

New Scholars

**THE SPIRIT OF RAPITALISM: ARTISTIC
LABOR PRACTICES IN CHICAGO'S HIP-HOP
UNDERGROUND**

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates artistic labor and its relationship to hip-hop culture in Chicago's underground rap music scene. To be a rapper is to work: writing and recording songs, performing on stage and in music videos, and promoting and networking via the Internet or in person. Drawing upon studies of artistic labor practices, I explore the content and character of this work, the centrality of the work ethic to identity construction, and the way rappers use work to build and maintain status, authenticity, and a "spirit of rapitalism," the act of behaving in a thoroughly capitalist manner while maintaining a sense of street credibility. I also analyze the difficulties faced by the hip-hop laborer, including the pressure to commercialize, unpaid work, and balancing day jobs and family obligations with commitments to the music scene. I conclude by exploring the ramifications of these findings and offering suggestions for policy.

INTRODUCTION

"One thing that sets Chicago apart from many other big cities is both the quality and diversity of our music," the then Chicago mayor, Richard M. Daley, said in a 2006 statement. "Whether it's blues, gospel, country, jazz or the rock of Lollapalooza, music enhances the quality of life of our residents by providing enjoyment as well as opportunities for intellectual development and

self-expression” (Kot, 2006). Missing from Daley’s list of laudable Chicago musical genres was rap, despite the fact that native son Kanye West had had the ninth-best-selling album in the United States in the previous year. Furthermore, rap music thrives in Chicago’s nightclubs, recording studios, record stores, and radio stations. For many, it is the very soundtrack to the city.

There are three tiers to Chicago’s rap music scene. Tier one includes internationally established artists, such as Kanye West, Common, and Lupe Fiasco, who are tied to the major music corporations. Tier two includes local and regional artists, who are independent from the major music corporations and earn a modest living from music sales, concert appearances, and merchandise. Tier three is the underground, consisting of rappers who are trying to launch careers in the music industry. Some third-tier rappers work day jobs or go to school; those who do not must rely on others or even resort to criminal activities to make ends meet. This article examines labor practices in the third tier of Chicago’s rap music scene.

It is difficult to quantify the number of working rappers in Chicago. Official reports (Rothfield et al., 2007) find that Chicago is fifth in the nation for employed musicians, behind New York, Los Angeles, Nashville, and San Francisco. In addition to musicians, Chicago is third in the nation for total music industry employment (which includes everything from promoters to radio disc jockeys to equipment manufacturers), with 53,104 individuals employed by the industry in some capacity and 12,749 individuals employed within its “core” components (recording studios, radio stations, music publishing companies, and instrument manufacturers and dealers). Chicago’s music industry generates revenues of more than \$818 million per year. These figures, however, include only professionals who report their income and have established businesses. Web sites such as MySpace and Facebook are home to thousands of musicians whose income is not calculated in the official figures. Furthermore, “these sites tell us nothing about their income from gigs or recording sales. . . . It is highly likely that self-employed musicians are underreporting their income, or not reporting it at all” (Rothfield et al., 2007: 5).

Chicago boasts the fourth largest grassroots or underground music scene in the nation. The musicians who comprise this scene occasionally perform in small nightclubs, but also in “ad hoc settings such as raves, unlicensed clubs whose business operations cannot be traced, house parties, college classrooms, dorms, church basements and garages. Though some may be signed to independent labels, they often do not tour but perform locally or regionally only. Though their cumulative effect is enormous, the direct economic contribution of these musicians individually is thus next to nil” (Rothfield et al., 2007: 39).

I begin with an examination of the literature that analyzes the relationship between creativity and capital, as well as the challenges faced by artistic laborers in a variety of industries. This is followed by an account of my methods. I then analyze the content and character of work in the third tier of Chicago’s rap music scene, unpacking the actual processes that take place. This is followed by a

consideration of the pressures to commercialize and other difficulties faced by the hip-hop tradesperson. I conclude by exploring the ramifications of these employment practices and offering suggestions for policy.

CREATIVITY AND CAPITAL

There is a vast body of scholarly research that explores the relationship between creativity and capital, yet rap musicians are often absent from this analysis. Economist Richard Florida (2003) has spent the better part of a decade writing about what he calls the creative class. Members of the creative class “engage in work whose function is to ‘create meaningful new forms.’ The super-creative core of this new class includes . . . artists, entertainers [and] actors. . . . Members of this super-creative core produce new forms or designs that are readily transferable and broadly useful—such as . . . composing music that can be performed again and again” (Florida, 2003: 8).

Adding to this concept, Shorthose and Strange (2004: 47) distinguished artistic work (“an expression of one’s creative capacity through self-determined labor”) from managed creativity (“alienated work within orthodox capitalist relations of production”). The former was performed by fragile, informal networks of independent artists with flexible and highly insecure “portfolio careers” marked by financial instability and part-time work.

Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) found that while artistic labor offered freedom, flexibility, and autonomy, creative workers suffered from anxiety and frustration over unpredictable income, long working hours, heavy competition, lack of job protection, compulsory networking, and isolation. This produced enormous stress and a sense of ambivalence for the workers, who experienced a never-ending cycle of independence and constriction.

