

Not Like Us

Presented to the Sphinx Club of Lynchburg

By Geoffrey Kershner

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(Slide 1)

“Not Like Us”

(Slide 2)

Preface: Many of you may have watched the Super Bowl 59 halftime show featuring Kendrick Lamar. You may or may not have understood some of the nuance of some of what he was messaging, some of what he was referencing, and the history behind his massive summer hit, “Not Like Us,” which he teased throughout the performance until finally performing the song as the performance’s climax. The song, “Not Like Us” is and was part of a “rap battle” between Kendrick Lamar and the hit-making hip-hop artist Drake.

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Thesis: At its core, the hip-hop battle is about authenticity. Whether representing where you are from or who you are, rap battles serve as a proving ground for realness. The competitive nature of MCing has always been more than just about lyrical skill—it is about staking a claim to legitimacy, confronting challengers who question an artist’s place in the culture, and defending one’s narrative. This tradition stretches back to the earliest days of hip-hop and continues to shape the music today.

Abstract: Tonight, I will examine the historical development of MCing and rap battles as a fundamental element of hip-hop culture. I will share some notable rivalries, investigate the artistic and cultural significance of competitive lyricism, and trace its evolution from early party MCing to modern digital-age diss tracks. Understanding why hip-hop MCs have a long tradition of battling, why so much of rap lyrics are boastful, and how this tradition can be both a means of popularizing the form and a source of real-life conflict is crucial to appreciating hip-hop’s trajectory. This lecture will explore the evolution of rap battles by analyzing the most prominent conflicts in hip-hop history, shedding light on their cultural and musical significance.

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I also want us to consider how hip hop arose from struggle. I think it is key in understanding how rapping can often be aggressive and confrontational. Lyricism is often depicting, as those in hip hop call it, “the struggle.” The form was created by artists facing many obstacles not just to their success as artists but their ability to literally survive in the face of poverty, racism, and cultural barriers.

Before we get started, I want to supply a warning about language you will hear in my lecture. Hip-Hop is a gritty and raw art form. If you are easily offended, please try to move past the language and perceptions you might have about its subjective crudity. As I stated, the form is about authenticity and this language is a part of the culture. To understand the lecture, please try to be open to the themes and intent and move past your individual aversion to certain language.

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What is a rap battle? Let's watch two scenes from the 2002 film, *8 Mile* starring the rapper Eminem. The film is largely biographical. (*Play scene from 8 Mile*)

Clip one: Shows how battle lyrics work.

Clip two: Shows the importance of authenticity. Eminem wins the battle by revealing who he truly is and not by trying to be something he isn't. He disarms his opponent by taking away anything he can use against him.

I. Introduction

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So, now that we have seen a rap battle, let's try to understand why two artists are articulating their art form through braggadocio and insults.

MCing (which derives from Master of Ceremonies) sometimes known as "rapping" is a foundational pillar of hip-hop, originally emerging as a means of hyping crowds at early hip-hop gatherings called "block parties" which originated in the Bronx during the 1970s. These gatherings were often hosted in community centers, schoolyards, or directly on the streets of neighborhoods. The most famous pioneer of these events was DJ Kool Herc, who threw parties at a legendary address in hip-hop culture, 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in the Bronx. These block parties featured breakbeats, which Kool Herc extended using two turntables, allowing MCs to engage with the crowd and lay the groundwork for MCing and competitive lyricism that would become what we know today as a "rap battle."

What is a breakbeat? Breakbeats are instrumental drum sections, or "breaks," taken from funk, soul, and disco records, which were isolated and looped by DJs to create the foundation for hip-hop music. The term "break" refers to the part of a song where most instruments drop out, leaving only the drums and percussion, allowing dancers—especially b-boys and b-girls—to showcase their breakdancing moves.

At these early hip-hop block parties, the Master of Ceremonies (an MC) played a crucial role in energizing the crowd and interacting with the DJ's beats and the breakdancers. The MC's job was to hype up the party, keep the audience engaged, and maintain the event's flow. This involved call-and-response chants, rhythmic spoken word, and, eventually, full-fledged rap performances. Often, an MC had to earn their right to remain on the stage and would boast and insult aspiring MCs who wanted to usurp the MCs place on the stage. The form was empowering but also precarious.

Over time, MCs evolved into competitive lyricists and recording artists, engaging at times in rap battles as a form of artistic expression and dominance in the form.

