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Mark Janzer
mjanzer@pugetsound.edu

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Uncharted Progress: A Musical Analysis of the Elements and Evolution of Rap

By Mark Janzer
Supervised by Dr. Robert Hutchinson
Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to develop and apply a relatively objective method to analyze the musical properties of rap. This paper studies the rhythm, rhyme, and phrasing of rap lyrics in hopes of finding trends in these elements throughout time.

This research was done as objectively as possible, but it is still not purely objective. It is sometimes difficult to tell if a certain syllable is stressed, if an internal rhyme was intended, or if a rapper is out of time, or just using a bizarre subdivision of the beat. Also to measure trends accurately, one would have to transcribe and catalog all of the rap music and determine the quantity of techniques used to see if a technique of rap was really trending at a certain time.

All of the music I choose is from The Anthology of Rap, which was edited by Adam Bradley and Andrew Dubois and published by Yale University Press. I have great trust in their taste of what “good” rap is. However, their method of picking the music was to some extent subjective.

This study is not about defining rap as good, and this paper cannot tell you how to make good rap. There are many expectations of rap that I cannot measure, and therefore do not cover, and many rappers fulfill these. These rappers show us that although this analysis explains many fascinating aspects of rap, it cannot measure quality.

What this analysis may provide you with is a new way to listen to, understand, and describe this new, young form of art.

Expectations

Music develops, denies, and fulfills our expectations. We create these expectations by listening to the patterns in the music throughout the course of our lives, but also by recognizing patterns within a single piece of music. Classical music often leads us to believe that we are about to reach the end of the piece until the cadence ends deceptively, letting down our expectations yet surprising us. When we expect a melody to be repeated, we are kept on our toes by a variation. Often in the
last movement of a symphony, the orchestra builds towards the climax and finally resolves in a way that fulfills our expectations and completes the emotional journey of the music. The increased intensity of the last chorus of a pop song and the return of the chorus back after a wild jazz solo are both examples of how music plays with our expectations. Rap is a genre that started with masters of ceremonies and disc jockeys, often referred to as MCs and DJs. Rap from an MC hosting the DJ’s performance, often making toasts over the beat. These toasts developed rhythm and rhyme and MCs gained popularity before rap’s thirty-four years of recorded history even began. Since it is “merely” rhyme over a (often) simple chord progression, what is it that makes the music so satisfying? What expectations do we have that MCs have learned to trick and fulfill?

The expectations of rap are developed as the listener absorbs rap music and effects their perception and expectations for the entire genre. In addition, when listening to rap music the MCs create patterns that develop expectations for the individual song, and perhaps the artist and album. However, due to the use of rhyme, some of rap’s expectations can be developed by listening to almost any rhyming verse, whether it be nursery rhymes or the lyrics of a favorite rock song. The expectations of rap can be roughly broken down into a hierarchy of four elements.

The hierarchy of expectations from the strongest to the weakest is related to these concepts: rhyme at the end of the lines, internal rhyme, the rhythm of the stressed syllables, and the rhythm made by all syllables stressed and unstressed.

The strongest expectation in rap is shared with nursery rhymes: end rhyme. We predict the last stressed syllable of the last word of a line to rhyme with the last syllable of the last stressed syllable of the last word of the next line. In addition, we expect this rhyme to take place at the same place in the next measure.
Example 1: Children’s Story- Slick Rick -1988- :29

The last accented syllable of the first line is the “oh” sound from “ago,” which lands on the fourth sixteenth note of beat three. This creates the expectation for something that rhymes with “oh” on the fourth sixteenth note of the third beat in the next measure. Slick Rick uses a perfect rhyme with “slow” to resolve the rhyme right where we predict, and fulfills our expectations.

This expectation of end rhyme is not constant in strength, as it has molded around the rhymes that we have heard, and most rhymes follow rhyme schemes. Most rap has the rhyme scheme of couplets (AA). There are longer forms, such as ballad form (ABAB or ABCB) and a single end rhyme quatrain (AAAA). Rappers also use one-liners (A), which is a line that does not rhyme with any other lines. Most of the couplets and quatrains line up with four (and sometimes two) bar phrases created by the beat and the length of time the MC has to rap (usually 16 bars). This means that when we hear the last syllable of a line our expectations differ depending on where we are in the four bar phrase. The expectations between the first and second, and between the third and fourth bars are strong, because it predicts the most common four bar rhyme scheme: a couple of couplets. Between the second and third bar of a four bar phrase our expectations are weaker because we don’t have strong expectations for a single end rhyme quatrain (AAAA), and none of the other rhyme schemes rhyme the second and third bar. The expectations are weakest between the fourth bar and the first bar of the next four bar phrase, because we expect the rhyme scheme to change after the four bar phrase. Our expectations may change with the artist or song we listen to as we become accustomed an artist’s style or an established pattern, but this expectation holds true throughout the genre.
Example 2: Zulu Nation Throwdown- Afrika Bambaataa and the Cosmic Force*
- 1980 :27

In this excerpt, MC Lisa Lee first establishes a syllable to be rhymed ("thing" that is pronounced to rhyme with bang), and the other three MCs (MC Chubby Chub, MC Ice-Ice, and MC Ikey C) resolve the rhyme as we expect (with "bang"). If there was no end rhyme to match "thing," the rhyme would be unresolved and we would be surprised. However we are not surprised when we hear the end rhyme "delight" in the third measure even though it does not rhyme with the previous measure. We feel the same expectation and resolution of the first two measures once again between the third and fourth measure. This shows our expectations for a couplet rhyme scheme, as opposed to ballad form or a series of one-liners.

Internal rhyme and stressed rhythm are the two next elements on the hierarchy, and they share much in common. The stressed rhythm is the rhythm created by the natural and sometimes unnatural stresses in the words of the verse. Most rhyming syllables are stressed, and if they aren’t, they risk going unnoticed. This includes internal rhyme, which is rhyme that occurs in the middle of the line. These internal rhymes can rhyme with the end rhyme or rhyme with other words within or outside of the line they are in. With both stressed rhythm and internal rhymes, the expectation is for the stresses and rhymes to fall in the same place in the next measure. Since rappers often change rhyme and flow with a change in the rhyme scheme, the same lapses in strength of the expectations seen with the end rhymes are seen with internal rhyme and stressed rhythm.

In the first couplet, Rakim begins an internal rhyme on beat two, places a rest in the middle of the measure after the internal rhyme, and places an end rhyme starting on beat four. There are differences between the two lines of the couplet: in the first, Rakim dodges beat one, uses triplets, the end rhyme has a duration of three sixteenth notes, and doesn’t rest in the middle of the measure for nearly as long as he does in the second. Despite these differences, the first two measures are far more similar than the second and third measure. In comparison, the third measure does not rest in any of the same places, has an internal rhyme on beat one, has it's end rhyme on the fourth sixteenth note of beat three, and leaves beat four as a pick up for the next line of the couplet. Despite the differences between the couplets, the changes are not shocking and expectations are not shattered. This shows how our expectations of the internal rhyme and stressed rhythm also change with the rhyme scheme.

One more type of rhyme that develops expectations yet falls under the categories of both end rhyme and internal rhyme is multisyllabic rhyme. When we hear a word that is going to be used as a multisyllabic rhyme, we have no way of knowing for sure, because it could always be monosyllabic. MCs hint at a multisyllabic rhyme by delivering the first stressed syllable of the multisyllabic rhyme on a strong beat that they often rhyme on (usually beat three or four depending on the rapper). The following stressed syllables sound suspicious to us, and we can predict that the MC will do the same the next line. You can hear Rakim employ this technique in example 3. However, these expectations can also be
developed if the MC has used the multisyllabic rhyme earlier, perhaps internally, so we automatically expect it.

