

Global Hip Hop Studies
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ABSTRACT

This article provides a brief overview of hip hop's development in Germany. First, it explains how rap music and hip hop culture arrived in a divided Cold War Germany in the 1980s. It then traces the music genre's evolution into one of Germany's most popular and commercially successful music genres since the country's reunification in 1990. The contribution affirms that rap music and hip hop culture in Germany continues to reflect, revise and respond to larger social justice issues in German society, such as struggles for racial, ethnic, gender and sexual equality. The author argues that hip hop culture in Germany is a rich, multi-faceted and diverse phenomenon which has been shaped by, responds to, and remains embedded in larger geopolitical and transnational dynamics in Europe and beyond.

KEYWORDS

German Democratic Republic (GDR/
Eastern Germany)
Federal Republic of
Germany (FRG/
Western Germany)
Cold War
rap in Germany
cultural history

Hip hop in Germany is a rich, multi-faceted and diverse phenomenon which has been shaped by, responds to, and remains embedded in larger geopolitical and transnational dynamics. It is an urban as well as a small-town and rural phenomenon with many different aesthetic styles and forms of expression; its artists come from a range of ethnic, gender and class backgrounds as well as a wide political spectrum. Hip hop culture took root in Germany in the early 1980s (Mager 2007: 254). Although the elements of breaking and graffiti emerged along with emceeing and deejaying in the 1980s, the latter are clearly the major, most visible and most commercially successful components and expressions of hip hop culture in Germany today.

The Cold War influenced how hip hop reached the divided Germany of the 1980s. In the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG or 'West Germany'), young people learned about the existence of hip hop by way of film and television

NOTABLE GRAFF WRITERS AND CREWS

- 1UP CREW
- CHINTZ
- LOOMIT
- MAD C
- MOSES
- OZ (R.I.P.)

NOTABLE HIP HOP FILMS AND TV SHOWS

- *4 Blocks* – award-winning crime series set in Berlin’s Neukölln hood (2017–19)
- *Blockbustaz* – sitcom about Cologne-based rapper Sol played by rap legend Eko Fresh (2014)
- *Dessau Dancers* – break-dance comedy set in East Germany (2014)
- *Here We Come* – documentary about hip hop in the GDR by Nico Rashick (2006)
- *Hype* – a fictional series about young rapper Musa (2022)
- *Lost in Music* – one of the first hip hop documentaries on public television (1993)
- *Status Yo!* – documentary about the Berlin hip hop scene (2004)
- *Unlike U* – graffiti flick about Berlin (2011)
- *We Wear the Crown: 40 Jahre Rap aus Deutschland* – seven-part documentary on rap and hip hop history in Germany (2021)
- *Wholetrain* – cult flick about graffiti culture in Germany (2006)

and through personal interaction. In 1980, the humorous group G.L.S. United – which consisted of three popular rock and pop radio DJs and TV hosts Thomas Gottschalk, Frank Laufenberg and Manfred Sexauer – released the first German-language rap song ‘Rappers Deutsch’ (‘Rapper’s German’). The song is an ironic parody of the Sugarhill Gang track ‘Rapper’s Delight’, and the radio DJs performed it on German television introducing rapping and rap music to a wide German audience (Strick 2008: 270). In 1983, the West German public TV network ZDF aired the cult film *Wild Style* thus providing kids with a ‘detailed audio-visual hip-hop manual’ (Nitzsche 2012: 185). Later, the films *Beat Street* and *Style Wars* also contributed to the distribution of hip hop culture in the FRG (Mager 2007: 254).

Secondly, Black soldiers serving at US Army bases in Frankfurt, Mannheim and Wiesbaden brought their music with them (Bennett 2004: 181; Friedrich and Klein 2003: 97–98). Record stores in larger cities and urban centres soon featured records of the latest US MCs and DJs. Breaking and graffiti were popular elements in the early days of hip hop in Germany. Dortmund (and the wider Ruhr Area) and Berlin, for instance, were early German graffiti centres where writers managed to ‘bomb the system’. Frequent breaking battles garnered large crowds, but those elements remained rather underground while rap music – at that time performed only in English – slowly took the lead in various scenes in Berlin, Cologne, Frankfurt, Hamburg and other urban centres (Mager 2007: 256–59; Süß and Kress 2021: 146).

