

## FIVE Storytelling

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**Here's a little story that must be told, from beginning to end. . . .**

—Common, “Book of Life”

**STORYTELLING DISTINGUISHES RAP** from other forms of popular music. That isn't to suggest that lyricists in other musical genres don't tell captivating stories: anyone who's ever heard the Eagles' “Hotel California” or Don McLean's “American Pie” or the Charlie Daniels Band's “The Devil Went Down to Georgia” knows better than that. Rap isn't even the first musical genre to tell a story to music in rapid phrases that are as close to speech as to song; that distinction belongs to operatic recitatives, which date from the seventeenth century. Rap's difference from other genres is one of degree, not of kind. Rap just tells so *many* stories. Indeed, it's difficult to identify a rap song that doesn't tell some kind of story in rhyme.

Storytelling highlights both the good and the bad in rap music and hip-hop culture. Advocates often cite rap's stories

as proof of the music's truth-telling capacity, its prophetic voice for everyday people. Conversely, rap's critics target storytelling, particularly the explicit tales of so-called gangsta rap, as a corrupting influence on our culture, celebrating the worst excesses of violence, misogyny, and commercialism.

Most of rap's stories are neither incisive social commentaries nor thug fantasies. Like most stories throughout the history of human civilization, most of rap's stories are occasions to imagine alternate realities. To hear rap's storytelling at its best is to experience liberation from the constraints of everyday life, to be lost in the rhythm and the rhyme. Rap's greatest storytellers are among the greatest storytellers alive, staying close to the tones of common speech even as they craft innovations on narrative form. Rap's stories demand our attention not simply as entertainment, but as art. Whether it is Common weaving the classic hip-hop allegory "I Used to Love H.E.R." or Nas inverting narrative chronology in "Rewind," rap is an effective form for sophisticated narrative expression.

Between the street life and the good life is a broad expanse of human experience. Rap has its screenwriters, making Hollywood blockbusters in rhyme with sharp cuts, vivid characters, and intricate plotlines. It has its investigative reporters and conspiracy theorists, its biographers and memoirists, its True Crime authors and its mystery writers. It even has its comics and its sportswriters, its children's authors and its spiritualists. It is high concept and low brow; it has literary hacks and bona fide masters. It has all of these and more, extending an oral tradition as fundamental to human experience, as ancient and as essential, as most anything we have.

Even so-called gangsta rap, which one of its originators, Ice-T, prefers to call “reality rap” for its gritty fidelity to the everyday struggles of pimps, hos, and hustlers, is more concerned with imagining possible realities rather than simply recording experiences. The fact is, rap’s realism is as much about telling stories as it is about telling truths. While “keeping it real” and “real talk” have become a part of rap’s code of ethics, reality’s importance to rap’s lyrical artistry is more complicated. Reality may carry considerable weight when it comes to an MC’s social capital, but it has less to do with the craft of writing great rhymes or telling good stories. In a 2006 interview, the Chicago-bred rapper Lupe Fiasco reflected upon the interrelatedness of storytelling, poetry, and rap.

I come from a literary background, and I loved to tell stories. I remember freestyling stories, not in rhyme, by just coming up with things when I was a kid on the bus. But I couldn’t play an instrument, so I decided to take my storytelling mind and to apply it to rap, which seemed like a natural thing. So I practiced a lot and really tried to apply the techniques I’d learned from poetry—which, of course, is the predecessor of rap—and include new things. I’d add haikus and try all wild poetic things, and I knew I’d have something different and interesting to say.

To tell a familiar narrative in a new way is the motivating impulse behind a lot of rap storytelling. With a storyteller’s mind, rappers create poetic narratives with character and setting; conflict, climax, and resolution. They do all of this while rhyming many of their words, and usually in less than four minutes.

Rap’s early years were filled with rhymed stories. Few hip-hop heads could forget Wonder Mike’s question from his

last verse on “Rapper’s Delight”: “Have you ever went over to a friend’s house to eat / and the food just ain’t no good?” On the other end of the spectrum from the Sugar Hill Gang’s comic tone, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s “The Message” offers a powerful description of urban plight: “A child is born with no state of mind / blind to the ways of mankind.”