Finally, we develop the expectation for a consistent multisyllabic rhyme, so when it is contracted or expanded in length we notice. If a multisyllabic rhyme spans three sixteenth notes, we will expect it to span three sixteenth notes the next time, and if it is longer or shorter it will be tricking our expectations. Multisyllabic rhymes often have unstressed syllables within them which may or may not be rhymed. The unstressed syllables have much less sonic influence, so when they don't rhyme they do not stand out. MCs use multisyllabic rhymes and add or subtract unaccented syllables or rests from the rhyme to create the same deception of expectations described previously.

The weakest expectation has to do with the complete rhythm, or the rhythm that is made up of not only stressed syllables, but unstressed syllables too. The expectation is that the entire rhythm of the line will be the same as the one before it. Although listeners can be conscious of this rhythm, rappers are generally more consistent with the stressed syllables and feel free to add or take away unstressed syllables because they aren't nearly as noticeable. This makes complete rhythm the element that can be compromised, and it allows for flexibility, especially for the syntax of the lines. MCs can slightly alter the number of syllables in a line and keep the stressed rhythm exactly the same by adding or detracting from the complete rhythm.

There are many other expectations that are developed from listening to rap. We expect the beat to repeat as it has been throughout the song, we expect the MC to use a consistent tone of voice and stay on the same subject matter, and we may even be able to predict the next rhyming word. I am not addressing these expectations because I am focusing on a relatively objective musical analysis.

Here is an important and intriguing idea that is important to note as we study rap in retrospect: it is difficult—if not impossible—to tell if the rappers changed styles in order to play with the listeners' expectations, or if they simply changed the way they rap and the expectations arose to suit the new styles.
THE OLD SCHOOL ERA
1978-1984

End Rhyme

The Old School Era of rap used several different rhyme schemes. The most popular was the couplet. This rhyme scheme was used by seemingly every rapper, and was sometimes the only form that a rapper would use. The second most popular was ballad form, either ABAB or ABCB. Most rappers would vary between ballad and couplet forms often. For instance, the first fifty-two measures of “Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugarhill Gang are mostly ballad form (ABCB), and then the next forty measures are almost entirely composed of couplets. One-liners, were even less popular than ballad form. This is partially because in order to make them a one-liner and not a non-rhyming line, internal rhyme had to be employed. The internal rhyme matches the end rhyme, creating a slight resolution at the end of each line. Single end rhyme quatrains were used the least, and were heard very rarely.

End rhymes were relatively simple in the Old School Era. It was most common for them to monosyllabic end rhymes, however sometimes they would use multisyllabic rhymes of up to three syllables in length.

To fulfill our expectations, MCs rhyme where we expect them to rhyme due to what we heard in the previous line. A strategy widely used to deceive these expectations is the displacement of the end rhyme. When the end rhyme is early it hits us when we don’t expect it, and when the end rhyme is placed later than expected we are suspended in wait for the resolution. For example, if the first bar of a couplet an MC places the end rhyme on beat four, and in the next measure the end rhyme is on the fourth sixteenth note of beat three, it is displaced earlier. If the first end rhyme starts on the fourth sixteenth note of beat three and is placed on beat four in the next, it is late displacement.

Those examples are the most common applications of displacement in the Old School Era. These small shifts leave us on our toes and can rarely predict exactly where the rhyme is going to land. They also rhyme on other beats, such as beat three or the third sixteenth note of beat three, but not as often. Other beats were
rare, partially due to the common phrasing of the Old School Era, which will be addressed later.

**Example 4: Rappin and Rockin the House- Funky Four + 1- 1979 :52**

The first couplet, performed by Rodney Cee has its first end rhyme on the fourth sixteenth note of the third beat, and has internal rhymes landing on the fourth sixteenth note of the first beat. This sets up the listener to expect the last rhyme to land on the fourth sixteenth note of beat three the second time, but in the fashion of the Old School style, Rodney Cee *displaces* the end rhyme, letting the end rhyme land one sixteenth note later, on beat four. Sha-Rock does just the opposite, with the first end rhyme landing on beat four, and then fooling the listener by *displacing* the end rhyme to the fourth sixteenth note of beat three.

MCs didn’t find it necessary to use end rhymes all of the time. They would often go a line or two without rhyming, making the rap sound more like the toasting that it is partially derived from (example 9). To someone who has listened to a lot of the later years of rap, these lines stick out, as it has become less common for MCs not to rhyme. Back in the seventies and early eighties however, this may not have been as noticeable as there were not such strong expectations for the resolution of end rhyme. It was not uncommon for even the best rappers of the time to drop the rhyme for a measure or two.

**Internal Rhyme**

Internal rhymes were used in the Old School Era, but not with great consistency. The rhymes were almost always only one syllable long; multisyllabic internal rhymes were rare. Internal rhymes can rhyme with anything, and are not restricted by rhyme schemes. Internal rhymes can rhyme with the end rhyme of the
measure they are in, or the end rhyme of adjacent lines. They also can rhyme with internal rhymes within the same line or within adjacent lines, or a combination of any aforementioned rhymes.

Internal rhymes spanning over a measure have an important function. Rather than just adding to the rhythm and rhyme of the rap they can give the rap more continuity. For instance, an internal rhyme that spans the two bars of a couplet will make the form of the couplet more noticeable, and an internal rhyme that spans from the second line of one couplet into the first line of the next builds continuity between the lines.


Now who’s the king of these rude ludicrous lucrative lyrics?/Who could inherit the title, put the youth in hysterics?/Usin his music to steer it, sharing his views and his merits/But there’s a huge interference—they’re saying you shouldn’t hear it

Although this excerpt is not from the Old School Era, it is one of the best examples of how internal rhyme can build continuity between, Eminem gives great continuity to the quatrain using internal rhyme. Although he uses rhymes like “-herit” and “steer it” as two different multisyllabic internal rhymes, the most noticeable rhyme that holds the quatrain together is the assonance of “who.” This excerpt has such dense internal rhymes that the listener does not mind that the end rhyme does not rhymes are not consistent. The first end rhyme “lyrics” is transformed to sound more like “-terics,” but it is not too clear. More notably, the last internal rhyme does not fit with the rest, as “mer-“ and “hear it” do not form a multisyllabic rhyme. The “mer-“ and “hear” do not rhyme, but because of the use of internal rhymes to give continuity to the quatrain (and to prepare the end rhymes), the lack of end rhyme does not shock or disorientate the listener.

Internal rhymes that are the same as the end rhyme are essential for the use of one-liners. A series of one-liners has a different end rhyme each line, but the lines would not have end rhymes and therefore be unrhymed unless they had something
to rhyme with. When using this form MCs often use internal rhymes, usually right around beat two, and then resolve that rhyme with the end rhyme around beat four. MCs change the end and internal rhymes each line to make the *one-liners*.

**Example 6: To the Beat Y'all- Lady B- 1979  3:59**

This is one of the few times a series of *one-liners* is employed, and Lady B executes it with creativity. She uses internal rhymes (Ike/mic, Gable/table etc.) to give the end rhymes a rhyme to resolve. At the end of the four bars, Lady B plays with our expectations by leaving a space for our own creativity to fill in the rest of the phrase. In addition she also *displaces* the end rhyme. Although she might not resolve with the word we were expecting, the “what” in the next line can be seen as a postponing of the resolution of the rhyme that she led us to expect from the word “Duck.”

