



St. James Encyclopedia of

Hip Hop Culture



St. James Encyclopedia of Hip Hop Culture**Thomas Riggs, Editor**

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to representing black masculinity in such films as *Killer of Sheep* (1978). As blaxploitation faded by the end of the 1970s, hip hop soon became the dominant forum for expressions of black identity in popular culture, with many hip hop artists borrowing and repurposing elements of blaxploitation imagery.

LEGACY

The 1980s generally saw a dearth of leading roles for black actors in Hollywood, with few films representing the black community in the ways that blaxploitation cinema did in the decade prior. Yet, just as hip hop replaced disco and funk as a leading force in music, dance, and fashion in the 1980s, so too did a handful of movies emerge that captured hip hop culture for film audiences. *Wild Style* (1983), *Breakin'* (1984), *Beat Street* (1984), *Rappin'* (1985), and *Krush Groove* (1985) all feature rap soundtracks (and often the performers themselves on screen) and represent such fundamental aspects of hip hop as breakdancing, freestyling, and graffiti. Some were produced independently, others by major studios. Most were made on relatively low budgets, as the majority of blaxploitation films were.

In many ways the hip hop films of the 1980s were a natural extension of blaxploitation cinema, providing images and narratives about an underrepresented culture for an underserved audience. Most hip hop films of the 1980s and 1990s were centered around themes of class and crime—such as *Tougher Than Leather* (1988) and *Juice* (1992)—just as blaxploitation did and as many of the black-oriented films of the 1930s and 1940s did before that. Simultaneously, the shift from hip hop's pioneering years to the new-school stylings of artists emerging in the mid- to late 1980s saw elements of blaxploitation reemerge. In "I'm Your Pusher" (1988), which features a sample of Mayfield's "Pusherman" from the *Super Fly* soundtrack, Ice-T (Tracy Lauren Marrow, 1958–) displays the pimp-like swagger embodied in films such as *The Mack* (1973) and *Dolemite* (1975). Ultimately, the images, music, themes, and personas of blaxploitation live on through hip hop.

SEE ALSO *Breakdancing; Film; Freestyle; Graffiti; Ice-T; Martial Arts; New School; Sampling; Wild Style*

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Blair Davis

BLING

Bling, a term that derives from the imaginary sound light makes when it reflects off a large diamond, refers to the expensiveness of the jewelry a person is wearing. Throughout the years the jewelry of choice within hip hop has ranged from solid gold to platinum to diamonds. Regardless of what metal or stone is currently the popular choice, however, the concept of bling is about how much of it the wearer can afford. The creative imagination associated with the word *bling* is a quintessential ethic of hip hop culture. Beyond status claiming and power yielding, bling and the long history of audacious jewelry in hip hop culture is about the ability of artists, who often come from minimal economic backgrounds, to imagine bright lives full of power, abundance, worth, and wealth—literally "living large."

THE EARLY 1980s: HIP HOP STRIKES GOLD

One of the first images of a rapper adorned with gold jewelry appeared on the cover of Kurtis Blow's (Kurtis Walker, 1959–) self-titled debut album, released in 1980. On the cover Blow is pictured shirtless, wearing six thin, gold chains. The photo, which showcased jewelry, not clothing, set an important precedent, as the record became the first hip hop album to sell enough copies to be certified gold by the Recording Industry Association of America.

By the mid-1980s hip hop was growing as a genre, and the fashion and jewelry associated with hip hop artists were growing in stature and importance. Artists such as Run-D.M.C., Eric B. and Rakim, Slick Rick (Richard Martin Lloyd Walters, 1965–), and Big Daddy Kane (Antonio Hardy, 1968–) popularized the thick "dookie" rope chain. The average, or "small," dookie chain was 16-millimeters thick and 36-inches long, but artists like

LL Cool J (James Todd Smith, 1968–) sported 27-millimeter chains. In fact, LL Cool J went so far as to adorn a black panther with a dookie chain on his 1989 *Walking with a Panther* album cover.

At the height of the hip hop gold rush, all of the members of Run-D.M.C. received solid gold classic sneakers from Adidas. Big Daddy Kane was also well known for rocking thick, gold chains. On the cover of his 1988 album *Long Live the Kane*, he is pictured adorned in gold and seated in a way that mirrors historic images of African kings or Greek gods. This imaging is important because the history of being adorned with gold jewelry traces back to ancient Egypt and in many ways connects hip hop culture to its African roots.