II. The Origins of MCing and Rap Battles

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Let's start with the 1970s and the early pioneers of the lyrical battle, Coke La Rock and Grandmaster Caz. They were among the earliest MCs to engage in lyrical battles, setting the foundation for competitive rap. Coke La Rock, often credited as hip-hop's first MC, performed at DJ Kool Herc's block parties in the Bronx. His rhymes were simple yet effective in hyping the crowd, and he laid the groundwork for braggadocious lyricism. One of his famous lines was:

"There's no story can't be told, there's no horse that can't be rode, and there's no bull that can't be stopped, and ain't a disco we can't rock!"

While Coke La Rock's style was more about rhythmic crowd engagement, Grandmaster Caz, a key figure of the late 1970s and early 1980s, refined battle rhyming into a sharper, more competitive form. As a member of the Cold Crush Brothers, Caz engaged in lyrical duels with rival crews, often mocking their abilities and asserting his dominance. In one of his most famous bars, he rapped:

"I'm the C-A-S-A-N-O-V-A / And the rest is F-L-Y / You see I go by the code of the doctor of the mix / And these reasons I'll tell you why."

His ability to weave humor, rhythm, and punchlines into his performances influenced generations of battle MCs. The early exchanges between MCs like Coke La Rock and Grandmaster Caz helped shape the tradition of lyrical one-upmanship, leading directly to the fierce rap battles that define hip-hop today.

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The first recorded rap battle took place in 1981 between Busy Bee Starski and Kool Moe Dee at the Harlem World Club, and it marked a major turning point in the art of MCing. Busy Bee, known for his charismatic, party-rocking style, had been entertaining the crowd with playful rhymes and call-and-response chants, embodying the early MCing tradition. However, Kool Moe Dee disrupted this approach by introducing a new level of direct lyrical competition, targeting Busy Bee's skills rather than just energizing the audience. In his groundbreaking verse, Kool Moe Dee declared,

"Hold on Busy Bee, I don't mean to be bold / But put that 'ba-ditty-ba' bullshit on hold."

This line challenged Busy Bee's simplistic style, signaling that rap battles would no longer be about who had the best party vibe, but about who had the best lyrical dexterity. Kool Moe Dee's aggressive, structured delivery set a new standard for battle rap, emphasizing wit, complexity, and direct confrontation—a style that would become the blueprint for competitive MCing in hip-hop moving forward.

(Play recording)

III. The 1980s: Establishing the Competitive Spirit

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The Bridge Wars was one of hip-hop's most legendary rivalries, ignited in 1986 when MC Shan and the Juice Crew released *"The Bridge"*, a track that many interpreted as a claim that hip-hop originated in Queensbridge, New York. MC Shan rapped:

"You love to hear the story, again and again / Of how it all got started way back when"

This set the stage for his narrative of Queensbridge's contributions to hip-hop. However, KRS-One and his group Boogie Down Productions (BDP) took issue with this claim, believing it disrespected the Bronx—the widely accepted birthplace of hip-hop. In response, KRS-One released *"South Bronx"*, a scathing diss track that reasserted the Bronx's status, rapping:

"South Bronx, South, South Bronx / If you wanna know the real deal about the three / We're gonna take it with Grandmaster Flash and Kool Herc, BDP!"

KRS-One directly targeted MC Shan, mocking his credibility and asserting that hip-hop was born in the streets of the Bronx, not Queens. If it wasn't from the Bronx, it wasn't authentic. This feud was pivotal because it solidified rap battles as a regional and historical dispute, not just a personal one. The Bridge Wars didn't just shape the careers of MC Shan and KRS-One; it established hip-hop's long-standing tradition of competitive lyricism as a means of staking claims to authenticity and territorial dominance. The Bridge Wars escalated further when KRS-One and Boogie Down Productions (BDP) delivered another devastating blow with *"The Bridge Is Over"* in 1987. After MC Shan attempted to downplay BDP's *"South Bronx"* with his response track *"Kill That Noise"*, KRS-One responded with even sharper lyrics and a hard-hitting piano-driven beat, sealing the fate of the rivalry. In *"The Bridge Is Over"*, KRS-One mocked MC Shan, Marley Marl, and the Juice Crew with razor-sharp bars:

"The bridge is over, the bridge is over, biddy-bye-bye! / MC Shan, you ain't down by law / You can't hang with my man Marley Marl."