In the Old School Era, internal rhymes were not used often, and when they were used, they were not used with consistent placement. It was rare for an internal rhyme to begin on the same part of a measure in adjacent lines. This inconsistent use of internal rhyme makes the expectation of internal rhyme very weak. The listener does not expect to hear an internal rhyme, and when it is heard, there is no strong expectation to hear another internal rhyme in the same part of the next measure.

**Example 7: Zulu Nation Throwdown- Afrika Bambaataa and the Cosmic Force-1980 4:36**

So young la-dies out there lis from the hea-vers a-bow. That’s right I ne-ver met a girl that I could pil-shock up.
The second part of this couplet is quite dense with internal rhymes. Both syllables of “Heavens,” the first syllable of “never,” and “met” all rhyme. The first syllable of “couldn’t” and “shook” also rhyme, and these rhymes are in addition to the end rhymes “above” and “up.” However they are not used consistently, so no expectations are developed by the listener, thus the rhymes pass more as decoration than as a noticeable rhyme.

**Stressed Rhythm**

The stressed rhythm of the Old School Era did not vary much, which gave all rappers a similar style (at least in comparison to the later years of rap). This Old School phrasing followed unspoken rules, and this restricted the possibilities of rap at the time.

The most noticeable trait of the Old School style is the consistency of beat one. Beat one is the anchor of the line, and Old School MCs emphasize their syllable on beat one consistently with very few expectations. Another custom of the phrasing is that there is a stressed syllable in every beat, unless there is a caesura (the MC is resting). This could be due to the sixteenth note rhythms that are used and the sheer amount of stressed syllables that naturally occur in the English language. Another unspoken rule is that MCs will not place two stressed syllables right next to each other, in the rhythm of two sixteenth notes. The reason adjacent stressed sixteenth notes are not allowed but eighth notes are will be explained later. This can be partly attributed to the natural stresses and phrasing of the English language. Finally the length and placement of phrases in the Old School Era are very similar. With a few exceptions, every line started on or between beat four of the previous measure and beat one, and almost every line resolved on or between beat three and beat four. This phrasing is useful because it is simple and gives time for breath. Always stressing beat one makes it much easier to stay with the beat, which could be difficult in performance depending on the size of the party and strength of the speakers. Beginning on or between beats four and one gives the MC room to add words before the accented word, making the syntax more flexible. Finally, the MCs would rarely end a phrase on beat four and start the next phrase as soon as possible.
or run the phrase through the measure (an enjambment). This makes the end of a bar a great time to separate the sentences (an end-stopped line) and give time for the rapper to breathe.

These “rules” restrict the use of many rhythms and give MCs of the Old School a similar sound. The accented rhythms of Old School rappers would very rarely stress the second sixteenth note of any beat, and this is due to the customs of the Old School style. The second sixteenth note of the first beat is practically unable to be stressed due to the need to stress the first beat and the restriction from stressing two sixteenth notes in a row. The second sixteenth note of the second beat isn’t too common because it can only be stressed if the third or fourth sixteenth note of beat one was stressed (as the second is off limits). Also it could only be stressed if neither the first or third sixteenth note of beat two are stressed, and these were both very popular options. The second sixteenth note of beat three was the most common because it could be reached by stressing the second, third or fourth sixteenth note of beat two. Finally, the second sixteenth note of beat four was uncommon because it lies where the MCs would most often breathe.

These trends lead MCs to stress beat one, the second beat or the sixteenth note before, and the fourth beat or the sixteenth note before. This is partially due to the fact that the unspoken rules limit the amount of possibilities to stress other beats, but it is also due to the fact that MCs of the Old School Era were influences for each other. There were not many MCs at the time and the art had not been around for long, so many of the styles they had were developed from the similar styles they had heard.

Example 8: Superrappin- Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five-1979 :54
This is a standard four bar phrase for the Old School Era. The rhyme scheme is two couplets, the most popular scheme for any four bars. All of the lines start between beat four and beat one, stress beat one, and end between beat three and four. There is only one internal rhyme—“blast” with “Flash” and “class”—and all of the rhymes are monosyllabic. It is possible that the “M” of MCs and “sec” of second are intended internal rhymes, but like many internal rhymes of the Old School it is rather vague. The most unusual aspect of this excerpt is in the first couplet. Melle Mel raps in a very syncopated manner, landing on the second and fourth sixteenth notes rather than the first and the third for most of the time.

**Complete rhythm**

There is a custom of the Old School style that has to do with the *complete rhythm* of rap. *Complete rhythm* is the rhythm of the lyrics, including both stressed and unstressed syllables.

With few expectations, every rhythm in Old School rap has a *rhythmic lowest common denominator*, and this denominator was the sixteenth note. This means that the rhythms go no faster than a sixteenth note. An aspect of rap that contributed to this universal lowest common denominator is the beat. Most of the music that DJs play in the Old School Era is between 90 and 110 beats per minute. This allows the MCs to rap as fast as constant sixteenth notes (which is rapid but manageable) and also gives the possibility of syncopation. The lack of triplets, quintuplets, or similar beat divisions that cannot be broken down into sixteenth notes makes the sixteenth note the rhythmic lowest common denominator. With very few exceptions, all rhythms of the rappers in the Old School Era can be written out as sixteenth notes. It was stated earlier that the MCs did not stress two syllables that were consecutive sixteenth notes; the reason it is sixteenth notes and not thirty-second notes is because consecutive sixteenth notes are as close as they can be regarding the *rhythmic least common denominator*. 
Trends

Despite the rigorous rules determining the Old School style, much progress was made in the first recorded six years of rap.

- MCs became more comfortable with vowel rhymes, as opposed to perfect rhymes. This experimentation with vowel rhymes gave MCs hundreds of more words to choose from when trying to rhyme a word. This can be heard in example 8 when Melle Mel rhymes “flash,” “blast,” and “class,” none of which rhyme perfectly with each other.
- The use of internal rhymes increased throughout the Era, becoming more obvious and slightly more predictable.
- MCs used less toasting phrases as they started making recordings in studios, not as a byproduct of a live performance. In the early years of the Old School Era, MCs filled space with toasting phrases. These phrases were memorized, generally had one rhythm, and were often repeated several times. It is possible that they still used toasting phrases, but only in live performance. Nevertheless, it is easy to say they lost popularity over the years.

Example 9: Live at Audubon Ballroom 12-23-1978- Melle Mel and Grandmaster Flash- 1978 :00

This excerpt is a classic toasting phrase used to keep the crowd going, and perhaps to fill time and give Melle Mel time to think about what to say next.

- The use of multisyllabic rhymes increased, and the use of two or three rhymes per line became more common.
- There was a decrease in the amount of displacement used, which created an increasing consistency in the placement of end rhyme.
- The medley form and ballad form lost popularity to the couplet.
Exceptions

Certain songs and artists stick out as significant exceptions to the characteristics of Old School rap. This is not to say they are the only exceptional MCs, but that these are songs that broke the patterns.

Example 10: Live at Audubon Ballroom 12-23-1978- Melle Mel and Grandmaster Flash- 1978 :19

Even in the earliest recorded history of rap, MCs like Melle Mel make exceptions to the unspoken “rule” of the Old School MCs. The first couplet has unusual phrasing that blurs the lines between end rhyme and internal rhyme. He rhymes “house” on the fourth sixteenth note of beat two, “out” on the fourth sixteenth note of beat four, and “out” on the third beat of the next measure. “House” can be interpreted as the end rhyme of the first line, making the first “out” an internal rhyme. “House” can also be thought of as an internal rhyme, which makes the first “out an end rhyme. Either way, the phrasing is new and unusual. He dodges beat one in the second measure, and displacement is used as none of the rhymes land in the same part of the measures. He follows the couplet with a one-liner that has an internal multisyllabic rhyme that matches the end rhyme.

