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# Canada

**ABSTRACT**

*In this country profile, Mark V. Campbell provides historical, cultural, socio-political and linguistic insights into the formation and existence of hip hop culture in Canada. Focusing on multiple elements within the culture and by exploring the climate of media imperialism that impacts the country's cultural forms, the contribution provides wide ranging and multiple contexts in which hip hop culture is situated within this large but sparsely populated country.*

**KEYWORDS**

Canadian hip hop  
turntablism  
festivals  
radio  
Indigenous hip hop  
breaking crews

In Canada, hip hop is as varied and diverse as the country's geography, ranging from the arctic tundra of the north to the mountainous west coast regions. Francophone, Cree, Mohawk, Patwa, Greek, Kréyol and Acadian are just some of the linguistic communities and ethnic uniqueness that colour articulations of hip hop culture across Canada. Hip hop travelled quite early to Canada primarily through four avenues: mixtapes, film, breaking and community radio. In major cities like Edmonton and Montréal, breakdancing competitions brought hip hop into the consciousness of many youth living outside of New York in the mid-1980s. In cities like Toronto and Montréal, with large populations of recent Caribbean migrants in the 1980s, mixtapes and radio shows recorded on cassettes found their way from New York to Toronto as relatives travelled back to reunite during the short summer months.

Caribbean cultural practices were central to the growth and circulation of hip hop music in Canada in the 1980s. In particular, the same sound system cultures from Jamaica that influenced a teenaged Kool Herc extended throughout cities like Toronto and Montreal with reggae sound systems such as Melody International, Black Zodiac and Big Toe's Hifi holding down the scene. The massive popularity of soundcrews and sound systems such as

**NOTABLE HIP HOP FESTIVALS**

- Concrete Canvas (<https://www.concretecanvasfest.com/>) was launched in 1995 in Hamilton Ontario, is a graffiti art festival that includes all the elements of the culture. After an initial seven-year-run until 2001, the festival returned in 2019. More than just a hip hop festival, Concrete Canvas has also included fashion shows, outdoor barbecues and a basketball tournament. The festival attracts dozens of graffiti artists from Southern

- Ontario and internationally known writers such as Burnt Toast and Bacon. House of PainT (<https://houseofpaint.ca/>): taking place annually in Canada's capital city, Ottawa since 2003, the House of PainT festival is a multidisciplinary hip hop festival that attracts thousands each August. In addition to several events, graffiti artists take to the refreshing a massive legal graffiti wall, breaker battles, poetry slams and a knowledge conference brings the freshest ideas to the forefront. The multiday festival has been headlined by major acts such as Smif-N-Wesson, Jean Grae, Big Daddy Kane and breaker legend Ken Swift.
- Peg City Holla began in 1997 in Winnipeg, Manitoba and was organized by local rap crew, Mood Ruff. The multiday event included DJ competitions, breaker summits, car shows, film screenings and headlining act such as Blackmoon, Ali Shaheed Mohammed, Jeru the Damaja and 2003 DMC World Champion DJ Dopey. The festival's location in central Canada served as an important site to bring together Canadian talent from both coasts and multiple time zones during its one decade run until 2007. The festival was a critical step in the development of Canadian talent providing stages for Monolith, Frek Sho, Kid Kola, Moka Only and D.L. Incognito and Canadian DMC champ DJ Brace amongst others. The 416 Graffiti Expo was Toronto's first major graffiti festival that emerged in 1996,

*Sunshine Sound Crew*, Maceo, Kill-A-Watt and Powerhouse Divine Sound in Toronto, contributed to the circulation of hip hop music as the music entered into the existing roller-skating jam scene. By the late 1990s, the tradition of sound systems evolved into sound crews with the likes of Baby Blue Sound Crew, Elite Squad, the Soul Controllers and many, many others.

Alongside the strong presence of sound systems and DJ culture, breaker crews proliferated in cities like Montréal and Ottawa since the mid-1980s. In fact, the Canadian Floor Masters from Ottawa were contemporaries of the New York City Breakers, competing internationally, while both Montréal and Toronto hosted their first major breaker showcases and battles in 1984 and 1985 respectively. Decades later, Canada remained well-represented on the dancefloor by crews such as Intricate, Bag of Trix, Dangerous Goods, Shebang!, Boogie Brats, Supernaturalz, Rock Flow Crew in cities such as Winnipeg, Vancouver, Ottawa and Montreal.