Menger (1999) surveyed research on artistic labor markets and examined the rationales behind workers’ decisions to choose careers in which there was an oversupply of labor and substantial risk, including job insecurity, vulnerability to aging, income instability, and constant change. Menger found that for some creative workers being an artist was a “calling.” Others were thrill seekers with a passion for risk against heavy odds, similar to high-stakes gamblers or those who played the lottery. Others received nonmonetary rewards from artistic endeavors: “the variety of the work, a high level of personal autonomy in using one’s own initiative, the opportunities to use a wide range of abilities and to feel self-actualized at work, an idiosyncratic way of life, a strong sense of community, a low level of routine, and a high degree of social recognition for the successful artists” (Menger, 1999: 555). One tradeoff for this was lower wages than those of workers in nonartistic industries, except for those who reached the upper echelons of their chosen field.

Menger disliked the simplistic alienation-freedom dichotomies proffered by Marxist theories of labor. There was, he wrote, a psychic reward that made the

risks associated with artistic labor more tolerable: self-actualization. Because artistic careers generally involved a great deal of trial and error and informal, on-the-job training, “One becomes more and more informed about the various facets of the occupation and about one’s own abilities through doing the job” (Menger, 1999: 560). This gave aspiring artists an opportunity to better estimate their chances of joining the creative class, and discover whether or not they were cut out for this type of high-risk occupation. Those who chose to remain artists—even if unsuccessful—could do so until the end, rationalizing the choice by hoping they would be famous in the afterlife, à la van Gogh. Those who gave up could move into less risky occupations.

Eikhof and Haunschild (2007) examined the competing, contradictory, and often overlapping logics of artistic and economic practices for creative laborers, and asserted that “The key feature of creative or cultural industries is that the creative goods and services are not only produced, but that their production is embedded in a context of economic utilization” (Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007: 531). In creative industries, workers are often pressured to commercialize their wares in order to increase market viability (Shorthose & Strange, 2004).

The issue of commercialization was salient for the rappers in this study because in hip-hop culture, where “keeping it real” is imperative, commercialization was linked to inauthenticity. McLeod (1999: 141) examined authenticity in hip-hop culture and noted that a “significant kind of sell-out is going ‘commercial,’ that is, the distancing of an artist’s music and persona from an independently owned network of distribution (the underground) and repositioning oneself within a music business culture dominated by the big five multinational corporations that control the U.S. music industry.”

Eikhof and Haunschild (2007) found that actors didn’t like to think of themselves as being motivated by economic logics, but were obligated to consider market forces when making artistic decisions. Toynbee (2000) believed that, as a locus of creative labor, the music industry represented a special case because musicians aspired to make lots of money yet often pursued decidedly noneconomic goals. In part, this was because of the “non-commercial values to which successive corps of music makers from swing to techno have subscribed. The tension between such conflicting attitudes to the market suffuses the discourse and practice of music making” (Toynbee, 2000: 2). This contrasts with hip-hop culture, where the desire to make money is not necessarily taboo. Rap music is distinct from musical subcultures such as “punk or indie rock, where monetary success is equated with selling out. In hip hop, money equals power, and making money is celebrated *as long as it happens on the artist’s own terms*” (Hess, 2007: 13, emphasis mine).

This points to a shortcoming in McLeod’s (1999) distinction between street authenticity and commercial fakeness: the implausibility that commercial rappers view themselves as less genuine than noncommercial rappers. In a study of studio musicians in Hollywood, Faulkner (1971: 89) noted the limits of dichotomizing

the commercialization and artistic purity models of creative labor. “By driving the opposites too far [one] can too easily assign rather inflexible perspectives to musicians in the commercial setting.” Going commercial was not incompatible with the stated goals of many musicians in Faulkner’s study. Indeed, many of his subjects aimed for precisely that outcome from the earliest stages of their careers. Furthermore, Faulkner’s musicians described their work as satisfying both financially *and* artistically. While Faulkner generally attributed these attitudes to the career outcomes of his Hollywood studio musicians (those who went commercial justified the decision using any number of explanations), missing from the analysis was the concept of social class.

The creative class is often conceptualized as occurring within fairly narrow social strata. According to Florida (2003), the threshold for membership is a bachelor’s degree. Yet creative ecologies contain widespread economic stratification, and this invariably impacts attitudes and behaviors *vis-à-vis* commercialization. In examining Chicago’s hip-hop underground, it wasn’t a matter of discerning who made art for art’s sake and who was a sellout, but who could *afford* to make claims about artistic purity and who could not fund such a privileged position.

Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin (2005) examined fashion models and new media workers who had “cool” jobs in “hot” industries, fields that demanded entrepreneurial labor from their workforces. Models and dot-commers were drawn to these occupations because they were perceived to enjoy autonomy, creativity, excitement, wealth, and status. Because of this, workers accepted the risk and instability associated with employment in these “winner-take-all” industries. “The internalization of risk may be justified by the expectation of high rewards—the million-dollar-a-year Revlon contract or the million-dollar share of an IPO. But the number of workers who actually get such rewards is small” (Neff et al., 2005: 329–330).