Example 11: Rappin and Rockin the House- Funky Four + 1- 1979 :17

The Funky Four + 1 begin their song by placing two stressed syllables right next to each other, breaking the rule that is almost never broken in the Old School
Era. Also the way that they break it lets them stress the second sixteenth note of beat one, a beat practically never stressed in this Era.

**Example 12: Rhymin’ and Rappin’ - Paulette And Tanya (“Sweet Tee”) Winley / Ann Winley*-1979  2:03**

Tanya “Sweet Tee” Winley surprises the listener by beginning her verse earlier than expected in the Old School Era, starting on the fourth sixteenth note of beat three rather than beat four. She then lands an internal rhyme on the first beat of the second measure (landing in the same place as it’s rhyme, “Tee”), before resolving the couplet. The continuation of this end rhyme may or may not be intentional, as at this point many MCs were much more comfortable using perfect rhymes rather than vowel rhymes. Nevertheless, the two couplets rhyme, making a quatrain (rhyming “dial,” “while,” “rhymes,” and “time”). In the second couplet, she also establishes an internal rhyme with “long” and “all,” but more notably, with “say” and “ain’t,” because these land in the same place of the measure, showing impressive consistency with internal rhyme. Last but not least, she connects the last couplet to the next line with the previous end rhyme “time” and the new internal rhyme, “rhyme.”
The most noticeable aspect of this song is that all three Treacherous MCs rap in a constant sixteenth note flow. There are almost no end-stops as the rhythm of sixteenth notes is constant throughout the whole song with a few exceptions. Because of this flow, the MCs do different things with rhyme that become popular in the next Era. First off, they often place the rhyme on the third sixteenth note of the fourth beat. There are more internal and multisyllabic rhymes in this song than most in the Old School Era. The most notable aspect is the consistency of internal rhymes. The Treacherous Three are consistent enough with end rhymes that expectations are developed.

In this excerpt, Spoonie Gee uses many internal rhymes, and a couple of them are multisyllabic. He also creates a sentence structure. Sentence structure (rhyme on beat two, on beat four, and then on beat four of the next measure) is used consistently throughout this song on a slightly smaller scale. They instead rhyme on beat one, on beat two, and then on beat four, making a sentence structure that is halved in length. Spoonie Gee does this in the first three lines of this excerpt.

Last but not least, the three MCs use one-liners consistently throughout the entire song, which is almost unheard of in rap of any age.
Example 14: Planet Rock- Afrika Bambaataa- 1982 :30

Afrika Bambaataa shatters the common expectations of the Old School with Planet Rock. The length of the lines and the end rhymes are not predictable at all, so there are no expectations developed. Due to the lines that don’t line up with the measures, it is hard to say that there is a rhyme scheme. However it is clear that there are only two end rhymes, one rhymes with “dreams” and the other with “sway”. By alternating and switching between these, it keeps us on our toes, but also gives us slight satisfaction as we hear one of the rhymes that we expect. Although the rhyme scheme is strange, it cannot be denied that they hold onto the two rhymes for eight bars, longer than almost any other song in the Old School Era. This does not follow the Old School style, and is therefore a very notable exception of the Era.

Example 15: The Message- Grandmaster Flash & Melle Mel-1982 1:01

This excerpt breaks the unspoken “rules” of the Old School Era in multiple ways. It begins by dodging beat one, uses a multisyllabic end rhyme, starts the second line on the second sixteenth note of beat three, and resolves on beat two. This phrasing places the end rhyme on beat two, where internal rhyme would normally be, and places the internal rhyme on beat four, the most common beat for end rhyme. This makes us expect the rhyme on beat two to be an internal rhyme followed by the end rhyme on beat four, but instead Melle Mel stops after beat two.
This isn’t a displacement of the end rhyme because we expect the multisyllabic rhyme at that point in the measure, so it is just a redefining of what we thought was the end rhyme. This makes a resolution that seems premature when first heard.

**Example 16: It’s Like That- Run-DMC- 1984 :17**

Run-DMC’s “It’s Like That” broke many trends and expectations of form. This song has a faster tempo than most, at just above 120 beats per minute, and instead of rapping fast, Run and DMC decide to rap slowly. The rhyme scheme that they use is AAAB, which is can be broken into a tercet and a one-liner. A tercet is three rhyming lines in a row, just one line longer than a couplet. In every quatrain in the song, Run and DMC (the two MCs) use the one-liner “it’s like that, and that’s the way it is” to complete the quatrain. With this repetition, they are able to build expectation of the one-liner.

**THE GOLDEN AGE**

1985-1992

**End rhyme**

MCs in the Golden Age had recognized the power of a consistent end rhyme. The displacement of end rhyme saw a significant decrease, which resulted in much more consistency in the placement of end rhyme than in the Old School Era. This consistency can make the rhyme more appealing as it keeps fulfilling our expectations, yet it also takes away a surprising aspect of the music. However, because the end rhyme is so consistent, alterations to the end rhyme have a larger
impact on the listener. For the first part of the Golden Age, greater consistency can be heard throughout an entire verse rather than just within rhyme schemes.

The couplet is by far the most common rhyme scheme for MCs in the Golden Era. Occasionally an MC would use a rhyme scheme that lasted more than two bars, but for the most part, the couplet dominated rap.

Another noticeable development of end rhymes is the increase of multisyllabic end rhymes. Although not all rappers have a significant amount of multisyllabic rhymes there is a noticeable increase shown by rappers in 1987. A few of the notable rappers who used multisyllabic rhymes that year are KRS-One, Big Daddy Kane, and Rakim.

Example 17: Raw- Big Daddy Kane- 1988 :42
I'm genuine like Gucci, raw like sushi/The Sage of Rage is what rap did to me/To make me want to create chaos and mayhem/Cold rock a party until the A.M.

This excerpt is a prime example of Golden Age rap from 1987 embracing aspects of typical verses pre and post 1987. Big Daddy Kane uses couplets, internal rhyme, and multisyllabic end rhymes that are not displaced within the couplets. In addition, Big Daddy Kane uses the words “Sage” and “Rage” in the first couplet, and “make, “-ate,” and “cha-“ to give continuity to the two couplets. In addition he uses the rhyme once more in the next multisyllabic rhyme “mayhem.”

In addition to the development of multisyllabic rhymes in 1987, there was also an increase in the use of displacement of end rhymes. This technique was out of style at the beginning of the Era, but began to regain popularity with MCs in 1987. Some notable MCs who used these techniques with consistency are MC Ren, Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, Tupac, and Rakim.

Internal Rhyme

There is a large difference between the internal rhymes of Old School and those of the Golden Age. A majority of Golden Age MCs began using internal rhymes
in ways that were obviously intentional (as opposed to some questionable internal rhymes of the Old School Era). It was more common to hear an internal rhyme land on a beat, and this gave the rhymes more emphasis. They would often land on beats one and two, but they can be heard on beat three with some frequency. Not only did MCs use more internal rhymes per verse, but it also became more common to hear a more densely rhymed line (more internal rhymes per line). It also became more popular to have multisyllabic internal rhymes, although they are still rare.