Although the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was a rather politically isolated Socialist country behind the so-called Iron Curtain, hip hop also reached East German youth via the more commercially accessible *Wild Style* ‘remake’ *Beat Street* (Schmieding 2013: 106–09). Originally aired by the Socialist regime for propaganda purposes as a critique of American capitalism and to show the oppression of African Americans to a younger audience, youngsters disregarded the propaganda (Schmieding 2013: 109). Instead, East German youth became fascinated by this latest Black American culture and started to rap, dance and write. Since hip hop related fashion brands such as Adidas and Kangol were not available in the GDR, the kids asked their mothers to re-create the fashion they saw in the film with their own DIY means (Schmieding 2013: 109–13).

The 1990s, which unofficially began with the Fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, the end of the Cold War and subsequent German unification ushered in the perhaps first golden age of hip hop in Germany. When underground artists switched to the German language in the early 1990s, hip hop culture grew stronger, reached a wider commercial audience and became much more popular (Süß and Kress 2021: 146). The most notable example of this tendency was the commercially extremely successful track ‘Die da?!’ (‘That One!?’) (1992) by the Stuttgart-based white German crew, Die Fantastischen Vier (The Fantastich Four). While the ironic lyrics are about two guys who fall for the same lady, the music video engages in a visual unification as it is set in the East German city of Leipzig. Die Fantastischen Vier were role models and identification figures for many other German-speaking artists who either engaged in this tradition of ironic subversion or rejected it for being too mainstream, too popular and perhaps also as too (white middle-class) German.

The commercial success of Die Fantastischen Vier also opened doors for political and conscious rap music in the newly unified Germany. As the country roiled from the burning of immigrant homes (in Solingen 1993) and asylum shelters (in Rostock-Lichtenhagen 1992; Hoyerswerda 1991) by right-wing

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extremists, (western) German hip hop artists, such as Torch, Cora E and the Stieber Twins, responded by increasingly addressing widespread discrimination, racism and xenophobia and by powerfully combating inequalities in their rhymes, beats and actions. The rap crew Advanced Chemistry released the seminal rap track entitled 'Fremd im eigenen Land' ('A Stranger in My Own Country') in 1992. The song's lyrics deal with the permanent othering of immigrant youth in larger German culture and their inability to be respected members of society. Perhaps not surprisingly, rap music spoke especially to a younger generation of Turkish Germans, such as Eko Fresh, Kool Savas, Aziza A. and the Cartel crew who strongly identified with the marginalized position of African Americans (Elflein 1998; Kaya 2015).

Germany's golden age of hip hop had its commercial and popular peak in 1999 (Mayer 2009). Predominantly male artists and crews such as Fettes Brot, Samy Deluxe, 5 Sterne Deluxe, Eins Zwo and Absolute Beginner from Hamburg, Afrob, Freundeskreis and Massive Töne from Stuttgart, Blumentopf from Munich, Rödelheim Hartreim Projekt from Frankfurt as well as RAG and Creutzfeld & Jakob from the Ruhr Area showcased great beats, highly ironic tracks and music videos, and thought-provoking, skilfully mastered lyrics. All of the artists were inspired by and responded to the success of their various American rap precursors while at the same time some of them created albums that were commonly more humorous and ironic than American rap traditions. Furthermore, especially white-middle class artists in Germany were much more embedded in a liberal leftist political attitude typical of German popular music traditions than their American counterparts. The 1990s also saw the emergence of international festivals. Splash!, Europe's self-proclaimed biggest hip hop and reggae festival, started in the eastern German city of Chemnitz and is now located near Leipzig. The organization of such festivals provided the local youth with a sense of community, self-reliance and stability after the chaotic political change of 1989.

As the 2000s were marked by the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and Germany's increasing geopolitical involvement in the subsequent war in Afghanistan and Iraq, hip hop culture in Germany also took on a rougher tone. It was characterized by the increasing popularity of battle and gangster rap, inspired by the American gangster rap of Ice-T, NWA and Ice Cube as well as 50 Cent and G-Unit. While gangster rap could already be seen in the late 1990s with artists such as Kool Savas, evolving sociopolitical realities are the reason why gangster rap flourished in Germany in the 2000s (Rollefson 2013). The most iconic and commercially successful label at that time was Aggro Berlin and its most popular gangster rappers were Sido, Bushido and B-Tight. Sido's album *Maske* ('Mask') (2004) opened the music market for German-speaking gangster rap while Bushido's *Vom Bordstein bis zur Skyline* ('From curb to skyline') (2003) produced music which articulated a specific *Kanak* (i.e. Turkish German immigrant) experience.

