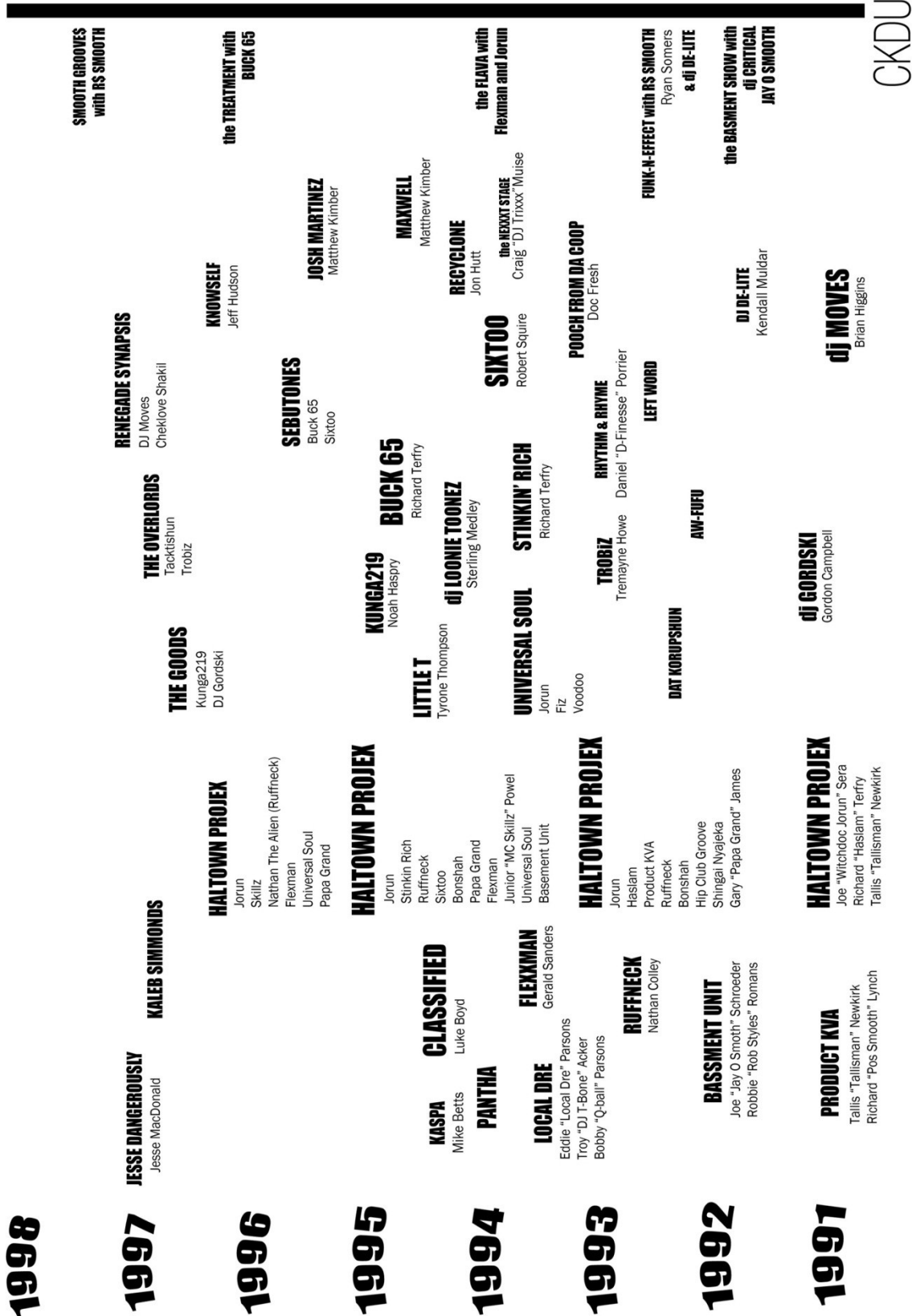
Race, regardless of intent, was a part of the scene, as an institutional force and through a resulting perceptual bias.

The extent to which Nova Scotia's historical treatment of its Black citizens affects their representation and visibility in the arts is one of several questions that remain to be answered regarding the hip hop community in Halifax. A related question is raised by the scene's physical record: What lies beyond the physical record? What of the artists not receiving media attention or indie label support? The involvement of women, only loosely chronicled here, is an aspect of the hip hop community that deserves further attention. Breaking and graffiti, central elements in the culture, have their own histories and, despite being definitively hip hop expressions, are too expansive to have been included in this study.

Hip hop is a dynamic, multi-faceted, political, contradictory, and – most importantly – creative culture. It has grown from its origins in the Bronx into an international cultural expression with each city, each region, and each country recreating it from their own experience and in their own image. Halifax, like many other urban centres in North America, learned of hip hop in its own way and made hip hop in its own way. From the ciphers and park jams of 1985 to the home grown indie rap of the late 1990s the Halifax hip hop community grew and changed with the culture of the city, and with hip hop culture, in general. In mirroring its socio-economic origins, its stylistic progressions, and its political concerns, Halifax and the Bronx found common ground.

