Second Reaction: The Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow of Hip-Hop

Higgins, Dalton. *Hip Hop World: A Groundwork Guide*. Toronto: Groundwood Books, 2009.

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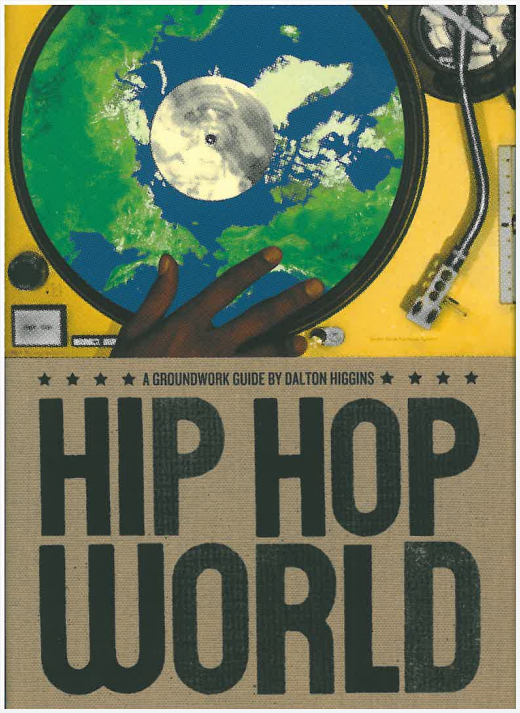

Dalton Higgins' *Hip Hop World* provides a comprehensive, historical perspective on the global hip-hop scene. By defining hip-hop and giving a description of its elements (i.e., deejaying, break dancing, rapping, and emceeing), Higgins sets the stage for his comprehensive presentation. He delivers vivid descriptions of hip-hop's African-American origins of social protest, including gang rivals on the floor break dancing and locking (18), while noting that the primary American consumers of hip-hop have become young suburban whites. He also informs readers that while it may originally have been a predominately African-American youth form used for expressions of outsider identity, hip-hop has become an attractive genre for disenfranchised people all over the world. However, Higgins cautions that rap often magnifies the darker side of life, is often controversial and scandal-laden, and is often tied to gangs and drugs.

While I appreciate the explorations of selected rap phrases (e.g., "dust some cops off," which means to shoot or stab crooked cops), the offensive language is disturbing and sometimes puzzling. Higgins assumes that each of us knows and understands hip-hop artists and lingo. For example, while Higgins does an adequate job of discussing the "face" of hip-hop—offensive terms, such as the N-word, rap slanguage, hip-hop's fixation on money/bling, and fashion—he rarely mentions stories of women in hip-hop and its sexist themes. Though he provides an excellent timeline as to critical points of reference in the hip-hop movement, the information is at times overwhelming.

Interestingly, as Higgins indicates, hip-hop is the only musical genre that has large numbers of white and non-black youth who revere the works of largely black performers. Higgins cautions that if we're not careful, hip-hop's fate will be similar to blues, jazz, and rock and roll, music from which the African-American creators moved on, giving up ownership until black audiences were almost nonexistent—possibly rewriting the significance of its place in black music history. According to Higgins, "given the fact that African American culture has suffered a long history of exploitation…there should be great concern that hip hop is next on the list" (51).

In summary, Higgins presents a global, comprehensive examination of the hip-hop scene, and I would agree that the importance of hip-hop is diminishing in the U.S. This was an extremely difficult book for me to read. There were numerous facts, interviews, and informational sidebars; however, my disinterest in hip-hop was evident from the beginning. Perhaps this book is not intended for the layperson. Rather it is more appropriate for the hip-hop/rap aficionado. While I felt that the information was thorough and well documented, I found it difficult to digest and understand. Unfortunately, many of my colleagues in the St. Louis school system shared my sentiments. So, are we near the end of hip-hop or rap as we know it? Is rap/hip-hop dead or dying? Has it lost its direction from that original aim of proclaiming the protestations of the young? I must admit, even after reading Higgins' book, I really do not have an answer for these fundamental questions.

About the Author

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