The authors found that entering these fields required entrepreneurial labor, an up-front investment of money (e.g., head shots for models), and/or an investment of time (e.g., the self-created Web site that advertised the Internet worker’s skill). Neff et al. (2005) noted that the relatively flat job hierarchies and informal entry requirements in these industries attracted workers, but only a handful of them ever managed to secure the most prestigious jobs. “The best jobs are at the top of a loosely-defined structure; access to these jobs does not depend solely on hard work and skills. Instead, getting ‘good work’ reflects luck or innate qualities (as in a fashion model’s ‘look’) and marketing (as in a new media founder’s ability to tell a ‘story’ that convinces potential investors)” (Neff et al., 2005: 327). This did not dissuade their subjects, who believed that they were on the verge of being discovered at any moment. The authors asserted that culture industries were “built upon workers being motivated by the promise of one Big Job being right around the corner” (Neff et al., 2005: 319).

Lamont (2000) found that blue-collar factory workers created a moral order centered on the work ethic to keep economic, physical, and other uncertainties at

bay. Lamont's factory workers stressed the importance of perseverance in the face of adversity, discipline, long-term planning, delayed gratification, and industriousness. These behaviors and attitudes, they believed, were part and parcel of being a "decent" person. Workers deemed lazy were scorned. The factory workers' daily routine was "often painful and time-consuming, yet underpaid, physically demanding, or psychologically challenging" (Lamont, 2000: 26). Moreover, because the factory workers could not easily escape the crime, drugs, and poverty of their neighborhoods, labor was the "only" means by which they might acquire upward mobility. All of this served to build up a collective identity for the workers, one that eliminated the hierarchy of class-based stratification and leveled the moral playing field.

This work ethic was aligned with the larger culture of entrepreneurship and the American Dream ideology, which promotes the idea that, with enough effort, one can achieve upward social and financial mobility. Smith (2003: 69) pointed out that the hip-hop laborer "bears the stamp of American tradition, since the figure is typically male, entrepreneurial, and prestigious both in cultural influence and personal wealth." Smith used the term "hip-hop mogul" to describe the rapper-businessman who rocked the mic and inked deals behind the scenes, earning fortune and fame in the process. He noted that those who achieved this elite status often did so as a means of transcending the confines of a socioeconomic structure that places young black men at the bottom.

In his detailed history of entrepreneurship in hip-hop culture, Charnas (2010) explored the rise of the rap mogul. The early days of rap music featured a division of labor between businesspeople and artists, but as the genre was transformed from a tiny subcultural practice into a multibillion-dollar global industry, some of hip-hop's most famous rappers aspired to greater ownership over the means of production. These included Sean Combs, Jay-Z, and 50 Cent, all of whom were lauded as much for their financial and marketing acumen as they were for their music. These rap-music moguls had a considerable influence on the subjects of the present study.

METHODS

The fieldwork for this project took place over a six-year period and relied on extensive fieldwork, including attendance at more than 500 live performances and the observation of hundreds of recording sessions, radio broadcasts, rap battles, and breakdance competitions. I also frequented poetry slams, dance clubs, DJ tournaments, and beat contests, and I perused a number of local hip-hop Web sites.

From the outset, I utilized traditional qualitative methods such as observation and interviews, but I also incorporated newer modes of inquiry, such as visual ethnography and Web-based snowball sampling. Initially, I recruited participants through traditional snowball sampling: I went to nightclubs, observed, made contacts with rap musicians, interviewed them at a later time, and was introduced

to others in their networks. Within months, I began employing a virtual variation of this method: I created a MySpace profile that offered brief information about my research and encouraged rappers to contact me to be interviewed for the project.

Through MySpace, I was able to network with Chicago's rap music underground, find out where performances were taking place, discover who was working together, distinguish who was feuding with whom. As I continued to add virtual "friends" to my profile page, I tapped into an ever-expanding network of Chicago-based rappers with whom I could easily make contact. This network, which eventually numbered over 800 underground rappers in Chicago, would have been difficult, if not impossible, to construct via traditional qualitative methods.

Over the course of the project, I conducted 135 in-depth interviews with musicians from Chicago's underground rap scene. I asked the participants to sit for interviews in spaces where they participated in hip-hop culture and created music. This often meant home-based recording studios, which were ubiquitous, but interviews were also conducted in bedrooms, basements, attics, record stores, parks, nightclubs, and warehouses, and even on the streets of Chicago. The interviews typically lasted between 60 and 120 minutes, although some took several hours. I also conducted second and even third follow-up interviews with a number of the subjects.

The participants in the study reflected the diversity of Chicago's underground hip-hop scene. Of the 135 subjects, 49 (36%) self-identified as Latino, 46 (34%) as African American or black, 29 (22%) as white, and 11 (8%) as biracial or multiracial. Only six of the subjects were women, reflecting the larger dearth of female involvement in hip-hop. Participants ranged from 18 to 37 years of age; the average subject was around 25 years old.

While the vast majority of subjects rapped, a handful participated in some other capacity, such as music production or DJ-ing. "Hip-hop" refers to a musical subculture that consists of rapping, breakdancing, DJ-ing, beatboxing, and creating graffiti. Those involved in hip-hop generally display membership of the rapper group by expressing themselves in African-American Vernacular English (Perry, 2004) and dressing in a style of clothing specific to the subculture. Because most of the musicians interviewed for this project were involved in a variety of hip-hop-related activities, and did not limit themselves to a singular form of subcultural expression, I use the terms "rappers" and "hip-hoppers" interchangeably.