What, then, is the significance of Halifax's hip hop scene? If the culture developed elsewhere in a similar fashion and under similar circumstances, then what makes Halifax worthy of study? The answer, like hip hop culture itself, is rooted in representation. The Halifax hip hop community grew out of uniquely Nova Scotian conditions and, because of rap music's representational nature, speaks to a uniquely Nova Scotian experience. Most importantly, though, is the fact that cultural history is difficult to preserve, particularly in the case of independent artists. Several major figures in the hip hop community have kept private collections of memorabilia, and some recordings are still available, but the reality is that much of what happened and what was produced has already been lost. Independently released albums are rarely distributed in large numbers. Performance flyers are torn down to make way for others. Participants move away and memories fade. What makes Halifax's hip hop community worthy of historical study is that it was active and productive. In time, however, the cultural remnants and the community that allow a history to be constructed can disappear from the public sphere completely, residing only in the recollections and personal holdings of private individuals. It is important because it is a thread in the cultural fabric of Nova Scotian and Canadian society, and it is important because it happened, between 1985 and 1997, in a way that profoundly reflected and influenced the city of Halifax.

APPENDIX I: HALIFAX HIP HOP FAMILY TREE, 1991 – 1997



CKDU

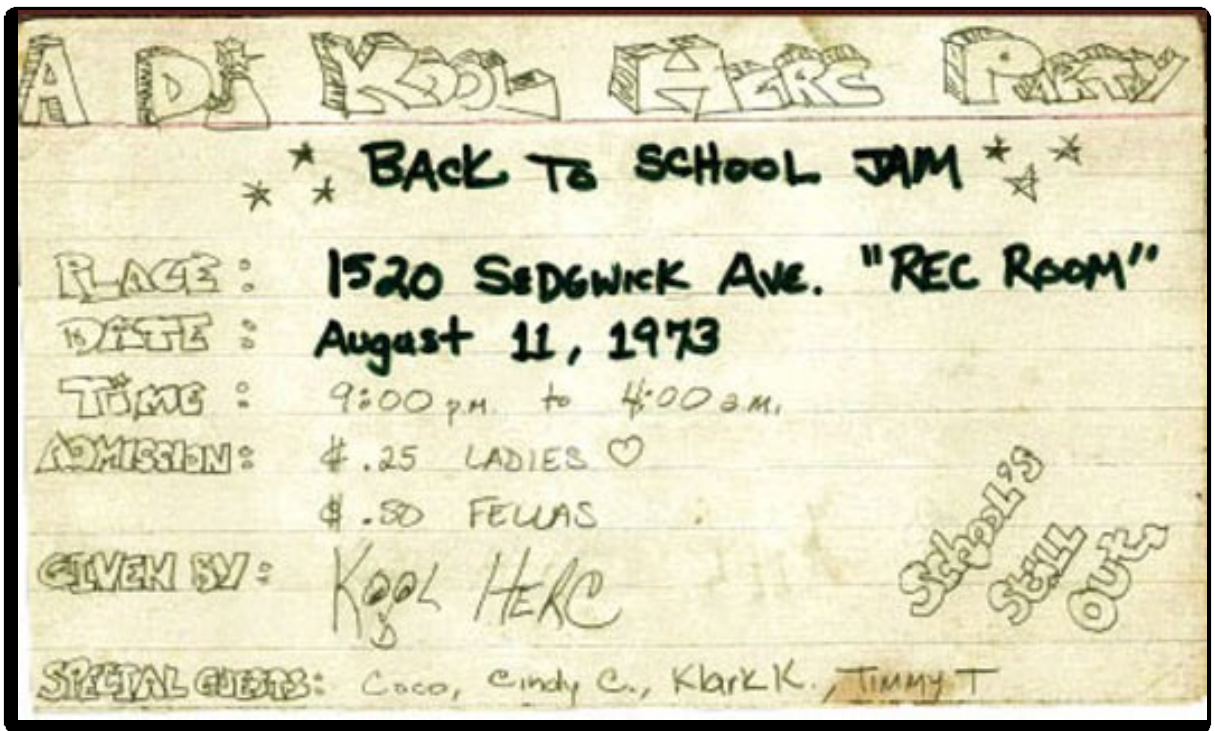


Figure A.1 - Promotional flyer for Cindy Campbell's Back-to-School Party, circa 1973