Beyond mixtapes and sound systems, hip hop culture in Canada grew largely due to the importation of films and the evolution of local television, in particular, *Wild Style*, a now cult classic led to line-ups around buildings when it was released in Toronto. In addition to films such as *Breaking 1* and *Breaking 2*, Canadian television featured a music video channel called MuchMusic, a 24-hour music specialty channel that offered music videos from several genres. Shows on MuchMusic, such as *RapCity*, *Xtendamix* and *Soul in City*, hosted by knowledgeable VJs, Michael Williams, Master T and Nam Kiwanuka (as well as Juliette Powell on Musique Plus) kept Black musical culture visible with *RapCity* becoming a major outlet for hip hop culture and the emergence of emcees. These shows kept Canadian audiences informed about the latest trends in hip hop culture and provided a reachable goal for local hip hop artists to promote their music. The presence of MuchMusic in supporting events and promoting local artists was critical in growing and sustaining hip hop cultures in Canada.

The importance of MuchMusic in Canada cannot be underestimated. As the northern neighbour of the world's largest and most powerful media industry in the United States, Canada, with one-tenth the population of its southern neighbour has historically struggled to bolster its creative industries. The founding of the Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC), modelled on Britain's British Broadcasting Company (BBC), was meant to unify Canada and protect its identity in the face of US media imperialism. Yet, the CBC, a crown corporation, spent decades either ignoring or marginalizing hip hop music and culture and finally coming around to recognize the genre in a 25th anniversary celebration in 2011 called *CBC's Hip Hop Summit*.

The impact of having greater access to various US-based hip hop artists meant it was easier to learn of an artist outside of the Canadian borders than to encounter the music of a Canadian artist from either coast of Canada. The scale of the US hip hop market has had multiple effects on the development of hip hop in Canada, ranging from youthful aspirations of 'making it' incongruent with the size of the Canadian market. Another impact has been within the recording industry as major labels in Canada choosing not to invest in hip hop music in its first decade. The major acts in the 1980s were all signed by foreign labels, such as Germany's LMR, New Jersey's First Priority Records and the United Kingdom's Island Records. The imprint, Beat Factory music, was one of the first to invest in what would become the global stardom of Toronto crew the Dream Warriors in the early 1990s. Minuscule major label investment opened the door to thriving and industrious local labels who

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were largely responsible for a great deal of the production and distribution of hip hop music in the 1990s. Labels such as Peanuts & Corn, Nine Planets Hip Hop, URBNET, 1Rock, Figure IV, Kneedeep, 7Bills, Half-Life, Treehouse Records and many more produced many award-winning artists and kept Canada's hip hop scenes thriving.

Pioneering artists such as Rumble & Strong, MCJ and Cool G, the Canadian Floor Masters and Michie Mee helped establish Canada's hip hop scene on an international level, supported in part by the confluence of factors such as *RapCity*, sound system culture and regular performance opportunities at events such as the *Monster Jam* series in Toronto. As these acts and others emerged, their successes highlight the importance of regular and annual events critical to the culture's formation. For example, the local community radio station, CHRY, founded the Metro Mix offs, an annual DJ battle nurtured generations of turntablists, such as DJ Dopey and the Turnstylez who would represent Canada well at international competitions such as the DMC World DJ Championships and the International Turntablist Federation battle respectively. Importantly, these events were born out of a strong community radio presence across the country. Community radio shows such as *The Masterplan Show*, *The Goods*, *The Jam Factor*, *The Fantastic Voyage*, *Peaceful Journey* show and the *Masters at Work* show stimulated the growth of Canadian hip hop music. These shows and others in cities such as Winnipeg, Montréal, Ottawa and Edmonton operated like community centres, as they became the focal point to meet, network and learn about hip hop culture, especially music. Eventually, by the 2000s when commercial radio in Canada finally decided to support Black music and place Canadian hip hop on commercial airwaves, stations such as Edmonton's Vibe 98.5FM and Toronto's Flow 93.5FM grew audiences for Canadian artists.

As early as the mid-1990s, Canadians were taking the world stage and excelling at international competition. While artists like Rumble and Michie Mee were recording in Jamaica and the Dream Warriors were selling significant albums in Europe while world-class turntablists were representing Canada well internationally. The beginning of this trend was 15-year-old DJ ATrak's phenomenal win at the DMC World Championships in 1995. Years later in 1998, Toronto's Turnstylez Crew would place second in team competition at the World International Turntable Federation finals. By 2003, Canada would once again excel in international competition, with DJ Dopey taking home the gold turntables as DMC World DJ Champion. Close to a decade later, DJ Vekked would take the DMC World Championships multiple times, beginning in 2015.