Rather than audiotaping interviews and/or writing field notes, I took a video camera into the field at all times. The video camera made it easier for me to conduct research than it would have been had I relied entirely upon traditional qualitative methods. For example, at rap concerts, it was not unusual to see dozens of people snapping photos or shooting videos with their cell phones or camcorders, so I didn't stand out because I had a video camera. This method also

proved useful because it enabled me to study the subjects and setting more deeply, including scrutinizing my findings well after the fact. It also allowed me greater access to the nonlinguistic aspects of the interviews, including gestures, body language, facial expressions, and emotions.

The video camera proved transformative for me, at least in the eyes of others. Without the video camera, I was viewed with wariness, but with a video camera in hand, I was welcome nearly everywhere. This was due to the fact that I had a semiformal role that was easily understood by the rappers: the “video guy.” Assuming the role of “video guy” allowed me to gain entrée into the literal and figurative backstage of hip-hop culture in Chicago and penetrate the inner circles of this subculture.

HUSTLE AND FLOW

Schor (1991) tallied the number of hours people worked, both on the job and at home, and found that, over time, leisure hours decreased as hours spent carrying out paid labor increased. For the hip-hoppers in this study, their so-called leisure time was filled with what many would call work: when they weren’t toiling away at day jobs, going to school, or tending to household and family duties, they often spent their free time doing the work of being a rapper.

When the hip-hoppers in this study talked about rap as a form of labor, they meant it in an empirical sense. “This is a job,” Urban Spexx insisted. “We do it day in, day out. If we weren’t taking this seriously, we wouldn’t keep making music and keep making CDs. We’re coming out with the Web site, we want to come up with a production studio. I think those are the steps that we’re taking to try to make it a career.” Peterson and Anand (2004) believed that every cultural field fostered a career system that, hypothetically, enabled workers in that field to amass skills, build a network, and advance in a patterned fashion. For the Chicago rappers, this system required vast amounts of labor.

Like other creative laborers, the aspiring rappers in Chicago had to do most of the work themselves. This involved attending to the artistic elements of musical creation, as well as the business aspects. Condry (2006: 88) noted that “The process of career development, from being one among the mass of amateurs to becoming one of the very few megahit stars, depends on navigating past the gatekeepers, developing connections, and improving one’s skills.” When the hip-hoppers talked about rap music as a form of work, many described it using the term “grinding,” which referred to the all-consuming nature of being a rapper, the number of hours required, the amount of sheer effort involved. Nephew described his average workday to me:

I wake up at 11:30, 12:00. I’m making phone calls, booking shows for myself, getting myself [press], making connects and building relationships with people in and out of Chicago. And then at night time, I’d say 10, 11 o’clock,

I'm back to my humble abode, and I'm in my mode with my headphones on and I'm being a artist from 11:30 'til about six in the morning. This is my life, this is a job for me. I'm a manager by day, artist by night.

Participants emphasized the importance of maintaining a strong work ethic. This rhetoric added a veneer of respectability that helped counter negative stereotypes about rap music from the larger artistic community and/or from their families and peers. Hard work conveyed responsibility, skill, seriousness, high status, and middle-class values. The premium placed upon hard work also helped to deflect concerns about achieving success in the face of nearly insurmountable odds. Hard work gave one an edge that supposedly lazy rappers did not enjoy, and lent a sense of order and control to a highly unpredictable occupation; hard work provided a means by which the financially struggling rapper might someday achieve upward mobility. Ya Boy AMC stressed the importance of working *harder* than the competition:

I wouldn't call myself the best rapper out there, but I will out-hustle you. If you feel like you gonna stay up two days, I'm gonna stay up for four days straight. If you got to walk a mile to get there, I'm gonna walk two miles. Whatever you do, I'm gonna do it times two. There ain't nobody out there right now that's gonna out-grind me, that's gonna outshine me, that's gonna out-hustle me. Every day I have to make something new happen.

For participants, being a musician was an ongoing process, one that entailed a continual commitment of time, energy, and money. This included learning to rap, honing skills, writing, recording, and mixing songs. This music had to be distributed, be it online or in the form of physical CDs (complete with artwork). At times, messages about work were embedded directly into these cultural objects. For example, Marz released a CD entitled *Grind Music: The Movement*, which directly emphasized motivation, effort, and delayed gratification. Songs such as "Let's Get Rich," "Get Bread," and "On the Grind" promised vast wealth via hard work. Music videos for the songs had to be conceptualized, shot, and edited. Some rappers did this work themselves; others hired outsiders or recruited friends and associates for these tasks. Bartering for these services was not uncommon.

Live performances also proved important, both as a means of gaining new fans and as a means of networking with other members of the music scene. Rappers were rarely paid—or were paid very little—to perform. The exposure and the potential income from merchandise were considered payment enough. Touring musicians earned more income, but these dollars often went back into the costs associated with traveling. No one in this study was making much money from live performances, yet live performances were an integral element of the required work.

To get audiences interested and further their reputation in the public eye, rappers had to promote themselves. Promotion involved marketing oneself to the public via a variety of online and in-person methods. Digital promotion was common and consisted of posting flyers, songs, videos, news, and information to

various online outlets, as well as sending “bulletins” to “friends” on social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter, sending mass e-mails to listservs, and posting on rap-related message boards and Web sites. These posts were used frequently as a platform for doing work (promotion, networking), and also as a means of displaying one’s work ethic. For example, a bulletin might be titled, “I’m On My Grind—Check Out the New Video!”

