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A CONCISE HISTORY OF HIP HOP IN...

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this contribution, written by a researcher and rapper of extensive experience in Argentina, is to reflect on the origins and development of hip hop in Argentina since its emergence in the 1980s. The lack of archival material and the scarcity of documentary sources which might have served as valuable input for this contribution, prompted the authors to use a variety of sources. The authors used oral history and private archives as the primary methods of data collection. This article recovers testimonies from Argentina's first emcees, DJs and local party organizers, thanks to whom the authors were able to identify three sources of origin.

KEYWORDS

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In 1970s Argentina, the country's military dictatorship started to implement a process of social disciplining and reorganization. It enforced a systematic plan to eliminate dissenting voices by censoring, arresting and forcing journalists, intellectuals and culture workers into exile. This process had a remarkable impact on society's everyday lifestyle and practices, slowly transforming its ways of living, thinking and behaving – and complicating the emergence of a nascent hip hop culture in the country. As one notable example, meetings in public space as a means of expression, which had always played a key role in the country's history, were strictly forbidden. In this context, as Lucena explains,

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NOTABLE HIP HOP RADIO SHOWS

- *DAMN!*, Pluzito and team, YouTube
- *El pulso de las rimas*, Chavo Ruiz and team, Radio Fribuay FM 90.7
- *Nirvana Verbal*, F. Lozano and team, Radio Nacional FM 93.7
- *Rimas Rebeldes*, Manu Rivas and team, Radio Gráfica FM 89.3

Dance, as a mode of interaction in which the body has a privileged role, was circumscribed to discotheques where uncompromising mainstream music played just for fun, unlike the consolidation of a critical attitude among youths, which was, indeed, possible in the medium of live concerts.

(Lucena 2018: 8)

Before hip hop's emergence, musical youth culture of the 1970s and 1980s was divided between disco and Argentine rock music. After the success of *Saturday Night Fever* in 1977, disco was one of the most popular club sounds in Buenos Aires. The local rock scene condemned discotheques and disco music because they associated it with complacency, a lack of social commitment and of the formation of a collective and thinking subject (Giusti 2020: 2). In this regard, many discos in the nation's capital would select the most outstanding dancers of the evening which would go on to join a troupe in charge of the evening's getdown and close. The discos which drew the largest crowds could afford to hire troupes to choreograph and perform the latest hits, but the less fortunate had to make arrangements with ad hoc dance groups in exchange for entrance tickets and drinks, as well as permission to hold rehearsals in the premises during the week. Famous or not, these disco dance crews were the first ones to venture into breaking – the first element of hip hop culture to emerge in Argentina as rap records slowly entered the national market.

The Argentine recording industry had a great potential for rap music in the 1980s. The rap albums *Rapper's Delight* (The Sugarhill Gang 1980), *The Breaks* (Kurtis Blow 1981) and *Whodini*, by the eponymous US hip hop group (1983), were locally released during the dictatorship. They were marketed as hot new disco or funk releases and were played in the discos, since rap was not really known yet.

In April 1982, after the so-called Malvinas-Falkland War for possession and control of the South Atlantic archipelago broke out between Argentina and the United Kingdom, the military dictatorship's radio controllers gave orders to eradicate all music sung in English from the airwaves (Lucena 2013). In 1983–84, the democratic transition started to modify this scenario, not only because foreign music was allowed back in, but also because previously forbidden practices, such as public gatherings, were once again permitted. Access to and promotion of English-language records resumed as censorship was lifted. New bands and styles emerged and were added to the corpus of the already existing ones (Salerno 2008: 90).

One of the most influential US artists was Michael Jackson, whose record-breaking album *Thriller* was locally released in late 1982. It would not be long before the US recording industry publicity machine landed in Argentina, giving rise to the so-called 'Jackson mania', fostered by magazine, radio, television and other media appearances as well as hordes of fans of this new dance style known locally as 'breakdance'. As Shaviro explains,

Jackson's fame [...] was only possible because it came about at the peak of 'mass culture', an era which no longer exists. In the mass scale production of the Fordism age and the era of mass marketing, cultural products were also sold massively. This process reached a new height when television came to replace movies and the radio as the dominant mass medium.

(Shaviro 2014: 59)

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In this context, a new show started airing on network television in 1984: *El show de Michael Jackson*. Hosted by film critic Domingo Di Núbila, it would broadcast the singer's video clips, also holding a contest that attracted masses of youngsters who wanted to show their breaking moves. Thus, this breaking wave occurred before young people in Argentina started practising rap music.

Capitalizing on their dance skills, many youngsters who had been dancing funk or disco music or who were members of the discotheques' troupes, started to make an inroad in the nascent breaking scene. Further increasing the attraction of the new vogue, the film *Breakdance (Breakin')* (1984) opened in 21 movie theatres,¹ drawing almost half a million viewers in the first month; as a result, breaking was what most urban youths started to delve into in public spaces.