In ancient Egypt the color yellow was a symbol of being indestructible and eternal. Objects associated with the color yellow, such as the sun and gold, were heavily revered. Many believed that gold was the substance that formed the skin of the gods. Statues were often made from gold, kings and queens were fully adorned in gold, and nobility were buried in solid gold coffins. African king Mansa Mūsā (?–1332/37?), who ruled the Mali Empire in the fourteenth century, was the richest person in human history and known for his love of gold. His caravan consisted of five hundred heralds carrying gold staffs, and his entourage traveled with a large amount of gold bars.

Hip hop artists in the 1980s brought into the contemporary world this long tradition of using jewelry as a symbol of status and importance. However, what was different within hip hop culture was the spirit of competition. Because there are no official kings and queens of hip hop, rappers are often self-proclaimed royalty. The title king or queen may be taken at any time, meaning that everything is a competition, including lyrics, sales, clothes, and especially jewelry. Thus, during the 1980s, artists often competed to wear the most chains, the largest chains, or the most creative pieces of jewelry at their concerts or on their album covers.

CLASSIC JEWELRY PIECES

As competition in hip hop has grown, so has the creativity in the types of jewelry pieces worn. Several of these jewelry pieces have become essential to hip hop history.

Dookie Chains. Thick, gold braided rope chains, called dookie chains, emerged in the 1980s as the most important fashion accessory to signal success as a rap artist. Necklaces went from being a complementary accessory to the most important item an artist could wear. Dookie chains grew in popularity due to the influence of music videos and TV shows like *Yo! MTV Raps*. As the chains became an iconic hip hop symbol, everyday fans began to wear imitation chains simply

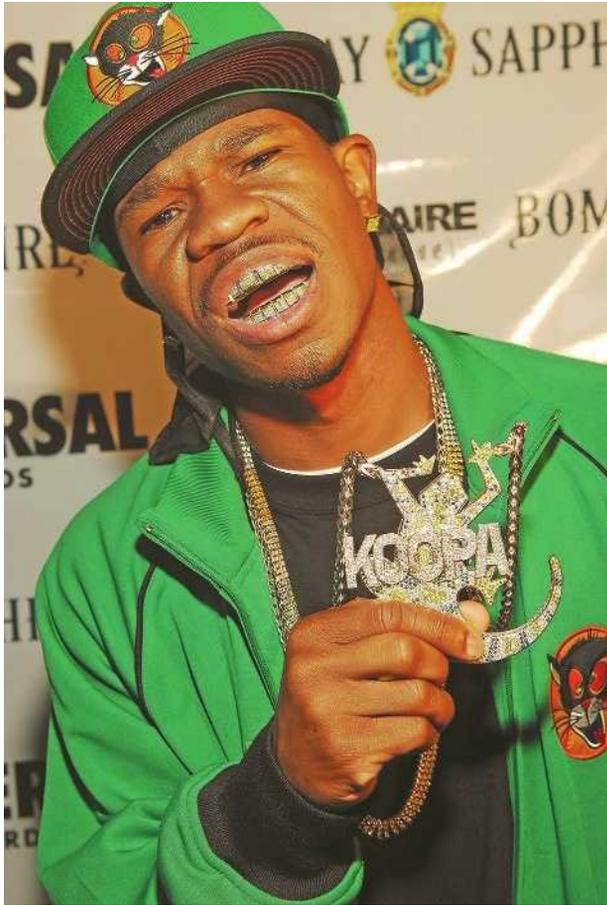
because their favorite artists sported them. Some of the most famous rappers associated with the dookie chain are Biz Markie (Marcel Theo Hall, 1964–), Run-D.M.C., Eric B. and Rakim, Kool G. Rap (Nathaniel Thomas Wilson, 1968–), LL Cool J, and Big Daddy Kane. Slick Rick was undoubtedly the dookie chain master and the original “King of Bling,” sometimes wearing up to thirty-two strands at once. Because being the best is an essential ethic in hip hop culture, artists often used these large chains to announce their status. Even in the twenty-first century, large chains continue to be the most enduring jewelry piece of hip hop culture.