Undoubtedly the most influential storyteller in rap history is the Ruler, Slick Rick. During rap’s first decade, Slick Rick helped establish the conventions that would define rap as a storytelling genre. Storytelling for him wasn’t just about entertainment; he understood the expressive power of a story well told: “Stories can teach, and stories can destroy, and stories can ease tensions,” he once observed. His best-known tales, love stories like “Mona Lisa,” cautionary tales like “Children’s Story,” and explicit stories like “Sleazy Gynecologist,” offer a primer of rap storytelling. Speaking of his classic album, *The Great Adventures of Slick Rick*, he recalls: “It was almost like a diary: ‘When I was nineteen, this is what happened and this is what I learned from it.’ It’s all just writing down life experiences as you go on. I just put them in rap form.”

MCs like Slick Rick put their lives, real and imagined, in rap form. Rap stories can take up anything from a few bars to an entire song, or even multiple songs. They can be told by one rapper or by several. They can follow conventional narrative chronology or be presented backwards or in fragments. They can represent a kind of rap realism or they can be fashioned as a form of heightened reality through extended metaphors or other nonliteral representations. At their best, they allow their listeners to inhabit other voices, other

selves, and in the process conceive new visions of possibility and freedom.

Rappers face the same challenge as earlier poetic storytellers: Namely, how do you tell the story you want to tell the way you want to tell it while satisfying the audience's expectation of rhyme? Rhyme, along with rhythm and wordplay, makes meaning in rap's stories. Together, rap's formal qualities shape narrative structure even as they are shaped to fit narrative. The most basic convention in rap storytelling is the necessity of working within limitations, turning them to the MC's specific purposes. On "Regiments of Steel" Chubb Rock rhymes that "Rap has developed in the Motherland by storytellers / of wisdom, no wonder we're best sellers / The art was passed on from generation to generation / Developed in the mind, cause the rhyme."

The fact that rappers tell their stories in rhyme shapes their very development. Rhyme provides rap's stories with their greatest formal constraint and their most valuable literary asset. Overdetermined rhymes are the bugaboo of narrative poetry; at the same time, rhyme skillfully rendered is rap's most fundamental claim to art. Those who see no difference between a newspaper account of a crime and a rhyme about a crime fail to understand the process of artistic creation—the necessary act of imagination it takes to tell a story, any story, in verse.

Rap shares most of the rest of its basic storytelling conventions with other narrative forms, poetic and otherwise. In a rap narrative, chronology usually moves from beginning to middle to end. It most often presents an initial situation

followed by a sequence of events that leads to a change or reversal, culminating in a revelation of insight enabled by that reversal. It puts characters in relation to one another; for rap this usually means the first-person narrator in relation to others who sometimes are given voice as well—either through indirect quotation or through the introduction of another (or several other) MCs. Finally, it involves patterning of formal and thematic elements that support and extend the narrative action. All of these conventions are open to revision and even rejection. The one inviolate element of rap storytelling, however, is voice.

Voice in storytelling is the governing authorial intelligence of a narrative. Voice would seem to be a given in rap: the MC and speaker's voice are one and the same. We assume that MCs are rapping to us in their own voices and, as such, that what they say is true to their own experience. All along, however, MCs have been taking far greater liberties with voice than their public stances of authenticity would suggest. Rap becomes much more interesting as poetry and rappers become more impressive as poets when we acknowledge rap as a kind of performance art, a blend of fact and fantasy, narrative and drama expressed in storytelling.

Storytelling is, at its base, a form of communication between artist and audience. Its vehicle of expression is voice. Voice is, of course, the physical instrument of expression, the sound we hear when an MC is rapping. It is also the term that defines the perspective poets take in relation to their audience. Used in this sense, a given rapper might employ multiple "voices," even in a single song. T. S. Eliot distinguished three possible voices in poetic narrative:

The first is the poet talking to himself—or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse; when he is saying, not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character.