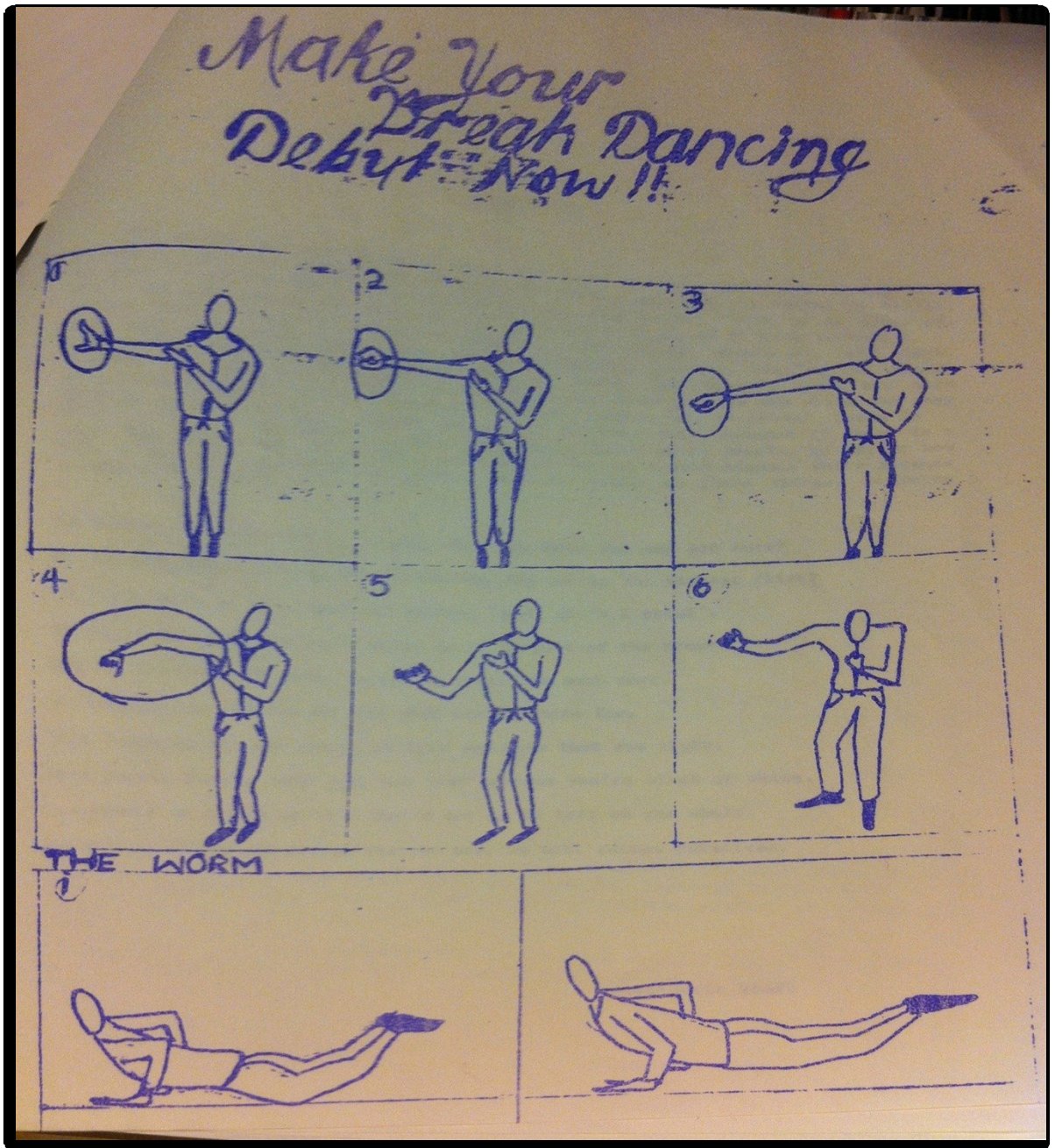


Figure A.2 - Breakdancing Diagram by Jerome Smith, circa 1984.

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**LIVE IN
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presents for the first time ever
PUBLIC ENEMY



With special guests **McJ & Cool G** From Montreal • **Down By Law** • **DJ Tuff** From Montreal

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INFO: Ron Smith 434-3670

Figure A.3 - Public Enemy Concert Flyer, circa 1989.



Figure A.4 - MC J & Cool G, *So Listen 12" single*, 1991.



Figure A.5 - Hip Club Groove Flyer, circa 1994, courtesy of Brian Higgins.

