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## Film, Video, and Multimedia Reviews

**Freestyle: The Art of Rhyme.** Producer: Henry Alex Rubin; Director: Kevin Fitzgerald; DVD; 75 minutes. Organic Films, 2004. Distributor: Palm Pictures, 76 Ninth Avenue, Suite 1110, New York, NY 10011; tel (212) 320-3600; [www.palmpictures.com](http://www.palmpictures.com)

In a particularly poignant series of scenes in Kevin Fitzgerald's 2004 Palm Pictures DVD *Freestyle: the Art of Rhyme*, several West Coast rappers offer detailed, if incongruous, explanations of the term "freestyle." Oakland-based lyricist Boots explains the temporal and aesthetic differences between freestyle (impromptu and improvised rap lyrics) and "written rhymes" (composed rap lyrics). Offering a more nuanced explanation of improvisation, MC Divine Styler ("MC" being a common prefix to rappers' stage names) argues that early forms of freestyle often emphasized "non-conceptual rhyming," the abstract association of words through improvisation. Articulating a version of freestyle that holds much currency in underground hip hop today, P.E.A.C.E., an MC from the Los Angeles-based Freestyle Fellowship, shows that freestyle is improvisatory rhyming drawing upon immediate social situations for its inspiration and meaning. In a compelling display, P.E.A.C.E. freestyles using rhythms and lyrical ideas from the preceding moments of the interview footage.

Brandishing the stage name DJ Organic, director Kevin Fitzgerald is certainly an "insider" to the world of underground hip hop. Throughout its fourteen chapters and several extras, including a special "freestyle" mode that randomly selects chapter order, the film highlights Fitzgerald's ability to capture candid interview-based footage in typically guarded social spaces. The cinematography exquisitely illustrates the underground hip hop scenes of Los Angeles and New York in the 1990s, an "art world" far removed from the glitz and glamor of MTV, Rolling Stone Magazine, and other gatekeepers of commercial rap music. Indeed, *Freestyle* seems to reinterpret the hip hop notion of "street cred(ibility)," the idea that authenticity is principally rooted in street experience. Instead of showcasing the celebrities of commercial rap music, Fitzgerald focuses on local youth communities that often strike an

adversarial relationship with the pop music mainstream, revealing the tension between underground and mainstream rap. In special moments, well-known rap celebrities are showcased, but they are captured outside of the music industry veneer: a seventeen-year-old Notorious B.I.G. is seen freestyling on a street corner in Brooklyn (before his commercial success) and Mos Def is captured freestyling with local rappers in a "cipher," that is, a circle of rappers who take turns freestyling, often in a competitive manner. In the context of recent commercial representations of rap music, Fitzgerald's film argues not for the authenticity of specific rappers and their glorified connection to street culture; instead, he highlights the centrality of local community-based music practices and maps the social networks that give rise to innovation and ideas about lyrical virtuosity.

*Freestyle* rests within a larger filmic discourse on hip hop culture witnessed in recent commercial feature films like *8 Mile* (2002), *Pass the Mic* (2003), and documentaries such as *Scratch* (2001), also released on Palm Pictures. The latter provides a detailed account of DJ culture and turntablism in the United States. Taken together *Scratch* and *Freestyle* offer a glimpse into experimentalism in hip hop and illustrate fascinating and broad historical frameworks for the emergence of new trends in rap music.

*Freestyle* accomplishes this by incorporating interviews and performance footage of jazz musicians and the Last Poets (an activist spoken-word and performance art troupe that emerged in Harlem in the 1960s). Eluard Blurt II, an African American jazz musician and historian, appears frequently, arguing that contemporary improvisatory practices in rap are connected to earlier trends in black music and are best understood within a larger rubric of African American improvisation, experimentalism, and activism. Freestyling is likened not only to jazz improvisation, but also to the rhythmic and improvisatory oratory of charismatic preaching, a cornerstone of the Baptist tradition in the United States. While these historicizing moves are alluring and now common in hip hop culture and scholarship, a more nuanced discussion of the difference between rap and other forms of African American improvisation is left wanting. The looming danger is to reduce improvisation to a limited number of performative strategies, to a linear development that is comfy, predictable, and seductively entrenched. Such reductionism belies the diversity of black experimentalism witnessed in myriad forms since the earliest years of African American culture.

Another major thread in the film is the role of competition in MC culture. Social and artistic hierarchies within local communities are a function of a rapper's verbal and rhythmic dexterity. The stratification of these communities takes place in a few common social spaces, most notably the "MC battle," which occurs in not only highly publicized concert-like events, but more fre-

quently in informal ciphers. In both cases, MCs attempt to one-up each other by freestyling lyrics that criticize their opponent's rapping, artistic approach, clothing, appearance, crew, and so forth. These competitive encounters often become quite heated exchanges and culminate in either concession of one rapper to the other, or in general consensus by listeners as to a winner. A major section of the film focuses on the musical confrontation between two well-known New York-based MCs, Supernatural and Craig G. Using footage from their highly publicized encounter and interviews with each artist and others present, the complicated social and musical politics at work in high profile MC battles is mapped in detail.

Indeed, various forms of competition are ubiquitous throughout *Freestyle*, so much, in fact, that viewers unfamiliar with the often heated rhetoric of rap might easily be distracted and confused by it. This focus, however, captures an important element of hip hop that articulates larger connections to African American cultural expression. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and other scholars have argued that the "dozens," a form of playful verbal competitiveness, is a trope that spans a variety of African American discourses. Although *Freestyle* stops short of this critical interpretation, those striving to understand African American culture will find much in this film connecting freestyling to larger artistic, social, and cultural contexts.

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**Nadopasana: My Own Carnatic Tutor.** 2005. Two video compact disc VCDs. Concept and design by S. Sowmya and K.N. Shashikiran. Produced by Sristhi's Carnatica, Chennai, India; co-produced by Kalaioli Ethnomusicals, Houston. Available from: <<http://www.carnatica.net/otherproducts.htm>>.

**Raganidhi: A Treasure Trove of Ragams.** 2005. Three compact disc CD-ROMs. Project director, Prasada Rao L.N. Gandlur. Blue Lotus Informatics, Hyderabad, A.P., India. Available from: <<http://bluelotusinfo.com/buynow/buynow.htm>>

**Carnatic Krithis and Varnams Audio Archive.** 2005. Website and six compact disc CD-ROMs. Compiled by Shivkumar Kalyanaraman, Troy, New York. Available from: <<http://www.ecse.rpi.edu/Homepages/shivkuma/personal/music/background.html>>

New pedagogical resources for the study of Karnatak (Carnatic) classical music of South India have recently appeared in the form of websites, computer programs, and videos. For at least the past half-century, lessons