Some rappers spent a great deal of time displaying their work ethic online. Others did little of this, choosing to network and promote in person in physical settings such as concert venues and recording studios. Those who spent too much time online might be accused of being “Facebook rappers,” who sat at home and did little “real” work. Thus, social networking offered a forum to display one’s work ethic, but there were limits to how much of this could be done before one was accused of being lazy.

Promotion also took place in person at live performances, recording studios, and hip-hop related retail outlets, such as music and clothing stores. In-person promotion consisted of creating and handing out flyers and or/posters that announced upcoming performances, giving away free CDs, working with local clothing and music stores to persuade them to carry the artists’ music and/or merchandise, and designing and manufacturing press kits to distribute to journalists, radio disc jockeys, and other industry figures.

Related to promotion was networking, another form of labor for the underground musician. Networking involved making contacts with other members of the underground rap community, and building relationships that might advance one’s career goals. Networking took place both in person and online. Web-based networking often occurred on social networking sites, and consisted largely of garnering new “friends” as potential audience members and reposting bulletins sent by other rappers in hopes that the favor would be returned in kind. In-person networking consisted of linking up with other members of the underground rap scene. This included recording songs with other rappers, attending their concerts, buying their music, trading CDs with them, and/or appearing in their music videos.

These interactions were important for both parties, as the exchanges broadened their potential fan bases. They also served as a claim to community membership, a form of authenticity that was key to establishing oneself on the local rap scene. Many rappers were members of more than one musical group, effectively doubling or tripling the amount of labor required, but also producing higher dividends in terms of potential exposure and income.

THE SPIRIT OF RAPITALISM

The rappers in this study described career goals that ranged along a continuum from relatively modest goals to large-scale ambitions that included hit records and sold-out stadiums. At the modest end of the spectrum were “hobbyists” (who made music for enjoyment and had little or no expectation of receiving money from it)

and “realists” (who hoped that rap music would provide a living wage, that they could earn enough income from music to avoid outside employment). “I would like to just make a living off of this, just a middle-class living, pay my bills that I got now,” a realist named Doctor Who told me.

Contrasting with these sentiments were those of musicians such as Maverick, who insisted that “In five years, we gonna be the top selling artist, we gonna be on all the Billboard charts, we gonna sell everybody out, we gonna be everywhere. Madison Square Garden.” Maverick aspired to more than just rapping: “I wanna be an entrepreneur. I wanna take the game by storm. I wanna be a producer, slash rapper, slash super entrepreneur, the CEO of everything. I’m gonna be a mogul.” Those with higher aspirations emphasized delayed gratification: work hard today and achieve fulfillment later when goals and dreams have been realized. This American Dream ideology was repeated time and again by rappers in this study. For example, QT insisted that “I know I’m gonna be successful at anything I do, as long I put my mind to it and stay on my grind.”

In order to achieve their career goals, many participants felt a great demand to commercialize their works to the highest possible degree. This created tension, because commercialism was often equated with inauthenticity. A Chicago rapper named JR described commercial rap music as trendy, superficial, and inauthentic: “Glamour, jiggy, Benzes, gold D’s, gold fronts, half-naked women on the album cover. That’s what sells, that’s what gets ’em platinum, top-ten Billboard. And that’s fake.” Oftentimes, accusations of inauthenticity were aimed at first-tier rappers affiliated with major music corporations. According to Alo, “When you get signed to a Universal or a Sony, they’re gonna put you in the [studio] with somebody who’s gonna tell you, ‘This is your beat? We’re changing this whole beat around. We’re gonna bump it up to sound like that stuff that’s on the radio.’” This put pressure on rappers to alter their music in order to make it more commercially viable. For example, DJ Grimmace, a rap-music producer, noted that

A lot of producers that want to make money cater their styles to the commercial sounds, because you can definitely make way more money in the commercial area than you can in the underground areas. And you have to remember that there’s a much broader audience for commercial rap, not only because they can hear it on the radio and see it on TV, but because it’s more widespread and there’s more money behind it. You have to choose one over the other. You’re either going to be a creative artist or someone trying to make money off it. And if you want to make money, I have no problem with that, but if it’s gonna take away from the whole artistic culture, I’m uncomfortable with that.

The incentives to turn commercial were financially tempting, but doing so might lead to charges of selling out and being labeled phony. This created a sense of ambivalence as well as numerous debates about what constituted and what did not constitute selling out. “A lot of these commercial rappers were underground

first, but they wanna get paid immediately or get a deal so a lot of the real MCs turn commercial,” a rapper named Dizaz told me. “I’m not saying commercial’s bad ’cause of course you make money. But it’s bad for somebody who has something to say in a artistic form, to make it into this [commercial] dance thing. We just can’t do that type of music.” For these rappers, artistic purity was linked to authenticity and commercialization was linked to selling out. “That’s the struggle between underground real hip-hop heads and cats that are not considered real hip-hop heads,” Thesis opined. “They’re like, ‘Call me whatever you want to call me, I’m getting paid.’ And there’s [musicians like] us: I’m broke but I’m being respectful to the art and the culture which I love and grew up with.”

