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From Niche to Movement to Mainstream:

What Brands Can Learn From the Growth of Food Trucks and Hip-Hop

Walk down a city street at midday on an average day, and a familiar scene will likely greet you: brightly painted trucks equipped with full kitchens dishing out delicious food to crowds of people. And as you keep walking, you'll no doubt hear a car drive past playing hip-hop on the stereo – if you're not already listening to it in your ear buds.

Just a few decades ago, however, food trucks and hip-hop were relative unknowns, either completely undeveloped or, at best, popular within a very small community. So how did these trends take off and grow, morphing into two incredible cultural forces?

Hip-hop has shaped not only the music people listen to, but the way they listen to it, the way they dress, the way they talk, the way they dance and more. PhD dissertations are written about the genre's cultural effects. Many brands integrate hip-hop into their very ethos. And the most successful artists in the game are quickly approaching billionaire status.

Food trucks, meanwhile, have grown exponentially to become a force in the food world, capturing the spirit of the American dream and changing the food landscape in the country – a sector that is accounting for an increasingly large portion of people's spending.

There's no disputing the fact that these areas have grown into cultural juggernauts. But the questions of how and why persist. We wanted to understand more about these expressions of culture and their growth from niche to mainstream, so we talked to the people who went through that growth – journalists, artists, chefs, economists – to get the real story. This report makes sense of their stories and identifies key moments of cultural expansion – and the implications of those moments for brands in today's world.

We aren't looking for a formula here. There's no equation that can be solved to predict the next small movement that will make a big impact. But we hope to create a lens that makes it easier and clearer to understand the evolution of various trends and cultures as they grow.

I. Food Trucks: The Empowered Dreamers

Ever since Charles Goodnight invented his 'Chuck Wagon', selling food to settlers as they struck out towards the West Coast in the mid-19th century, people have been eating meals cooked up on wheels. To find an early version of today's popular food trucks, simply find the nearest crane: construction workers have been lining up at chrome carts on their lunch breaks for decades. But in recent years, food trucks have morphed from blue-collar sustenance vendors to flashy, gourmet dining options.

In less than a decade, the food truck industry has grown from a niche afterthought to a booming business. Annika Stensson directs research communications at the National Restaurant Association. 'We don't have a ton of hard data on food trucks, since it's a little bit of a moving target, pun intended, to track,' says Stensson. 'The way they handle their operating makes those figures not really available, fully. A lot of them don't even have payroll, so the government doesn't collect data on them either.'

Still, a category known as Mobile Caterers includes the food trucks that do report payroll figures. This year, that small segment alone will account for $764m in revenue. And the area is outpacing the growth of restaurants at large, growing at a rate of 5.3% annually, compared to 3.8% industry average.

So how did food trucks get to be such big business? And what can brands learn from the mobile caterers' recent success?

Although there isn't a formula for getting involved in burgeoning trends or for growing a small idea into a mainstream force, there are big takeaways for brands from the pioneering growth of the food truck industry. Like food trucks, brands must be agile in the way they think about nearly every aspect of their business: the products they sell, the methods they use to sell them, where they sell them, how much they charge, how they communicate with consumers, and more.

Food trucks, very early on, realized that clear communications – and two-way dialogue through social media – were critical to establishing and growing their consumer base. They realized that their business model allowed for increased flexibility and took advantage of that fact to iterate on ideas and create offerings that were increasingly interesting for hungry fans. Modern brands must put themselves in the same position, or risk being disrupted by up-and-comers with fewer limitations and greater imaginations.

Food truck owners, particularly those blazing the path toward the end of the century's first decade, have always been risk takers. They have worked to establish businesses outside of the normal paradigm, and have consequently faced risks and challenges from changing regulations, increasing competition and rocky reputations. Brands hoping to truly challenge the status quo must do the same. Whether it's attempting to understand a niche culture and guide it to the mainstream, or simply trying to inspire consumers through cultural offerings, brands must understand that without venturing anything, they won't gain much. Food truck owners – and hip-hop voices – have always been dreamers. Brands must aspire to be the same.

Brands need to identify pioneers and empower them to succeed

The explosion of food trucks can be largely traced to one man, the godfather of the modern food truck movement: Roy Choi. Talk to almost any food truck owner, and they'll cite Choi as an inspiration. His Kogi truck, which still serves Korean barbecue tacos in Los Angeles, launched in 2008 and quickly became a shining beacon for chefs with a dream.

Choi recounted his truck's literal overnight success: 'In December, it all just burst after UCLA. We went up to the dorms, and all the kids came out,' he told Fast Company. 'It was at night. They were studying. We went to the co-op housing where they were all studying, it was finals. Everyone was around. Word got out, I think there were fliers all over campus about this mysterious taco truck that served Korean barbecue for $2 and it's coming here. There were a thousand kids out there. It kind of created this kind of urban myth and groundswell…That was the turning point.'

As Kogi grew, it became a cultural phenomenon. The moving taco truck would pick a spot to park, announce it on social media and people would line up for hours to taste its innovative cuisine.

'A friend showed us the Kogi truck online and we stalked the schedule,' says Natasha Case, cofounder of the Coolhaus Ice Cream Truck, when asked about her first run-in with food trucks. 'I don't think we could fully comprehend at first what a phenomenon it was about it become, and of course, what a huge role it would play in our lives.'

‘I don’t think we could fully comprehend at first what a phenomenon it was about it become’

Nor could Choi.

Unbeknownst to him, Choi had started the Kogi truck at the exact right moment to spark a movement. With the rise of the celebrity chef, Americans were more focused on food than ever before. In fact, millennials spend a higher portion of their income on dining outside the home than any generation before them, with 43% of all money spent on food going toward eating out. Add in the fact that those millennials are more adventurous eaters, and you have an opportunity for inventive chefs to experiment with palate-challenging cuisines.

In order to enable and empower niche cultures, brands must align themselves with people like Roy Choi – people with the interests of the culture itself in mind. Any niche community, as it grows, will be wary of ‘selling out’ and becoming overly corporate – and consequently losing the independent voices that made the community so strong in the first place. It’s a cycle that repeats over and over, whenever a small movement becomes a large one, with initial instigators fighting to retain control over the movement’s voice. If brands come in as competitors, rather than enablers, they risk losing authenticity, goodwill and positive cultural affiliation.

Take, for example, a recent concert at Raleigh, North Carolina’s Red Hat Amphitheatre, where a Taco Bell truck sold only $320 worth of food despite an audience of 6,000 people. The same night, at a 4,500-person concert in Carrboro, North Carolina, an independent truck sold almost 800 slices of pizza, bringing in more than $3000. While there may be other variables affecting sales, the juxtaposition would seem to be an indictment of brand involvement in a setting where independent vendors might thrive.

‘It’s not that we’re pushing everyone out, but these concerts are not a huge profit opportunity for anybody.’ Taylor Traverser, who manages the amphitheater, told local newspaper Indy Week. ‘Taco Bell is looking for exposure, and I don’t think a food truck is looking for exposure. They’re looking to make money.’

That quote smacks of a lack of understanding about the food truck industry and why it has won the hearts of consumers. In fact, the blowback against branded food trucks can be traced to self-serving purposes (at least in the perception of the public) and greed. Food trucks rose to prominence because of the passion they brought to cuisine, not because they were highly visible moneymakers. Brands that have attempted to wedge themselves into the food truck community have often done so in what is at best a selfish way and, at worst, destructive. Whether it is a brand like Chick-fil-A starting its own truck or a movie franchise creating a ‘pop-up’ truck for a few weeks, customers view these copycats as attempts to cash in on the hard work of others, rather than as contributing to the unique community created by inspired individuals.

Instead, brands should find the key instigators and passionate people involved in a given movement and empower them to succeed. In the case of food trucks, established food brands could use their size and customer base to improve the regulatory environment around food trucks, or to draw attention to food trucks as a whole. Non-food brands interested in getting involved in food trucks can seek out partnerships with existing independent operators, rather than attempting to compete via an inferior product.

Brands must get to know the people who have shepherded the culture from a niche culture to the larger stage and work with them to understand how they can simultaneously reach the movement’s acolytes while maintaining good relations and intentions. As with any trend, culture or movement, the brands that approach with respect will be the ones that are accepted – and consequently prosperous.

Illustrations by Diego Figueroa

Brands should align themselves with nascent cultural communities

As trucks began to follow Roy Choi's lead, popping up in more places, communities began to form around food trucks and food truck culture. These communities proved extremely critical to the growth and expansion of the food truck industry.

'A ton of friends and professional contacts supported us so much early on---hiring us for events, helping connect us in the biz, giving us feedback (both positive and negative), helping with architectural ice cream sandwich name puns!' says Coolhaus co-founder Case. 'It sounds cliché, but it really does take a village.'

She credits events with playing a big part in the growth of her business (the Coolhaus truck first launched at Coachella). 'The truck is like a marketing tool in itself, so being out there was mandatory in building brand awareness,' she says.

In cities like Portland, these communities often took the form of symbiotic relationships—between different food carts in 'pod' setups as well as between trucks and brick-and-mortar establishments like bars. 'There was this nice combination between, get your food at the carts, bring it then have a beer. Then that kind of relationship started to happen and then more carts started to do that where they would have beer and tents and eating and just more infrastructure,' says Kelley Roy, co-author of Cartopia: Portland's Food Cart Revolution. 'It's a real great expression of culture and values: we value food and drink and entrepreneurialism.'

'If you're here with other people that are really struggling to make it, you kind of share the tricks of the trade with each other like, "Oh, who's your accountant? Who's this? Or we've got a business resource guy next door who comes and helps focus here for free just talking through some of their business ideas." It's that really having that community support network,' says Roy.

Brands should look for new movements that are playing on trends and inspiring excitement /

Food trucks began to spread more rapidly across the country in 2009 and 2010, and a once-niche phenomenon started to go mainstream. No longer were food trucks simply local business people serving an underserved office park or construction site. Instead, the new kids on the block quickly became food celebrities. Food trucks represented a fresh face in the restaurant industry -- at a time when consumers were increasingly looking for variety from their meals.

'Consumers are really more adventurous in their food choices these days. They have a wider acceptance of foods they're not familiar with, especially with younger consumers' says the National Restaurant Association's Stensson. 'They're all about the experimentation and making an experience out of dining, rather than just serving the purpose of a meal. Food trucks sort of add to the fun factor -- you're outside, you often have music playing, there are fun colors on the outside. There's a lot of stimulation.'