**Example 18: I Ain’t No Joke- Eric B. and Rakim- 1987 :36**

In the first couplet Rakim has two rhymes working at once: “wild” and “child” (which is also displaced), “wanna be tame” and “gonna be named”, which is a four syllable rhyme. He then moves to a very different rhythm and new rhymes. It can be thought that he is only working with one multisyllabic rhyme, “enemy,” “friend of me,” and “-tend to be.” However, he takes syllables from the multisyllabic rhyme and uses them individually. Rakim uses “get” and “end”, taking from the first syllable of the multisyllabic rhyme, rhyming with “en-,” “friend,” and “-tend.” “Get” may go without notice because it is not stressed, but “end” is stressed and is noticeable to the listener. Rakim connects the second couplet with the “be” of his end rhyme to the “-pete” in the new multisyllabic internal rhyme that he establishes on beat one of the next measure. He continues this multisyllabic internal rhyme, and establishes a new multisyllabic end rhyme for the couplet.

Connecting rhyme schemes with internal rhyme was still very rarely used, but another, arguably more important aspect of internal rhyme was created in the Golden Age. The consistency and emphasis of the internal rhymes is such that the
expectation of the internal rhyme can be felt. This is illustrated perfectly by a song released in 1985: Rock the Bells, by LL Cool J.

**Example 19: Rock the Bells- LL Cool J- 1985 :18**

LL Cool Jay establishes strong expectations of internal rhyme, by using internal rhymes on beat one and beat two every line for almost the entire first verse. In the last bar of this excerpt, Cool J uses a multisyllabic internal rhyme to switch it up rhyming “thought plus” and “brought Cut.” Despite the change, the multisyllabic rhymes still begin where we expect them. It is also important to note that this is not a pair of couplets, but it is in fact a *single end rhymequatrain.*

The consistent end rhymes of the Golden Age develop the previously untapped expectation of internal rhymes.

**Stressed Rhythm**

Possibly due to the intertwined nature of the two, internal rhyme and stressed rhythm developed in very similar ways. Both developed a greater consistency, and both became less syncopated and trended towards the strong beats. Like internal rhyme, stressed rhythms became more consistent from line to line, and it became much more common for the stressed rhythm to stay exactly the same throughout a couplet or a *single end rhymequatrain.* In the Golden Age it became more common to make minor changes to the stressed rhythm as opposed to making significant changes every new line or rhyme scheme change. Although MC in the Old School Era would sometimes make small use of similar small changes to rhythm, they lacked the consistency of the Golden Era that makes the expectation
much more powerful. An MC in the Golden Era uses much more consistency throughout their verses in comparison to the Old School MCs. This consistency lets the listener develop a greater expectation, so the expectation creates a greater impact when it is denied.

As a byproduct of aiming for consistent rhythms, MCs began landing on strong beats more often, favoring a straightforward rhythm over syncopation. The second and fourth sixteenth notes of beats became much less common, the third sixteenth notes of beats (which fit into an eighth note rhythm) did not see much change, and the first sixteenth note of beats became more common.

**Example 20: Check the Rhime- A Tribe Called Quest- 1991- 1:34**

Phife of A Tribe Called Quest keeps his stressed rhythm and his rhyme quite stable. The two couplets have different internal rhymes, but the stressed rhythm is almost identical. This is the very end of his verse, so on the last line Phife slightly changes the stressed rhythm to throw the listener off. He does this by moving the third stressed syllable of his last line to the second sixteenth note of beat one instead of the third. This breaks from the Old School style of stressed rhythm. Aside from this, Phife resolves as usual, and his flow is predictable, similar to many MCs of the Golden Age.

Many aspects of the Old School style are dominant in the Golden Age, but as the age passed, MCs began pushing the boundaries. Beginning the phrase on or between beat four and one, and ending the phrase on or between beat three and four was still the most common phrasing. Multisyllabic end rhymes, which saw a rise in popularity, would often disrupt this phrasing. MCs such as KRS-One used multisyllabic rhymes that started on beat four, carrying the phrase well into the fourth beat.

KRS-One’s first couplet of the excerpt uses rhythmic repetition to create expectations of the phrasing that is truly unique. Starting with a rhyme on the fourth sixteenth note of the beat four before the first measure, KRS proceeds to stress every third sixteenth note for the next two bars. While doing this he adds internal rhyme and maintains an end rhyme around beat four. This is a unique technique of small-scale rhythmic repetition is not heard often, and since he continues it through the bar-line, he creates an enjambment, breaking Old School style.

In the second couplet, KRS-One breaks the Old School trends in three ways: he does not stress a syllable for over a beat using a caesura, he dodges the down beat of beat one in the second line, and throughout the couplet uses a multisyllabic end rhyme that continues the phrase beyond beat four.

MCs began to break common phrasing in several other ways. Some MCs would move the Old School phrasing forward or back a beat (this can be heard later in examples 25 and 26), use enjambments, or start their phrases after beat one. Despite these exceptions, most of the Golden Age rap can fit into the Old School phrasing.

Complete rhythm

Complete rhythm gained consistency along with stressed rhythm, and it began to gain slightly more expectation, especially in combination with multisyllabic rhymes. Unstressed syllables within multisyllabic rhymes can be more noticeable and provide stronger rhythmic expectation than unstressed rhythms on their own.

The rhythmic lowest common denominator still has much strength in this Era, yet it became slightly more common for an MC to break the lowest common
denominator. Another notable break from the Old School style is that it became more common for rappers to put stressed syllables adjacent to each other.

Example 22: Paul Revere- Beastie Boys- 1986- 1:08

Adrock uses two stressed syllables adjacent to each other, “Quick on,” being one of the first examples to break that Old School custom.

Despite this breakthrough, this technique was not used frequently, and some artists did not use it at all.

Trends

As the history of rap progressed, the amount of rappers flourished, and the styles sprouted from the foundation of Old School and grew in many directions. There are common trends in the way the MCs’ styles developed over time, but as time passes the trends become less and less applicable to rap as a whole. However, the styles of rap had not diverged too greatly yet, so finding trends is still feasible and useful.

- There was an increasing amount of consistency in stressed rhythm throughout verses.
- Multisyllabic rhymes increased in popularity.
- Displacement began to regain its lost popularity with rappers such as Rakim, MC Lyte, MC Ren, Queen Latifah, and Tupac.
- Finally, three methods for breaking the Old School style gained popularity throughout the Golden Age. The placement of the Old School phrasing—where it began and ended—was sometimes shifted a beat or two forwards or backwards, MCs would not stress the first beat of the measure, and adjacent stressed syllables became more common.
Exceptions

Example 23: I Ain’t No Joke- Eric B. and Rakim- 1987  1:50

Rakim is a pioneer of a new style that pervades the Mainstream Era. Rakim's style abandons the consistency established in the beginning of the Golden Age in favor of a less predictable, constantly changing flow. In addition he uses lines that are thick with rhyme, unpredictable stressed rhythms, many multisyllabic rhymes, augmentations, diminutions, and enjambments.

In this excerpt Rakim uses the multisyllabic rhyme “-aggerate” rhyming every syllable multisyllabic rhyme except for the unstressed syllable “-er”. He uses the multisyllabic rhyme first as an internal rhyme so it is easily established as an end rhyme. In the next measure, he uses the last syllable of the multisyllabic rhyme on its own, and when he resolves the end rhyme with the multisyllabic rhyme Rakim adds the word “me,” which dodges beat one and lands on the second sixteenth note of beat one. This “me” establishes the new rhyme and uses it again as an internal rhyme before the end rhyme. After these lines that are dense with rhyme, his next line is mostly void of internal rhymes, and builds to the final resolution of the rhyme, which is slightly delayed to land on beat four. Out of all four lines, Rakim only stresses beat one once, and in every other line he falls on the second sixteenth note of beat one, the beat that was practically unstressed in the Old School Era.
Example 24: Fight the Power- Public Enemy- 1989 :43

Chuck D of Public Enemy began to create a new, rhythmically loose style of rapping. Although he still mostly uses discernable rhythms, he lands a little ahead or behind the beat. This style was adopted by many more MCs in the next Era.