This was how the first breakers' crews started to originate (Biaggini 2021a: 109–10). Closely observing the above-mentioned film, practitioners started to imitate the attire and the dynamics of the fictional characters' modes of group organization, even adopting fantasy names, such as Moron City Breakers, Buenos Aires City Breakers and Dynamic Breakers. These groups started to participate in competitions in different discotheques, which granted them access to the premises, thus allowing them to join the new trend.

A few months after the release of *Breakdance*, the new trend started to wane because the public interest in the dance form decreased. Hence, discotheques no longer welcomed breaking performances. Instead, breakers who embraced the genre seriously started to gather in public spaces and began to mutually benefit from networking with other aficionados. It was through this exchange and collaboration that they learnt that breaking was part of a larger cultural lifestyle known as hip hop. Breakers also benefited from cultural exchange with Black American immigrants in Argentina. Some of them were famous basketball players who had brought with them cassette recordings, names of rappers, bands and record labels. These players also served as references for local breakers to expand their knowledge of hip hop culture.

Another key element for the local breaking pioneers to come into contact with hip hop culture was the theatrical (and later home VHS-) release of *Beat Street* (1984). *Beat Street* allowed local breaking crews to learn about the origin of hip hop and its main characteristics. Indeed, the film shows how a group of friends organize a party street, each character eventually managing to develop the main elements of hip hop culture (breaking, DJing, graffiti and emceeing). Watching the film became an audio-visual tutorial to learn about hip hop culture, also providing an incentive for 'old guard' practitioners to try their hand at DJing, rapping and graffiti.

Between 1984 and 1990, as democracy returned to the country, other hip hop elements started to appear: graffiti² on trains and walls, and DJs and MCs learning the ropes of their craft. By the end of the 1980s, the four core elements of hip hop culture were firmly established in Argentina. The 1980s ended with the release of several noteworthy rap records including *TV Rap* by Club Nocturno (1989) and indie tapes, such as *Los Adolfos Rap* (1991). Hip hop pioneer, old school breaker and emcee Mike Dee featured as a rapper on the commercially successful album *Los Fabulosos Cadillacs* (1989). Breaker and rapper Jazzy Mel (see Figure 1) and MC Ninja's albums came out in 1991, the duo Illya Kuryaki and the Valderramas made their debut, and *Los Adolfos Rap* won a rap contest organized by the teen music magazine *13/20*. Importantly, one of their songs were added to a compilation album released by *13/20*. This

1. 'En todo el país: Fuente', *People Magazine*, Year 18, No. 997, August 1984.
2. The use of walls for graffiti can be traced back to the first political slogan paintings. In the 1970s decade, this form of visual expression became part of a subgenre: political parties' expression on the walls, seeking to somehow reach out to the people in spite of censorship.

3. Duo made up by Alika and Malena D' Alessio, the latter a daughter of parents disappeared by the military dictatorship.



Figure 1: Argentine hip hop activists from the 1980s, from left to right: DJ Bart, MC Frost, Caly D, Lady Killer, DJ Hollywood, Gino T, Jazzy Mel, DJ Buda, photographed in the early 1990s. 'File: viejaescuela_en_1994.jpg by Frost'. Photograph. Courtesy of Frost.

old school generation of rap music in Argentina, which started in 1984, ended around 1992.

The 1990s saw the emergence of a Neo-Conservative government and the one-to-one parity of the Argentine peso with the US dollar. This parity resulted in an import surge of American, Spanish and international magazines and CDs. Because of this new inward flow of media, the decade saw the massive arrival of American artists and bands. This was how rap metal and crossover genres made their way to local markets, as albums like the Beastie Boys's *Licensed to Ill* (1986) was released for the first time in Argentina – even though their song 'No Sleep Till Brooklyn' had appeared on the US broadcasting company CBS's compilation record *Llena tu cabeza de Rock 88* (1987). Run-DMC with Aerosmith on *Walk This Way*, and, in 1991, Public Enemy's and Anthrax's crossover song 'Bring the Noise' inspired young people to find their own musical styles, messages and generic innovations, such as a movement later known as 'alternative'. Network television programmes like *La TV ataca* (1991–93), *Crema Americana* (1991–92) and some summer shows on the public TV network channel started to broadcast rap music video clips far from the mainstream scene, with more social and political content.

Since 1993, the DMC international DJ competition saw the participation of 'old guard' members Mike Dee, DJ Bart, Frost, DJ Hollywood, Fabry and Derek. In 1994, hip hop parties were held in peripheral areas of Buenos Aires City (see Figure 1), featuring the elements breaking, emceeing and DJing. The Grammy-winning band Sindicato Argentino del Hip Hop emerged from these events. A new generation of rappers, such as Encontra del Hombre, Actitud María Marta,³ 9MM, Bola 8, AMC and Tumbas emerged during this time, hot on the heels of the pioneers. They were propelled by the need for freedom of expression which started to become more and more evident around the world with peaceful revolutions in Europe and independence movements in the

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Global South. They expressed their frustration and anger over the increasing social inequalities and, through their lyrics, staged a head-on attack against all the social injustices of the time. Rap, which still did not have a scene of its own here, shared spaces with other genres like punk, hardcore, trash, etc, eventually amalgamating their critical message.

