

# Rappers concoct singular African, Jamaican sound from traditions

By Tom Mainelli

**F**rom Hammer's radio-friendly rhythms to Ice Cube's hard-core tracks, rap encompasses a broad spectrum of music and messages. From top 40 to "Gangsta" rap, each has its own style, yet it all shares common roots.

Uncovering those roots is a complicated task.

Experts say rap music originated in the sounds of reggae, funk, blues, jazz, rock 'n' roll and African storytelling traditions. Which source had the most influence depends on who you talk to.

Craig Werner, a professor of Afro-American studies at the University of Madison at Wisconsin, points to Jamaica as rap's place of origin.

Werner, who is writing a book about rap, said Jamaican dub musicians were rap's earliest predecessors. The dub musicians performed at Jamaican house parties.

The musicians, lively and outgoing, pumped the party atmosphere. They talked over the instrumental side of their albums, rewiring the crowd, extolling their abilities and plugging their next gig.

As these musicians developed their art, they looked for new avenues of expression. They began to "scratch" — skimming the stereo's needle back and forth over a vinyl LP. It gave them a new, unique sound.

Many of the musicians came to the United States, and found the technology to take the art form further. Dual turntables allowed them to enhance their performance. They could change albums while another played, and they could scratch two records at a time.

Eventually, dub musicians stole the scene, becoming more than mere DJs, but actual performers.

Rap was born. Dub musicians might be the ancestors of rappers, but rap's essence lies in blues and the "blues impulse," Werner said. The "blues impulse" lives in most Afro-American art forms: It is the will to face great problems and laugh instead of cry.

"African-Americans have had to come to terms with a brutal experience," he said. "The blues helps a person to deal with it, to say what they feel inside instead of bottling it up or striking out physically."

The blues essentially talks about what it is to be African-American, Werner said. Rap follows a similar path.

"Rappers are saying, 'Here's what it's like to be black in America,'" Werner said.

When rappers look at violence, they use the blues principle of speaking out instead of physically lashing out, he said.

"Rappers shoot caps in song instead of in reality," he said.

Werner said violence in rap should be expected, considering the situation many blacks are in.

"The black ghettos, places like South-

Central Los Angeles, experience a horrific level of violence," he said. "These people are simply trying to deal with it."

"At their best, blues and rap generate spokesmen who can best articulate the position of a people."

Another tradition, passed from African culture to blues and on to rap, is the musical battle. In ancient African culture, many tribes would settle disputes without bloodshed, through battles between "aesthetic warriors." These warriors tried to upstage one another musically.

The blues form of this combat is the long-standing cutting contest, Werner said. In the cutting contest, two blues guitarists face off on stage. They alternate, each playing a few licks of his or her best stuff. In the end, the audience decides who is the best.

Early rappers borrowed this competition in the form of verbal attacks or "disses" on one another's work. A classic battle occurred between L.L. Cool J and Cool Moe D. Each rapper tried to best the other, deriding his rival's ability to rap, among other things. One of Moe D's album covers had a photo of his jeep parked on L.L.'s trademark kango.

The better rap artists have moved away from this phase of rap, Werner said. Most dissing now takes place in Jamaican dance halls by young rap newcomers.

"It's a fall-back position for those who don't have anything to say," Werner said. While Werner said there were many strong connections between blues and rap, his viewpoint wasn't the only one out there.

Noting rap and blues' similarities is one thing, but to say rap was heavily influenced by blues is another story, said Lewis Black, editor of the Austin Chronicle, an alternative weekly publication.

"To compare rap and blues is too spacious," Black said. Blues is hard to categorize; each region of the country has its own style, its own sound, Black said.

Blues tradition is spread out and has a long, rich, fine history. But blues never has had the cultural movement that rap has, and comparisons can be misleading, Black said.

Black has watched rap's evolution, and sees a different origin. Black said rap came from toasting, an African-American tradition of oral

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storytelling. A toast often was told by an elder family member, who gathered his multi-generational family around him and began his story. The toast was a long, elaborate tale, told with much vigor and excitement. The narrator boasted of his greatness, telling tales of his life, exaggerated with stories of gangsters and shoot-outs. The toasts were performed without music.

Toasting thrived in the urban landscape, in places like Harlem and Los Angeles. It was family tradition, Black said.

Rap evolved when toasting was mixed with music, he said.

While Black and Werner might not agree on the extent of blues' influence on rap, both said jazz had played a role in rap's development.

"Rap embodies oral traditions mixed with the improvisation of jazz and the sensibility of rock 'n' roll," Black said.

Werner said rap borrowed jazz's ability to draw from other types of music and incorporate them into the mix. Rap does this primarily through the use of samples. And like jazz, rap looks to the future, "envisioning new realities and possibilities."

Werner said theories about rap were divided in the jazz community. "Many jazz artists are into rap and enjoy working with it, exploring. Others will always say it's nothing but shit," he said.