In addition to this new style, Chuck D has lines and rhymes that are very reminiscent of Afrika Bambaataa’s “Planet Rock,” as he does not establish any steady pattern in the end rhyme, internal rhyme, or stressed rhythm. The combination of the lack of expectations and a rhythmically loose flow makes his rap seem more like a speech, and it makes the listener pay more attention to the lyrics than the sounds of the words that he uses.

Example 25: Millie Pulled A Pistol on Santa- De La Soul- 1991 :20

De La Soul broke the phrasing of the Old School Era by shifting the phrase. It can be thought of as a standard phrasing that starts on beat one and ends on the third sixteenth note of the third beat that has been shifted forward a beat and a half. This displacement makes it start on the third sixteenth note of beat two and places the end rhyme on beat one.
In addition to this, Posdnous from De La Soul starts the first verse with a *single end rhyme quatrain* that ends with a multisyllabic “hillbilly” that is displaced, delaying the rhyming resolution of “-billy.” He also continues to maintain the rhyme for another two bars after this excerpt before moving on to another couplet, making a rhyme scheme that is longer than most in the Golden Age.

**Example 26: Brenda’s Got A Baby- 2Pac (or Tupac)- 1991 :48**

In this excerpt, Tupac uses unusual phrasing that gives the verse a unique style. Tupac starts his phrases on or after beat four, and ends them on or just after beat three. It still technically fits into the Old School style, but would be much more common if it was shifted back an eighth note, resolving on the third sixteenth note of beat three and starting closer to the middle of beat four.

Aside from his unique phrasing, Tupac juggles many rhymes. The first two measures are working with three rhymes at once, rhyming with “Bren-,” “dad,” and the multisyllabic rhyme “knew her moms.” However the rhyme “dad” actually takes place in the next line, and can be heard of more as an internal rhyme connecting the two couplets. Tupac also uses the “Bren-“ rhyme consistently as an internal rhyme in the next couplet, connecting the couplets with yet another internal rhyme. Between the couplets, only the end rhyme changes. Also, the end rhyme of the second couplet is displaced, delaying the resolution, and releasing when we don’t expect it, three sixteenth notes later. This strong *displacement* is a technique that becomes much more common in the next Era.

Finally it is important to note that he keeps the stressed rhythms throughout the couplets similar, so we notice the *displacement* of the end rhyme and the absence of words after “grow”, when we expect the beginning of the next phrase.

The Wu-Tang Clan can be heard leading the charge into the new Era of rap. The first couplet of the song has many internal rhymes, and even though many of the rhymes are self-rhymes—for instance “hell raiser, raisin hell...”—the listener still feels that the lines are dense with rhymes. In the first line of the second couplet, Inspectah rhymes the “jam” sound three times, and it leads the listener to expect a multisyllabic end rhyme in the next line. The next line, however, does not have any internal rhyme. The only rhyme of the line is displaced to make the listener wait till the very last sixteenth note of the measure before he resolves the rhyme with the last syllable of “Spiderman.” Strong displacement and the use of many internal rhymes are two of the many techniques that the Wu-Tang clan uses to break from the norm and pioneer a new style.

THE MAINSTREAM ERA
1993-1999

End Rhyme

The use of end rhyme changed dramatically throughout the Mainstream Era of rap. The constant and steady end rhymes of the Golden Age disappeared and techniques for denying the listener’s expectation of end rhyme gained popularity.

The displacement of rhyme that was very popular in the Old School Era of rap saw resurgence. When displacement returned, MCs began to move the end rhyme more rhythmic distance than before. In the Old school Era, displacement usually
moves the rhyme one-sixteenth note earlier or later, and only sometimes would they move up to a full beat away from the expected placement. In the Mainstream Era, larger alterations are more common and MCs will displace the rhyme two beats. This can push the end rhyme into the beginning of the next measure, or make the rhyme land so early that it could be thought of as an internal rhyme in certain situations. These large displacements are also used to connect different rhyme schemes, giving continuity to the verse.

Non-rhyming lines and one-liners became more popular. Many rappers in the Mainstream Era were no longer afraid of breaking consistency or the listeners’ expectations, making non-rhyming lines a viable option, and a good way to throw the listener off.

*Deceptive rhymes* were developed and employed to an unprecedented extent. A deceptive rhyme is when the end rhyme is not the syllable that the listener expects. These deceptive end rhymes are often created by using the syllable of an internal rhyme instead and create a deceptive rhyme. When this happens between rhyme schemes, it is not considered deceptive because the listener expects a different end rhyme anyway. Therefore it is only a deceptive rhyme when it is used in the middle of a rhyme scheme.

**Example 28: Spontaneity- Bahamadia- 1996 :42**

The last word of the first line is “scanners” which leads us to believe that we will hear something that rhymes with “scanners.” Instead, Bahamadia uses the internal rhyme from “beep” to create a deceptive end rhyme, ending the second line with “Jeep.”

When an MC is using a multisyllabic rhyme as the end rhyme, and then changes one of the accented syllables it is a half deceptive rhyme. Part of the rhyme is what is expected, but the other part is not.
Example 29: The World is Your- Nas- 1994 :42

In this couplet Nas establishes the multisyllabic rhyme “phlegm on the streets” with the internal rhyme in the next line, “Timb’s on my feet.” This leads us to expect another multisyllabic rhyme at the end of the next line, but then Nas uses the words “cipher complete.” This only rhymes the “-ete,” as “cipher” does not rhyme with anything else, creating a half deceptive rhyme.

Both types of deceptive rhymes were practically unused before the Mainstream Era, and quickly became common techniques.

The use of deceptive rhymes and heavily displaced end rhymes had such influence that they made one-liners more common. When deceptive rhymes are used in the second half of what we expect to be a couplet, the couplet is destroyed and two one-liners are created. When displacement pushes the end rhyme to the first beat of the next measure (or later), a couplet almost sounds like two one-liners or a non-rhyming line and a one-liner, as the end rhyme is introduced in the same measure that it is resolved in.

In addition to the increased use of one-liners, the single end rhyme quatrain and longer rhyme schemes saw a gradual rise in popularity. Despite these changes, the couplet form is still the most dominant of them all.

The consistency of rhyme schemes and their connection to the beat was weakened by deceptive rhymes and one-liners. The beats MCs rap over are often two or four bar loops, resolving in the last measure, and until the Mainstream Era, the resolution of the beat was usually in sync with the resolution of rhyme scheme. The synchronization gives listeners a sense of structure and lets the listener know when to expect end rhymes. When an odd number of deceptive end rhymes or one-liners are used in, it offsets the couplets. This makes the resolution of couplets happen a measure after the resolution of the beat, slightly disorientating the listener, and making a change in rhyme scheme sound similar to a deceptive rhyme.

Prodigy of Mobb Deep begins his verse one measure before the beat resolves. This *displacement* is noticeable as most of his verse is couplets, and when he strays away from the couplets, he still returns to couplets displaced by a measure.

Prodigy creates more confusion in his first line: the listener thinks he might rhyme “realness,” or “infamous” but it is not clear. Then in the beginning of the next line, functioning in retrospect as a displaced end rhyme he says “heard of us.” This is what he uses for the end rhyme for that bar. Finally when we expect him to rhyme with “murderers” in the third line to make a couplet that resolves with the music, he moves onto the next couplet.