Phil Shen, co-creator of the blog Behind The Food Carts, agrees. 'People just wanted to try something different -- they were tired of eating the same stuff over and over again. It was just something new and fresh that we hadn't seen before,' he says. 'Food trucks have a lot of leeway. There's not as much pressure to serve the same food every day, so they can throw in a special every week and tweet about it, and people will go out and try that new crazy thing. I think the nature of the scene enables them to do a lot of things that restaurants can't do, and people like that excitement.'

This cool factor, driven largely by the passion and personality of the truck owners and chefs, can be directly traced to the enthusiasm around the food truck industry. Meals at food trucks became events worth waiting for, and people traveled large distances just to taste the interesting fusions coming out of these mobile kitchens. Novelty sparked interest, and the cool factor of food trucks kept people coming back.

Innovation comes from cultural edges in times of hardship/

Beyond the cool factor and expanding consumer palates, the single most important catalyst for food trucks' growth was undoubtedly the economy. On both the vendor and consumer side, food trucks are almost always preferable to restaurants from a price perspective. For food truck owners, the mobile kitchens require less initial capital outlay, allowing people to take on smaller risk when starting a business. That lower initial overhead also leads to lower prices.

'Coming out of the recession, trucks were a great option as they had a relatively low barrier to entry,' says Natasha Case, cofounder of the Coolhaus Ice Cream Truck. She and cofounder Freya Estreller launched their first truck in 2009, and now operate 11 trucks around the US, as well as owning two scoop shops and selling packaged ice cream in more than 1,500 gourmet markets nationwide.

‘If you’re looking for the real cause of the ‘explosion’ so to speak, the catalyst for that was certainly the Great Recession,’ says Stennson. ‘Necessity is the mother of invention.’

‘During a recession there’s actually a way for very resourceful entrepreneurial people to get into the food business,’ says Cartopia author Roy. ‘It’s a great starting point, it’s been a great launching point for a lot of the cart owners that have been really successful that have now moved into brick and mortar spaces.’

These days, the economics of food trucks are shifting slightly, as gourmet entries into the category are testing consumer price elasticity and charging more for their meals on wheels. Still, says Shen, food trucks offer a slightly better deal for customers. ‘If you get a lobster roll at a restaurant, it should still be a little bit cheaper at a food truck versus a real sit down restaurant.’

Lower costs have led to the growth of food trucks in unexpected areas, as well. Take, for example, weddings. Doug Povich, owner of the DC Red Hook Lobster Pound truck, has seen a big boost in demand for his trucks at wedding receptions. ‘People are interested because they’re on a budget and want to get a lot of bang for the buck. In general, food trucks are generally well below the cost of a caterer,’ he says.

Stensson, for her part, believes the economy was the spark that lit the food truck fire. ‘People didn’t have a lot of options, and restaurateurs are very entrepreneurial by nature, very innovative and resilient during a lot of circumstances,’ she says. ‘This was one of those catalyst moments where one person thought this was a good idea, other people saw it and sort of mimicked it, and it grew into a movement.’

Outside of general attitudes, however, two key factors sparked the growth of the food truck industry after 2008: the rise of social media and the struggling economy.

‘If you’re looking for the real cause of the ‘explosion’ so to speak, the catalyst for that was certainly the Great Recession,’ says Stennson. ‘Necessity is the mother of invention.’

With capital hard to come by, especially for new businesses, aspiring restaurateurs—either people in the industry unhappy with their situation or people outside the industry dreaming of starting a restaurant—saw food trucks as an opportunity to take a lower-risk shot at getting into the business.

‘There were also lot of people reinventing their careers, as they strayed from the traditional path they were on,’ says Coolhaus’s Case. ‘

In some cities, like Portland, Oregon, the recession also inspired real estate developers to get into the food truck business. Kelley Roy remembers the dynamic around that time: ‘There seemed to be a lot vacant lots that weren’t going to be developed. The recession hit in 2008, and condos that were going to go up on those lots weren’t going to go up anymore. When the economy tanked those property owners had to adjust course and try to come up with other creative solutions for generating income.’

Instead of spending money to build condos that may or may not sell, some landowners turned to food trucks, charging rent of $400-$600 each month for a guaranteed spot. Rather than roaming around the cities, food trucks began forming ‘pods’, where a handful of carts would set up shop, pay rent and attract crowds. The system, says Roy, soon attracted attention from outside of Portland. ‘Places like New Orleans and Cleveland were struggling during recession to try to find opportunities for economic development—economic opportunity for people, ways to bring in

‘The food truck industry kind of grew up alongside social media platforms’

some kind of economic activity to an otherwise struggling real estate market and struggling job market.’ Food trucks became a method to spark the economy in cities across the country.

Media, especially social media, can give niche trends a bigger voice

Another fortuitous trend toward the end of the century’s first decade helped the food truck movement go from local buzz to national frenzy: the rise of social media. Nearly every food truck owner cites the ability to communicate directly with fans and customers in real time as a critical part in growing their business. Twitter, in particular, became a necessary tool for drawing hungry crowds and informing potential customers about things like hours, locations and menus.

‘Social media was a huge part of our growth,’ says Coolhaus’ Case. ‘Twitter was an important outlet for getting our truck location out there, but it’s also been great for our wholesale products too. People are always reaching out to ask where they can purchase our sammies, pints and bars, and we’re able to connect personally with our customers and promote our retailers.’

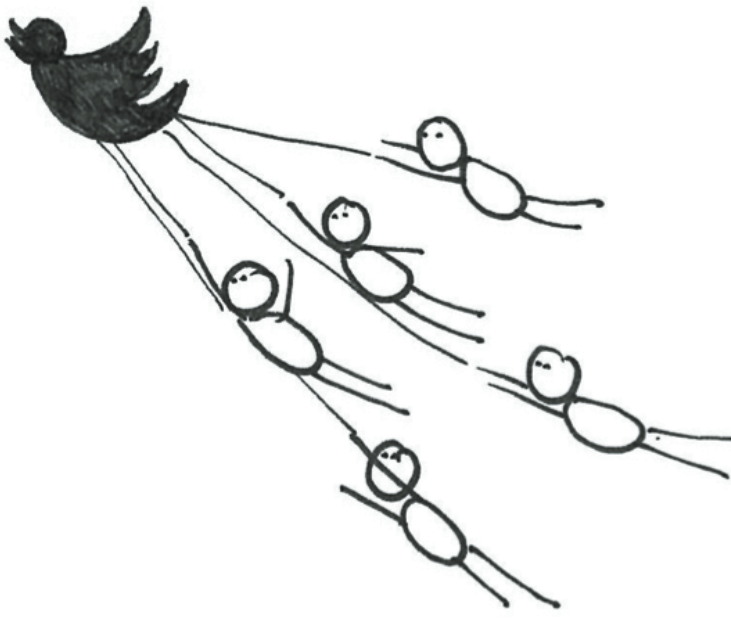
In addition to informing people about truck locations, social media allows truck owners to broadcast the personality of their brand and their food, creating a strong bond with consumers looking for the aforementioned cool factor in their dining experiences.

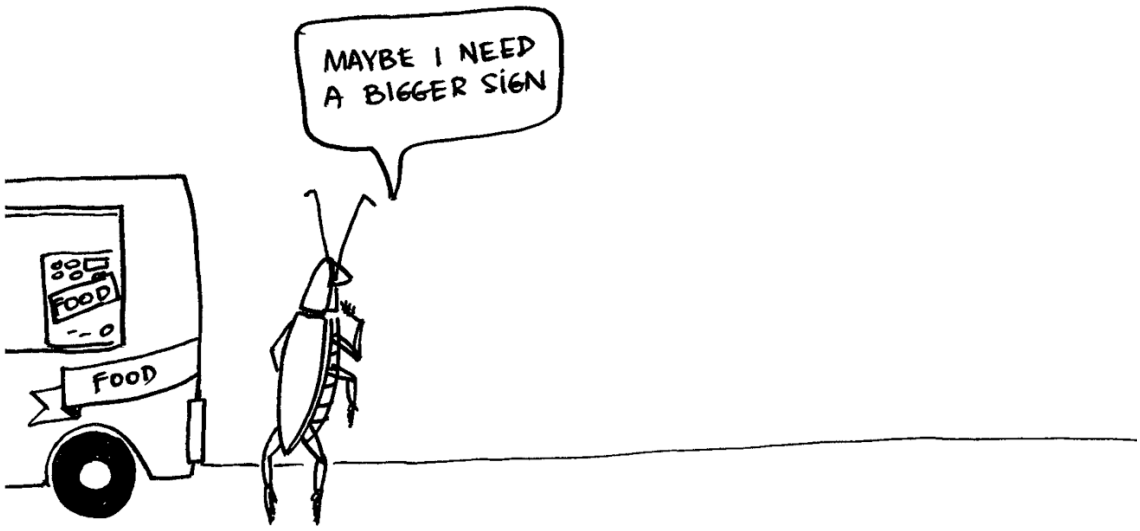
‘It’s a big part of the food truck culture—that social media piece. I think the ones that really have it down, you can sense a difference,’ says Shen, who published a book about the people and stories behind popular food trucks. ‘It’s a little more personable because it’s such a personal thing with whoever is running it. It’s definitely really important for them to promote themselves - that’s kind of what we thought was really important for us, too. To tell their stories.’

Food trucks rode the wave of social media as they grew and expanded from city to city. Because of their roving nature, food trucks are unpredictable and hard to pin down. Historically, a moving cart would have to rely on repetition (being in the same spot frequently) or serendipity (hoping hungry customers happened to stroll past). Thanks to Twitter, which launched in 2006 and was processing 100 million tweets per quarter in 2008, food trucks could keep prospective customers up-to-date on where and when they would be showing up to dish out food. Once again, it was Kogi and Roy Choi paving the way.

‘Social media was a big part of it,’ says Phil Shen, who co-created the blog Behind The Food Carts with his wife Kim. ‘I remember when Kogi first started they would tweet their location. I actually went out to one of the locations when they first opened, and I think I got there maybe 2 or 3 hours before they were scheduled to be there, and the line was already 200 people deep. I didn’t even wait there, I just went to the next location. But there was literally a line before the truck was even there. In the initial stages, there was that social media hype. It was just something new and fresh that we hadn’t seen before.’

