

Ian Maxwell, *Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes: Hip Hop Down Under Comin' Upper*

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Reviewed by Tony Mitchell

**Sydney-centrism, Parochialism and Popular Music Studies**

In a recent seminar given at the University of Technology, Sydney, entitled 'The Future of Parochialism,' Meaghan Morris expressed her investment in a Tuen Muen, Hong Kong and Sydney-based parochialism in conflict with the academic and cultural strictures of a far more 'empowered, institutional parochialism' imposed by the USA and Western Europe:

As all those who live in 'second tier cities' know, a high metropolitan parochialism can be truly dense in its failure to conceive of its own restricted nature; the parochialisms of Paris and New York are in this respect exemplary.

Or as Slavoj Zizek has put it, in an apolitical sphere which matches the cultural sphere, the problem with US global political dominance is:

not that the US is a new global empire, but that it isn't one, although it pretends to be ... The watchword of recent US politics is a weird reversal of the well-known ecologists' motto: act global, think local.

With its enduring investment in and representation of city, suburb, locality, neighbourhood, community, family and crew, hip hop epitomises an affective parochialism at the same time as it connects with the global rhetoric of an often imagined US-centric 'hip hop nation,' but is usually subjected to the restrictive and creatively bankrupt domination of a US parochialism which often defines itself in terms of an East Coast-West Coast conflict.

The first sentence in Ian Maxwell's book states a familiar dilemma for practitioners of both Australian cultural studies and 'peripheral' popular music studies: 'Writing about Hip Hop in Australia with a predominantly North American readership in mind is hard work' (p. ix). So hard, in fact, that five years passed between completion of the PhD thesis in Performance Studies at Sydney University on which *Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes* is based and its publication by Wesleyan University Press's supposedly globally-oriented Music/Cultures series. The publisher's readers, among other stipulations, insisted that Maxwell add a Preface entitled 'A Brief History of Race in Australia.' This was seen as a necessary contextualisation of his focus on what one reader called 'a relatively obscure local scene' of predominantly white, middle class hip hop practitioners far removed from the by-laws and orthodoxies of African-American identity politics that have dominated US hip hop studies. As Ser Reck of Def Wish Cast put it, summing up the 'indigenising' local dynamism of Sydney hip hop in defiance of this African-American prerogative: 'They'll tell you it's a black thing, man, but it's not. It's our thing' (p. 67). Emphasising this marginality, one of the book's dust jacket blurb imprimaturs, by cosmopolitan Columbia University 'world music' commentator Timothy Taylor, rather

patronisingly suggests Maxwell's 'exciting' approach to his subject will even 'interest people who might not otherwise have much interest in hip hop in Sydney.'

Recent praise in the New York Times for 2004 Aria Award winning hip hop duo Koolism, who are based in Canberra (and, some might think, ironically won their award for 'Best Urban' release), suggests hope that US hip hop parochialism might be eroding slightly, as native language hip hop continues to take root in unthinkably far-flung, marginal localities such as Palestine, Iran, Algeria, Greenland, Romania, the PRC and Wales. Meanwhile the huge growth in diversity, range and prominence in Australian hip hop over the past two or three years has extended to Sonic Allsorts, an all-Australian compilation of hip hop by seventeen artists from seven states performing in over twenty languages, including French, Spanish, Punjabi, Swahili, Macedonian, Henghwa, Mandarin, Samoan and Tongan. But Maxwell's study covers the relatively barren years of Sydney hip hop between 1992 and 1994, when the scene was still almost entirely underground, struggling to define itself and negotiating a geo-political shift from the western suburbs into the inner city, where its main focal points were situated—radio station 2SER, which ran 'The Mothership Connection,' a weekly hip hop show where local MCs could battle it out freestyle in the absence of any real back catalogue of local recordings, and the Lounge Room record shop, started in 1994, which in those days also served as an informal locus for live DJing, rhyming and break dance performances.

Combining ethnographic analysis with theoretical readings of the various embodied practices of hip hop in its geographical locations around Sydney along with close textual exegesis of key recorded texts (such as the identity-defining Def Wish Cast track 'A.U.S.T.' which gives the book its subtitle), freestyle battles, written texts from 'zines and the street press and pronouncements about the 'four elements' (Mcing, DJing, breaking and graffiti) by key figures such as Miguel D'Souza, Blaze and Ser Reck, Maxwell manages to tease a vast amount of data and significance from a barely visible scene. He does not set out to provide an historical survey of the Sydney scene from its beginnings, and overlooks pioneering figures such as Maltese-Australian Case, who with cohort Mentor released 'Combined Talent,' generally acknowledged as the first Australian hip hop recording in 1988, calling themselves Just Us for obvious reasons. Also absent is reference to the 1988 Virgin compilation *Down Under by Law*, which despite causing general embarrassment, contained tracks by the West Side Posse, who were later to become Sound Unlimited, along with Sharline (aka Spice), the leading female figure on the Sydney scene in both MCing and graffiti, who does get a brief passing mention, but only in reference to the self-consciously feminine 'Sugar and Spice' connotations of her tag. As Maxwell is at pains to point out, in keeping with the focus of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) subcultural studies, he was observing what was largely an all-male scene of protagonists who had yet to experience the destabilising impact of female MCs or DJs:

The hip hop world I encountered was for the boyz, a masculinised, even phallogocentric world in which young men performed, rapped, breaked, boasted, bombed, leaving their phat tags to mark their presence, hung out, strutted, posed with their legs thrust out and their hands hooked in low-slung pockets, fingers brushing their groins. Where young men talked about their Community, Culture, Nation (p. 33).

A key textual focus is on the two main Australian hip hop releases of the time, Sound Unlimited's *Postcard from the Edge of the Underside*, and Def Wish Cast's *Knights of the Underground Table*, both of which, as Maxwell notes, define themselves as 'underground,' despite the fact that the Sound Unlimited release was backed by Sony and led to an unfortunate commercial skirmish with members of the Backstreet Boys which sent the group into pop-soul obscurity and a sizeable debt to the record label. Meanwhile Def Wish Cast, who reformed in 2003, continue the battle to 'keep it real.'

In the process of applying various theoretical tropes to Sydney hip hop, including Appadurai's scapes, Maxwell skirts around the issue of ethnicity and its role as a defining factor in much Australian hip hop—figures such as Lebanese-Australian rapper and comedian Sleek the Elite don't get much airplay, and Maxwell relies a great deal on Pakistani-Australian informant Miguel D'Souza to provide an ethnic angle. He does briefly mention two now-defunct, short-lived all-female Aboriginal posses (mis-spelling their names in the process), the Arrernte Desert Posse, who combined traditional bodypaint and dance moves with rapping, and Blackjustis, who represented Redfern, but were deemed to be 'not really hip hop' (p. 68) by local luminary Blaze (whose Finnish background, later manifested in a return to his homeland to examine the Suomi hip hop scene, is not explored). While emphasis on the importance of ethnicity and class as a factor of the identity politics of hip hop is sometimes over-stated, Maxwell's choice to focus on mainly middle-class Anglo-Australian protagonists who were involved in 'predicating a community based on an affective identity, rather than on blood descent' (p. 97), although it provides a local counter to the widespread insistence on African-American ownership of US hip hop, sells short the significant number of Lebanese, Pacific Islander and other hip hop practitioners who have been negotiating links between their own indigenous cultures and hip hop (from Rosanno and T-Na, the Filipino-Chilean brother and sister duo who fronted Sound Unlimited, to Fijian-Australian MC Trey and Tongan MC Hau of Koolism who are prominent current examples).

*Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes*, is not quite the first book-length account in English of a non-US hip hop scene (Ayhan Kaya took that distinction in 2001 with the fascinating *Constructing Diasporas: Turkish Hip Hop in Berlin*, closely followed by the disappointing *Black, Blanc, Beur*, Alain-Philippe Durand's compilation of essays on French hip hop which appeared in the US in 2002), but it's an important local extension of the existing, mostly US literature on the subject. In representing the idiosyncracies and distinctively local, suburban configurations of hip hop in Sydney, Maxwell chronicles, transcribes and narrates a cross section of Sydney's MCs, DJs, breakers and writers, its voices, scratches, moves, and pieces, its freestyles, texts, publications and pronouncements, as well as its emergent pedagogies and epistemologies which figures such as Morganics have since taken to remote Aboriginal and disadvantaged communities all over Australia. Maxwell does so with an immediacy which brings the scene and some of its main personalities and protagonists vividly to life, including a number of now forgotten crews like Urban Poets, Voodoo Flavour, Fonke Nomads, 046, Illegal Substance and the White Boys, who gave varying degrees of substance to the scene at the time. While Def Wish Cast might have been a more appropriate presence on the cover of the book than J.U. of the now defunct but then seminal Easybass, *Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes* offers a cartography of Sydney hip hop's contested spaces, places, events, ideologies, urban mythologies, battles, traditions and self-

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definitions as a 'polychrome Pacific' outgrowth of the hip hop nation. At the same time, Maxwell theorises his responses to the various 'flows' of this local hip hop scene through sharply critical readings of a wide range of existing writing on hip hop, popular music, subcultural studies and cultural philosophy. The result is, to use the top level of Blaze's hip hop CD ratings system, 'Doper than dope. Buy it.' Similar, but significantly and parochially different narratives remain to be teased out of the Melbourne scene.