At the end of his last video, 99 Problems, Jay Z is symbolically gunned down, Bonnie and Clyde style. He stated that the video assassination represented his exit from the rap scene and the return of Sean Carter (Jay Z's real name).

Jay Z's video represented a clear change in direction, but it also comes at a time in which rap itself has turned a corner and seen a new style develop and dominate. Jay Z, by the way, has been one of the chief architects of this new direction.

In recent years, rappers have further broken down the barriers of what they can do - see any Missy Elliott video, or listen to Twista (who is the fastest rapper ever), if you want to see how far the limits are being pushed. There is much to applaud, but also something to lament. The idea of rap as social statement - a theme through much of its history - has been lost or abandoned by most in the past few years.

The social conscience of hip-hop developed slowly, through the early to mid 1980s. When DJs like Grandmaster Flash, DJ Herc, and Grand Wizard Theodore introduced rapping, beats, and scratching to this country in the late 1970s, they performed in parks and in basements. Rap was meant to dance to, whether breakdancing to a Kurtis Blow record, dancing disco-style to the original "Rapper's Delight", or even jump roping to beats - a popular activity at the time. In this infant stage, the point of rap was to have a good time.

Rap's social conscience was born out of the period of expansion and experimentation that was prevalent from 1980 to 1983. After the success of the early rap records (a couple even made it to the Billboard charts), rap branched out in all manner of directions. "The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash and the Wheels of Steel" made scratching popular. Rappers like Jimmy Spicer, K-Rob, and Rammallzee looked for new ways to combine lyrics with beats, and looked to see how long they could stay on the mic (In "The Adventures of Super Rhymes", Spicer went on for 15 minutes). Even Mel Brooks put out a song, titled "It's Good to be the King."

Two of the most important contributions, though, were those made by the aforementioned Grandmaster Flash, along with the Furious Five, and Afrika Bambaataa. Bambaataa was, aside from rapping, was a social activist. He had formed the Zulu Nation in the 1970s, and brought the Nation's emphasis on knowledge and social awareness to rap. Bambaataa was one of the first to incorporate politics into his music - he sampled Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and others into his music. Bambaataa also pioneered the use of other types of music into rap; he sampled the electronic group Kraftwerk in "Planet Rock", and called the sound "electrofunk". Bambaataa

brought social utility to rap.

What Bambaataa expressed through activism, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five expressed in their records. They did so most famously in "The Message", in which Melle Mel describes the litany of economic and social problems that plagued New York City in 1982. "Broken glass everywhere, people pissin" on the stairs, you know they just don"t care," he begins. The song's focus on the City's deteriorating conditions made it popular to use rap as a vehicle for expressing substantial messages.

"The Message" brought social awareness and critique to record. From that point on, different rappers made social statements in various ways and in new places. KRS-One, for example, highlighted poverty, police brutality, and other issues in a rap style he named "edutainment." Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five touched upon drug use in "White Lines." The video for the 1983 song was notable not only for the content, but for those involved - actor Lawrence Fishburne and novice director Spike Lee. Schooly D discussed the social issues prevalent in Philadelphia, his own city. Gangster rap is one of the most important developments arising from the trend initiated by "The Message", and maybe the most popular of them.

In 1983, a rapper named The Rake put out a song called "Street Justice." It tells the story of a man who is fed up with what he sees going on around him and lashes out violently at society. Think of the movie Falling Down. "Street Justice" resembled other socially conscious rap at the time in decrying society's ills, but diverged from rappers like Afrika Bambaataa in not offering solutions, or even hope. "Street Justice" helped lay out the blueprint for the soon-to-emerge gangsta style.

Whether gangsta rap has any socially redeeming value is a question that has certainly received more than its fair share of attention. "F*** tha Police", by N.W.A., was controversial enough to attract the attention of the FBI. Body Count's "Cop Killer" was the target of complaints from police groups, conservatives (including Charlton Heston), and even the Vice President. Regardless of whether one believes that either of the above, or any other gangsta rap song, actually advocates violence against police - and the rappers themselves have refuted that notion, gangsta rap, if examined in isolation, can seem excessive and fantastic. Examined as part of a trend, and in light of the social realities of the time, gangsta rap can be seen as social statement.

Social commentary need not be positive, or offer solutions to existing problems. George Orwell's 1984 hardly offers hope. In calling attention to social ills, N.W.A. and Ice-T are not far removed from Grandmaster Flash or Bambaataa. The social ills of the late 1980s and early 1990s, particularly in neighborhoods like South Central, Compton, and the South Bronx were hardly fiction. These places are the homes of rappers like Dr. Dre and Ice Cube. Their rhymes reflected their realities. The significance of something like "F*** tha Police" is not just that it is a harsh diatribe against the LAPD, but that police-civilian relations had deteriorated to the point where individuals felt urged to make such a statement. Mostly lost in the controversy accompan ying songs such as these was the underlying social discontent - discontent which became all too apparent in the aftermath of the Rodney King verdict, for example. Such was the tenor of the time in the early 1990s.

Ironically, it was in the 1990s, when social messages were being expressed in the bluntest and most plain ways possible, when rap's move away from the spirit of social conscience really began. There had been, for a number of years, emphasis on displaying success and wealth - bling or bank in MTV-speak. Eric B and Rakim's first album had twenty dollars bills in the background of their cover. Ice-T rapped about his success as a pimp in his first record. Other rappers incorporated these themes into their music by the early 1990s.

After the early 1990s, showing off wealth became the dominant theme. There were socio-economic reasons for it. Police issues and economics improved marginally over the course of the decade. Railing against social ills seemed to carry less urgency. More importantly, though, rappers and executives saw their income shoot up during and after the early 1990s. Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, and Death Row Records founder Suge Knight made millions of dollars off of Snoop Dogg's records alone. Puff Daddy's (or P.Diddy's) achievements are well documented. In the past ten years, rappers have been able to live large and are willing to show it. Jay Z's "Big Pimpin" video takes place aboard a cruise ship. Rappers show off gold teeth, fur coats, and Cristal in their videos. In one sense, these newer rappers are like the original ones; they focus on having a good time. The difference is that the new ones have the means to party lavishly. In rap today, this continues to be the dominant theme.

One might ask why this matters. After all, haven"t rappers earned bragging rights? They may have done so, but it is beside the point. Rap has become largely unmoored from its origins. Many successful rappers are no longer subject to the same pressures and influences as their fans. There is nothing inherently wrong with that - music changes and musicians grow and develop their music. Indeed, if music never changed, it would get old, predictable, and boring. However, a few rappers show that the genre need not abandon its roots. Nas is one such example. Hi videos and songs still attempt to reach out and discuss issues. Of course, it takes more than Nas and a select few others to push social messages to the forefront of the scene, with the major themes today.

It matters that rap's focus has been drawn away from social issues because the issues and problems that were relevant in the past are still important today. Through their music, artists have always been able to call attention to issues and affect involvement on them. This has been as true for rap as for any other genre. "The Message", "**** the Police", and Public Enemy's song "By the Time I get to Arizona" have all had important influences on society. What impact will the newest school rappers" songs have?

Rap is not stagnant. As noted in the beginning, rappers are continuing to innovate and develop the style further. Rap's social conscience has become dormant. It is not dead - the presence of Nas and others is proof of that. It is also not outdated - the realities that inspired its development still exist. Finally, it is not unimportant - the past has shown the potential power and influence of rap's social conscience on society. Rap is at its best when it is at its most relevant. It is impossible to predict how rap will continue to develop, but it will be best served by reclaiming the mantle of social significance that it possessed from its roots.

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