Without Twitter, the food truck revolution likely never takes off in the same way. ‘The food truck industry kind of grew up alongside social media platforms, which also saw rapid expansion in that timeline. This force helped catapult brands that otherwise may not have had as much of voice,’ says Case.





Obstacles to Food Trucks' Ascendance

A common refrain about food trucks is that they are in direct competition with the restaurant industry—and have consequently made a lot of enemies within the brick-and-mortar community. Some even go as far as saying that food trucks, with their low overhead and location flexibility, are negatively impacting restaurants' bottom line and killing the sit-down joint as we know it.

Though food trucks, and the industry they've created, have made massive strides in the past several years, the notion that they are killing the restaurant industry is an overgrown assessment, more designed to drive page views to stories in the media than based in actual fact. No doubt the cliché feeds off the fear of being supplanted by something new—the idea that something is lurking in shadowy vagueness destined to take money out of your pocket. The numbers tell a different story, however.

In 2010, restaurants earned $586.7bn, according to the National Restaurant Association, and sales projections for 2015 come in at $709.2bn. 2010 is a key year for discussing the food industry, since it's generally considered the time when the food truck industry transformed from a novel concept into a tangible employment option for disillusioned fry cooks, second-career virgins and ambitious foodies. In the five years since, food trucks ownership has skyrocketed. But while though the popularity of food trucks has had an explosive uptick, it has not stopped the momentum of restaurants, or the creation of new sit-down locations. Overall, brick and mortar establishments are undoubtedly strong.

Still, just as traditional commerce has lost ground to online retailers, brick-and-mortar restaurants are not the kings they were 15 years ago. If you peel back a layer, there's more to the story. Though restaurants, numbers-wise, continue to grow, the kinds of establishments—in regards to type of cuisines and other concerns in which specificity is a primary concern—are giving up market share to food trucks.

Trucks are usually laser focused on their customers in a way that gives them a healthy advantage or at least the potential for advantage. Food trucks, by their very design, are born out of necessity and tend to attract free thinkers who feel compelled to stand out in a busy marketplace. The products they sell tend to come from higher quality, often healthier ingredients designated to fill a niche. As foods like acai berries and quinoa become mainstream standards, trucks can adapt much faster than a 20-table restaurant.

Restaurant owners may not be actually feeling the pinch, but they are aware of the changing winds, and food trucks are drawing first blood. So even though the demise of brick and mortars has been overstated, the perception lingers and the pushback from restaurants and their accompanying organizations has predictably strong. Their main weapon? Politicians.

Politics and Regulation

'The Food Truck Business Stinks.' So proclaims the headline of a 2013 New York Times article that goes on to detail the intricate web of red tape familiar to anyone trying to run a food truck business in NY. Things tend to move at glacial speed when it comes to government oversight in emerging industries, and New York City is no different. The food truck industry's explosion has caught many cities by surprise and forced government administrators to scramble. They either create a haphazard set of new regulations, or they just go by whatever is already on the books, even if it's outdated.

For example, one of the owners profiled in the Times talks about the arduous task of food license requirements. The NYC Health Department requires each of his workers (he needs four workers to operate effectively) to have individual licenses, and if anyone is fired or quits, it takes up to two months for a new worker to receive a license. This requirement only extends to food trucks. Regular brick and mortar establishments require proper certification of only one person on duty at a time.

These outdated laws are enforced by bureaucrats with cloudy agendas. Trucks are restricted in every way imaginable: where they can park, how long they can park and how many trucks can operate at any given time.

Matt Geller, the CEO of the Southern California Mobile Food Vendor's Association, is a leading voice for food truck owners who feel slighted by brick-and-mortars' entrenched sense of privilege.

'The wrong argument is this: when a restaurant or a city council person says, "Well, we need to protect our restaurants." That's not an argument that you have. This is America. I didn't see guys

‘If your restaurant with climate control, bathrooms, tables and sometimes alcohol can’t compete with a food truck that has none of that, well, maybe it’s time to go knit or do something else.’

protecting Blockbuster Video from Netflix. You don’t see Borders Books getting protection from Amazon,’ he says. ‘I always say if you can show me where you protected other brick and mortars then we’ll have that conversation. But you didn’t protect them. If you want to tell your constituents that you think you know better than they do about what foods they should be eating, then I welcome that. Go ahead. I’ll help with that. That always scared people off. No entrenched business likes new competition, and that’s what we’ve seen in the food truck industry.’

‘We have a saying– we don’t steal customers, we earn them,’ continues Geller. ‘If your restaurant with climate control, bathrooms, tables and sometimes alcohol can’t compete with a food truck that has none of that, well, maybe it’s time to go knit or do something else.’

Not every area of the country harbors such an adversarial relationship between brick and mortar owner and truck owners. Many of the dynamics hinge upon the local leadership and whether or not there are mechanisms in place to aid food trucks. In Seattle, under the leadership of Seattle Food Truck Alliance president James Barrington, the truck owners have a strong network, which levels the playing field quite a bit.

‘2010 is when things really turned the corner here,’ says Barrington. ‘We dealt with regulations from the city, with things like where we could park, etc. [Initially], they didn’t know what to do with us. Now we have 156 trucks and there a million different things you have to know about. You have to know codes for health, labor, for different industries. If something breaks you have to know how to fix it. It’s easy to get a permit, but there’s so much more to it. Part of my mission is to put together a website that will have all sorts of preferred vendors that our members can go to. For example, if your generator goes out, say it goes out at 12:30 pm and you’re in the middle of a service and you now have a resource to ask questions, a resource that other food truck owners have used in the past. My job is just creating more of a community environment, where people can look out for each other.’

‘In Washington State and especially in the Seattle area, food truck associations are really strong,’ says Barrington. ‘We have lobbyists, but we also have social media and especially if we all band together, we can go to where the people are.

Roach Coaches To Riches

Food trucks have become a mainstream phenomenon in less than a decade, with media focus, depiction on movies and TV, and, most of all, personal contact playing a huge role in their spread. The once-foreign notion of paying for food outside the walls of a restaurant has entered into the mix of options many Americans have for lunch at work, or a special treat on the weekends.

‘It’s kind of scrappier, independent, slightly disruptive, not everybody wants to go sit at a restaurant to eat and a lot of people don’t cook anymore.’

It’s nowhere near the majority of dining options yet, though. In the National Restaurant Association’s 2014 forecast, food trucks brought in around $700m in revenue. IBIS World puts that figure a little higher, at $857m, with around 9.3% annual growth, with around 4,000 businesses employing almost 15,000 people. That’s not much, by standards of all restaurants—only around one percent. But, an analysis in the Next City project notes it’s a big gain in the first five years of measuring impact. Meanwhile, the article cites a study by Emergent Research that says revenue from trucks could top $2.7bn by 2017.

What’s interesting is to think about how the balance of class and power has changed. Once, food trucks were frequented by day laborers or blue-collar workers seeking a quick, cheap fix. Now, they’re likely to represent a bourgeois culinary culture that’s a bit more aspirational for the everyday shopper, who may appreciate the time-pressure that McDonald’s can alleviate or the buy-in-bulk-for-the-whole-family options at a Wal-Mart. Further, choice is an important part of the food truck class shuffle. The options from the truck, while varied, may be a bit more complex or difficult for a beginner’s palette.

‘There are certainly are variations from people who are producing super gourmet food trucks and then people who are just creating standard fare,’ says Kelley Roy, who founded makerspace ADX Portland, in addition to writing about Portland’s food carts. Roy thinks options are what count most. ‘If you’re going to a food cart and you’re the kind of person that wants the fancy gourmet stuff you can find something, but if you’re just kind of like, “I’ve just got four bucks and I have to eat something,” that’s seen as fairly decent and there are options. I also think the younger generation kind of gets this model a little bit more, gets what’s happening. It’s kind of scrappier, independent, slightly disruptive, not everybody wants to go sit at a restaurant to eat and a lot of people don’t cook anymore.’

‘Food carts have just added another layer to the dimension of food options, and allow somebody who may have an incredible amount of skill to enter into the market and maybe get picked up by somebody to then go on and open their own restaurant and that might be their goal,’ says Roy.

Corporate Trucks: The Man Comes Around

It wasn’t long before larger food brands saw their chance to connect with a younger audience, to attempt to trade on the cool factor food trucks brought. And some succeeded, building food trucks into their event marketing plans at outdoor festivals or large industry gatherings like South By Southwest, or involving food trucks in hyping film or television releases, like HBO did with Game of Thrones in 2011.

But there’s another interesting area where large-scale corporate quick-serve restaurants see their niche: to be able to introduce new customers to their haute-cuisine options, while still serving something reasonably traditional to the eater who’s reticent to swim out into deeper water.

‘Some of the larger national brands launched one on a trial basis over the course of a few years, but they don’t really keep them in business. It was almost more of a marketing strategy than a business expansion,’ says the National Restaurant Association’s Stensson.

That tempting mix of millennials, social media and cuisine proved alluring, and now firms have even launched to create ‘food-centric brand amplification,’ as agency Roaming Hunger bills itself. The company is able to deploy partner trucks to marketing events around the country even providing a handy calculator to see how much your event or tour might cost.

‘I think a lot of the bigger brands used it from that perspective,’ Stensson says, mentioning Chick-fil-A as one of the brands her office has observed putting in a broader effort to use the carts beyond building short-term buzz. However, the future of carts may include extensions for local food businesses beyond their standard locations or brick and mortar stores, as a way to experiment with menu items or build a new offering. ‘What we see more, especially on the local level, are either multi-concept local or independent local businesses expanding with a truck.’

The truck craze has attracted the attention of celebrity chefs as well. Chefs have never been more popular and arguably food has never been more popular either, existing as a legitimate culture in ways that would have likely surprised previous generations. People like Carla Hall, Jamie Oliver, David Burke and Andrew Zimmern all have taken a part in the trend. Tom Colicchio even had a hand in the Game of Thrones truck traversing the streets of NY a few years ago.

‘We’ve gotten a lot of calls from people who want to offer a mobile shoeshine business, a mobile back massage business. We haven’t licensed any of these, but these are the calls that I get.’

