

Global Hip Hop Studies  
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# The Netherlands

## ABSTRACT

*This article outlines the history of hip hop in the Netherlands from the early 1980s onward. After discussing Dutch hip hop culture's early days – during which breaking was hip hop's driving force in major cities like Amsterdam and Rotterdam, and rap music from the Netherlands followed American trends and was strictly anglophone – it focuses especially on the emergence of and later developments in Nederhop ('Netherhop'): Dutch-language rap music. In the 1990s, Dutch rap groups like Osdorp Posse and rappers like Extince were crucial in this regard, as their pursuit of authenticity eventually led them to rap in their native tongue, a practice which has since become the norm in the Dutch hip hop scene. The article touches on influential emcees from the country's major urban areas (e.g. Brainpower), while also acknowledging the influence of Dutch artists from smaller cities on the outskirts of the Netherlands (e.g. Opgezwolle, Typhoon and Fresku). The article then proceeds to discuss how in the twenty-first century, artists like De Jeugd van Tegenwoordig, Ronnie Flex and Broederliefde managed to reach the mainstream, pushing Nederhop to become the most popular genre of music in the Netherlands, improving the genre's reception by critics and the mainstream media in the process. Moreover, the article identifies recent developments in hip hop culture in a broader sense, for instance when it comes to the Dutch hip hop media landscape and academic hip hop scholarship in the Netherlands, concluding that Dutch hip hop appears to have a bright future ahead.*

## KEYWORDS

hip hop  
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With the arrival of Sugar Hill Gang's song 'Rapper's Delight', which held on to the number one position in the Dutch charts for three weeks straight in 1980, people all over the Netherlands were first introduced to hip hop. Once the novelty of the song's rapping died down again, so did the mainstream's

## ESSENTIAL DUTCH HIP HOP ALBUMS

- Osdorp Posse – *Geendagsvlieg* (1997)
- Extince – *Binnenlandse Funk* (1998)
- Postmen – *Documents* (1998)
- Brainpower – *Door Merg en Brain* (2001)
- De Jeugd van Tegenwoordig – *Parels voor de Zwijnen* (2005)
- Opgezwolle – *Eigen Wereld* (2006)
- Jiggy Djé – *Noah's Ark* (2006)
- Typhoon – *Tussen Licht en Lucht* (2007)
- Winne – *Winne Zonder Strijd* (2009)
- Fresku – *Maskerade* (2012)

## ESSENTIAL DUTCH RAP SONGS

- Osdorp Posse – 'Moordenaars' (1992)
- Extince – 'Sprakwater' (1995)
- Brainpower – 'Dansplaat' (2002)
- Opgezwolle – 'Hoedenplank' (2006)
- Fresku – 'Zo Doe Je Dat' (2015)

interest in hip hop. Outside of the mainstream, though, hip hop culture strongly resonated with communities demographically similar to the ones that originated it across the Atlantic: disenfranchised, minority youths in inner-city neighbourhoods, specifically in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, though the culture would quickly spread across the rest of the Netherlands and reach white people as well (van Stapele 2002). In these communities, the foundations of what would become a thriving Dutch hip hop scene were laid down.

Although rap music would eventually become the dominant cultural expression of hip hop in the Netherlands, breaking was the driving force in the emergence of Dutch hip hop culture (Vanderheijden 2009). Breaking culture quickly spread from Amsterdam to other cities across the Netherlands, and local crews and scenes came into contact with each other at dance battles organized across the country. To call this national scene a full-fledged hip hop scene would be an exaggeration: in the early 1980s, breakers generally danced to disco or electro music and many breaking enthusiasts were hardly aware of hip hop culture's other elements. According to Shyroock – a former breaker and later member of the successful Dutch rap group Postmen – breaking enthusiasts only began broadening their hip hop horizons after breaking's decrease in popularity from the mid-1980s onward, when many breakers decided to move on to rap, deejaying, beatboxing or graffiti (van Stapele 2002).