Rap rarely employs the first voice, the cosseted tone of a poet addressing him- or herself in isolation. When they do use it, it can have powerful effects, as when Nas reflects upon his own life, or when Biggie contemplates his own death. The second and third voices, the narrative and the dramatic, are both common in rap. The narrative voice is that of the MC directly addressing an audience—this is by far the most prevalent voice, employed in braggadocio and battle raps. The dramatic voice, by contrast, uses the persona of a constructed character to address an audience (or another constructed character in the rhyme).

Narrative and dramatic voices often interpenetrate in rap. The consequence of this fusion is that audiences often don't know what to make of the rapper's poetic voice. Is the "I" speaking to them simply a narrator relating his lived experience, or is it a character in a poetic drama the rapper imagines for us? As a genre, rap has found great artistic success in having it both ways; but it has come at a social cost.

Rap most often combines the intimacy of the narrative voice with the imaginative freedom of the dramatic voice. It shares this impulse with the tall tale of the oral tradition. As an audience we have yet to condition ourselves to understand rap's tall tales as acts of projection. Rap's relation to reality is

like an inside joke that much of the listening public doesn't get. The joke lies in the MC's winking assertion of the "truth" of obvious fictions. Taken to the extreme, like in the short-lived "horrorcore" rap genre in which rappers like the Gravediggaz (a group that included both the RZA and Prince Paul) described macabre tales to rival the dark imaginings of Edgar Allan Poe, this interplay is obvious to all but the most obtuse listener. But rap usually resides in the indeterminacy found in between the narrative and the dramatic voice.

As a narrative form, rap can be usefully compared to the dramatic monologue. Dramatic monologues are "poems spoken by a character through a persona (Greek for 'mask'), rather than by the poet or an unidentified speaker." Think of Marshall Mathers rapping as Eminem rapping as Slim Shady, for instance, or Troy Donald Jamerson rapping as Pharoahe Monch. "On 99 percent of the songs that I do," Pharoahe explains, "I take on a presence or a character." This is far from unusual in rap. So where does the poet's direct expression end and the persona begin? Answering this rests upon how we interpret the "I" in rap.

The dramatic monologue is most often associated with the Victorian poets. Robert Browning's poems like *My Last Duchess* and *Fra Lippo Lippi* offer powerful first-person poetic narratives that illustrate the speaker's descent into madness. In their poetic voice, they involve both the subjectivity of the "I" as poet and persona as well as the element of impersonation—of rendering, often to the point of exaggeration, the characteristic vocal qualities of another. This is precisely what we see happening when Eminem raps as Slim Shady. The voice takes on a nasally whine, the flow becomes ecstatic and er-



matic, all while the lyrics describe exaggerated and comic acts of violence.

Dramatic monologues extend MCs' first-person narrative voices, freeing them to say things they might not say in their own voice and explore territories of experience they might not otherwise visit were it not for the liberation of imaginative distance. MCs have written rhymes that leave their persona incarcerated (Ice Cube's "My Summer Vacation") or even dead (Cube's "Alive on Arrival" or Nas's "Undying Love")—a host of circumstances that the MC might not, or even could not, have the firsthand experience to describe.

In its use of dramatic monologue rap extends a tradition with deep roots in African-American expressive culture. The dramatic monologue is the model upon which such aspects of the oral tradition like the toasts and the stories of John Henry and Stagolee emerge. "In both Stagolee and the dramatic monologue," notes Cecil Brown, "the narrator creates a character who gives the audience a look into his special world. The audience sees through the eyes of the character the rapper creates. It is the 'I' that makes the bridge between the 'I' of the rapper and the 'I' of the character."

By severing—or at least loosening—the bond between personal identity and first-person narration, rappers find a new expressive range for their rhymes. Occasionally, rappers have gone so far as to relinquish the "I" entirely as the focal point of the lyrics. The effect is to demand that the listener understand as fiction the story contained in the lyrics. Rapping in the third person, while certainly uncommon, forces listeners to acknowledge the constructedness of the narrative. Common's "Testify" does precisely this, rendering a taut

story of deception and betrayal while staying entirely in the third person. By relinquishing the first-person focus on the narrative, Common establishes a new relationship with his audience as equal bystanders in a drama of his own creation.