The track not only discredited Queensbridge's claim to hip-hop's origins but also showcased KRS-One's dominance as a battle MC, delivering an upbeat yet ruthless dismantling of his opponent. The song's catchy hook made it one of the most memorable diss tracks in hip-hop history, and it effectively ended MC Shan's reign, proving that battle rap was about more than just lyrical skill—it was about strategy, delivery, and cultural influence. *"The Bridge Is Over"* remains a defining moment in rap battles, cementing KRS-One's status as "The Teacha" and reinforcing the Bronx as the birthplace of hip-hop in the public consciousness.

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The LL Cool J vs. Kool Moe Dee rivalry exemplified the generational clash between old-school and new-school MCing as rhyming styles evolved. Kool Moe Dee returns to the battle as a respected lyricist from the early days of hip-hop, while LL Cool J, a younger artist, brought a more aggressive, swaggering delivery that appealed to a new wave of fans. The feud began when Kool Moe Dee felt that LL Cool J had disrespected his lyrical predecessors by claiming dominance in the rap game without paying homage. In response, Kool Moe Dee released *“How Ya Like Me Now”* in 1987, directly challenging LL’s credibility with lines like:

“I was a fiend before I became a teen / I melted microphones instead of cones of ice cream.”

LL Cool J, known for his brash confidence, fired back with *“Jack the Ripper”*, delivering hard-hitting rhymes such as:

“I’m the pinnacle, that means I reign supreme / And I’m notorious, I’ll crush you like a jellybean.”

This lyrical battle set the tone for future generational disputes in hip-hop, showcasing the competitive nature of the art form and reinforcing the importance of respecting the culture’s roots while evolving its style.

IV. The 1990s: Rap Battles Become Deadly

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The 2Pac vs. The Notorious B.I.G. feud was the most infamous rivalry in hip-hop history, intertwining personal betrayal, professional competition, and regional tensions between the East and West Coasts (Specifically Los Angeles and New York City). Initially young friends, Tupac Shakur (2Pac) and Christopher Wallace (The Notorious B.I.G. or Biggie Smalls) saw their relationship deteriorate after 2Pac was shot during a robbery at Quad Studios in New York, in 1994, an attack he believed Biggie and his Bad Boy Records associates, run by Sean Combs (aka Puff Daddy and later P. Diddy), had prior knowledge of.

(Personal note, I saw 2Pac that morning as a teenager, visiting New York with my father).

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This belief that Biggie was involved in his 1994 shooting, fueled 2Pac’s rage and in 1995 he signed with Death Row Records, based in Los Angeles. The label founded by Dr. Dre and funded by Suge Knight (who was a known member of the street gang, The Bloods), encouraged the commercial benefits of pitting themselves, the new guard in the West Coast, against Bad Boy Entertainment, which made its home in the establishment East Coast. 2Pac went to work on Biggie right away with the release of *“Hit ‘Em Up”*, a venomous diss track in which 2Pac openly attacked Biggie. His aggressive delivery and personal insults, including claims of an

affair with Biggie's wife, Faith Evans, turned the battle into a deeply personal and violent affair that transcended music.

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Biggie, on the other hand, took a more calculated and indirect approach, with many believing his 1995 track "Who Shot Ya?" was a subliminal diss aimed at 2Pac, even though Biggie denied any connection to the Quad Studios shooting. In the song, he rapped,

"Who shot ya? Separate the weak from the obsolete / Hard to creep them Brooklyn streets."

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The feud spiraled as media sensationalism and record labels fanned the flames of the East Coast vs. West Coast rivalry to push record sales, escalating tensions beyond the music and to a violent conclusion. Tragically, 2Pac was gunned down in Las Vegas on September 13, 1996, and six months later, on March 9, 1997, Biggie suffered the same fate in Los Angeles. Their murders remain unsolved but very few believe their deaths and their timing were coincidence, particularly with the involvement of Suge Knight's street gang associates and Bad Boy Entertainment's employment of The Crips, the Bloods rival gang, in handling security while Biggie was in Los Angeles.

2Pac and Biggie's legacies live on, with their rivalry serving as a cautionary tale about the dangerous intersection of music, ego, and real-world violence in hip-hop.

V. The 2000s: Commercialization and Lyrical Warfare and the 2010s: Social Media and Lyrical Feuds

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The Jay-Z vs. Nas' feud was a nostalgic moment in hip-hop, aimed at claiming supremacy as the top New York MC, pitting Brooklyn against Queens. The rivalry began in the mid-1990s, as both MCs vied for dominance in the New York rap scene after the death of the Notorious B.I.G. (who was from Brooklyn) and who many viewed as the top MC in New York. Jay-Z fired the first major shot in 2001 with *"Takeover"*, a track that criticized Nas's career and questioned his relevance.

