Music In Chicago: Rap, Jazz, Hip-hop

In central Nebraska, we would work hard. We worked hard all day and every day, in the field and in the classroom. We worked early on cold winter mornings, breaking ice on the water tanks as our breath floated into the frigid air. We worked in the middle of hot summer days, fixing pivots while sweat ran down our faces and our arms intertwined with the bright green corn stalks, cutting our arms and tripping us up. While all this was happening, though, there was a constant. We were always listening to music. Most people would listen to the highly relatable classics by George Strait or the hottest new country music by Florida Georgia Line or Thomas Rhett, but that wasn't me. I listened to music by people that couldn't have seemed more unrelatable to my life. I listened to young rap artists from Chicago.

My first interaction with the Chicago jazz rap scene was in the fall of 2015 when I was a sophomore in high school. I was already an avid listener of hip-hop music at that point, and one of my favorite ways to waste time was to find videos of my favorite artists doing freestyles on radio shows. A freestyle is when someone is given a random beat or instrumental and they have to rap over it on the spot or with prewritten verses. I was watching improvised performances of artists such as Tyler, The Creator and Childish Gambino when I saw the thumbnail of this weird-looking dude wearing a grey and teal Adidas sweatshirt named Chance the Rapper. Naturally, I clicked on the video so I could make fun of him. However, he spit a freestyle over Kanye West's "Through the Wire" and his wordplay and rhythm grabbed my attention. I knew I had to listen to more music by him, but I couldn't find any of his music on any mainstream sites such as Spotify or iTunes. After searching for an hour or so, I finally found a slightly sketchy website called Datpiff. Datpiff is a site that has songs and mixtapes that are primarily uploaded by rappers. I gave his tape Acid Rap a listen and it changed my life forever. The instrumentals seemed so full but simple with their rich Gospel chords and fast-paced beats. Chance's high-pitched crooning came through the speakers as if he was one with the music.

Soon after discovering Chance, I looked into other artists that he collaborated with. I quickly realized that all the artists were from Chicago. My knowledge in the scene expanded when I found Mick Jenkins's The Water[s] tape. The only way that I can describe Mick Jenkins's 2014 project is that I felt like I was underwater when I listened to it. The mellow, jazz-influenced instrumentals and Mick's deep baritone made for an unforgettable combination. In October of 2016, Saba's Bucket List Project was also very influential to me. His rapid flow and unique word play and hooks impressed me. These three artists made me realize that something different was happening in Chicago that wasn't happening anywhere else in rap music.

This hip-hop was different compared to anything else I'd heard before. Not only was the style of rap new to me, but also the topics they were rapping about. They discussed chasing your dreams, relationships between friends and family, and life as a young black American living in Chicago. The last overseeing idea may not seem like it would have had an effect on me considering where I grew up, but it still resonates with me to this day. They were standouts in a community that wasn't the most encouraging toward people that tried doing anything outside of what was normal. I was trying to be like those that I idolized because they were like me.

Even though the hip-hop I listen to has positive and constructive messages, the negative views

of those outside still leak into the picture. I still hear statements from people around me, usually older people, that act as though rap music is toxic and shouldn't be shown to younger people. While the language used and the topics discussed in the music are sometimes explicit, it can be necessary. The world is explicit, and trying to suppress the artistic freedom of individuals would be a step in the wrong direction.

When it comes to Chicago rap, those on the outside have a certain "drill vs. everything else" mentality. In Chicago, there are primarily two dominant genres of rap music. There is soulful, jazz-influenced hip-hop and there is dark drill trap music. The styles became popular at the same time and sparked debate and comparisons between the two sides of south Chicago. However, many listeners misinterpret the differences as competition even though the artists frequently collaborate. In the past, Chance the Rapper has shared the stage with one of the kings of the drill movement, King Louie. Chief Keef, another founder of drill, has released heavily R&B inspired music during his career and has made.