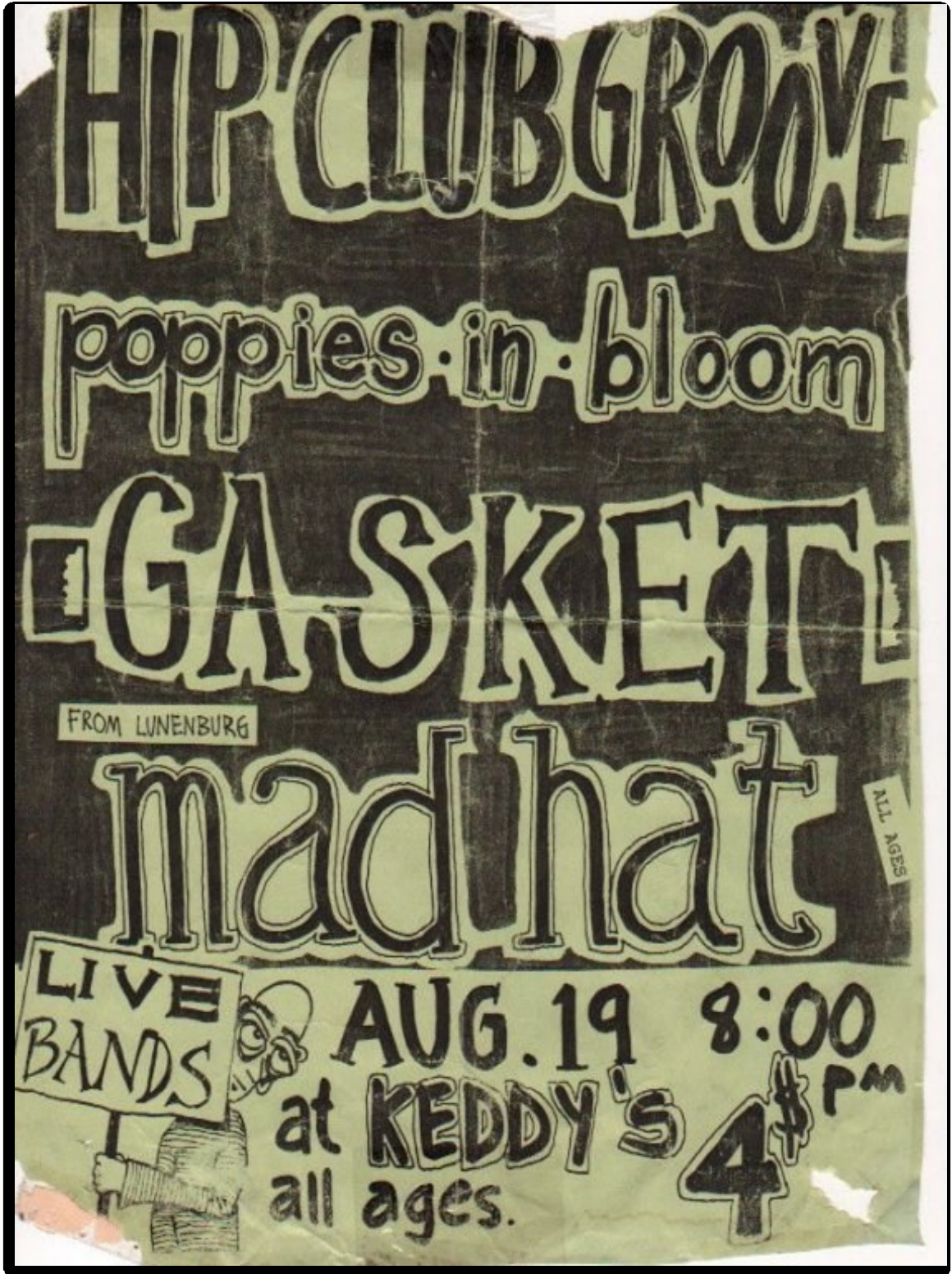


Figure A.6 - Hip Club Groove Flyer, circa 1994, courtesy of Brian Higgins.

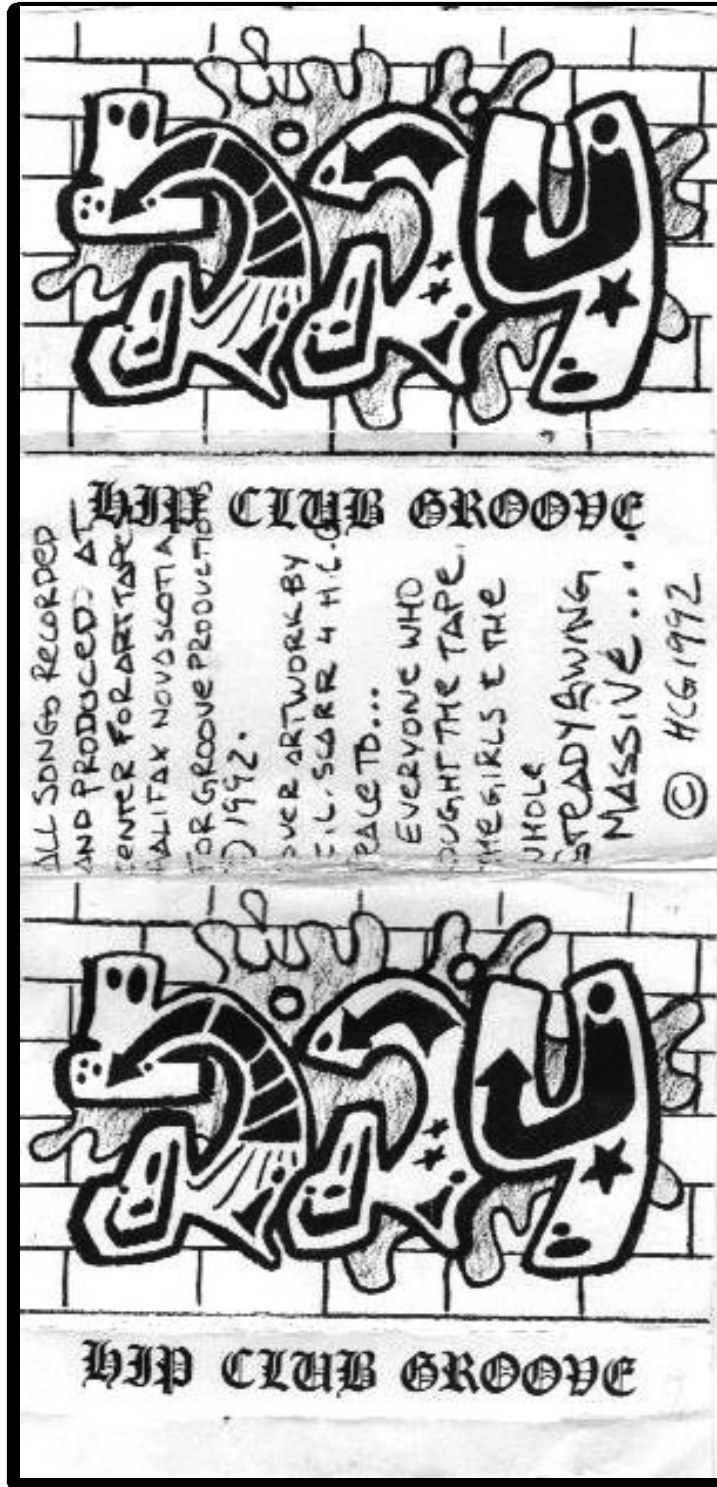


Figure A.7 - Hip Club Groove, *The Art Tapes*, 1992, courtesy of Robyn McNeil.