Some hip-hoppers in this study claimed that they would not commercialize their sound or compromise their artistic vision under any circumstances. “I would love to get some sort of record contract, but if that company asked me to change my music, then I wouldn’t agree to it,” DJ Grimmace said. “For me, selling out isn’t signing to a big record label, selling out isn’t selling your music to an ad agency. Selling out is changing your artistic and creative ideas because someone else thinks it will sell better.”

Conversely, there were rappers who lacked commitment to models of artistic purity. For example, Votrocious, a rapper in this study who made radio-friendly music, claimed that “When I make songs, I make what I want, what I like. I’m not making songs just so people can buy it. You can make a commercial sound without being commercial.”

There was a marked class difference between the participants who refused to sell out and those who did not equate commercialization with inauthenticity. Rappers with college degrees, white-collar jobs, wealthy parents, and other middle-to-upper-class indicators espoused lofty ideals about artistic purity; statements about making it at any cost were universally proclaimed by the economically less fortunate. Working- and lower-class rap artists had no problem commercializing their lyrics, sound, or image in order to appeal to the masses. Selling out or going commercial was a nonissue; if anything it was the goal. “I’m *trying* to be mainstream,” FrankNit insisted. “I can make a thousand [noncommercial songs], but that don’t put food on the table. I’m in this for the money.”

Making commercial rap music, however, did not mean that its creators viewed themselves as less genuine than those who professed artistic purity. Commercial rappers often viewed themselves as *more* authentic than noncommercial rappers because, to them, mass acceptance signaled making it. “I don’t even call it commercial rap, I call it successful rap—you hustled and made something of yourself,” Robin Steel told me. “You got underground rappers that stay underground forever. They ain’t gonna get signed, ’cause they ain’t got the heart and dedication. They phony.” By linking authenticity to commercial success, Steel neatly sidestepped the accusations of sellout aimed at radio-friendly rappers with large-scale ambitions.

It was this tension between authenticity and going commercial that imbued these hip-hop entrepreneurs with a “spirit of rapitalism,” the delicate balancing act of behaving in a thoroughly capitalist manner while maintaining a sense of street credibility. Noiz exemplified the spirit of rapitalism when he stated that

I don't know how to really sell out. I don't think I've ever sold out in my life so I don't see myself doing that now. What's a sellout record? They want us to talk about something that we really don't live? No, that's not gonna happen. Someone that wasn't a street dude who's doing some street music, that's selling out. But when we make records it's true, it's real life. We been there. This ain't made up. I ain't trying to sell out but this is what I wanna do. So why not get money?

Adding to this, Mr. Chicago pointed out the substantial financial investment that he and other rappers had made in their quest to develop music careers. “We spend money on it, why can't we make money off it?” This justification was connected to entrepreneurial labor, the investment of time and money made by aspiring artists who hoped to become members of the creative class.

Many participants believed that their investment of entrepreneurial labor would lead to a big break. For example, Bo-Go told me that “If the right person hears our music, we can go like that [snaps fingers]. It only takes 15 seconds for somebody to pop in the disc and listen to the first eight bars and be like, ‘I wanna sign this guy.’ So we 15 seconds away from a multimillion dollar deal.”

UNPAID LABOR AND OTHER CHALLENGES

For participants in this study, the decision to become rappers often led to negative consequences. For example, the prospect of performing underpaid or unpaid labor was less than desirable. Rusty Chains bemoaned the opportunities he had lost due to his pursuit of a music career. “I had no high school education, not much of a job history. So it's hard for someone like me to get a job, because I've always tried to focus on making the music.” Chains, an ex-drug dealer, described his feelings of envy upon seeing his former peers in the narcotics trade doing well financially. “They're eating,” he said. “I'm *rapping* about eating.”

Participants were often employed in fits and starts, with only occasional paid gigs, and most had day jobs to support their artistic aspirations. “We all got regular jobs that we have to do,” Strive Tek explained. “Unfortunately music isn't paying for anything. So we're working after work.” Kid Static designed Web sites, Phillip Morris worked in the billing department of a hospital, Juni was employed at an auto-parts store, and Thesis drove a delivery van. “I got two full-time jobs,” Thesis explained. “I just don't get paid for one of 'em.” Rusty Chains, who did not have a day job and was supported by his girlfriend, noted that his earnings were variable and unpredictable. “If I get enough shows in a month, I'm all right. If not, I'm struggling hard.”

In order to earn additional income, it was not unusual for the participants in this study to secure side jobs in some other element of Chicago's hip-hop underground. While many rappers worked on their music careers for free, these side jobs almost always included a fee or were used for barter. These jobs were useful because they provided much-needed income, but they also allowed rappers to network and build up their name and reputation within the hip-hop community. O-mega worked as an unpaid intern at a recording studio, exchanging his labor for education, experience, and the opportunity to network. MadAdam started a management company that oversaw several local rap acts. Reap worked as a professional (and popular) hip-hop photographer and videographer, charging hundreds of dollars per session. Others offered design, printing, and marketing services.

Producer DJ Grimmace earned a living by recording local artists in his home studio. Grimmace had a degree in sound design from Columbia College and was able to secure relatively high-paying freelance gigs in his spare time. Doing so allowed him to focus on his music career. "This is what I do full time," he explained. "It works some of the time, but it's been slowing down, so I might have to get a consistent nine-to-five studio job. It's great to be able to work from my apartment, but it's just hard to keep up at this point." Grimmace eventually took a day job designing sound for a video-game company, but he continued to record and DJ in his spare hours.

