Representation Of Rap Music In The Book The Evolution Of Hip-Hop Culture By Jan Devos: Opinion Essay

‘Rap’. A term that has become rather synonymous with dubious morals, immoral/unlawful behavior or plain and simple ostentatiousness. However, the book “The Evolution of Hip-Hop Culture” by Jan Devos changed my perspective towards it. Granted, my previous negative impression of rap music was formed by what I saw and read in the media. I now realize that the media has the power to paint our opinion and also influence the art itself.

This book helped me go back to the basics to understand the background of rap, its effect on the population, what it stands for and what it is turned out to be over the years. As the quote by Michael Eric Dyson aptly says at the introduction of the book- “We should be willing to take a scholarly look at hip-hop for no other reason than the art form and culture has grabbed global attention and sparked emulation in countless different countries and among widely varied ethnicities. “ Rap, being a part of hip hop has been overlooked by critics for the longest time solely due to the fact that it is dismissed as ‘popular’ or a ‘fad’. While learning about the origin of rap, I got to know that the process leading to the production of reggae and rap is basically the same.

The artists rap their lines in time to rhythms taken from records. And the content of these raps is similar, too. There are boast raps, insult raps, news raps, message raps or party raps, just as there are in reggae. There are also other similarities. “Just as reggae is bound up with the idea of roots and culture, so rap is rooted in the experience of lower-class blacks in America’s big northern cities. In one of the best-written lines of the book, Davos says “Rap did for poor blacks in America in the 1980s what reggae had done for the ‘sufferers’ in Jamaica a decade earlier. It got them noticed again and it helped to forge a sense of identity and pride within the local community”. I was interested in understanding the gradual origin of rap with DJ Kool Herc, Gil Scott-Heron and the Last Poets, and even Bessie Smith’s rapping to a beat in some of her blues. What surprised me was the date that politically charged rap goes back to. In 1980, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s scathing lyrical realism caught the music scene off guard, for there was nothing to compare ‘the message’ to.

The despair, anger, and claustrophobia of life in the inner city were brought to the public uncensored: “I can’t take the smell, I can’t take the noise I got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice.” Songs like this gave a voice to the previously unrepresented African-American and destitute people living in the country that sold the ‘Great American Dream. However, this wasn’t the only issue that rap music raised. In fact, rap music also represented an astute critique of the rise and impact of the Reagan right on working-class and urban locales. Since rap music was bringing up previously unrepresented issues, it made a huge part of the population hopeful about their future.The fate of the individual spirit living within the parameters of the post-industrial urban landscape had been consigned at birth to live a short and miserable life.

The representative of the genre, hip-hop, was perhaps the first popular form of black music that offered little or no hope to its audience. I wonder if this ‘fatalistic’ experience has become a standard trope of urban-based hip-hop. Rap has also retrieved historic black ideas, movements, and figures in combating racial discrimination. Rap music has also focused renewed attention

on black nationalist and black radical thought. This revival has been best symbolized by the rap group Public Enemy.