‘In Washington DC, one example is Jose Andres, who is a chef with a lot of restaurants in the DC area and around the country,’ says Stensson. ‘His business concept launched a food truck as an expansion. Not that he is on the truck itself, because he has a lot on his plate. I’d say it’s more common on the small business and independent restaurant level than it is on the national chain level.’

The familiarity of celebrity chefs makes the food choices they serve less intimidating to people, essentially giving them a built-in market. It also keeps their names circulating amongst younger people, which in turn keeps their brand viable for the immediate and long-term future. It’s a smart business move, provided they can remain seeming authentic. If they lose that and find themselves in an opportunistic light, the whole thing could backfire.

Beyond Both Food and Trucks

As the tools and infrastructure that businesses need to collaborate in a 21st century economy evolve, new types of businesses are developing using the model successfully proven out with food trucks.

‘There are always innovative people who are coming to work. I think the service industry, mobile vending is starting to take off,’ says Vincent Parker, vending program manager at the District of Columbia Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, who oversees the issuing of food truck licenses in the District of Columbia. ‘We’ve gotten a lot of calls from people who want to offer a mobile shoeshine business, a mobile back massage business. We haven’t licensed any of these, but these are the calls that I get.’

Now, in places like Portland, Oregon that have become familiar with getting a delicious lunch from carts or trucks, you can have keys cut, get shoes or bicycles repaired or any number of ancillary services from mobile vendors.

In one working-class neighborhood in Portland, Lents, a nine-years-in-the-making plan centered on food trucks is just now launching, with help from the neighborhood’s economic development organization and the city’s development commission. Portland Mercado is a mixed-retail project that initially began as a farmer’s market, but evolved to something less seasonal and launched in April, 2015 with 19 Latin American-themed businesses, including food carts, a chorizo vendor and a custom piñata shop. There’s a training and finance component for people in the neighborhood, too, with business coaches and a microloan program. The 7,000 square foot space was formerly a bank and a car dealership. ‘If we’re successful, at least 19 businesses won’t be gentrified out,’ Nathan Teske, Hacienda’s community and economic development director told The Oregonian.

‘I think there’s definitely room for growth in the larger markets,’ Annika Stensson says. ‘It’s a point-of-access and convenience factor, and food trucks have, as an industry segment, been around for a while, so they’re starting to get their sea legs in the industry. It’s not just “I’m getting in a truck and cooking up some burgers” or whatever you’re serving. It’s more of a serious business model these days. I think it’s maturing a little bit.’

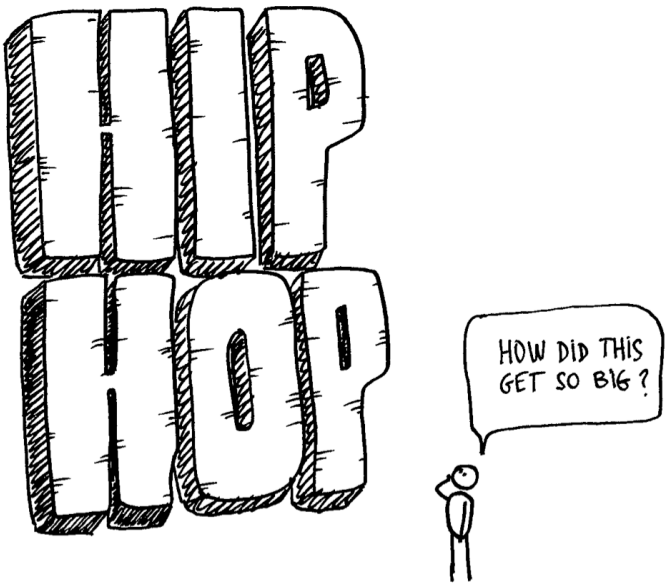
‘Again, a lot of food trucks are not necessarily getting into the food truck business with the intention of staying there for the next 10-20 years,’ notes Stensson. ‘It’s often a short-term project. And some do it with the intention of opening a brick and mortar as an outgrowth of that food truck. There’s a lot going on there. But I don’t think it’s going to go away–I think it’s just going to keep evolving and maturing.’

For Natasha Case and Coolhaus, there’s an easy way to expand in line with their strategy of offering different product to different consumers. ‘Even though we are a “young” brand, I see it more as our different channels hitting different audiences,’ she says. ‘The truck vending is for social media savvy, upwardly mobile young people, the truck catering is for an older, more established population who can afford to book us. The brick and mortars are very family friendly, the sandwiches at grocery are for the single-serve purchaser, generally younger. The bars and pints at grocery stores are more family-friendly because they are in multi-packs.’

The way she and her colleagues are building Coolhaus with trucks also caters to different audiences (pun intended). ‘Again, strategic utilization as part of a bigger strategy is in order,’ she says. ‘Marketing tours around the country, special events, activations, a PR platform for launching new products or growing into brick and mortar. Trucks are best utilized this way.’

Running a brand isn’t brain surgery, but developing an idea and building that brand depends on dozens of factors including lots of luck. For brands that have built a toehold with a mobile audience and are now looking to expand, keeping four wheels on the ground is an important part of that strategy, wherever fate may bring their products.

II. Hip-Hop: From Block Parties to Blockbusters



Compared to food trucks, which are still nibbling at the edges of mainstream culture, hip-hop feels like it peaked as an underground phenomenon twenty-some years ago. Since then, it has only reached higher popular culture heights and more prominence as time has gone on. Hip-hop has become an undeniable part of the fabric of American life, across a broad swathe of cultural touch points, from popular music, film and television to business, products and politics.

So what can brands learn from the genre and culture's rise from a small community on the streets of New York to a global powerhouse? How did hip-hop jump into the mainstream?

Unlike many trends, which seem to emerge from the ether without a definable moment of genesis, hip-hop's invention can be traced to a specific date: August 13, 1973. On that date, DJ Kool Herc, a local unknown DJ in the Bronx, noticed that people on the dance floor at his sister's fundraising party were waiting around for specific parts of each song–the so-called 'break' during which bands often experimented with instrumentals. So he decided to extend that break. As journalist Jeff Chang wrote in his 2005 hip-hop chronicle Can't Stop Won't Stop: 'In a technique he called "the Merry-Go-Round," Herc began to work two copies of the same record, back-cueing a record to the beginning of the break as the other reached the end, extending a five-second breakdown into a five-minute loop of fury, a makeshift version excursion…"Once they heard that, that was it, wasn't no turning back," Herc says. "They always wanted to hear breaks after breaks after breaks after breaks."'

Hip-hop was born.

Of course, since that legendary day, hip-hop has been a shape shifting juggernaut, impacting everything from style and pop culture to language and art. It is arguably the most important musical genre to arise in the last half century, and its reach extends far beyond the purview of music. By tying things like fashion, commercial interests, art and history together with music, early hip-hop pioneers formed a foundation upon which the culture has continued to build for the past four decades.

'Hip-hop disrupted everything,' says Keith Clinkscales, former CEO of hip-hop magazine VIBE and current CEO of Sean 'Puff Daddy' Combs' media startup Revolt TV. 'It disrupted movies, because you found another way to make stars. It disrupted radio because promotional campaigns were not really the way that hip-hop records got put on–instead it was the whole nature of the protégé, where you had cats get on another cats record. Hip-hop was always down with what was nice; if a product was nice, they were doing branded entertainment. Hip-hop invented branded entertainment, without a doubt.' From a single musical innovation at a New York block party, hip-hop's music and culture have become world-changing, billion-dollar areas of interest.

Where food trucks provide a blueprint for brands to get involve in burgeoning trends, hip-hop provides a case study in slow, prolonged growth of a trend, over the course of many years. In this section of our report, we'll look at hip-hop's formative years, speaking to some of the people who were involved with the genre's early expansion to gain an understanding of how and why hip-hop got huge. From these conversations and this research, a few key takeaways bubble up for brands interested in integrating themselves with the zeitgeist, identifying early days trends and enabling the growth of new cultures.

Brands need to listen to what people on the ground are saying, and work to amplify it

Like most trends, hip-hop started within a defined geographic community, before growing into a global force. Growing out of DJ Kool Herc's 1973 block party, hip-hop music and culture became a local force in New York City, as an important form of expression in traditionally disenfranchised young, black and poor communities. But though hip-hop spread on its own throughout the region, it relied on advocates with an audience to take its boots-on-the-ground message and bring it to the masses.

In the genre's early days, it was difficult even for journalists like Steve Hager, who wrote for local publications like the Village Voice in New York City, to draw attention to the vibrant musical scene that was emerging in Harlem and the Bronx. Despite dozens of rejections from national outlets, Hager pushed to cover hip-hop, spending time ingratiating himself with the scene's key figures and learning how to tell the story of hip-hop in a compelling way. Once he understood what made the local culture tick, he was able to articulate it to larger audiences—thanks in part to some forward-thinking editors—and as a result he catalyzed the movement.

Similarly, Fred Buggs, a radio DJ in New York and Philadelphia, fought to get hip-hop on the radio, defying the traditionally conservative black radio norms to break new artists and expose listeners to new-sounding tracks. By staying close to the people in local communities, embedding themselves with those people to truly understand the culture, and then broadcasting that culture to the wider world, advocates like Hager and Buggs served as megaphones for a niche culture, amplifying and spreading its message.

Brands should pay attention to potential crossover moments /

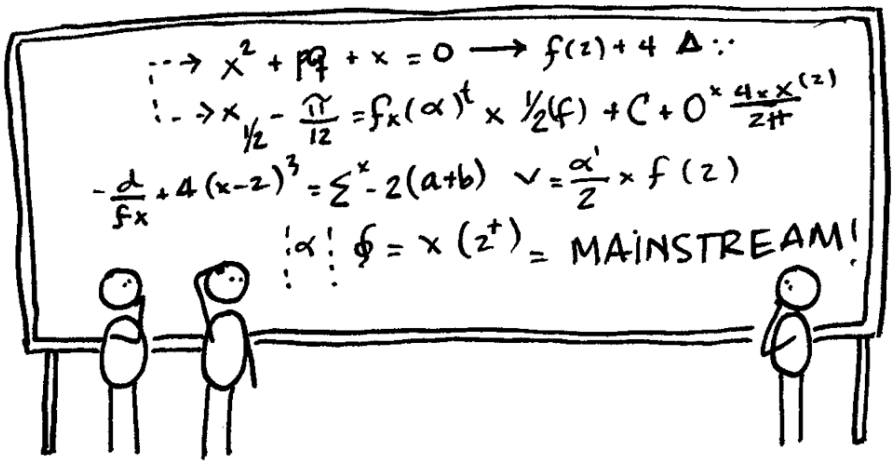
When looking at niche trends that break through to larger audiences, we often talk about 'tipping points'. In the case of hip-hop, it may be more instructive to look at 'mixing points', wherein different genres or cultural elements combined to bring hip-hop to new audiences. Take, for example, Run-DMC's collaboration with Aerosmith in 1986, which is often credited with breaking down the wall between rock and rap. Or the emergence of hip-hop in advertising campaigns (and, in turn, product placement in hip-hop songs), which added a commercial element to the music. In a similar vein, rappers-turned-actors have brought hip-hop style and sensibilities into new communities through television and movie careers.