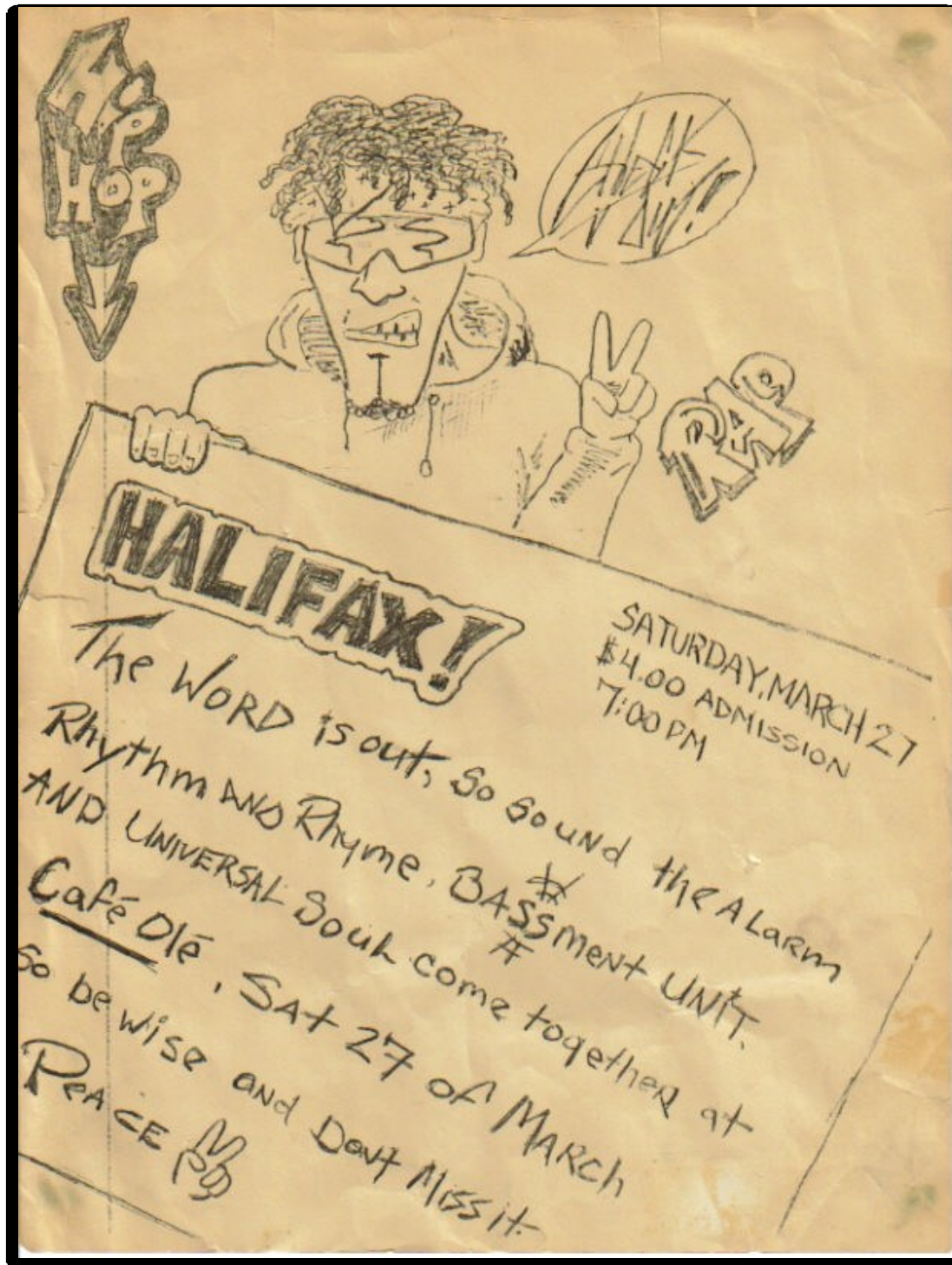


Figure A.8 - Halifax Hip Hop Flyer, circa 1993, courtesy of Joe Schroeder.