German-speaking gangster rap was marked by tougher and more explicit lyrics and beats, hypermasculinity, homophobia, vulgar language, and a great affinity to symbolic and real violence. This tendency is perhaps the most polarizing, criticized and controversial in the development of German rap music and beat making culture in Germany. It is also a serious response to the changed social realities in Germany. An increasing neo-liberal ideology in politics and economy as a result of globalization accompanied the cutting back on social welfare during the so-called HARTZ IV welfare reforms and an increasingly social division of German society in terms of ethnicity, class

and gender (Rollefson 2013). As many artists oriented more towards gangster rap at the expense of commercial success, rap music became saturated and retreated back to the underground from where it emerged in the early 1990s. Because of the great popularity of rap and hip hop in German popular music, a first wave of scholars, such as Jannis Androutsopolous, Dietmar Elflein, Eva Kimminich, Gabriele Klein, Malte Friedrich and Susanne Stemmler began serious scholarly inquiry into this phenomenon from different fields and angles, such as linguistics, musicology, cultural studies and social sciences.

The global economic crisis of the late 2000s and early 2010s accelerated the revival of hip hop culture in Germany. While it retreated to the underground in the 2000s, rap music underwent an artistic regeneration phase. It resulted in new voices, new genres and new collaborations. Artists such as Jan Delay mixed rap with soul, disco, reggae and rock while the crew Deichkind mixed rap with different electronic music styles. Perhaps the commercially most successful rap genre which emerged as a response to the financial crisis is so-called hipster rap. Drawing on the rather optimistic styles and ironic rhymes of the golden age as well as American 'hipster' rapper role models (Kid Cudi, Wiz Khalifa, Drake, Kanye West and Pharrell), artists such as Cro, Die Orsons and Alligator rap about an unspectacular and relaxed lifestyle. However, seen in the light of the European debt crisis, this feel-good rap is a subversion of the apocalyptic public discourse in the era of global financial and sociocultural instability. The flipside of this two-sided coin are gangster and battle rap which continue to be popular genres. Hypermasculine rappers such as Azad, Haftbefehl, Farid Bang and Kollegah address increasing social divisions in German society (Seeliger 2021). Those artists successfully exploit new media technologies and social networks to boost their own sales.

In the 2010s, hip hop culture became increasingly visible in public and official institutions. It was used increasingly in secondary education to teach German and English language at German schools. Students would occasionally analyse rap texts as a form of poetry and attend hip hop workshops as part of special project weeks and after-school programmes. Hip Hop Academies in Wuppertal and Hamburg created platforms for mutual exchange and interaction between artists and educators as well as fostering an awareness of cultural difference and empowerment in an increasingly multicultural German society (Kautny 2010; Siepmann 2013). In 2011 and 2012, for instance, the final written high school examination in English asked students in the state of Lower Saxony to analyse and contextualize the rap classic 'The Message' by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five.

As hip hop remains one of the most popular musical genres and forms of expression in Germany, it has the potential to transgress existing cultural boundaries. Keeping in mind that hip hop in Germany remains trapped in a male-dominated heteronormative framework, artists tend to be mostly cis-gendered men from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds with lyrics especially in the gangster and battle genre being misogynistic and homophobic.

With new anti-racist and feminist civil rights movements, such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, a new generation of artists has joined Germany's commercial rap cypher since the mid-2010s. Currently, one of the first and most commercially successful female rappers is Shirin David. As much of German commercially oriented rap music, David's style draws on American rap music as a source of inspiration to articulate a specific German rap identity. The Lithuanian-Iranian-German rapper propagates a sex-positive

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femininity and appropriates the subversive performances of Black femininity by US-American role models, such as Nicki Minaj, Meghan Thee Stallion and Cardi B (Nitzsche and Spilker 2021).

With *Platz an der Sonne* ('Place in the Sun') (2017), Berlin-based rap crew BSMG released one of the first rap albums in German hip hop history that take a decidedly Afrocentric and Afrodiasporic approach in their art. Using a wide variety of intertextual references and musical styles, BSMG artists Megaloh, Musa and Ghanian Stallion teach their audiences about Germany's neglected colonial past which has been silenced in larger culture. Re-surfacing neglected stories of colonial rule and resistance, they contribute to the formation of a new Black German masculinity (Nitzsche 2021).

Since their beginnings in the 1980s, rap music and hip hop culture in Germany were transnational phenomena which fostered the formation of new genres, aesthetics and new versions of what it means to be German. As Germany is currently experiencing its largest immigration wave since the end of the Second World War as a result of the Russian war against Ukraine, hip hop in Germany could likely again receive an infusion of new voices and styles as well as new and exciting layers of (rap) identities.

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