These crossover moments are less tipping points than tangential avenues that accelerated hip-hop's spread throughout culture. If brands can identify such opportunities for burgeoning trends to insert themselves into other arenas, and enable those crossovers, they will establish themselves as long-term allies of the trend and culture.

Rather than trying to coopt cultures, brands should figure out how to curate and empower them

Early in hip-hop's rise, businessman Charlie Stettler convinced brands like Coca-Cola and Swatch to sponsor hip-hop events and tours, bringing awareness and audiences to the genre beyond the geographies and communities where it got its start. Rather than trying to coopt the genre's sound or style, these brands and promoters recognized talent and created a platform for it. By empowering these artists—and later, by presenting them with opportunities outside of their typical areas of interest—brands allowed hip-hop culture to flourish and prosper, while growing in its scope and scale.

This sort of sponsorship and curation has continued throughout hip-hop's history, most recently seen in events like the Budweiser Made In America music festival. And since the early days of the genre, sponsorship has expanded and extended beyond performances and tours to include product endorsement, fashion lines, co-branded business ventures and more. By letting the creators speak for themselves, brands ally themselves with movements in an authentic way, without any perception that they might be trying to coopt culture as an inauthentic middleman.



Brands should be on the lookout for democratizing technology that will empower creativity and cultural spread

Ironically, a powerful moment in hip-hop's spread occurred in 1977 when New York City suffered a widespread power outage. As Grandmaster Caz and Disco Wiz, two up-and-coming DJs in the early days of hip-hop, told Experience Music Project, the blackout—and the looting that ensued—brought recording and performing technology to people who otherwise wouldn't have been able to afford it.

'I see this store called the Sound Room that was one of the first audio stores, Caz told EMP. 'People are crawling in there and running out with speakers and turntables.'

Wiz seconded his recollection: 'Before that blackout, you had maybe five legitimate crews of DJs. After the blackout, you had a DJ on every block. [It] made a big spark in the hip-hop revolution.'

Similarly, technology like the Roland TR-808, a programmable drum machine and looping synthesizer first sold in 1980, is credited with speeding the spread of hip-hop, by putting relatively lower-cost tools into the hands of would-be producers.

Brands should look for technology that is suddenly much more accessible and ubiquitous, and see what types of creative cultures and movements those technologies could enable. Then, they should look for opportunities to help that technology spread, while helping users harness the new tools at their fingertips.

Analyzing Hip-Hop's Ascendance

Given the cultural headwinds facing hip-hop during the decades of its ascendancy, the genre's impact is even more impressive; not only did hip-hop transcend musical boundaries, geographical boundaries and stylistic boundaries, but it did so while upturning long-seated cultural issues. It could even be argued that beyond financial or critical success, the real achievement of hip-hop has been in creating a multi-faceted movement that has redrawn the boundaries of 21st century artistic and commercial accomplishment.

In many ways, the acceptance (and then dominance) of hip-hop can be tied to other large cultural shifts in the United States. We would be remiss, for example, to ignore the element of race in the rise of hip-hop. Much of America's coming to terms with its own heritage of institutionalized racism and inequality—specifically when it comes to self-expression—can be tracked as becoming more progressive along with hip-hop. Hip-hop as a cultural phenomenon, coming into ascendancy in the wake of the civil rights era, can be viewed as the first American artistic movement for which black Americans received due credit.

So what enabled hip-hop to surmount the obstacles facing it? And what can we learn from hip-hop's escape from niche communities to impact mainstream culture? An examination of the phenomena and its evolution helps us understand how small communities can eventually make big impacts.

Movement More Than Music: Hip-Hop's Five Elements, Writ Large

Hip-hop writer Keith Murphy points to the 2008 Glastonbury music festival as a milestone in hip-hop history that illustrates the genre's ability to morph alongside its audience, as well as its place on the global stage. After Oasis front man Noel Gallagher objected to having a hip-hop artist headline the Glastonbury music festival, Jay-Z led a crowd of tens of thousands in a sing-along to Oasis' hit song 'Wonderwall' from the festival's main stage.

'To me that was amazing moment,' says Murphy. 'It was like, "Hip-hop is super mainstream." It is beyond that one thing and going mainstream now. That's what I knew, okay, yeah, this is still evolving.'

Jay-Z, at the time of his Glastonbury performance, noted hip-hop's continued growth in pop culture. 'This headline show is just a natural progression. Rap music is still evolving. From Afrika Bambaataa DJ-ing in the Bronx and Run-DMC going platinum, to Jazzy Jeff And The Fresh Prince winning the first rap Grammy, I'm just next in the line,' he said. 'The world changes and we have to embrace the change. The artists of yesterday paved the way for the artists of tomorrow and that's just how music is. For us rappers to arrive at this point has taken years.'

Though music is often the focal point of hip-hop, the movement comprises much more than rap. The roots of hip-hop culture can be easily categorized into five major areas, colloquially known as

‘The radio stations around the country wouldn’t play rap at all because they thought it was a novelty. Some of the station managers felt that the music was too raw.’

the ‘five elements’ of hip-hop: emceeing, B-boying (or breakdancing), DJing, graffiti and knowledge/culture, a scene-specific consciousness element. Any analysis of hip-hop’s ascendance must look beyond music to include the cultural elements surrounding it.

It’s tough to overstate the importance these themes had in creating parallel pursuits and shaping the tent poles of a nascent movement. The five elements captured the various forms self-expression popular within hip-hop’s early acolytes and transformed them into a structure through which outsiders could approach the genre and culture. Perhaps more importantly, the five elements show that from the first days of hip-hop, its forebears understood that the movement was multi-faceted; a glance at early Bronx pioneers like Afrika Bambaataa and the Zulu Nation shows hip-hop’s pan-cultural influence and its inclusion of not only new musical techniques, but boundary-pushing fashion, unique subject matter, striking performance styles and expressive art.

These elements, though they have shifted and evolved over the course of decades, still permeate and force us to consider hip-hop as a cohesive cultural movement.

For example:

- Hip-hop artists Dr. Dre, 50 Cent and Puff Daddy achieved moguldom not through music alone, but through million- and billion-dollar business deals with brands like Apple, Coca-Cola and Diageo for brands built largely on the rappers’ celebrity outside of rap.

- Will Smith, Ice T, Ice Cube, LL Cool J and Queen Latifah are among dozens of rapper-actors who appear across film, television and theater, having become household names even in households that have never listened to hip-hop.

- Fashion labels like Sean John (Puff Daddy), Billionaire Boys Club (Pharrell Williams) and Rocawear (Jay-Z) have enabled artists to cross over into high-street fashion. Nicki Minaj even has a line distributed in K-Mart, following in the footsteps of supermodel Kathy Ireland. Meanwhile, Kanye West’s Donda line bills itself as ‘A Content, Experience & Product Company founded by Kanye West. Galvanizing creative thinkers…’.

- Artists springing from hip-hop culture, like Kehinde Wiley, have brought an entirely new audience to the visual arts, following on from the legacy of artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat who brought the raw power of street art to galleries.

- We believe there is a lot to learn from hip-hop’s continuous re-drawing of the notion of success; a system that began with the five elements, underground, has expanded to fit the imaginations of the artists and creative people involved, allowing hip-hop to become a mainstream force that shapes and shifts culture on a grand scale.

How Early Hip-Hop Paved The Path

As a rule revolutions start small, pushed ahead by singular talents with oversized ambition and a risk-taking sensibility. That story repeats time and time again through history, whether in government coups or economic movements like the Industrial Revolution. Hip-hop culture is no different. The survival and strengthening of hip-hop can be traced directly to its early proponents.

Interestingly, hip-hop’s early champions were largely found in communities, occupations and demographics outside of typical influence. It’s early practitioners and proponents were all overwhelmingly limited, resource-wise. Inner city folks, specifically from NYC’s South Bronx area, should have been easy to marginalize, if only because they lived so far off of the mainstream that they were largely invisible to the rest of society.

What’s more, hip-hop was very much a youth movement, pushed ahead by teenagers and people in their early 20s. And to make hip-hop’s rise even more improbable, these were majority black and brown kids whose voices were not deemed significant by most influential and powerful tastemakers. That hip-hop and its culture ever found a powerful voice, overcame social obstacles and broke into popular culture is still, decades later, pretty awe-inspiring.

“A lot of stations were playing just the instrumentals, which is crazy. I was like “Why? We might as well not even play it”

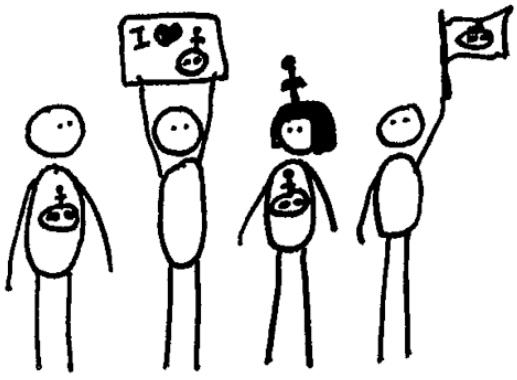
Fred Buggs, a long-time radio DJ who lists both New York City’s WBLS and Philadelphia’s Power 99 on his résumé, was among hip-hop’s early disciples, bringing the new sound of the nascent culture to eager listeners. But it wasn’t easy. During hip-hop’s first major mainstream push in the mid 1980s, radio across the county was dominated by synth laden pop music and hair metal. Though there was still a distinction between what was played on mainstream (i.e. white) stations and what played on black stations, even black stations dismissed hip-hop. There was a homogenized lilt to the black radio acts of that era, led by musicians like Michael Jackson, DeBarge and Shalamar, and hip-hop went against the grain.