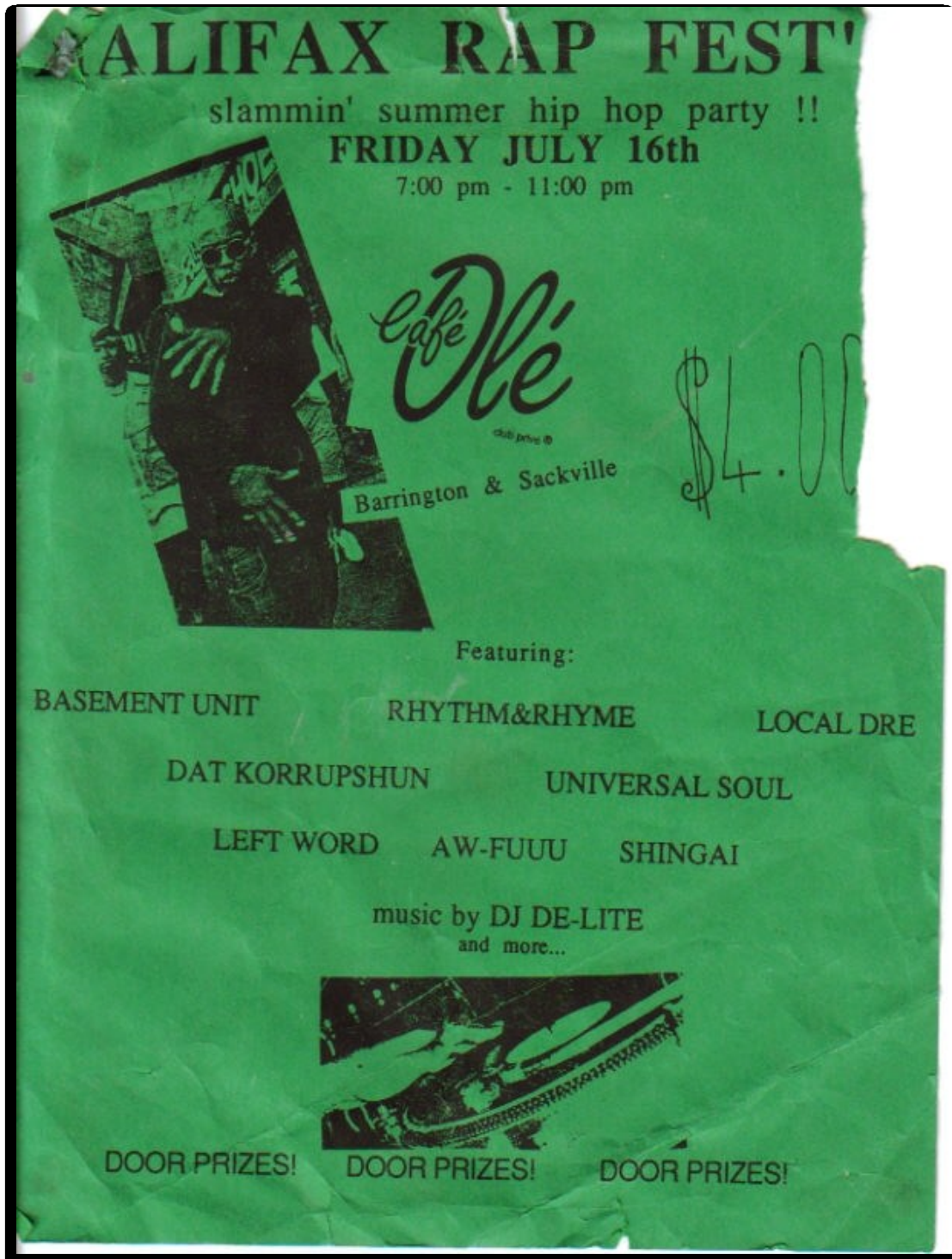


Figure A.9 - Halifax Hip Hop Flyer, circa 1993, courtesy of Joe Schroeder.

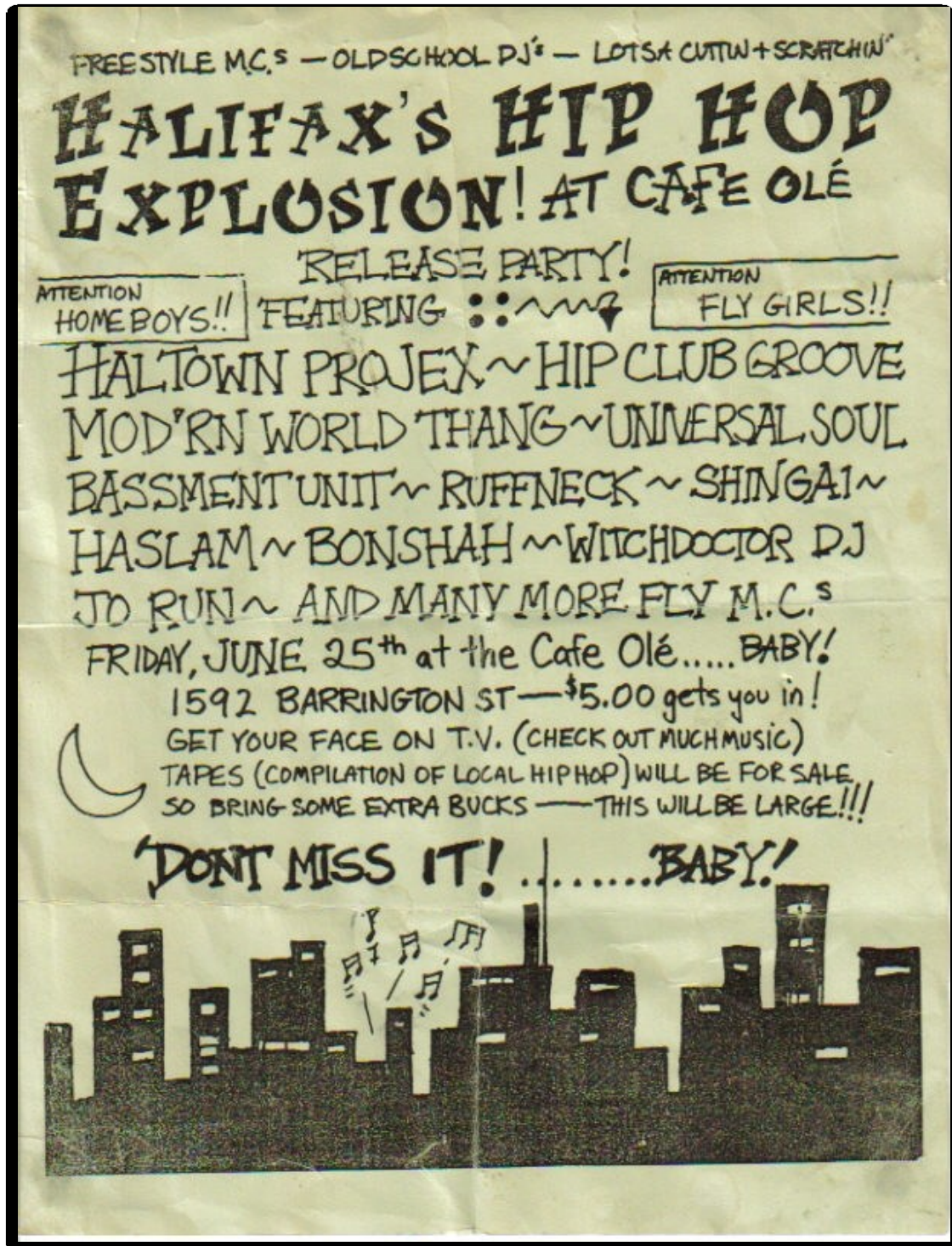


Figure A.10 - Haltown Meltdown Release Show Flyer, circa 1993, courtesy of Joseph Serra.