This theme may sound familiar, as Jay-Z painted Nas as inconsistent and outdated, claiming if he was the king of rap after Biggie's death, he had now lost his status to Jay-Z. However, Nas struck back with *"Ether"*, an explosive diss track that is widely regarded as one of the most scathing responses in hip-hop history. He viciously attacked Jay-Z's credibility and ego.

Nas's raw delivery and unfiltered insults turned the tide of the battle, with many considering *"Ether"* the defining victory. Their feud ultimately elevated both artists, was largely commercial and not violent and solidified both their places as rap legends, and the term *"ether"* is now synonymous with delivering a devastating lyrical takedown.

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Now let's get to the foundations of that Super Bowl Performance.

Who is Drake?

Drake: A Brief Biography

Aubrey Drake Graham, known professionally as Drake, is a Canadian rapper, singer, songwriter, and actor who has become one of the most commercially successful and influential hip-hop artists of all time. Born on October 24, 1986, in Toronto, Canada, Drake first gained fame as an actor on the teen drama *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, where he played the character Jimmy Brooks. However, his passion for music led him to transition into hip-hop, releasing his first widely recognized mixtape, *So Far Gone* (2009), which featured the breakout hit "Best I Ever Had."

Over the years, he has dominated the Billboard charts, setting numerous records, including the most top 10 hits in Billboard Hot 100 history, surpassing Michael Jackson. His albums, such as *Views* (2016), *Scorpion* (2018), and *Certified Lover Boy* (2021), have consistently achieved massive commercial success.

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Moving into the 2010s, the rise of social media transformed rap feuds, making them more public and meme-driven. The Drake vs. Meek Mill battle (2015–2016) was the first major rap war shaped by digital discourse, with Drake's track "*Back to Back*" gaining mainstream popularity and meme status, effectively humiliating Meek Mill. In 2018, Pusha T reignited tensions with Drake, delivering "*The Story of Adidon*", a track that didn't just focus on lyrical attacks but also exposed deeply personal aspects of Drake's life, proving that modern rap battles had become as much about reputation damage as they were about lyrical prowess.

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VI. The 2020s: The Kendrick Lamar vs. Drake Saga

So, Super Bowl 59 and the Kendrick Lamar hit "Not Like Us," which was aimed at Drake.

(Slide 18)

Who is Kendrick Lamar?

Kendrick Lamar: A Brief Biography

Kendrick Lamar Duckworth, known professionally as Kendrick Lamar, is an American rapper, songwriter, and record producer widely regarded as one of the most lyrically gifted and socially conscious hip-hop artists of his generation. Born on June 17, 1987, in Compton, California, Lamar was influenced by the West Coast rap scene, particularly legends like Tupac Shakur and Dr. Dre. His career began in the early 2000s under the stage name K. Dot, but he gained widespread recognition with the release of his independent album *Section.80* (2011).

Lamar's major breakthrough came with *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (2012), a concept album that depicted his experiences growing up in Compton and showcased his intricate storytelling, poetic lyricism, and unique flow. He followed this with *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015), an album blending jazz, funk, and hip-hop while addressing themes of race, identity, and systemic oppression. His critically acclaimed album *DAMN.* (2017) earned him a Pulitzer Prize for Music, making him the first rapper in history to receive the honor.

Throughout his career, Lamar has maintained a high standard of lyricism and artistic integrity, often incorporating political and philosophical themes into his work. You may have noted this in the imagery of his Super Bowl HalfTime performance that symbolized more than his battle with Drake, and was also about this moment in America. I would encourage you to watch the performance again, thinking about what Kendrick is cleverly saying about the current political moment. It should not be lost that the President of the United States was in the audience.

The Feud

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In 2011, as Drake was rising to mainstream superstardom, he recognized Kendrick Lamar's talent early on and gave him a major platform by inviting him to open for his *Club Paradise Tour* in 2012. At the time, Kendrick was gaining traction with his critically acclaimed independent projects, but this opportunity helped introduce him to a broader audience. Drake also publicly praised Kendrick's artistry, featuring him on *Take Care* and positioning him as a key figure in hip-hop's next generation. However, despite this early support, their relationship later evolved into one of hip-hop's most high-profile rivalries.