In addition to these changes, there was a large increase in the use of multisyllabic rhymes in the Mainstream Era. This gave the MCs more ways to play with the listeners’ expectations.

**Internal Rhyme**

Internal rhyme developed in leaps and bounds in the Mainstream Era of rap. Internal rhymes are not only more prominent than they are in the Golden Age, but they are also more complex.

First off, internal rhymes were often held for longer amounts of time than in the previous Era, giving them more potential to connect rhyme schemes. These connections became much more common and helped build continuity throughout the verse. In addition, the use of multiple multisyllabic rhymes in one line became much more common, allowing for verses that were more complex and dense with rhymes.

As internal rhymes became more popular, MCs developed new ways to use the internal rhymes. The internal rhyme is the most common replacement for the
end rhyme in the *deceptive cadence*, and it could often transform the internal rhyme into an end rhyme if the *deceptive rhyme* is used to establish a new end rhyme.

**Example 31: Triumph- Wu-Tang Clan (feat. CappaDonna)- 1997  1:18**

Due to the ambiguity of the rhyme scheme, it is difficult to tell where in the form this is, or even if this fits into any common rhyme scheme at all. Earlier in his verse, Method Man consistently rhymed around beat two and beat four, so we expect the previous beat two rhyme to rhyme with the next. This leads us to expect that around beat two he’ll rhyme with “fryin pan,” and around beat four rhyme with “fire.” He then uses the word “-rider” to rhyme with “fire” in the second beat to make a *deceptive rhyme*. Then on beat four he uses the word “pack,” as a *deceptive rhyme* that rhymes with the end rhyme of the next line. In that last line, Method Man fulfills all of our expectations with no *deceptive rhyme* or lack of end rhyme.

Occasionally an internal rhyme is derived from one of the syllables of an earlier multisyllabic rhyme. MCs have also done this in reverse and taken monosyllabic internal rhymes and added on other syllables to create multisyllabic rhymes.

**Example 32: Fu-Gee-La- Fugees- 1996  1:24**

 Yeah in sa-rooms we drink Bournes and cool-the goons 'til high noon. Buss' up rum on flat spoons, t'aint no blood for a row. No bir-der, see hоad-ies pop mooch-ies for Guss-sis and loo-chi. Flih me in my lif-sun-bi-shi eat-in su-shi bump-in Fu-gees
Lauryn Hill uses the sound that rhymes with “goon” in three different ways. She uses the sound by itself as the end rhyme for the first couplet, and as internal rhymes throughout the four measures. Lauryn Hill also uses the sound as part of an internal rhyme in “battle goons” and “rap toons.” Finally, she uses it as part of multisyllabic internal and end rhymes in the last couplet to resolve on “Fugees.” The consistent use of this syllable creates a strong connection between the couplets, and leaves the listener not knowing how she is going to use the syllable next.

A very cunning trick used by Notorious B.I.G was to have a multisyllabic internal rhyme along with a monosyllabic internal rhyme that shares the same rhyme as the first syllable of the multisyllabic. Then every time Notorious uses that syllable, the listener does not know whether to expect the monosyllabic rhyme or the multisyllabic rhyme.

Example 33: One More Chance (Remix)- Notorious B.I.G- 1995 1:17

This tercet made by Notorious B.I.G introduces a multisyllabic rhyme in the first line with the word “Mafia,” which is displaced to land on the first beat of the next measure. He then concludes the measure using the multisyllabic rhyme as an end rhyme. Then Notorious says “I’m,” which is pronounced to sound like the rhyming syllable, so we expect the multisyllabic rhyme to begin on beat one once more, but he displaces it half a beat begins the multisyllabic rhyme on the offbeat. He uses the syllable again the middle of “Versace,” only to be the monosyllabic internal rhyme, and then he resolves the tercet with the multisyllabic rhyme on beat four once more.

There was a large increase in multisyllabic internal rhymes throughout the Mainstream Era. This gives the MC more techniques to play with our expectations. For instance, MCs will often play with the amount of space between the two stressed
syllables of a multisyllabic rhyme. When we hear the rhyme, we hear the multisyllabic rhyme as a small motif that we learn to expect the next time we hear the multisyllabic rhyme. This makes it very noticeable and surprising when the length of the rhyme is increased or decreased.

MCs also use internal rhymes multiple times over the course of multiple bars, and can create a noticeable rhythm with the internal rhyme. If they establish a pattern with the internal rhymes, they can make impressions on the listener by displacing the internal rhymes from where it is predicted to land. This often done with one monosyllabic rhyme, but several MCs can juggle several internal rhymes, whether they are monosyllabic or multisyllabic. Used in tandem with the end rhyme, they can build and fulfill many expectations at once. Some of the most complex polyrhythms in rap can be found in these verses, created from the rhythm of the internal rhyme and stressed rhythm over the complete rhythm, and the rhythm created by the beat.

Example 34: One More Chance (Remix)- Notorious B.I.G- 1995  1:27

This excerpt introduces the multisyllabic rhyme with “dress, it’s this” placed on the third beat of the first measure. Notorious uses the multisyllabic rhyme again beginning on the second sixteenth note of beat one of the next measure, making it more syncopated. Then he uses the word “stretch,” which is the first syllable of the multisyllabic rhyme so we think he is going to start the multisyllabic rhyme on the third sixteenth note of beat two, but instead he starts it an eighth note later on beat three. Notorious is relentless with the rhyme and does the same trick again with “the” landing on the second sixteenth note of beat four, and the multisyllabic rhyme placed on the third sixteenth note of beat four. This places the unaccented syllable
on beat one, and resolves the rhyme on the second sixteenth note of beat one, creating syncopation and connecting the couplet with the next.

**Stressed Rhythm**

Overall, the stressed rhythms of the Mainstream Era became much less predictable. It seems very possible that this change of rhythm was a result of the advancements of rhyme. Either way, many MCs of the time abandon the expectations developed by a consistent rhythm, and instead favor playing with the expectations of rhyme. Few MCs had relatively predictable flows, many changed their stressed rhythms with the rhyme scheme, and the rest were completely unpredictable and had stressed rhythms that were constantly changing. Although many MCs of the Golden Age also change rhythm as the rhyme scheme changed, the MCs of the Mainstream Era make more radical changes with the rhyme schemes as opposed to the slight modifications of the earlier age.

The unpredictability of the end rhyme and syncopated use of internal rhymes contribute to making the stressed rhythm unpredictable. *Displacements* that spanned into the next measure throws off the predictability of the next bar, as the rhythm was not often repeatable. The Mainstream Era saw a large increase of the use of enjambments, which also broke the Old School phrasing. For most rap in the first half of the Mainstream Era, there are little to no expectations for stressed rhythm. The rhythms are so inconsistent and unpredictable that the listeners do not know what to expect.

**Example 35: Cell Therapy- Goodie Mob- 1995 :45**
In this song, Khujo does not use any recognizable rhyme schemes, and barely has recognizable end rhymes. “Pipelines” and “nineteen-forty-five” can be heard loosely as an end rhyme, but it is not predictable at all. His other rhymes “trash,” “back,” and “gas”, or “me” and “slavery,” for example, can be heard, but not predicted. To top it off he has an odd, punctuated flow that makes rhythms that are very interesting, but completely unpredictable.

Despite these changes, not all was lost for the expectations of stressed rhythm and the Old School style. Around 1996, there was a change of direction, and many of the trends of the Mainstream era started reversing. By the end of the Mainstream Era, there were more verses with predictable phrasing similar to the Old School style than rap with the new unpredictable phrasing.