‘The radio stations around the country wouldn’t play rap at all because they thought it was a novelty. Some of the station managers felt that the music was too raw. If you were into R&B ballads, you weren’t really trying to hear someone saying “people pissing on the street like they just don’t care”’, says Buggs, referencing Grandmaster Flash and Furious Five’s seminal song ‘The Message’. Despite songs like ‘The Message’ dominating street parties and black clubs in New York City, radio was slow to come around.

‘New York was still the base of it but a lot of radio station managers didn’t want their records to play because they lyrics were too much and not really what they thought reflected the upward mobility of black folks. It was not what they liked to represent to the advertisers. So, a lot of stations in a lot of markets were playing just the instrumentals, which is crazy. I was like “Why?” and I refused to do it, I said, “Well, we might as well not even play it”’, says Buggs.

Rather than breaking through in a sudden wave, hip-hop trickled its way onto the radio and into common consciousness, thanks to small groups of DJs and artists who did the heavy lifting in the culture’s formative years. One such DJ? Mr. Magic, a radio legend from New York City’s WHBI radio station, who began playing rap records as early as the late 1970s. ‘I remember being at St. John’s University and there was a college crowd there for a panel about music, and some of the students in the audience were telling Mr. Magic to “Stop playing those stupid-ass rap records and rap music is negative and blah, blah, blah”’, recalls Buggs. ‘I said to Mr. Magic, “Do you want me to speak up on your behalf” and he said, “No it’s okay let them talk, I’ll take care of it.” And he stood for it. He stood for the idea of what he believed in and those were the rappers and the rap records that he was playing.’

Mainstream acceptance crawled on in the 1980s, with acts like Whodini and the Fat Boys gaining small-scale popularity. In 1985, trio Run-DMC gained mainstream exposure with a 7-minute performance at legendary global benefit concert Live Aid. ‘They were like “DJing is my instrument, this is my guitar”’, recalls Datwon Thomas, editor-in-chief of VIBE Magazine. ‘To be able to see hip-hop on that stage as a youngster, you have no limits because they are from the block. So now I am starting to think, “This could be something really big”’.



‘I collected rejection letters from every major media outlet, magazine, you name it’

Break Through This Way

But it was Run-DMC’s much-ballyhooed crossover moment with Aerosmith a year later, in 1986, that has long been credited for helping leading hip-hop out of the shadows in its early incarnation. It’s a distinction that is well deserved. The track, which featured the hip-hop trio covering Aerosmith’s hit 1975 song ‘Walk This Way’ alongside Aerosmith’s own Steven Tyler and Joe Perry, is credited with both revitalizing Aerosmith’s career as well as bringing hip-hip to the masses. The cover, which charted higher than the original song, was the first hip-hop song to crack Billboard’s Top Five and gave hip-hop visibility in a new category—one that was no longer relegated strictly to an outsider role.

The song vaulted Run-DMC’s album Raising Hell to the number 1 spot on Billboard’s R&B Album chart, the first rap album to hit the peak position (Raising Hell wasn’t an R&B album, but Billboard hadn’t caught on to rap as a category unto itself yet). The album itself went on to sell over 3 million copies, instantly transforming the group into superstars.

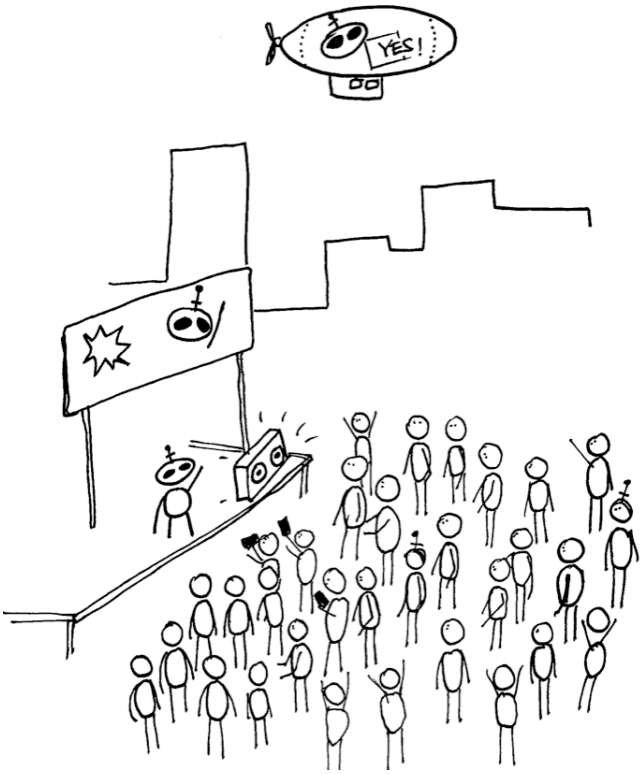
A less-talked-about moment occurred simultaneously—one that would define hip-hop’s branded future. Also on Raising Hell was track ‘My Adidas’, Run-DMC’s ode to their favorite sneaker brand. Likely because it was written before the group broke through to the mainstream, the track was accepted as authentic rather than coming off as a suspicious appeal for mainstream dollars, a breakthrough in it’s own right.

‘The fact that they latched on to a popular brand with Adidas, which was so synonymous with what would be fly on the street, I think that’s when you saw the marketability and how big hip-hop could be,’ says Vibe editor Thomas. Thomas recalls Michael Jordan wanting to join Adidas—although he eventually signed a world-changing deal with Nike—as a sign that Run-DMC had its finger on the pulse of the streets.

Hip-hop became much more easily identifiable through Run-DMC, but the group wasn’t the only force at work driving the genre and its culture into the mainstream. LL Cool J’s first album, Radio, went gold in 1985, and he followed it up with Bigger And Deffer, which went multi-platinum in 1987. DJ Jazzy Jeff & The Fresh Prince released the first vinyl double album, He’s the DJ, I’m the Rapper, in 1988 and went on to win the inaugural Grammy award for Best Rap Performance. White hip-hop group the Beastie Boys, whose debut album Licensed To Ill was the first rap album to hit the top of the Billboard album chart, further helped expose the genre during its first foray into the mainstream.

As hip-hop’s popularity swelled in the late 1980s, new artists began to redefine the aesthetics of the genre. Though they never reached the same overall commercial success as acts like LL Cool J and Run-DMC, acts like Rakim, KRS-One and Slick Rick set the cultural table for what was to come. Artistry within the genre grew, and hip-hop’s viability from an aesthetic appreciation level filled a vacuum, becoming a legitimate alternative to the overproduction of many popular ‘80s acts. As tastes changed, mainstream groups fell out of favor and rap music became a preferred option for many youth, in particular young men. The genre had an edgy, braggadocio-filled energy, and its brashness stood out in an era where major male music acts were increasingly manicured by the music industry. This surge reached an apex with outspoken hip-hop groups like Public Enemy and NWA, which further established hip-hop as a beacon for social awareness and ensured that hip-hop’s second mainstream moment would hit even harder than the first.

‘The first article I wrote in the Voice in 1981, I predicted this culture was going to take over the world. I am sure people thought I was deluded, but there it is, in black and white for all time.’



Media Takes Notice

By the end of the 1980s, major media outlets began to catch on, and articles about hip-hop and its culture appeared in national magazines and local newspapers alike. The very publication of these articles represented a seismic shift on the part of media organizations that hadn’t valued the genre or its associated culture for nearly a decade.

‘I collected rejection letters from every major media outlet, magazine, you name it and yes they all thought it was a fad, would soon disappear and not worth covering,’ says Steve Hager, a NYC writer credited with being amongst the first mainstream writers to document the culture. Indeed, Hager is known for coining the term hip-hop in a seminal 1982 piece titled ‘Afrika Bambaataa’s Hip-Hop’, published in New York’s Village Voice. That article alone provides a snapshot of hip-hop’s growth in New York City over the course of the late 1970s and early 1980s, with Hager predicting big things: ‘Who knows? In another five years, hip-hop could be considered the most significant artistic achievement of the decade,’ wrote Hager. ‘Hip-hop has the capacity to infiltrate and subvert the mass media culture…and spread the hip-hop sensibility across the globe.’

Today, Hager credits his editors for recognizing hip-hop’s explosive potential and pushing to publish stories that other outlets would not. ‘Tulani Davis was my editor at the Village Voice, David Hershkovits was my editor at the Soho Weekly News, and Leonard Abrams was the publisher at the East Village Eye who accepted some of my articles,’ Hager says. ‘The first article I wrote in the Voice in 1981, I predicted this culture was going to take over the world. I am sure people thought I was deluded, but there it is, in black and white for all time.’

While Hager was fair in his assessments, many of his colleagues at other publications were not so kind. The tone of many articles was predictably negative, though in hindsight that is somewhat understandable–it was a heavy task for writers and editors to evaluate a culture about which they had basically zero familiarity; they were simply unqualified. If hip-hop was to tell honest stories, it had to do so on itself. Thus the genre birthed it’s own media evaluators, mostly notably The Source magazine and TV show Yo! MTV Raps. Both became de facto star makers, legitimizing the acts they profiled.

The Source, first published as a newsletter in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1988 and became a full-fledged magazine after a move to New York City in 1990, quickly became a proving ground for quality hip-hop. Its new artist column, called ‘Unsigned Hype’, launched the careers of famed artists like the Notorious B.I.G, Common and Mobb Deep. Meanwhile, its record reviews became the zeitgeist setters in rap, rating new releases between zero and five microphones. Getting ‘five mics’ became industry parlance for releasing an instant classic; to date, only 45 albums have received the hallowed rating in the magazine’s nearly 30-year history. Outside of music, The Source also dealt with cultural issues relevant to many hip-hop fans – police brutality, the crack cocaine epidemic and more – and served as a real glimpse into the psyche of a generation.