In the 1980s, Dutch hip hop music strictly followed the hip hop trends set in the United States. Dutch rappers such as LTH, Sugacane, Extince and E-Life rapped in English, originally following the brag-and-boast formula of early 1980s American hip hop and later moving on to the more politicalized, gritty sound of Public Enemy (van Stapele 2002). Despite the scene's attempts to stay true to the hardcore aesthetic of American hip hop, however, the Netherlands' first international rap success was the gimmicky 1986 pop single 'Holiday Rap' by MC Miker G and DJ Sven, which interpolated Madonna's 'Holiday'. The song became a massive summer hit record, but Miker G and DJ Sven also received immense backlash from hip hop heads both inside and outside the Netherlands – they were notoriously criticized for selling out hip hop's street culture by Def Jam co-founder Russell Simmons (van Splunteren 1986) – which effectively destroyed their reputation in the scene (van Stapele 2002).

The 'Holiday Rap' story served as an important reminder to other Dutch rappers of the importance of authenticity within hip hop. The pursuit of authenticity would eventually cause artists to start rapping in their mother tongue from the late 1980s onward. As the Amsterdam rapper Def P states:

I started rapping in Dutch after I had spoken to hip hop fans in Compton and South Central. Those guys didn't understand why we were so desperately trying to copy American hip hop, while we rapped with thick accents, hadn't mastered the vocabulary, and lived in a totally different world.

(Def P quoted in van Stapele 2002: 67)

Def P and his crew the Osdorp Posse would refer to their Dutch-language rap music as Nederhop ('Netherhop', a play on the term Nederpop for pop music from the Netherlands). According to successful Dutch emcee Brainpower, rapping in Dutch was just 'not done' before then: 'Dutch rappers were afraid they wouldn't be taken seriously if they didn't rap in English, but then the Osdorp Posse came around and changed everything' (Stolker 2009: n.pag.).

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Osdorp Posse's success with rapping in Dutch inspired many other acts to follow suit, bringing Nederhop to the next level. Crucially, backed by what would later become the leading Dutch hip hop label Top Notch, Extince made the switch to Dutch in 1995 and achieved a top ten hit song with 'Sprakwater', exposing the general public to Dutch-language rap for the first time. Dutch artists like Urban Dance Squad, Postmen, Pete Philly & Perquisite, The Kytoman Orchestra and Mr. Probz would still achieve great successes both nationally and internationally with non-Dutch hip hop music, but from the late 1990s onward, rapping in Dutch became the norm rather than the exception in the Netherlands.

Though there were certainly hip hop artists from outside the Randstad region – the megalopolis in the central-western part of the Netherlands which encompasses the country's two biggest cities (Amsterdam and Rotterdam) – Dutch hip hop culture was dominated by Randstad artists during the 1980s and 1990s. Often, when rappers from other areas of the country became successful, they did so in a Randstad context. Extince, for example, may have rapped in his native southern Dutch accent, but he was not based in his home region, operating within the Amsterdam scene instead. Other Randstad acts that dictated the sound of Dutch hip hop at the time were commercial rappers like Def Rhymz or popular underground emcees like Brainpower, whose Dutch raps were noticed by none other than Nas, who featured him on his 2002 remix of 'One Mic'.

Even though they rapped in Dutch, many artists from this era were very much US-oriented. Osdorp Posse was heavily inspired by the Bomb Squad's work for Public Enemy, Extince's beats mimicked the funkiness of West Coast hip hop and some rappers' Dutch lyrics were even literal translations of American rap songs. Around the turn of the century, however, a group of artists from Zwolle, a small city of approximately 100,000 citizens in the eastern part of the country, would come to challenge the Randstad hegemony with a truly unique sound. The crew Opgezwolle's Phreako Rico (MC), Sticky Steez (MC) and Dippy Delic (DJ/producer) proudly represented for their city – the name Opgezwolle (bloated) is a pun on the name of their city – and came with a unique sound. Musically, their work was characterized by mysterious world music samples, unapologetically gritty drum sounds and eerie electronic instruments. Lyrically, they were one of the first groups to employ multisyllabic rhyme schemes heavily leaning on assonance rather than perfect rhymes, and by lacing their lyrics with colourful descriptions of their everyday lives, the Opgezwolle rappers established themselves as truly authentic. As long-time collaborator Blaxtar states:

Opgezwolle sounded closer to home, literally. It was fresh, different from all the other rappers out there. Their music didn't sound like American hip hop, their lyrics were creative and authentic, and they brought the house down whenever they performed.