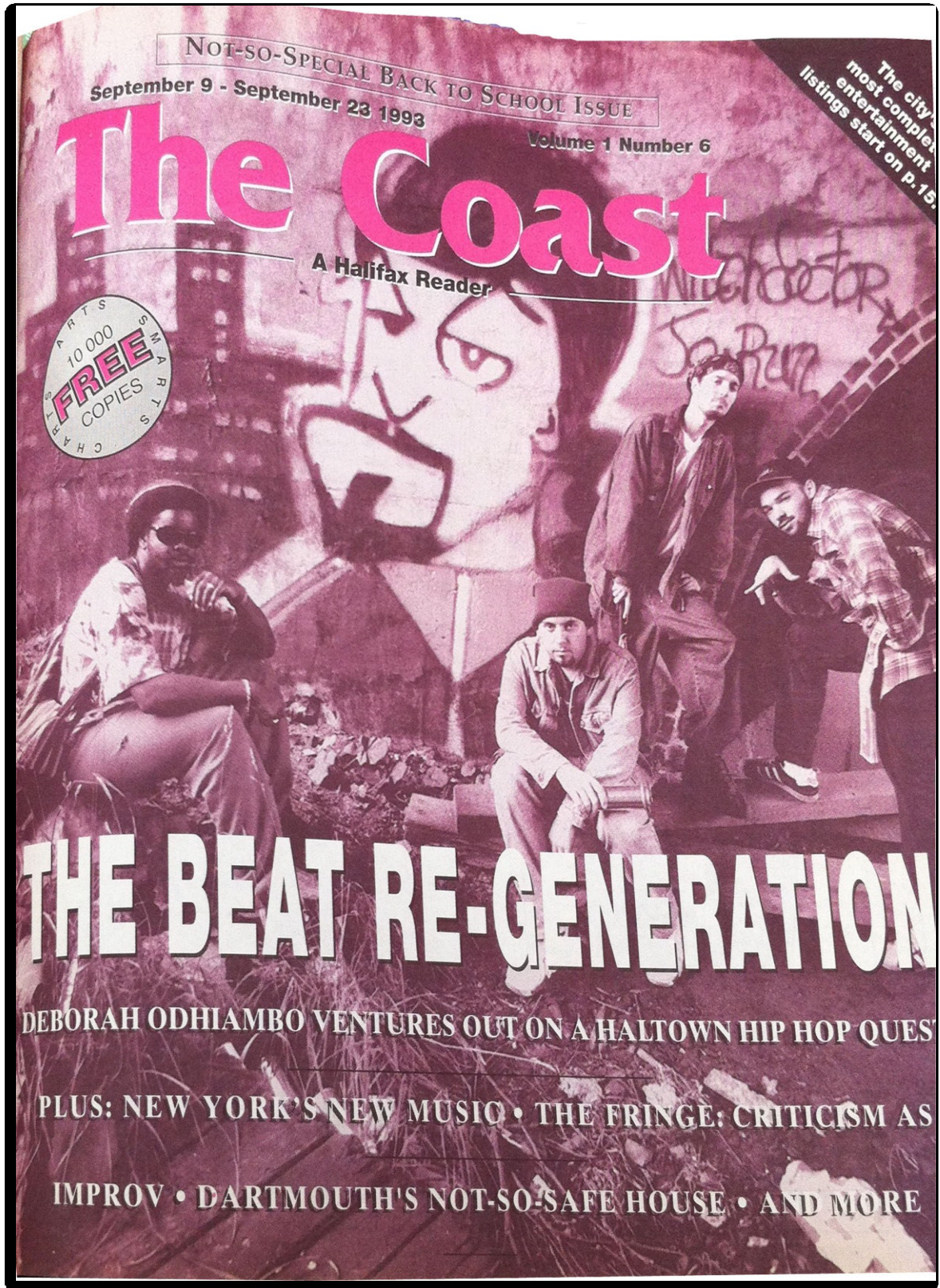


Figure A.12 - Haltown Projex cover, *The Coast*, 9 September, 1993.

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&
HIP HOP
DANCE
EXTRAVAGANZA**

THE BIG SHOWDOWN

FEATURING



Special Guests:
(from Montreal)
"MC J & Cool G"

**Pooch From
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Pantha

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M C Skillz

(Halifax)

Ruff Neck

(East Preston)

Papa Grand

(Dartmouth)

M C Shy Luv

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all ages event (Rap/Dance Contest
7-10 p.m. Dance 10 p.m. - 1 a.m.)

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Figure A.13 - CAYG Rap Contest Flyer, circa 1994, courtesy of Joseph Serra.



Figure A.14 - Halifax Hip Hop Flyer, circa 1995, courtesy of Joseph Serra.