More common are those instances in which the MC retains the first-person voice, but retreats to the peripheries as a first-person narrator of other characters' actions. This highlights the rapper's role as storyteller even as it retains a direct connection between the story and the teller, the teller and the audience. Tupac's "Brenda's Got a Baby," Nas's "Sekou Story," and Slick Rick's "Children's Story" all come to mind. The "I" of the MC becomes the eyes of the audience, revealing a host of experiences both real and imagined.

But how do rappers see themselves in relation to the stories they tell? Do they self-consciously assert the dramatic, the fictional element, of their storytelling? The question of authenticity in rap is phrased as a question of sincerity in literary poetry: "It may be of great interest to discover how accurately a poem reflects its author's experience, attitudes, or beliefs; but this is a question that belongs to biography not to criticism." Testifying before a Congressional subcommittee on profanity in rap in 2007, David Banner made a clear and compelling case for rap's respect as a dramatic medium: "The same respect is often not extended to hip-hop artists as to those in other arenas. Stephen King and Steven Spielberg are renowned for their horrific creations. These movies are embraced as art. Why then is our content not merely deemed horror music?"

One could answer Banner's question any number of ways. Perhaps it is a matter of racial, generational, and socio-economic bias. Perhaps the difference is formal, having to do with the relation between creator and creation, the speaker

and the spoken. Rap, after all, relies upon a near collapse of the distinction, while the other forms keep them clearly separate. Perhaps the best response comes from Jay-Z. He addresses in broad terms the very question taken up at the Congressional hearing: the perceived virulence of rap as an influence on popular culture. His answer gets to the bottom of the question of the “real” in rap.

In hip-hop, the whole “keep it real” has become more than a phrase. Scorsese and Denzel are not tied to the films they make, so people see the separation between art and life. Unfortunately, they don’t see that separation between Shawn Carter and Jay-Z. As far as they’re concerned, everything I talk about is happening for real. To them, at no point is it entertainment. Rappers in general, **THEY ARE** the guys telling their story. To me, real is just the basis for a great fantasy. Not everything I say in a song is true. I’ll take a small thing from life and build upon it, and usually it becomes a fantastic story.

Hip-hop storytelling is what happens when elements of the real become a “fantastic story.” Devin the Dude echoes Jay-Z’s point about fact and fiction, playfully dividing the sources of his storytelling down by percentage: “I’d say 60 percent is really just personal shit I went through; 20 percent is stuff I know about somebody who’s close, or a story I heard. Ten percent is wishful thinking. And the other 10 percent is some high shit we just thought of [Laughs.]” Regardless of how it breaks down, rap storytelling is the vernacular product drawn from multiple sources—fact, fiction, and everything in between.

If we understand rap simply as fact—as it would seem many Americans do—then it’s no wonder that so many are

scandalized by it. But if we treat it as fantasy, as entertainment, then its offensiveness becomes indistinguishable from that of other explicit material that those very same Americans who criticize rap seem to have a voracious appetite for consuming when it comes in the form of movies or television, books or graphic novels. Rap's difference from these other forms is not one of substance but of rhetoric, not of content but of packaging. That packaging is both the product of corporate media and the stuff of the artists themselves.

Unlike writers or filmmakers, rappers rely upon the assumption of first-hand experience with their subject matter. Some have called attention to the irony of the rapper who finds fortune and fame by rapping about already having fortune and fame. Rap relies upon this slippage. "Others talk about it while I live it" is a common boast. Both artist and audience consciously create this illusion and tacitly agree to overlook its artificiality. But this fiction has a way of intruding upon fact, be it through acts of actual violence by concertgoers at rap shows—a problem that almost doomed the rap-concert business in the 1990s—to the artists themselves trying to live up to their own lyrics.

As a result, some of rap's greatest fictions have become "facts" in the public consciousness. Audiences tend to accept uncritically what rappers say as the truth. Even rappers themselves sometimes buy into their own fictions. When Tupac Shakur was in high school he wasn't gangbanging, he was in the drama club. He didn't have a criminal record until *after* he constructed the Thug Life persona that both he and his fans came to see as "real." It is a credit to Tupac as an artist that he rendered such a vivid character in rhyme that people could mistake it for the truth, and yet that identification may

have cost him his life. Rarely are the stakes of rap storytelling as high as they were for Tupac, and yet almost every story rapper tell plays upon the line that divides fantasy from reality.