The feud between Kendrick Lamar and Drake began simmering in 2013 when Kendrick delivered a now-legendary verse on Big Sean's "Control", where he called out several rappers, including Drake, J. Cole, and Big Sean, declaring himself the best in the game. Though not directly dissing Drake, the verse challenged the industry status quo and was perceived as a shot at Drake's dominance in mainstream rap. Over the years, their relationship remained tense, with Lamar taking subtle jabs at Drake in tracks like "The Heart Part 4"

"I tell 'em all to hail King Kendrick / Resurrectin' my vengeance"

Drake responded with subliminal lines in songs like "4PM in Cala-bass-us"

"They want to be on TV right next to me / You cannot be right here next to me".

The tensions between them boiled over in 2024, culminating in one of the most intense rap battles in modern history.

In the summer of 2024, the feud escalated with a rapid exchange of diss tracks, each one more direct and aggressive than the last. Kendrick fired first with "Euphoria," a slow-burning, venomous track in which he dismantled Drake's credibility, rapping, "*A master manipulator, a habitual liar / A minivan soccer dad hiding behind a choir.*" Drake quickly responded with "Family Matters," where he attacked Kendrick's personal life, alleging issues within his family and career, rapping, "*Your own city barely claim you, where's the love from LA?*" Kendrick struck back immediately with "6:16 in LA," reinforcing his dominance and calling out Drake's alleged insecurities, spitting, "*You can buy the charts, but you can't buy respect.*" However, it was Kendrick's final strike, "Not Like Us", that cemented his victory in the battle. Over a West Coast-style beat, Lamar mocked Drake's authenticity and character, repeatedly taunting, "*They not like us, no, they not like us.*" The song became a cultural phenomenon, played at clubs, sports arenas, and even celebrations across hip-hop communities, further isolating Drake in public perception. The idea that Drake was not "from the culture" struck at the core of the rap battle tradition, asking the question of who was more authentic; A young man who came up from poverty in Compton or a TV star turned MC from Canada making music for the masses.

Following the devastating impact of "Not Like Us," Drake took legal action against Universal Music Group (UMG) in January 2025, alleging that the track contained defamatory content and false accusations that damaged his reputation. The lawsuit sparked industry-wide debates about the boundaries of diss tracks, free speech, and the legal implications of rap feuds. Some critics argued that Drake's lawsuit undermined the competitive nature of hip-hop, where lyrical battles have historically been settled on the mic rather than in court. Meanwhile, Kendrick Lamar emerged from the battle with his reputation even stronger, proving that in an era where branding and public image are everything, rap battles still hold immense power to shape an artist's legacy. The feud reinforced the idea that in hip-hop, lyrical prowess, authenticity, and public perception ultimately determine victory, further solidifying Lamar as one of the most respected MCs of his generation.

(Play a portion of "Not Like Us")

VII. Conclusion

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Rap battles have evolved from localized street competitions into a global cultural phenomenon, profoundly shaping the development of hip-hop. What once began as live lyrical duels in parks and block parties has transformed into high-stakes contests that influence careers, define eras, and spark widespread discussion across the industry. The lyrical skill, personal stakes, and cultural impact of rap battles continue to push the boundaries of the genre, elevating the art of MCing while fueling rivalries that captivate audiences worldwide.

At the heart of these battles lies authenticity—a defining principle of hip-hop that transcends borders. Once rooted in the lived experiences of urban communities, this raw, unfiltered self-expression now resonates across continents, as MCs from Tokyo to Johannesburg, London to Mexico City bring their own cultural identities into the cipher. Whether in underground freestyle sessions or globally streamed battle leagues, authenticity remains the ultimate currency, proving that hip-hop's essence is not just American-born but universally understood. As technology and media continue to evolve, rap battles remain a cornerstone of hip-hop's artistic and commercial landscape, proving their enduring relevance in shaping both the sound and narrative of the genre while solidifying hip-hop as a truly global force.

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Supplementary Materials

- Video clip from “8 Mile”
- Lyric breakdown of key diss tracks.
- Sound clip of “Not Like Us.”

“Not Like Us”

Hip-Hop and the Battle for Authenticity

The Super Bowl 59 Halftime Show



The MC or “rapper” is often staking a claim to their legitimacy and their place in hip hop culture.