Rappers with children discussed the difficulty of balancing family obligations with their commitments to the music scene. "I try to be as active a part of the hip-hop community as I can, which is difficult at times," Phillip Morris admitted. "I got a nine-to-five [job]. I have two kids, which is, as any parent knows, a full-time job. And I try to treat hip-hop like my full-time career as well, so there's not much time for sleep."

For some, family responsibilities took precedence over rap career building, and they adjusted their goals accordingly. "I don't wanna be huge," Visual said of his music industry aspirations. "I got a family, so I gotta balance that. To be huge, you gotta put in huge work, and I don't have the time to put in huge work into music. I do it more because I love it. It fills me up inside and makes me keep moving. So I need to do music, but I don't want to do it to the point where I lose other things because I'm doing it."

For women, the responsibilities of family and children were more complex. Ms. Rapture, a parent, talked about successful female rappers such as Lauren Hill and Raw Digga who effectively retired after having children. "As a mother, you have to make those decisions: family or hip-hop. Men don't think about it that way. I had the father of my child—who's also an artist—say, 'You're a mother, be a mother.' [There's] all this negativity that we hear from men in regards to what we can or cannot do, and a lot of that is defined by motherhood."

Others delayed motherhood in order to concentrate on their music careers. Kimzone, a 30-something female rapper, had made rap her sole focus for nearly 20 years, a decision fraught with increasing ambivalence as she got older:

I put my life as being a mother on hold for hip-hop. I have been without a boyfriend for so long. I've been doing this whole hip-hop thing for my entire life, and I put [motherhood] on hold because I wanted to be together, so that when I do have my family, I could actually bring them into something. But I think I'm wasting so much time. Everything gonna dry up and I'll be like, I did all this for hip-hop and I don't have no kids and I'll die an old spinster lady with no kids and a thousand cats.

Gender was also complicated for structural reasons. Rap is a highly masculinized musical genre (Ogbar, 2007). A musician's choice to pursue rap over, say, smooth jazz served as a claim to masculinity in and of itself, as was the choice to pursue gangsta rap over other categories within the genre. Fitts (2008: 230) examined hip-hop culture industry laborers, and found "limited avenues present for black women in rap music." Rap music's hypermasculinity, which reflects a larger hegemonic culture that supports the oppression of females in the workforce, meant that opportunities for women were severely limited. This notion was echoed by the female rappers interviewed for the present study, who decried the systemic exclusion of women from hip-hop culture. "This is a male-dominated world," said Kayanne, a Chicago-based female rapper. "You'll have one female in an all-male crew, and there can be no other females. Why hasn't there ever been a female Wu Tang? Because the world isn't ready for that, they don't want to see that."

DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR POLICY

The work performed by the participants in this study suggests that the conditions of artistic labor apply as readily to rappers as they do to participants in any other creative industry. Also similar are the challenges encountered by artistic workers, which are especially difficult for the subjects of the present study due to the fact that many of them struggle to stay afloat financially. Yet they provide significant worth to the communities in which they reside.

Arts-impact metastudies (Guetzkow, 2002; Reeves, 2002) attest to the economic value of the arts for local communities. Cities with high concentrations of creative workers "tend to be the economic winners of our age. Not only do they have high concentrations of creative-class people, they have high concentrations of creative economic outcomes" (Florida, 2003: 8). Furthermore, artistic labor has a clear social value that offers a "substantial contribution to the general welfare of society and its communities" (Shorthose & Strange, 2004: 49). In the UK, the discourse over the value of artistic labor has shifted from the discussion of purely economic models to those that acknowledge its social value for communities. The arts "increase social inclusion and community cohesion, reduce crime and deviance, and increase health and mental wellbeing" (Böhm & Land, 2009: 77).

While it is difficult to correlate, for example, increased artistic activity and reduced crime rates at the community level, similar sentiments were echoed in the personal narratives of rappers in this study. For example, Jam One claimed that

“Without hip-hop, I’d probably be in a really bad world right now. I grew up in a bad neighborhood—a lot of gangbangers, a lot of drug dealers. Hip-hop kept me away from all of that. It’s kept me a good boy. I would’ve been a drug dealer.”

Despite its social value, rap music remains maligned in a manner similar to the way that now-highbrow jazz was viewed in the wake of its inception, as an affront to all that is good and decent in society. (America’s first “drug czar,” Harry J. Anslinger, called jazz music “satanic” while testifying before Congress.) It is time that cultural, artistic, and academic gatekeepers not only recognize rap’s legitimacy as creative labor, but also acknowledge that it is the most significant cultural development produced by the African American community in the past 30 years. Doing so would go a long way toward recognizing that rapping is a cultural practice that reaches some of America’s most vulnerable populations: young, ethnic minority males from inner cities.

Rap music is generally not acknowledged as artistic labor, and its contributions to local communities are overlooked. This is problematic for rappers because this type of labor is unlikely to be recognized for its social value. Policymakers must do more, not only to appreciate the cultural value of these musicians but also to put into place protections to keep them from falling through the cracks of society. Organizations such as the Musicians Foundation, Inc, are helpful in that they assist professional musicians with medical and other emergency expenses, but they require applicants to demonstrate that their primary income for the previous five years stemmed from employment as musicians, thus excluding developing artists and those whose low-paying day jobs support their musical aspirations. Entities such as the Songwriters Guild of America offer advice and limited networking opportunities, but premium services such as royalty collection, contract reviews, and group medical insurance are available only to published songwriters. More must be done at the local level to assist up-and-coming musicians, including rappers.