Undoubtedly the themes of sex and violence are disproportionately represented in rap. This seemingly impoverished range of subjects, however, has produced stories of exquisite complexity and nuance. The theme of a story is also an occasion for expression, a way of making new meanings out of familiar circumstances.

In the mid-1990s, perhaps the dominant narrative voice belonged to its dominant MC, the Notorious B.I.G., who weaved tales of gangster excess drawn more from films like *Scarface*, *Bad Lieutenant*, and *King of New York*, than personal experience. What makes Biggie's stories stand out is his genius in pacing, and his ability to match violence with rueful comedy. "I Got a Story to Tell," from *Life After Death*, the last album completed in his lifetime, released just two weeks after his death, shows him at the height of his creative powers. To a spare beat set by a wicked kick and snare he rhymes of a dangerous liaison with another man's woman.

What begins as a tale of sexual adventure quickly becomes one of ingenuity as the satisfied couple ("She came twice, I came last / Roll a grass"), resting in the bed of the absent cuckold—a player from the New York Knicks—is interrupted by the door opening downstairs. While the woman panics, Big stays calm ("She don't know I'm cool as a fan / Gat in hand, I don't want to blast her man / But I can and I will, though"), and directs her to stall him while he disguises himself for an ambush. When the player comes upstairs, Biggie is waiting, gun drawn and scarf around his face, ordering the man to give him all his money. Not only, Biggie tells us,

does he leave with \$100,000 in cash, but also with the knowledge that he has duped the man into seeing an unlikely robbery in place of a dangerous liaison. Triumphant, Biggie concludes: “Grab the keys to the five, call my niggas on the cell, / Bring some weed, I got a story to tell.” The verse clocks in at less than three minutes, but the track continues for an additional minute and a half as Biggie tells the story *again* to his boys, this time talking instead of rhyiming. By amplifying what was already a dramatic narrative, Biggie has, in effect, enshrined his own verse in legend.

“I Got a Story to Tell” differs in its tone from the other notable story rap on *Life After Death*, “Niggas Bleed.” Gone are the playfulness and mischief, replaced by a dead-serious story about crime and consequence. Biggie’s voice is not exactly his own, and yet it is informed by his rap persona. He tells the story of a drug deal gone bad. But even on this dark song, Biggie can’t resist himself. With the last line, he undercuts the mood of menace by having his story end on a blunder—the getaway car hits a hydrant. This small detail transforms the entire song, with all its menace and drama, into a setup for a Biggie punch line. Unlike so many of those rappers who followed his lead, Biggie never took himself too seriously.

Perhaps the most natural story of all is the story of oneself. For rap music, this often means combining the dual modes of braggadocio and narrative into a kind of autobiography of greatness. Stories of one’s rise to the top—in the rap game, in the crack game, whatever—are quite common. Stories of the MC’s life form one of the core narratives in rap. Of course writing of one’s own birth is a hoary conceit in Western literature, so much so that even its parodies (Laurence

Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* being foremost) are now canonical. In the African-American tradition, autobiography's roots are in the slave narratives, which almost invariably began with some version of "I was born. . . ."

MCs have employed this convention in surprising ways. A partial catalogue of birth narratives includes Ras Kass's "Ordo Abchao (Order Out of Chaos)"; the Notorious B.I.G.'s "Intro" from his debut album, *Ready to Die*; Andre 3000's "She's Alive" from *The Love Below*; and Jay-Z's "December 4th" from *The Black Album*. By far the most arresting example, though, is Nas's "Fetus," the hidden track on 2002's *The Lost Tapes*. The song begins with pensive guitar chords followed by the sound of bubbling liquid, soon overlaid with a beat and a piano riff that picks up on the guitar's melody. Then Nas begins, almost as a preface, in a tone more spoken than rapped, "Yeah. I want all my niggas to come journey with me / My name is Nas, and the year is 1973 / The beginning of me / Therefore I can see / Through my belly button window / Who I am." By endowing the insensible with voice, he aspires to an expressive level that transcends speaking for oneself, or of oneself, to one that self-consciously constructs itself as an artist giving shape to that which lacks coherence.