WARNING:

P A R E N T A L

A D V I S O R Y

E X P L I C I T C O N T E N T

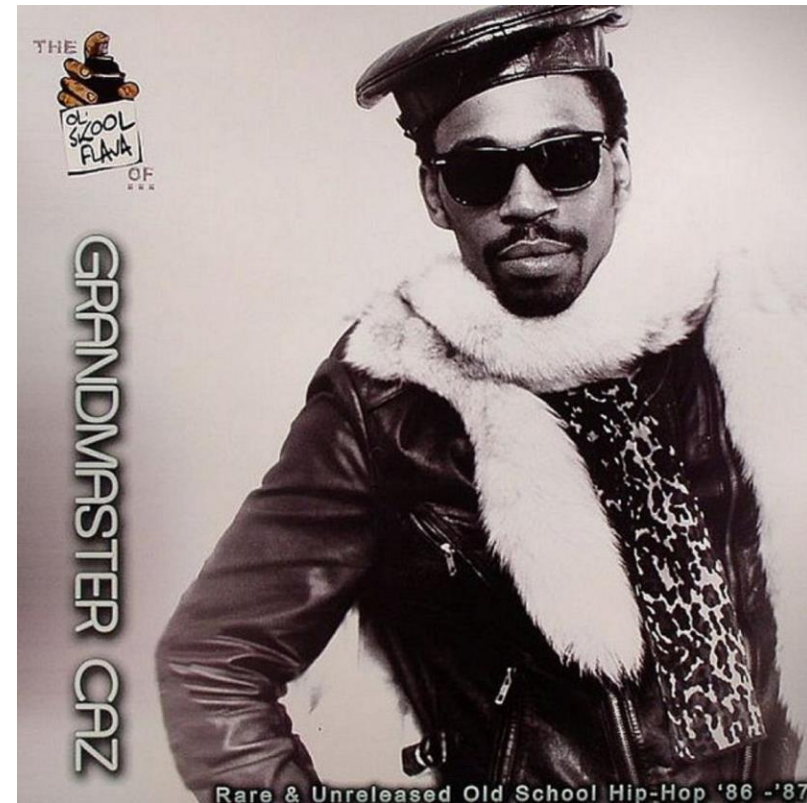
“The Battle”