(personal communication)

The fact that they were not from the Randstad was also essential for their success and opened the door for other rappers who were not from the Randstad, for instance, the rap crew D.A.C. (Jiggy Djé, Diggy Dex and Wudstik) from Amersfoort or Kempfi and Fresku from Eindhoven. As Typhoon – acclaimed rapper, early Opgezwolle affiliate and Blaxtar's younger brother – remarked:

1. For example, in 2018, there were eight Dutch rappers/rap groups in the Spotify Top 10 of most-streamed artists in the Netherlands; the other two artists on the list were Drake and Ed Sheeran (Het Parool 2018).

I think that when Opgezwolle burst onto the scene, rapping about everyday topics and representing for a relatively minor city, all of a sudden it became cool to represent where you were from even if it was just a small village no one had ever heard of.

(De Wereld Draait Door 2015: 00:07:07–00:07:33)

After the group dissolved following the release of their final album *Eigen Wereld* ('Own world') in 2006, its members kept working with each other in varying formations (e.g. the Fakkelfbrigade supergroup), continuing to leave their mark on the culture. The latter became especially evident in 2016, when after fifteen years in the game, Phreako Rico, Sticky Steez and Typhoon celebrated the longevity of their careers with the biggest Nederhop concert to date (i.e. a sold-out show in Amsterdam's Ziggo Dome, the largest concert venue in the country).

In the early 2000s, while artists such as Opgezwolle and D.A.C. were catering to the hip hop heads, other rappers saw a different route to success: the mainstream. Artists like Ali B, Lange Frans & Baas B and Yes-R specifically targeted a demographic that usually did not care much for rap using a highly successful formula: upbeat party songs or protest songs about causes that anyone could get behind (e.g. songs opposing senseless violence and child soldiers) with clean productions and catchy, melodic choruses, often sung by pop singers. As a result, they were embraced by the Dutch mainstream audience and media, while not really being taken seriously by the country's fans of 'true', undiluted hip hop. Nevertheless, the formula was so lucrative (especially if it eventually led to a career in media, as was the case for Ali B) that rappers like Gers Pardoel and Snelle would continue to employ it for years.

Around the same time, a group called De Jeugd van Tegenwoordig ('Today's youth') – Willie Wartaal (MC), Vieze Fur (MC), Faberyayo (MC) and Bas Bron (producer) – achieved great mainstream success a different way. In 2005, their breakout single 'Watskebut?!' (Dutch slang for 'what has happened?') introduced the country to rap lyrics that were technically Dutch, but contained so many slang words and alternative pronunciations that the older generations had no idea what the group was rapping about. For obvious reasons, this made the group incredibly appealing to the teenagers their group's name referred to. Although De Jeugd van Tegenwoordig's music would gradually move away from hip hop and more into the direction of avant-garde pop with rap influences, the group has remained a stable fixture in the Nederhop landscape ever since their debut.

In recent years, Nederhop has seen several developments that have led it to become the number one genre of Dutch music. More so than any other genre, Nederhop was able to take advantage of the changing ways in which people consume music, with Dutch hip pop dominating music streaming services such as Spotify and YouTube.<sup>1</sup> Acts who have been especially successful in this regard are the group Broederliefde, who held on to the number one album spot for fourteen consecutive weeks (breaking the national record), the young rappers of the New Wave collective (Lil Kleine and Ronnie Flex), and rappers like Josylvio, Sevn Alias and Boef, whose commercial street rap records have attracted a large online following. Musically, Dutch hip pop has largely followed the trends from abroad: mumbled, auto-tuned rapping and singing over trap or grime beats, sometimes with influences of Caribbean and North African instruments and rhythms that reflect the diverse cultural heritage of these pop rappers.