New Jack Swing Builds A Bridge To Hip-Hop Radio

Hip-hop became unavoidable, and the music industry soon adopted an ‘if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em’ mentaility. Though most radio stations were still averse to playing rap music, R&B began to

‘Fashion is our lifestyle. It was our swag, it was our voice and so was hip-hop. So it went simultaneously, it ran neck and neck’

shred some of its baggage and take on the swagger associated with hip-hop in a style known as ‘New Jack Swing’. The vocals were similar in many ways as its predecessors, though the writing was identifiably more aggressive. But the production was where it really made a difference. The heavier bass lines and loud drums usually associated with hip-hop were now backed by singers.

In the hands of producers like Teddy Riley and Minneapolis-based Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis, the genre became the standard sound of R&B (and even some pop music) in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Acts such as Bobby Brown, Janet Jackson, BBD and Michael Jackson made hit records off of the sound. Where previously R&B artists stayed away from hip-hop, and mostly vice versa, the two genres began to find common ground.

‘You’ve got to remember, this is the era of [radio personality] Tom Joyner. Tom Joyner did not mess with hip-hop like that. And if he did, it had to be very commercial,’ says writer Keith Murphy. He noted a shift when public opinion created enough demand for hip-hop on the radio that even holdouts had to give in.

‘I remember, when it became so big that he was forced to play the battle records, between LL and Kool Moe Dee. And he was a Moe Dee man because Moe Dee sampled a lot of James Brown. And Moe Dee was kind of, your mother’s favorite rapper…your father’s favorite rapper. They understood what he was saying. Because his diction was flawless, he was straight ahead. And LL was on some blah, blah, blah,’ says Murphy. ‘Joyner ended up saying, “Moe Dee is the winner.” I always remember that because the most street boy, hood element of hip-hop was not accepted and struggled until later.’

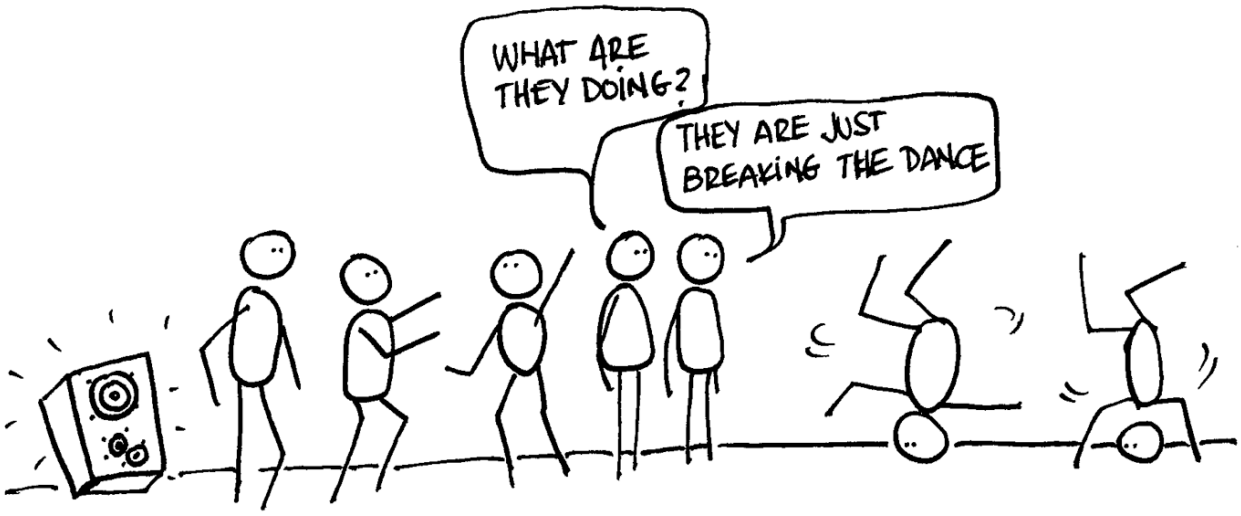
‘This was the youth music,’ says Murphy. ‘New Jack Swing came in—they kind of were the bridge for lot of radio people. That meant that, “Hey, I may not want to play Geto Boys, I may not want to play NWA because that’s shit is crazy, but I’ll play Heavy D,” which was important. Looking back, New Jack Swing was very important, That played a role in slowly but surely injecting hip-hop into the bougie black mainstream.’

Looking The Part

Hip-hop didn’t just change the sound blaring from radios nationwide, it also changed the very look of the country. As Sacha Jenkins, director of the documentary Fresh Dressed, told the LA Times, ‘In the world of hip-hop, fashion is a language.’ Jenkins and his film detail the evolution of fashion throughout hip-hop’s rise. Once again, Run-DMC come through as pioneers who helped break the genre into the mainstream. In comparison to the more aggressive, outlaw style of early acts—or the elaborate garb worn by artists like Afrika Bambaataa—Run-DMC’s everyman style was familiar enough to set the tone among hip-hop fans. ‘Run DMC’s “you guys” style felt comfortable and accessible,’ says Jenkins. ‘And once hip-hop became accessible, the fashion became accessible and spread like wildfire.”

‘Fashion is our lifestyle. It was our swag, it was our voice and so was hip-hop. So it went simultaneously, it ran neck and neck,’ says Guy Wood, Sr., who has designed clothes for hip-hop megastars from Notorious B.I.G. to Kanye West. Things have changed since the early days of hip-hop, he says, particularly when it comes to products and fashion. Whereas today’s artists often only support brands that are paying for placement and inclusion, early hip-hop acts like Biggie used brand names as status symbols.

‘Big would spit out names, like Versace and all that, for free.



You understand me? Jay Z, is not spitting out too many names unless the check is being cut or he owns it,' says Wood. 'It's a different mindset. But like I always say, the pioneer, the first guy in, that opens the doors, gets trampled, by everybody else who runs through the door.'

The materialism in rap often lamented by non-hip-hop fans, likely stems from this use of fashion as a signifier of success and status. As Kanye West reveals in Fresh Dressed, looking good trumped being wealthy in many communities. 'Being fresh is more important than having money. The entire time I grew up, I only wanted money so I could be fresh,' says West.

Wood puts it another way, when talking about the lyrics of one of Notorious B.I.G.'s hit songs, 'Mo Money, Mo Problems'. 'Where the true players at? Throw your Rollies in the sky' raps Biggie, referring to Rolex watches. Says Wood: 'When you're talking about Rollies in the sky, you can't have a Swatch. You've got to have a Rollie.'

Stettler and the Fat Boys Find a Role for Brands

Ironically, Swatch was one of a handful of brands that played an integral role in helping hip-hop grow beyond its original scale and become a worldwide phenomenon, thanks to a hustling Swiss businessman named Charlie Stettler. Stettler, who moved to the United States illegally at age 19, had scraped together a living in New York City as a massage parlor manager, an actor in adult films, a mover and a roller disco proprietor, among other things, before settling on a new moneymaking scheme in 1982: recording the sounds of the city. Taking a microphone to the streets of NYC, Stettler created a tape called Tin Pan Apple–just five minutes of poorly recorded street sounds. His real coup came in the promotion of the cassette, however, in which he donned a gorilla suit, walked against traffic up 5th Avenue, and photobombed a press conference at city hall. By Christmas of 1982, he had sold 250,000 copies of his tape.

Stettler's tape caught the attention of an Arab artist who wanted to record a rap version of Tin Pan Apple, setting off a series of events that would bring Stettler into the world of hip-hop. 'I didn't know what rap was because I was listening to Led Zeppelin and people like that at the point,' recalls Stettler. 'So somebody told me that on a Friday night I should go over to the Roxy for hip-hop night. So I went there and I walked up the stairs and I stood in the corner and on stage was, unbeknownst to me, Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash was in the other corner, Kurtis Blow in the back corner, there is a bunch of kids on their heads spinning, there were guys with graffiti. I absolutely, in two seconds, knew that this was going to be the biggest

thing in the world.'

Stettler launched a plan to create a hip-hop competition in New York, securing $70,000 worth of radio airtime from WBLS radio DJ Charlie Warfield on the condition that Stettler find a corporate sponsor for the competition. On Warfield's recommendation, Stettler connected with an executive named James Patton at a local Coca-Cola bottling plant in Purchase, NY. 'I told this guy, that I saw the second coming of Christ, it was called hip-hop,' says Stettler of his meeting with Patton. 'It turned out that his wife bought him a [Tin Pan Apple] cassette for Christmas. He got up and said, "Good, well, I will give you $300,000 commitment for radio advertising." And remember, this is 1983, January. I don't know what that's worth now, it's got to be like 2 million. Then he put his arm around me and he said, 'So where are you going to hold the finals?" I say, "Well, I was thinking Studio 54," because that was the hottest club at the time. He put his arm around me and said "Nothing less than Radio City Music Hall, sir." '

Stettler had secured the first corporate sponsorship for a hip-hop event in history. To lock in the sponsorship, he immediately sent out a press release thanking Coca-Cola and name-dropping Radio City Music Hall–a wise move, given that Patton was fired shortly after committing the brand to sponsor the event. And although Stettler received pushback from Radio City, he parlayed his connections in New York's somewhat seedy side to ensure that the event went off without a hitch. On May 23rd, 1983, the Coca-Cola-sponsored Tin Pan Apple Break Dance and Rap Contest took place in front of an audience of more than 5,000 people. According to Stettler, it was the first black event to be held in the venue.

The winners of the competition, who called themselves the Disco 3, were quickly renamed The Fat Boys by Stettler. Together Stettler and The Fat Boys would take hip-hop to new arenas around the world.

Following the Tin Pan Apple Break Dance and Rap Contest, hip-hop promoter Russell Simmons, who founded Def Jam Record in 1983, accused Stettler of coopting black culture for his own gain. 'I said, "I am not stealing the culture, I am just a good promoter." And that's when he said, "Well, if you are so good, I am going to take LL Cool J, Melle Mel, Grandmaster Flash, Whodini, Run-DMC and I am going to go on a tour, why don't you find out if you can do this again."', recalls Stettler.

'I said, "Well I can't go back to Coke, but I'll see what I can do"', Stettler told Dot Vision Films in 2013. 'I called my only Swiss friend and said, "Is there anything the Swiss are trying to sell?" He said, "There's a guy named Max Imgruth who's selling something called Swatch Watches out of the back of his pickup truck." I said [to Max], "If you give me your whole marketing budget (which was $360,000) we'll rename it the Swatch Watch Fresh Festival Tour and I'll throw out Swatch Watches every night, and I'll make sure that the Fat Boys wear about 20 of them on each arm. He left that night and he says, "I'm going to do it with you, but if it's not working I will kill you." I said, "OK, I'll take those odds." We went on tour.'