The Bronx Block Parties of the 1970s



1970s: Coke La Rock VS Grandmaster Caz



1980s: Busy Bee Starski vs Kool Mo Dee



1980s: “The Bridge Wars” Queens vs The Bronx



MC Shan



KRS One

1980s: Cool vs Kool



LL Cool J

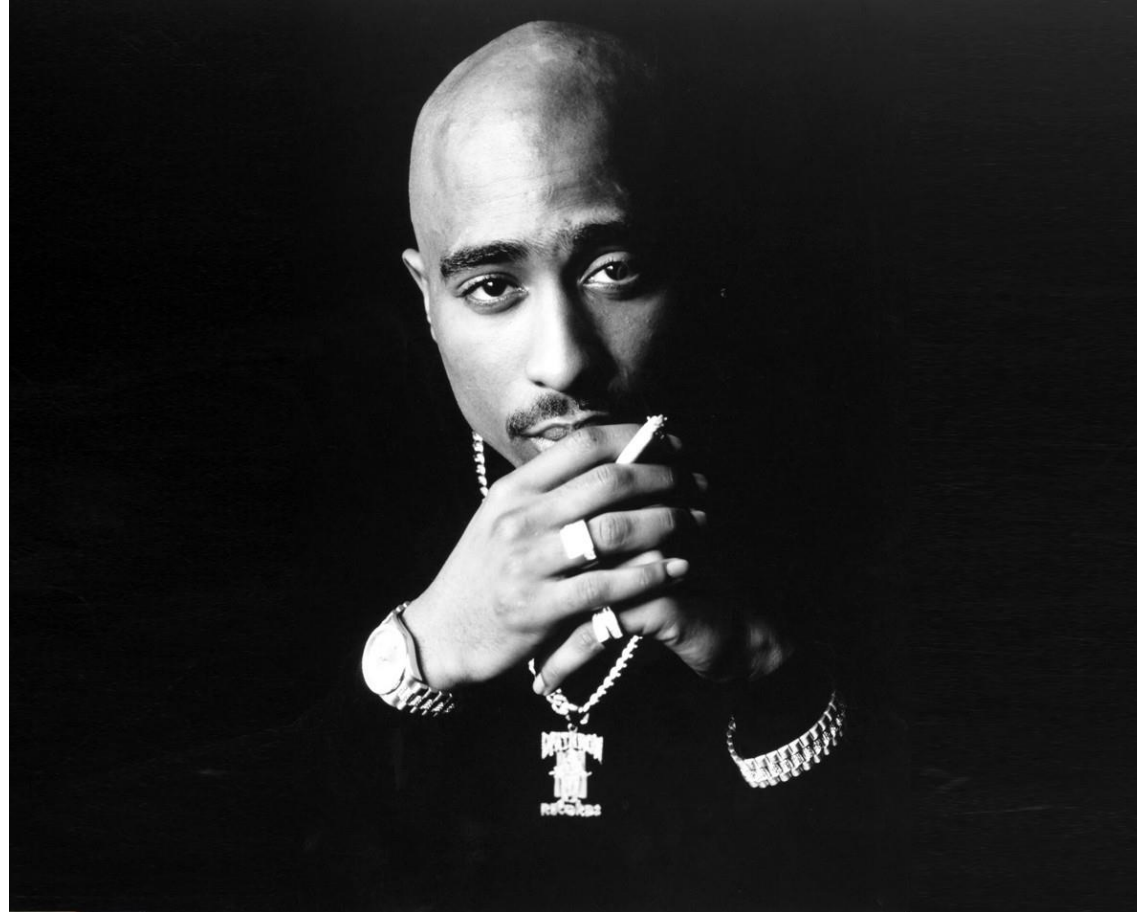


Kool Moe Dee

1990s: East Coast vs West Coast



2Pac: Death Row Records (West Coast)



The Notorious B.I.G: Bad Boy Records (East Coast)



1990s: Things Turn Deadly



Suge Knight
Death Row Records



P. Diddy
*Bad Boy
Entertainment*



Early 2000s: Jay Z vs NAS

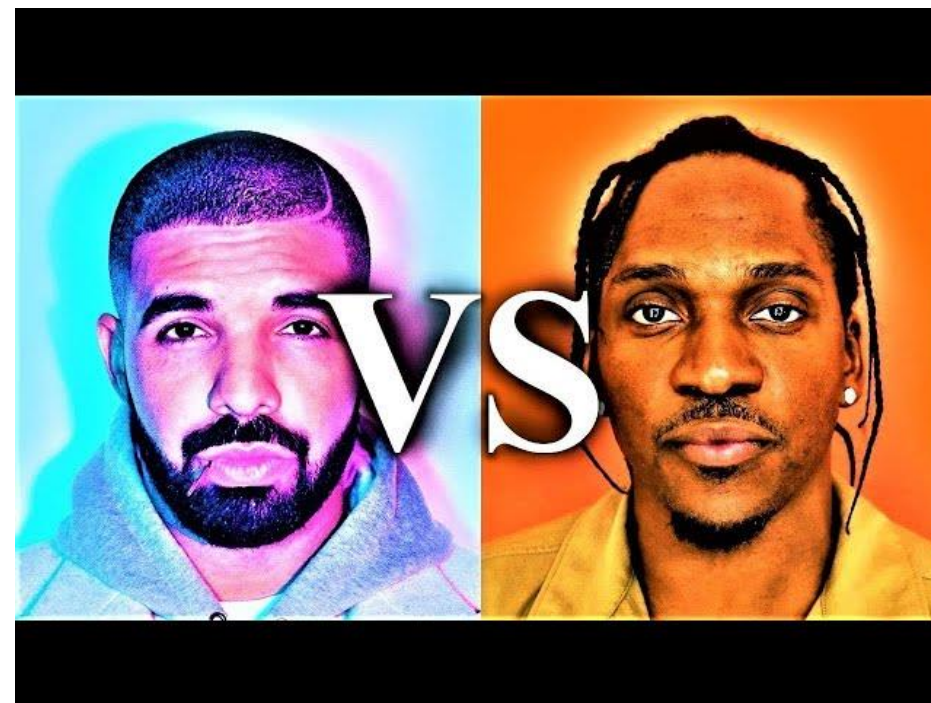
The Return of Brooklyn vs Queens



2010s: Who is Drake? “The Hit Maker”



2010s: Drake vs Meek Mill & Pusha T



Who is Kendrick Lamar? "The Poet"



2020s: Kendrick vs Drake



The Culture vs The Commercial

“They Not Like Us”



A Global Cultural Phenomenon