Figure A.15 - Halifax Hip Hop Flyer, circa 1995, courtesy of Joseph Serra.



Figure A.16 - Various releases from Haltown and Sixtoo, circa 1991-1995



Figure A.17 - *Haltown Live*, 1996, courtesy of Joseph Serra.

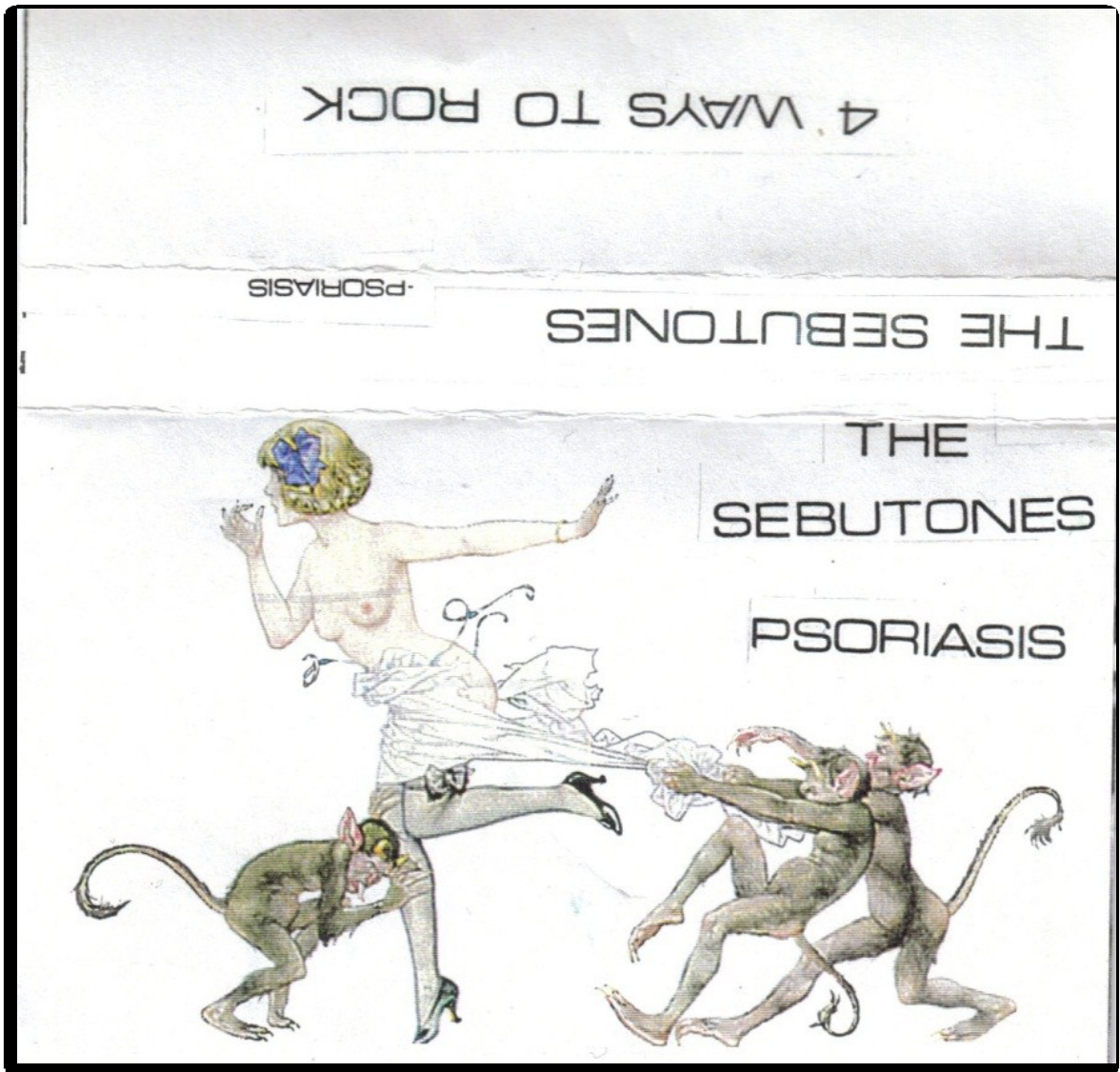


Figure A.18 - Sebtonones, *Psoriasis*, 1996.

APPENDIX III: PLAYLIST

	<u>Artist</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Year</u>
01.	Witchdoc Jorun	Haltown Junior Intro	1996
02.	Care Crew	Money	1986
03.	Care Crew	The Care Crew Cares	1986
04.	New Beginning	In Effect	1986
05.	Paid In Full vs. Magic D	CKDU battle	1988
06.	MC J & Cool G	Back Ta Fax	1991
07.	Hip Club Groove	Throw in the Towel	1991
08.	Haltown Projex	Haltown Chowder	1992
09.	Richard Terfry	The 10 Commandments	
10.	Jorun, Ruffneck, Sixtoo, Flexman & Papa Grand	shakinawakinabreakinemup	1995
11.	Various Artists	Live at Café Ole	1995
12.	Cheklove Shakil vs MC Skillz	The Original Battle	1995
13.	Witchdoc Jorun, Ruffneck, Sixtoo & MC Skillz	Red Rova	1995
14.	Hip Club Groove	Sucker Salad	1995
15.	Buck 65	Memories of the Passed	1995
16.	Sixtoo	An Open Letter to Hip Hop	1995
17.	Sebutones	To Mock A Killing Bird	1997

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