Domestically, Canada's Juno Awards have had an interesting relationship with the rap category. When the West coast, Vancouver-based Rascalz refused their Juno Award due to their award presentation not being televised in 1998, the hugely successful hip hop crew spoke out against Canada's lacklustre support for hip hop culture. The Juno Awards's decision to not televise the award for best rap album signalled a refusal of the industry to support the development of the musical genre. Ironically, the Juno's mirrored the same lack of support the Grammy Awards showed DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince a decade earlier when the duo won a Grammy for their hit song, 'Parent's Just Don't Understand' (1988), but boycotted the award ceremony since their award was also not televised.

Canadian hip hop has never lacked significant political content as the protest track 'Can't Repress the Cause' (1990) by a combination of several Toronto-based artists, as well as WarParty's now legendary 'Feeling Reserved'

founded by Jonathan Ramos and his team. It was a pivotal development ground for graffiti artists such as Skam, Ren, Elicser, Air, Star and crews such as KOP5, UNC and Syndicate and for creating battle spaces for breaker crews such as Ground Illusionz, Intrikit, Bag of Trix and the Supernaturalz. The festival also created stages for Canadian talent such as Mood Ruff, Daneo and served as a catalyst for future festivals such as Manifesto and Stylz in Progress. While the festival ran for more than ten years, its legacy has been to open the door towards legal graffiti walls and the acceptance of graffiti art by Toronto's city beautification policies.

- Under Pressure (UP) (<https://underpressure.ca/>) is an annual graffiti festival that takes place in downtown Montreal. Founded in 1996 by graffiti writers Seaz and Flow, UP is one of oldest urban culture festivals in North America. UP emerged from a street magazine of the same name, extending its grassroots support of graffiti culture. Featuring both local and international writers, the festival captures the essence of an old school block party with sections of the downtown core blocked off for large-scale murals, stages and live performances. Run by a team of volunteers, UP complement their huge outdoor presence with indoor art exhibits, dance battles and the limited run of compilation CDs as part of their magazine, the *Up North Trip* featuring both anglophone and francophone Canadian hip hop Artists.

## NOTABLE HIP HOP RADIO SHOWS

- *Club 980*, on CKGM (Montréal) was a radio show which was begun by future MuchMusic VJ Michael Williams and featured turntable wizardry of DJ Butcher T. and DJ Ray. The show would become Montreal's first urban music programme in 1983.
- *The Fantastic Voyage*, CKLN 88.1FM (Toronto), despite being named after a funk song, became known in Toronto as the place to hear hip hop on the radio in the middle of the 1980s. Founded by DJ Ron Nelson in 1983 the radio show was at the epicentre of the emergence of hip hop culture in Toronto. As a concert promoter, DJ Ron Nelson, was responsible for bringing emerging acts such as a teenage LL Cool J, Biz Markie, KRS-One, Ice-T, Queen Latifah amongst others to Toronto to battle local talent such as Michie Mee, Rumble (from Rumble & Strong) amongst others. Importantly, through *The Fantastic Voyage*, Nelson stimulated the development of Toronto's hip hop scene by putting onstage future stars such as Maestro Fresh Wes and mentoring the next generation of DJs, such as DJ X, who would inherit the timeslot and host the *Power Move Show* in the 1990s.
- *Masters at Work*, on CKUT 90.3FM (Montréal) was the brainchild of a trio of artists, DJ Mike Mission, emcee and host Royal-T and DJ Stone. Airing on Montréal's powerhouse community radio station

(2000) just begin to tip the iceberg of politically charged rhymes. WarParty's 1994 hit, which received national video rotation on MuchMusic sparked the beginning of a much-needed Indigenous voice within the hip hop world in Canada. Today, such poignant political commentary can still be found in the works of Dreezus, Eekwol, Que Rock, Samian, A Tribe Called Red and T-Rhyme. Outside of Indigenous hip hop circles, politically conscious hip hop by the likes of Shad K, Politic Live, Nomadic Massive and the Freedom Writers balance the commercialized explosion of hip hop in North America.