**Complete Rhythm**

More MCs took after Chuck D and rapped either out of rhythm completely or between rhythms. In addition, it became more common for a rapper to break rhythmic lowest common denominator (which was still almost always sixteenth notes) of the song either by doing some form of triplet or thirty-second note.

**Trends**

In the first half of the Mainstream Era, MCs trended towards unpredictability. With the Wu-Tang Clan leading the charge, displacement, enjambments, one-liners, and deceptive rhymes became much more common and the predictable flow was being abandoned. Rhyme was on the rise with the large increase of internal and multisyllabic rhymes, and MCs had developed new ways to use them. Notorious B.I.G could be seen as the pinnacle of the movement, with an unpredictable flow and an intelligent and complex use of rhyme.

Sometime around 1996 there is a reversion back to a more steady flow moving back towards the Old School style. There was a decrease in displacement, and enjambments, one-liners, and deceptive rhymes. There was a slight decrease in the number of internal rhymes, but the verses were still much more dense with
rhymes than the verses of the Golden Age. In addition, the presence of multisyllabic rhymes stayed constant.

Throughout the Era, there was a trend toward longer rhyme schemes, breaking the rhythmic lowest common denominator, connecting rhyme schemes together through rhyme, and increasing complexity with internal rhymes.

Exceptions

At this point in rap’s development, it is very difficult to label songs as exceptions. There are many exceptional artists, but the artists are exceptional for their amazing use of techniques, not for the novelty of the techniques they use. The exceptional artists stand out with their intricacy, continuity of verses, the amount of rhyme, and non-musical aspects such as the lyrics and their meaning. These are things that are hard to measure without subjective opinion. This is why by the time the New Millenium rolls around innovative and exceptional techniques are rarely found.

Example 36: ’95 Freestyle- Big Punisher (feat. Fat Joe)- 1995 1:37

The most noticeable aspect of Big Punisher’s flow is how dense it is with rhyme, specifically multisyllabic rhyme. He starts with two multisyllabic rhymes “-arious” and “-edians,” the first on beat one and the second on beat two. Big Pun then uses the first syllable of the multisyllabic rhyme to trick the listener and delay the same pattern half a beat, so the rhymes are placed on the third sixteenth notes of beats three and four rather than on the first sixteenth notes. He displaces the next rhyme by using the first multisyllabic rhyme on beats two, three, and four, placing the second multisyllabic rhyme on the last sixteenth note of beat four. In addition,
when we do hear the second multisyllabic rhyme that last time it is extended, as Big Punisher added another syllable into it, once again breaking our expectations.

THE NEW MILLENIUM
2000-2009

End Rhyme

The end rhymes of the New Millennium are more consistent and predictable than the Mainstream Era, creating stronger expectations for the end rhymes. This is a continuation of the trend that began around 1996, in the second half of the Mainstream Era.

The uses of techniques that alter the end rhyme—displacement, deceptive rhymes, and non-rhyming lines—were more restrained than their use in the previous Era. None of them specifically saw a huge decrease in use, but all of them are used more sparingly in the New Millennium. This increases the strength of the end rhyme’s expectation, therefore making the techniques more powerful when used.

Rhyme schemes changed significantly in this Era. Although the couplet may still be the most used rhyme scheme, it is not in the lead by much. Length of rhyme schemes increased as the popularity of the single end rhyme quatrain grew and it became more common for rappers to hold onto a rhyme for even longer than a quatrain. Ballad form is heard very occasionally, but not with nearly the amount of popularity as it had in the Old School Era. Deceptive lines and one-liners are still used, but it is extremely rare to hear chains of one-liners.

Internal Rhyme

Techniques for playing with the expectations of internal rhyme that were developed in the Mainstream Era are put to use throughout the New Millennium. There have been no serious developments in this element of rap, but certain aspects of internal rhyme have become more popular.
Similar to end rhyme, rappers in the New Millennium hold on to internal rhymes longer than they do in the Mainstream Era. In addition, it has become more common for a rapper to connect internal rhymes, such as transforming a monosyllabic internal rhyme to a multisyllabic internal rhyme by adding on syllables. It has also become more common for a rapper to use one or two internal rhymes many times with consistency. This tends to give the internal rhymes a percussive element that MCs use throughout their phrases.

The aspect of internal rhymes that changed the most was the increase of the use of internal rhymes to connect lines and to connect different rhyme schemes. It is very common to hear internal rhymes span over multiple bars, or at least to use a rhyme one last time in the first beat of the next rhyme scheme.

**Stressed Rhythm**

Stressed rhythm has seen an increase in consistency ever since 1996. This trend of increasing consistency did not carry through the entirety of the New Millennium; it may have only continued for the first couple years. However the trend has not been reversed and lots of rhythmic consistency can be heard in the New Millennium.

With certain artists and songs, this consistency can be heard throughout the verse, as the listener only hears small variations from a single flow. Other verses change the rhythm more radically between rhyme schemes, but develop a rhythmic pattern within the rhyme scheme. It is rare to hear an MC that abandons the expectations of stressed rhythms in favor of unpredictability in the style of the Mainstream Era.

Old School phrasing is still quite common, and is a style that many rappers fall back to, but in no way does it restrain the MCs. Rappers will often break this phrasing for entire verses. However they often find it a useful style to return to. Near the end of the verse a rapper will sometimes return to phrasing similar to the Old School style.
Complete Rhythm

The expectations of complete rhythm became stronger, and are used more often in this Era. This is due to the increase of exact rhythmic repetition. This repetition makes the expectation of the complete rhythm stronger, so when there are slight deviations it is noticeable. The alterations of the stressed rhythm is still much more noticeable, but the complete rhythm has more impact on the listener than it has had before.

Example 37: The Way I Am- Eminem- 2000  2:10

Every syllable Eminem uses is part of a rhythmic motif; his precision is required to maintain the expectation. This gives unprecedented amounts of power to non-stressed syllables, so when he breaks the pattern it stands out significantly to the listener. In this example the rhythm is strongly established from the previous lines, and then Eminem drops the rhythm for two beats “when a dude’s gettin bullied,” and the listener feels a strong rhythmic change, even as Eminem goes back to the original rhythm in the next two beats.

The rhythmic least common denominator has lost its consistency. MCs often have brief periods of rapping faster than sixteenth notes for the rhythmic effect and to fit in words, they sometimes switch into triplets to create a different feel, and many MCs rap with an out of time flow. Other rappers use subdivisions less common than the triplet to fit in the syllables they need.

In addition, several MCs have flows that are rhythmically loose, who shift around landing ahead or behind the beat.
**Example 38: The Light- Common- 2000 :28**

In this excerpt Common is rapping in time, yet landing slightly ahead of the beat. This is not a sixteenth note ahead, but just a touch. This style makes the rap seem less rigid and more like common speech.

**Trends**

This Era does not appear to have any significant trends. This is partially because it often takes a while for gems of an Era to be recognized, and it is possible that favorable styles are decided in retrospect to what we listen to now.

**Conclusion**

This paper is focused on increasing the musical understanding of rap in its entirety, from the analysis of a single line to the development of styles throughout rap’s thirty-four-year recorded history. Hopefully this research gives you the tools to identify what it is you like about styles of rap, artists, or verses. The paper is not meant to show “good” rap, or “good” MCs—many of my favorite MCs are not in this study—but to give the reader knowledge about the art that they can use to cultivate their own appreciation of rap.

Although it is paradoxical, objectively measuring and analyzing rap can help give it a more widespread credibility as art, which is innately sublime. Perhaps what proves it to be art is that the more we dissect rap into musical elements, the more complexity we find with both measurable and non-measurable elements that cannot be known but only experienced.