The Swatch Watch Fresh Fest sold out shows in 27 cities across the country, netting more than $3.5m and bringing hip-hop to cities that had never been exposed to the music or culture before.

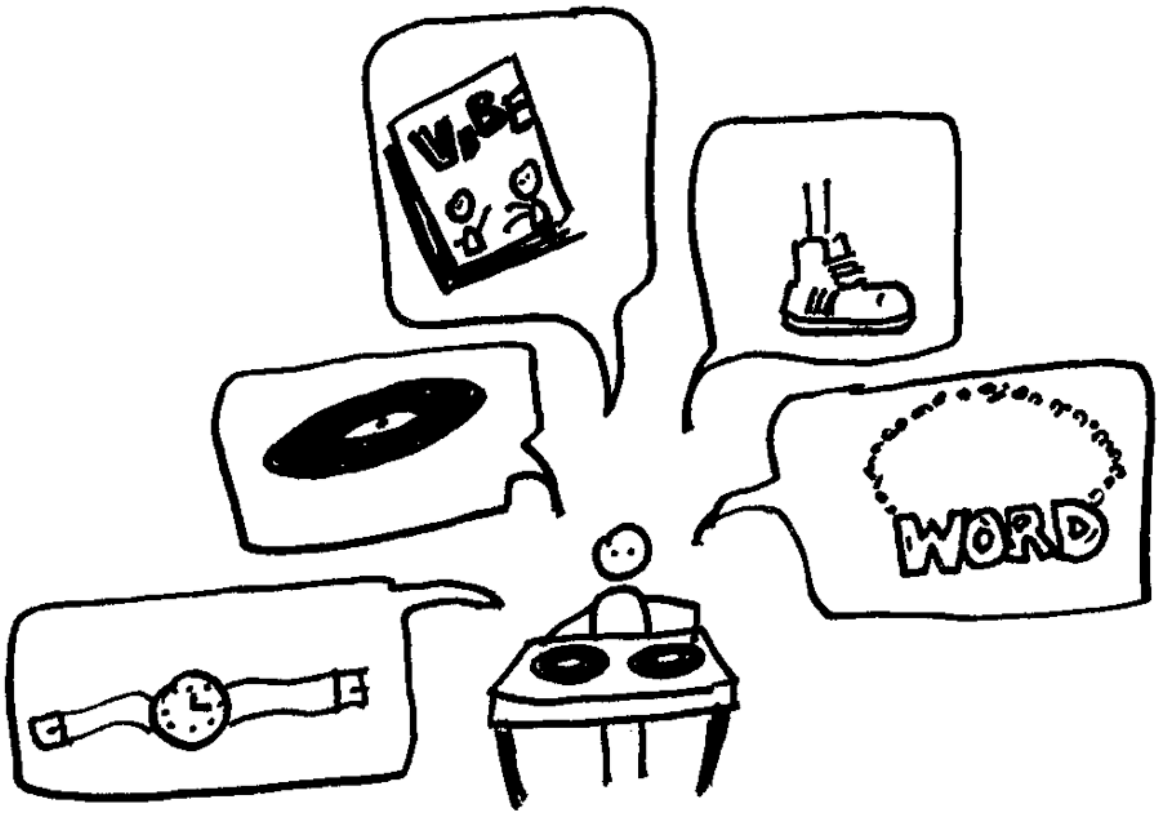
From Songs To Screen

Stettler didn't just take the Fat Boys on tour with Swatch; the Fresh Fest tour set the groundwork for the group's appearance in a Swatch advertisement, in which they disrupted a stuffy black-tie dinner party with hip-hop music and flipped their signature line, 'Brrrrr, stick 'em, hahaha stick 'em' to 'Brrrr, Swatch 'em, hahaha Swatch 'em.' The ad was hip-hop's first commercial appearance on television. The Fat Boys would go on to be the first hip-hop group with their own movie (1987 comedy Disorderlies) and the first hip-hop group to perform on the Super Bowl halftime show. Along with groundbreaking hip-hop documentaries like 1983's Wild Style, and increasing news coverage (TV's first segment on hip-hop, titled 'Rappin' To The Beat', aired on ABC's 20/20 in July of 1982), the group helped the culture make the jump from song and stage to screen.

Within a few short years, negative associations with hip-hop culture began to erode, as fans of hip-hop spread around the country and the world. The NBC show A Different World and the movie House Party were monumental breakthroughs for the culture, both laced with sensibilities familiar to kids who had grown up with hip-hop as their music of choice. A Different World, a spin off of The Cosby Show, was a series about a fictional college in which each storyline revolved around the lives of black students. Hip-hop music was played on the show often, and issues discussed within the genre (South African apartheid for example) were also discussed on the show. In season 3 (1989-1990), rapper Heavy D even made an appearance on an episode, playing himself and performing his hit song 'Somebody For Me'. The series was a ratings winner, finishing in the top five during its first four seasons (the series ran for six season overall).

MTV's hip-hop show Yo! MTV Raps, which ran from late 1988 through late 1995, was just as influential. Bringing imagery from all parts of hip-hop's culture into living rooms across the US, it became the most important way for artists to introduce themselves to the public. The show combined interviews with musicians and music videos, turning untold numbers of impressionable teenagers into hip-hop fans via the words of the show's hosts Doctor Dre, Ed Lover and Fab Five Freddy. During the still-early years of the culture, regionalism played a major part in the music, with artists from places such as NYC, Houston and Oakland each claiming a distinct style and sound. Yo! MTV Raps broke down these barriers, introducing new wrinkles in the culture to the masses, nationalizing hip-hop culture and turning 20-year-old lyricists into superstars on nearly every episode.

At the turn of the 1990s, hip-hop made its biggest leap to the silver screen with House Party, a film featuring a familiar premise played out by fresh faces. Hip-hop duo Kid N Play, who had



just released two consecutive gold albums (1988's 2 Hype and 1990's Funhouse) played teenagers acting up while their parents were away. Though the duo never gained wide critical accolades for their music (it was considered watered down, in comparison to other acts of the era), the movie turned them into stars.

Released in the spring of 1990, it was an immediate hit, earning nearly 27 million at the box office. Its success opened the door for other movies starring rappers and helped move hip-hop out of the margins and really onto a major platform. Soon hip-hop produced several actors and became the foundation of a succession of movies aimed at a younger generation with increasing buying power. That power manifest itself in the coming years, moving hip-hop from a niche into a legitimate international movement both socially and economically.

Movie Stars, Moguls and More

A quick glance at the worlds of music, film, television, technology, food and beverage—nearly any industry in the world today—will likely reveal a few key figures who began their careers in the hip-hop world. From a tiny nucleus of creative energy in New York City, the genre has exploded into a world-shaping force, thanks to hard-working advocates, corporate curators, media mouthpieces, enviable ambassadors and simultaneous advancements in technology and societal attitudes.

Unlike any music genre before it, hip-hop has given birth to a class of moguls, from Jay Z to Puff Daddy to Dr. Dre, who have climbed hip-hop's ladder from humble beginnings to wealthy and powerful positions in modern culture. Though the spread of hip-hop has been a slow-burning fire over the course of decades, its roots can be traced to a few key moments in history that helped the niche movement make it to the mainstream. And it shows no signs of stopping now.

III. Six Key Takeaways
What Brands Can Learn From These Movements

1. Technology, available knowledge, and economics conspire to lower barriers to entry.

Whether it's a drum machine or a community of like-minded entrepreneurs, the democratization of knowledge and technology enables ideas and tools to spread quickly within a culture or community. When those two factors are combined with economic pressures, which force people to find low-cost opportunities trends become easily repeatable and spread like wildfire.

2. Media (and social media) is an important driver in taking niche communities and spreading them to wider audiences.

More than any other catalyst, aside from maybe word-of-mouth spread, media attention helps bring niche, geographically distinct trends to the rest of the country and the world. Increasingly, social media enables the creators in a niche area to reach those wider populations on their own, without relying on media gatekeepers.

3. The first part of a trend to go mainstream is often an outlier to the culture (e.g. Kogi, the Fat Boys).

Often, the first ambassadors for a niche culture to take risks and grow beyond the current boundaries are people or groups that are outside of the culture's core. Whether Roy Choi's Kogi truck or The Fat Boys the core of the culture follows later. There is a saturation point at which stigmas fall away and the trend becomes less novelty and more accepted part of the status quo, at which point the outliers are absorbed into the culture at large. Both food trucks and hip-hop initially received pushback from the traditional industries they were disrupting—brick-and-mortar restaurants and the music industry. As the trends gained an increasingly strong foothold in those industries, however, stigmas began to fall away and resistance decreased, allowing the trends to grow and prosper. Former outliers like Choi and the Fat Boys became focal points for the newly popular culture.

4. 'Dot-connectors' are important in helping things catch on—identifying opportunities for growth outside the initial scope.

In moving from tipping points to mixing points, people who can 'connect the dots' become hugely important for niche trends to impact areas outside of their typical remit. Pop culture crossovers play a big role in this growth.

5. As trends get bigger and bigger, side industries pop up, helping the trend spread wider and faster.

From media channels like MTV and BET to side industries like food truck outfitters, tangential businesses will arise to support and outfit trends and their creators. Once niche culture proves profitable—or shows signs that it could be profitable in the future—people outside the initial core will be interested and work to grow the niche. Frequently, the spread of a trend will accelerate once its profitability has manifest itself, and new people have been recruited to help the area grow.

6. Early ideas continue to be relevant to later followers.

Although both food trucks and hip-hop have evolved far beyond their original roots, the first forces in each area still impact the trend on a regular basis. Pioneers like Roy Choi and Run-DMC still hold great relevance to today's trendsetters.

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About Lapiz
As an agency, Lapiz includes an outside perspective in everything we do from research, strategy, and ideation to consumer participation. We partner with outsiders. The people who are disrupting other industries and creating culture waves. They help us look at client problems with fresh eyes, redefine challenges and create unexpected solutions. And we apply it to different kinds of projects: We use outside perspectives to solve business challenges with a human-centric approach.

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