While onstage, both at home and internationally, hip hop culture has made strides in Canada – what has been critical to artists' success has been local festivals and independent music criticism. Hip hop festivals have been a major force across Canada since Hamilton, Ontario's Concrete Canvas Graffiti Art Festival, launched in 1996 (Figure 1). The range of diverse and regionally responsive artists have been, and continue to be supported by Canada's range of hip hop festivals, such as Toronto's now defunct 416 Graffiti Expo, Edmonton's Rust Magic Graffiti Festival, Montréal's Style in Progress and Winnipeg's Peg City Holla. Currently, the House of PainT in Ottawa, Montréal's Under Pressure Graffiti festival, the Manifesto festival in Toronto, Halifax's Hopscotch Arts Festival and Edmonton's Hip Hop in the Park continue to provide stages and venues that keep all of the culture's elements alive and connected. Festivals not only bring all the elements of the culture back together but also bring A-list artists to Canada to rock stages, from the likes of Jay Electronica to DJs Kool Herc, Smif-N-Wesson, Black Thought, Pete Rock or DJ Premier, Canadian audiences and artists get to rub shoulders with hip hop's crème de la crème.

Long before the internet-dominated music scenes, independent music journalism could be found in local and national magazines such as *Peace!*, *Word Magazine*, *Under Pressure*, *Mic Check*, *Pound* (Figure 2), *Urbanology* and *Elements*. Album reviews, artist interviews and event listing in these publications provide in-depth access to hip hop culture as it evolved in Canada. These publications developed audiences for hip hop artists and provided critical commentary and insightful content that brought turntablism, graffiti, DJ culture and emceeing directly to fans, often free of charge. These magazines did well to counteract US media imperialism, placing Canadian artists on the same level as American acts, something not mirrored by dominant media platforms.

Across a country as large as the continent is wide, the multiplicities found within hip hop in Canada are numerous, overlapping and contribute nicely to various hip hop scenes all relational, yet poignantly marked by geography, regional slang, local festivals and radio shows. It is not a stretch to recognize how hip hop in Canada both embodies the country's official multiculturalism policies while also critiquing and augmenting the national discourse. While sometimes seen as a national myth, multicultural policy in Canada officially recognizes the country's two founding languages and encourages the country's many immigrants to preserve and celebrate their cultures of origin.

But as usual, hip hop stylistically flips the script, the preserving of cultural heritage easily becomes a celebration of hybridity, creolization and transformation. Witnessing the lyrical manoeuvres of artists like DL Incognito from Ottawa or Samian from Northern Quebec notions of official Canadian bilingualism are quickly disrupted. Case in point is Algonquin emcee Samian flips between Inuktitut and French in collaboration with Inuit throat singer Marie Belleau on tracks like Plan Nord. Artists, such as the supergroup, aptly named Nomadic Massive, explode Canada's bilingualism offering up performances

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Figure 1: Concrete Canvas flyer 6th edition. From the collection of Leon 'Eklipz' Robinson.

and albums that seamlessly move between Arabic, French, Spanish, English and Kréyol. In this Montréal-based crew, numerous members of the group flip verses, ethnicities and cultural references. In these scenarios, musical innovation allows Haitian Kréyol to become Montréal creole and in Toronto, Jamaican Patwa morphs into T-dot slang.

At times, such vibrant cultural fabric envelope articulations of hip hop culture, so that one can proudly hear the Caribbean reverberate throughout the lyrics of artists like the Rascalz's Red1 or experience samples of bagpipes from the East coast of Canada on joints by Classified. In other words, Canadian as an identity may not present itself in the same hegemonic configurations as other nationalisms allowing for a plethora of differing takes on representing hip hop culture that do not solely mirror and mimic the images of the culture that dominant mainstream American cable, radio channels and internet platforms.

CKUT, the two-hour Saturday night show replaced the legendary *Sound Supreme Show*. From 1992 to the present, the show remains Montréal's longest running hip hop radio show.

- *The Masterplan Show* on CIUT 89.5FM (Toronto) was started in 1989 by JonBronski, Motion, DJs Power and DTS. The Masterplan is Canada's longest continuously aired show and continues in downtown Toronto. Over the last three decades the show has mentored and raised generations of DJs and has hosted special guests such as KRS-One, breaker legend Crazy Legs, OHNO, Dougie Fresh and a countless number of hip hop pioneers and luminaries.
- *Peaceful Journey* on CKCU 93.1FM (Ottawa) was launched in 1996 by Jedi-One, Mikey Wizdom and Warren Peace. Still on air today, each Friday night, this two-hour show brings boom bap music to Canada's capital city. The show's current host, DJ Ducats joined the show in 1998 and continues to hold down this show's illustrious legacy.
- Honourable mentions: *The Real Frequency*, *The Goods*, the *Power Move Show* and *The Bassment*.



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