Another unforgettable, unconventional example of rap autobiography is Andre 3000's "A Life in the Day of Benjamin André (Incomplete)," the last track on *The Love Below*. At just over five minutes, it's a long song by today's rap standards. But what makes it stand out is the fact that he rhymes for the entire time—no hooks, no breaks, just words. Unlike the previous examples, Andre chooses to begin not with his actual birth, but his birth as a lover and as an artist: "I met you in a club in Atlanta, Georgia / Said me and homeboy

were comin' out with an album." The narrative that follows intertwines Andre's rise to prominence as an artist with his love relationships, most notably the tumultuous one he had with the R&B singer Erykah Badu. The lines that follow epitomize the way Andre balances the improvisational qualities of storytelling with a clear and directed narrative trajectory, stream-of-consciousness forays with factual assertion:

Now you know her as Erykah "On and On" Badu,  
 Call "Tyrone" on the phone "Why you  
 Do that girl like that, boy; you ought to be ashamed!"  
 The song wasn't about me and that ain't my name.  
 We're young, in love, in short we had fun.  
 No regrets no abortion, had a son  
 By the name of Seven, and he's five  
 By the time I do this mix, he'll probably be six  
 You do the arithmetic; me do the language arts  
 Y'all stand against the wall blindfolded, me throw the  
       darts . . .

These lines show Andre using stark enjambment, other voices, layered rhyme, and playful wordplay to render an unforgettable story, which also happens to be the story of his life.

Like so many other narrative forms today, rap too has seen a revolution in its storytelling structure. In particular, MCs have begun to devise nonlinear narratives, perhaps in emulation of filmmakers. "Narrative is a verbal presentation of a sequence of events or facts . . . whose disposition in time implies causal connection and point," notes the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Obvious examples include Nas's "Rewind," which begins with an invocation:



Listen up gangstas and honeys with your hair done  
Pull up a chair, hon', and put it in the air, son  
Dog, whatever they call you, god, just listen  
I spit a story backwards, it starts at the ending . . .

The first image Nas describes is of a man with a bullet coming out of his body. As we rewind, Nas inverts narrative tension without compromising its effect upon the listener; just the opposite, emotions are amplified. Nas uses a similar narrative conceit on “Blaze a 50,” except instead of telling the entire story in reverse, he narrates his story in conventional fashion all the way through, but, not being satisfied with the ending, “rewinds” to an earlier point and ends it another way.

Nas is perhaps contemporary rap’s greatest innovator in storytelling. His catalog includes songs narrated before birth (“Fetus”) and after death (“Amongst Kings”), biographies (“U.B.R. [Unauthorized Biography of Rakim]”) and autobiographies (“Doo Rags”), allegorical tales (“Money Is My Bitch”) and epistolary ones (“One Love”), he’s rapped in the voice of a woman (“Sekou Story”) and even of a gun (“I Gave You Power”).

His most arresting story, however, may be “Undying Love,” a dramatic monologue about infidelity, jealousy, murder, and suicide that would have made Robert Browning proud. It pairs well with Biggie’s “I Got a Story to Tell,” except where Biggie rhymes in the voice of the man cheating, Nas rhymes in the voice of the man being cheated upon. What’s remarkable about the story this song tells is that it pierces the armor of invincibility surrounding the MC’s ego, if only in fiction rather than fact. In the process, Nas explores

a texture of emotion rarely acknowledged in rap: human frailty. In doing so, he suggests that rap may yet be capable of encompassing the full range of human emotion.

Rap has always expressed a broad expanse of moods. Its rawest emotions are often on display when MCs aren't telling stories at all. After all, rap is the product of two seemingly disparate places—the block party and the lyrical battlefield. The good-times spirit that rap often displays is tempered by the more aggressive, even menacing, tone it takes on other occasions. As a consequence, rap is often misunderstood, taken either as a joke or as a threat. In reality it is both and so much more. It is to rap's complicated, sometimes contradictory, spirit that we now turn.