Preston Love, a jazz saxophone player, would agree with the latter theory. Love, a native of Omaha, has played with many jazz greats — Count Basie

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**House:** to attack someone violently

**Hype:** to overly build or exaggerate, or something really good

**Illin':** acting wild and crazy

**I'm straight:** satisfied

**Jacked:** being robbed or assaulted

**Jam:** a record, a party, or in trouble

**Jammy:** a firearm

**Jet:** to leave

**Jimbrowski:** male sex organ

**Jimmy:** male sex organ

**Jimmy hat:** condom

**Joint:** a place, jail or a marijuana cigarette

**Juice:** clout

Please see traditions on page 15



**Gat:** gun, especially pistol

**Gear:** clothes

**Get Busy:** to start doing something

**Get stupid:** to act silly

**Good to go:** everything is fine and ready

**Got your back:** looking out for someone's interest, physical or otherwise

**Hard:** mean and ruthless or a positive appraisal

**Hip-hop:** Style and state of mind as established by the originators of rap music and culture

**Hip-house:** rap lyrics laid down over house music

**Homeboy, homegirl:** a male or female from one's hometown or place of origin

**Homes or homey:** an acquaintance from one's hometown or a way of addressing someone whose name is unknown

**Honeys:** attractive young girls

**Hood:** neighborhood or gangster

**Hooptie:** a beat-up car that still runs

**Hottie:** a sexy young girl

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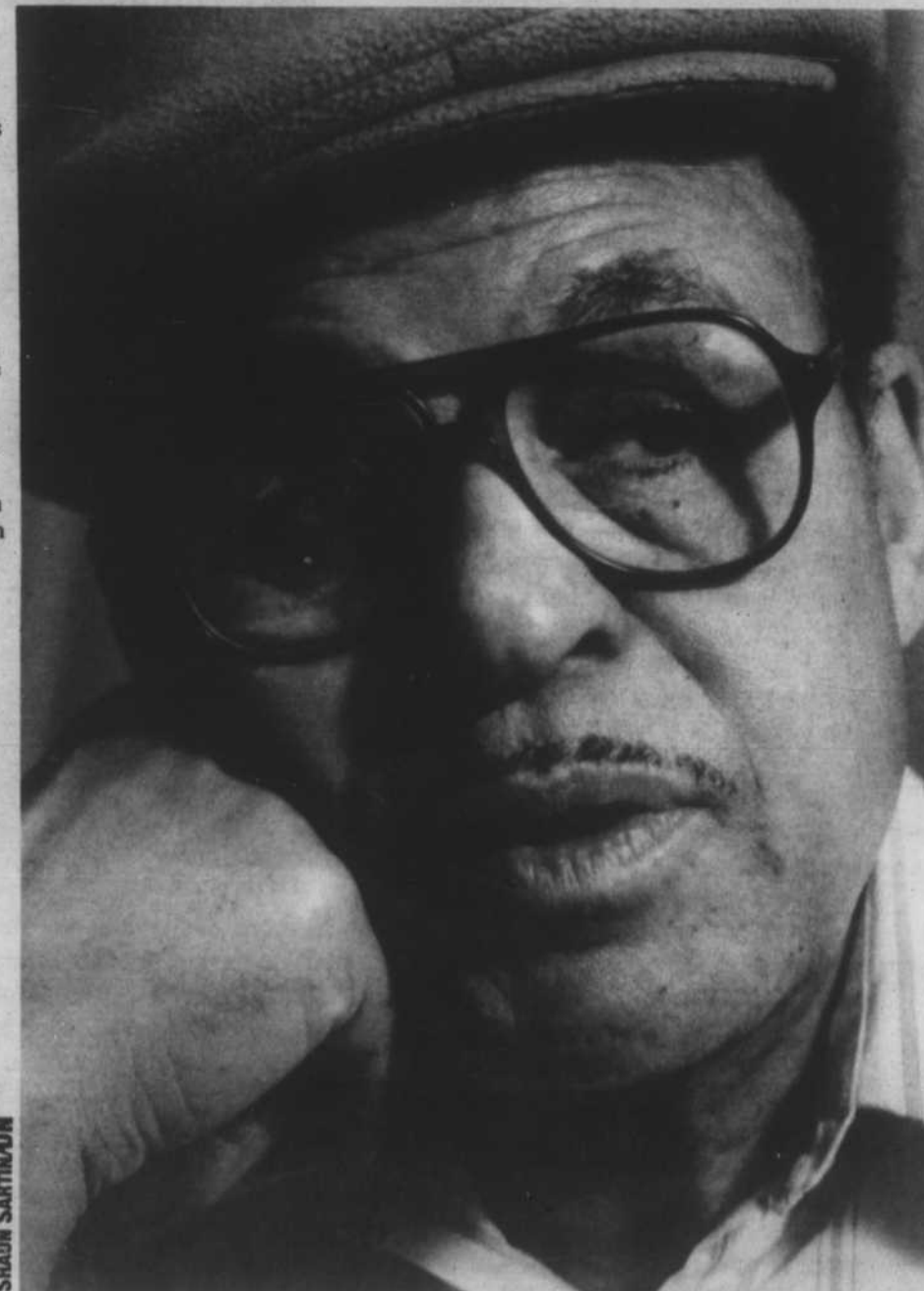
### CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:

Blues guitarist Stuebaker John rips out some tunes where? Some rap specialists think blues influenced the development of rap music.

Rock vocalist Mike Keeling of Rosebud sings at Duffy's Tavern in Lincoln.

John Primer of Magic Slim and the Teardrops plays blues at the Zoo Bar in Lincoln.

Preston Love, a jazz saxophone player, doesn't like rap music. Love said he saw no connection between rap and jazz aside from their common creators — blacks.



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