Four-Finger Rings. The four-finger ring trend also became popular in the 1980s. These jewelry pieces, a ring that stretches across four fingers, often showcased the artist’s name. LL Cool J made this ring popular, often sporting a ring that read “CoolJ.” Visually similar to brass knuckles, these rings may appear intimidating, merging the toughness and street savvy associated with hip hop with the gaudiness of flashy jewelry.

Door Knocker Earrings. Women were also major players in the hip hop jewelry scene. Artists such as Roxanne Shanté (Lolita Shanté Gooden, 1969–) and Salt-N-Pepa made door knocker earrings famous. A large silver or gold hoop earring, usually in the shape of a square, triangle, or circle, the door knocker earring resembled the knocker found on the front door of a building or home. Like dookie chains, door knocker earrings were large, heavy, and noticeable. They were often called “bamboo earrings” and were acknowledged in LL Cool J’s classic song “Around the Way Girl” (1990): “I need a girl with extensions in her hair / Bamboo earrings, at least two pair.” Door knocker earrings signified a girl who could take care of herself and who was simultaneously tough, beautiful, unique, and street savvy.

Nameplate Necklaces and Belts. Another quintessential piece of women’s hip hop jewelry was the nameplate necklace, often a gold necklace with the wearer’s name as the pendant. Nameplates were a particularly significant piece of jewelry for African American, West Indian, and Latinx women because they allowed for celebration of ethnic diversity. Wearing one’s name signaled pride and offered a sense of belonging to girls who could not locate their culturally unique names on the key chains, T-shirts, or coffee mugs typically sold in gas stations or convenience stores. Thus, hip hop culture became a space where names mattered, glittered, and shined.

Similarly, men often wore belts with their name carved in gold. Like nameplate necklaces, nameplate belts were a marker of an era in hip hop when self-identification



Rapper and entrepreneur Chamillionaire displays his bling, including a dookie chain, a pendant reading “Koopa” (a nickname he adopted), and grillz. RAY TAMARRA/GETTY IMAGES

was important. The nameplate belt became a key jewelry piece because it was another avenue by which a rapper could make his or her name, talent, and stature known to the world. For MCs aspiring to be number 1, promoting their name was a critical part of their craft.

Pendants. Since Kurtis Blow’s 1980 album cover, many artists have worn pendants or symbols on their chains. Often these pendants are of cultural or religious significance, such as African ornaments or the Christian Jesus piece (a pendant with the face of Jesus). The Notorious B.I.G. (Christopher George Latore Wallace, 1972–1997) wore an enormous Jesus piece that was made famous as the last chain he wore before he died. Eventually, pendants evolved from self-identification pieces that showcased the names of artists or the cultural symbols important to them into marketing pieces for hip hop labels or music brands owned by artists. JAY-Z (Shawn Corey Carter, 1969–) and Damon Dash (1971–) wore necklaces that promoted the Roc-A-Fella brand they

created. Death Row Records CEO Marion “Suge” Knight (1965–) and rapper 2Pac (Tupac Amaru Shakur, 1971–1996) also wore chains with the Death Row logo brandished in diamonds. Cash Money Records cofounder Birdman (Bryan “Baby” Williams, 1969–) ordered a special pendant with the label’s name wrapped around a sparkling diamond dollar sign. This evolution marked an important movement from the hip hop artist as entertainer to the artist as entrepreneur. The pendants became a way for artists who owned their own labels to market and generate interest in their brand. In the contemporary hip hop scene, arguably one of the most outrageous necklace pendants was the \$100,000 gold replica of Fozzie Bear, the Muppet character, worn by Waka Flocka Flame (Juaquin James Malphurs, 1986–).

Flavor Flav’s Clock. Not all hip hop artists followed the gold jewelry trend: Flavor Flav (William Jonathan Drayton Jr., 1959–) from Public Enemy became famous for adorning his neck with an oversize clock. When asked why he chose to wear a clock, he stated, “The reason why I wear this clock is because it represents time being the most important element in our life. Time can’t afford to be wasted, but not only that, God only gave us one life. Each minute we live, we got to live each second to our best value” (Johnson 2013, 1).

Grillz. When adorning themselves with jewelry, artists did not stop with their necks, hands, wrists, or ears. Rappers as early as Slick Rick showcased gold teeth in their mouths. Midwest rapper Nelly (Cornell Iral Haynes Jr., 1974–) was credited with bringing the full front set of grillz, one of the most expensive jewelry pieces, to the mainstream in his 2005 song “Grillz.” Southern rapper Lil Wayne (Dwayne Michael Carter Jr., 1982–) boasted of paying \$150,000 for his set. In many ways the entrance of grillz into the hip hop scene in the twenty-first century was the ultimate symbol of the extreme wealth in the hip hop industry; with nowhere else on the torso left to adorn, artists were now able to afford to put diamonds in their mouth.