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As Nederhop gained prominence in the Dutch music landscape, its reception by critics and the mainstream media improved. As a result, hip hop is now considered a full-fledged art form in much broader circles than was the case a decade ago. To illustrate, Typhoon's 2014 album *Lobi da Basi* was named second-best album of the year by the renowned Dutch music magazine *OOR*, the highest position for any Dutch album ever on the magazine's annual list and his 2020 follow-up album *Lichthuis* received similar critical acclaim. Moreover, in 2016, the New Wave rap collective received the prestigious Popprijs, with the award's jury recognizing their massive popularity on streaming services and commending them for sparking amusement and controversy (Buma Cultuur 2016).

The increasing appreciation for the craft of hip hop, especially with regards to lyrics, may in part be the result of the emergence of a Dutch spoken word scene, which has its origins in Dutch hip hop culture. Inspired by the Def Jam Poetry format, hip hop artist Blaxtar decided to start SPOKEN, a recurring spoken word event that allowed audiences to pay closer attention to rappers' lyrics than they would have if the lyrics were accompanied by music. Blaxtar: 'I wanted to create an event in the Netherlands that would showcase the power of hip hop's language without scaring off the people that would otherwise never attend a hip hop event' (personal communication). His strategy worked; rappers were eventually even programmed alongside poets and other notable figures of Dutch literature, garnering them recognition from new demographics.

While it is difficult to predict how hip hop will develop in the Netherlands over the coming years, it appears that the culture is in the process of maturing. For instance, in the past few years, several Dutch rappers have used their increased exposure in Dutch society to become more socio-politically active, especially regarding issues involving discrimination against minorities. Their most prominent target has been the Dutch blackface character of Zwarte Piet (Black Pete), which many argue is a highly offensive, racist folk tradition in a country that generally considers itself especially tolerant. Other examples are Typhoon, who has used his fame to expose racial profiling by police (NOS 2016) and Fresku, who brilliantly criticized Dutch radio stations for not playing enough hip hop by Black artists in his humorous 2015 song 'Zo Doe Je Dat' ('That's how you do it') and the accompanying music video (Top Notch 2015).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Nederhop has recently seen a substantial increase in the number of prominent female rap artists – for instance, Latifah and S10 – a welcome breath of fresh air in a genre whose successful artists have long been almost exclusively male. At the same time, the Nederhop scene is recognizing and celebrating the accomplishments of those who made it what it is today. For example, the fifteen-year anniversary of the country's leading hip hop media platform 101Barz was celebrated with a notable performance by several leading Dutch rap artists in collaboration with the Metropole Orkest (Metropole Orchestra; 101Barz 2021) and in 2022, Brainpower embarked on a nationwide theatre tour to educate people on the history of hip hop (Brainpower 2022). In light of the latter, it is worth mentioning that hip hop's fifth element – knowledge – is increasingly being represented within Dutch academia. In a diverse range of subfields ranging from anthropology to linguistics, several doctoral dissertations on hip hop have been published by Dutch researchers (e.g. Gazzah 2008; Gilbers 2021) or are currently in the works (e.g. by Aafje de Roest, Kim Dankoor and Dastan Abdali), with more research projects scheduled to follow in the coming years.

In short, it appears hip hop in the Netherlands has a bright future ahead.

2. It should be noted here that these were by no means the first instances of socio-political engagement in Dutch hip hop. For instance, the Groningen-based Zombi Squad were explicitly anti-fascist in their music and live performances and the Dutch–Moroccan rapper Raymzter famously challenged the discriminatory treatment of people of Moroccan descent in the Netherlands in his 2002 song 'Kutmarokkanen?!'.

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## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Steven Gilbers obtained his Ph.D. in hip hop linguistics from Groningen, the Netherlands. He specializes in the connection between language and music in a hip hop context as well as regional variation in African American English and rap flows from the American West Coast and East Coast. In 2021, he successfully defended his doctoral dissertation titled 'Ambitionz az a Ridah: 2Pac's changing accent and flow in light of regional variation in African-American English speech and hip-hop music' at the University of Groningen. Gilbers is a former Fulbright Visiting Scholar at New York University and the University of California, Los Angeles where he worked with Renée Blake and H. Samy

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Alim. Aside from his academic endeavours, he is also active as a rapper and producer, and is involved with Dutch hip hop platform Homebase.

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