By 1996, there already was a substantial difference among the subgenres within the small local rap scene in Buenos Aires and smaller cities. *Sindicato Argentino del Hip Hop*, *Encontra del Hombre* and *Actitud María Marta* all had an anti-establishment, socially conscious profile, with strong bases and hardcore choruses. Meanwhile, *Geo Rama* and *Comunidad Marijuana* made an inroad into G-Funk, *tumbas* experimented with Trip Hop, *Super A* went full steam ahead with its gangsta rap signature imprint, and groups like *Bola 8* and *AMC* went for a storytelling type of rap. During the 1990s, many female rappers appeared as well, such as *Attitude Maria Marta*, *Patricias Argentinas*, *Lady Killer*, English-born *Maxine*, but most were rendered invisible by national industry and media gatekeepers. Only *Attitude Maria Marta* achieved a larger popularity and visibility.

At the end of the 1990s, producers, managers and professional musicians became interested in the rebirth of Argentine rap. This rebirth was marked by the revival of social protest and a South American flair. Like labels in Chile (see pp. 49–56 in this issue), record labels in Argentina finally discovered rap music in Argentine Spanish. Music manager *Alejandro Almada* assembled several artists from the cities of Buenos Aires and Rosario for the compilation CD *Nación Hip Hop* (1997), which resulted in a professional turn for the scene that had started to develop in those areas. At that time, the few existing rap artists and bands mostly performed live because drawing the attention of record companies and recording demos was extremely difficult for them. As *Di Cione* explains, '[r]ap became a specific category in the local recording industry after the release of the genre's first compilation album, *Nación Hip Hop*, produced by (*Soda Stereo* band member) *Zeta Bosio* and published on the *BMG* label in 1997' (2022: 35).

As a result of the increasing interest of record labels, female and male rappers began to make giant strides in the mid-1990s. Its members were able to play big venues, share the stage with established local bands and international artists. One of the most famous bands of this era is *Sindicato Argentino del Hip Hop*, which won the *Latin Grammy's Best Rap/Hip Hop Award* in 2001. This global musical victory happened in the midst of political turmoil: the neo-conservative government left the country in shambles, an unprecedented socio-economic crisis took place, and Argentina saw a political instability of such proportions that it had five presidents of the nation in only one week.

In 2003, the Argentine economy started to recover thanks to key changes that allowed a new trajectory of development in a favourable international context (*Wylde* 2012: 121). Thanks to these changes, employment grew and the consumer power of the popular and middle classes recovered. With the appearance of the internet, social media, and video platforms, such as *YouTube* (*van Dijck* 2016: 14), a new generation of rappers have emerged since 2004. *Rappers 2.0* (*Biaggini* 2022) used new and social media to distribute their own audio-visual recordings of battle rap sessions, which started to become popular on social media and moved rap music back into public spaces. Meanwhile, the state implemented the *Programa Conectar Igualdad*, a government programme in which each student received a laptop computer, to bridge the digital gap, making an impact on the democratization of internet access and

digital technologies by youths from popular sectors of society (Pini et al. 2012: 40). At the same time, the cost of technology decreased and accelerated the democratizing process of music production (Semán 2017: 242), making it easier for music-makers and artists to produce music and to take on the role of promoters and managers of their own work.

In the 2000s, two new developments started. On the one hand, new rap groups formed and stood out on the hip hop scene, the most prominent cases being *Illuminate* and *La Conexión Real*. They approached their art in a more professional way without losing the essence of underground rap. Although they had minimal resources, they recorded their albums and created a self-made infrastructure without depending too much on the record companies or officials. On the other hand, freestylers began to appear under the influence of the Argentine release of the US film *8 Mile* (Hanson 2002). The release replicated what happened in the 1980s with the film *Breakdance*, unleashing a freestyle battle movement in every city and in every neighbourhood. Indeed, in 2005, the Red Bull energy drink brand organized the first international battle in Puerto Rico, *La batalla de los gallos*, which was won by Argentine rapper Frescolate. In later years, Argentina added two crowns to its roster of winners of the same competition: Dtoke (2013) and Wos (2018).

Thanks to the popularity of battle rap, several independent, self-managed competitions started to appear during this period in several cities across the country, organized by rappers' cooperatives. The music market began to pay renewed attention to this phenomenon, managing to transform many of these freestyle rappers, some of them immensely popular on social media, into the new stars of the mainstream market. This was how new rappers and trap rappers, such as Wos, Truenos and Duki, emerged and achieved international success.

In almost 40 years of its existence, the Argentine hip hop movement has achieved a heterogeneous development to date that is increasingly transforming Argentine culture. While clandestine hip hop parties continue to be held in different public spaces in working-class neighbourhoods – in which graffiti artists, DJs, breakers and rappers meet and keep the essence of original hip hop parties alive – many artists have positioned themselves in the national and international market often surpassing the stardom of Argentine rock.

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