Nose Rings. During the 1990s 2Pac made the simple diamond nose ring popular. After his death his nose ring was auctioned with a starting bid of \$7,500. Nose rings once again gained popularity in the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century with artists such as Kendrick Lamar (1987–), Chance the Rapper (Chancellor Johnathan Bennett, 1993–), and Chris Brown (1989–) wearing them. Lil Scrappy (Darryl Kevin Richardson, 1984–), star of the television show *Love & Hip Hop: Atlanta* (2012–), was so proud of his nose piercing that he announced it on social media. The resurgence of nose rings illustrates that hip hop artists continue to seek out unique ways to express, celebrate, and adorn themselves.

THE 1990s: PLATINUM AND DIAMONDS

As the 1990s set in, hip hop became a global phenomenon and a lucrative industry. Within the realm of hip hop jewelry, platinum and diamonds replaced gold as the jewels of choice. The term *gaudy* became a marker of the 1990s superfabulous fashion. JAY-Z is one of the artists credited with leading the transition to platinum jewelry or at least making the transition famous. The decade saw the entrance of mega-jewelers who became known for outfitting major hip hop stars such as JAY-Z, the Notorious B.I.G., and Lil Wayne.

Before this collaboration between hip hop artists and the jewelry industry, the industry largely ignored these artists and the cultural communities they represented. But as these young and outrageous artists embraced the extravagant designs that other communities shunned, a mutually beneficial relationship between the hip hop community and jewelers was born. Artists elevated their profile with superfabulous custom jewelry pieces, and the jeweler's public profile was also boosted, cementing them as the go-to designer for up-and-coming artists and young people with money.

Many jewelers have served hip hop stars, but three have been made famous by being featured in hip hop songs. Jacob Arabo (1964–), also known as “Jacob the Jeweler,” immigrated to the United States from the Soviet Union as a teenager. He later dropped out of high school to enroll in a jewelry-making class. His big break in hip hop came when Biz Markie commissioned him to make a custom four-finger diamond ring that spelled “Biz.” The ring was an important step up from the typical gold rings worn by other rappers. Arabo's unique designs were made famous later in the 1990s when artists such as JAY-Z, Nas (Nasir Bin Olu Dara Jones, 1973–), and Kanye West (1977–) began mentioning him in their songs. Arabo's signature piece is a five-time-zone watch.

Tito Caicedo (1961–2016), also known as “Tito the Jeweler,” outfitted many hip hop artists. His most famous designs include the Jesus pieces worn by the Notorious B.I.G. Johnny Dang (1974–) is known as the “Jeweler to the Stars” and the “King of Grillz.” He is best known for creating extravagant, diamond-encrusted mouthpieces and was featured in the music video for Nelly and Paul Wall's (Paul Slayton, 1981–) song “Grillz” (2005).

“BLING BLING”

The term *bling bling* was made famous by the hip hop supergroup Cash Money Millionaires when they released the song “Bling Bling” in 1999. Since that time *bling bling* has become the ultimate catchphrase for the audaciousness and extravagance associated with the status claiming, place making, and braggadocio central to the history of hip hop music. In a 2005 interview with KRT for the

Chicago Tribune, author Minya Oh sums up the significance of the term: “Hip-hop artists were the ones who were leading the way to have this amazing, beautiful fantasylike view where there is no such thing as too much . . . There's no such thing as being overdressed—these are guys who wear fur coats to a picnic or diamonds to go play basketball.” Thus, the term *bling bling* signified more than extravagant jewels; it gave a name to a culture of enormous dreams, the celebration of possibilities, and the notion of the “come up,” or coming into money and stature.

SEE ALSO *Cash Money Records; Eric B. and Rakim; Fashion; Golden Age of Hip Hop; JAY-Z; Lil Wayne; Nas; The Notorious B.I.G.; Public Enemy; Rap as Marketing, Advertising, and Branding; The Roxanne Wars; Run-D.M.C.; Sneakers; 2Pac; West, Kanye; Yo! MTV Raps*

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