Gorz (1999) recommends a revolutionary reimagining of society predicated upon the elimination of wage-based labor and capitalism, and the creation of a “multi-activity” society, one that does not aim for payment and profit but aims instead for personal fulfillment and community enrichment. Rather than wasting their lives in meaningless jobs, people would be empowered to divide their time between education and “group ecological, social and cultural projects. Work, study, experiment, exchange, artistic practice and personal fulfillment would all go hand in hand” (Gorz, 1999: 99).

According to Gorz, part of the problem with capitalism is that it generates competitive, self-interested workers who are too busy trying to get ahead to be concerned with the greater societal good. This is reflected in hip-hop moguls, aspiring or otherwise, who are “individualistic rather than communal,” concerned only with bypassing various “haters” on their way to the top (Smith, 2003: 82). Buoyed by a winner-take-all system that cares little about the individual, hip-hop moguls do little to give back to the communities that spawn them, and instead extend their material gains only to a small inner circle of family and friends. Gorz

(1999) believes that destroying capitalism and wage-based labor will lead to the obliteration of this mindset, leaving room for a more holistic society, in which people have a genuine interest in community building. In fact, *only* a society that cares about its people will produce citizens who are concerned about society in return.

Gorz outlines a set of specific policies aimed toward achieving this goal: (1) grant all people a guaranteed income sufficient to meet their basic needs. Doing so would allow people to be more selective in how they work and the conditions under which they do so; (2) give laborers complete flexibility over their time vis-à-vis work, with periods of discontinuity intentionally built in so that people have more time to pursue meaningful activities outside of labor; (3) produce urban policies that reorganize the material world into “clearly laid-out, polycentric towns and cities, in which each district or neighborhood offers a range of sites accessible to everyone at any time for self-activities, self-providing, self-directed learning, exchanges of services and knowledge” (Gorz, 1999: 101); and (4) create Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETS) where people could barter any product or service.

Gorz acknowledges that his proposals are as provocative as they are sweeping, but he bases his suggestions upon real-world solutions that have been implemented and succeeded. Cities such as Chicago must recognize the cultural and financial benefits of a thriving music community, and put policies into effect that nurture the development of its musicians, including rappers. To conclude, I build upon Gorz’s ideas and offer specific initiatives designed to assist Chicago’s musical laborers. These are not far-fetched fantasies but concrete suggestions that can be enacted immediately, even under the present system of capitalism.

1. A grant program for musicians should be established. The grants would cover basic living expenses, and would be renewable under certain conditions. While this hardly eliminates capitalism, it would allow creative laborers a period of freedom from work or school, and give them the time and freedom to pursue creative endeavors. Artists would have the flexibility to “spend” this funding on a timeline that meets their needs. For example, a summer grant would be especially attractive to secondary and postsecondary students, who generally have this time off. Musicians with day jobs could draw upon these funds during times of nonwork (vacations, nights, weekends) to cover expenses such as childcare services.
2. Urban planners in Chicago should erect a zone within the city specifically dedicated to the city’s music and musicians. This “music zone” would be home to performance, rehearsal, meeting, and workshop spaces, nonprofit recording studios, music-dedicated retail outlets (CD stores that cater to local music, instrument stores that offer discounts to area musicians), a nonprofit music-training center, and a nonprofit museum that showcases the history of Chicago music. These organizations should be owned and staffed entirely by

local musicians, and their revenues applied to grant programs, health care, and housing for musicians. To that end, located within this zone, there should be subsidized housing for musicians. New York City's Westbeth Artists Housing offers a successful model, and has fostered the careers of notable musicians such as jazz great Gil Evans (Walter, 2010). A Chicago music zone would likely be attractive to tourists. As noted by sociologist David Grazian (2003), Chicago is home to what is arguably the world's most famous blues scene, and tourists from around the globe flock to the city to partake in its rich musical culture. Establishing a dedicated music zone would increase music tourism for the city, and revenues could be directed toward Chicago musicians.

3. One or more Local Exchange Trading Systems should be created and dedicated to musicians. This would allow musicians to easily barter for musical equipment, services such as music and video production, and child and health care. Many of the musicians studied here already barter goods and services on an unofficial basis, but formalizing the process would allow for a broader reach. As Gorz (1999: 107) notes, a large LETS network allows workers to "pool their resources to acquire more technically advanced equipment than would be within the reach of a single network."
4. Policymakers should enact laws that protect local musicians. For example, promoters and nightclubs should be legally dissuaded from "pay-to-play" schemes, which are common in Chicago's music scene. Aspiring musicians sometimes pay outright for the privilege of performing, or are forced to purchase tickets from the promoter in hopes of reselling them. These types of practices should be legally prohibited. Similarly, "open-mic" nights, a common feature of Chicago's hip-hop underground, attract musicians hoping to gain valuable onstage experience and audiences willing to pay entry fees and purchase drinks and food from the venue. A percentage of these revenues should rightfully accrue to the artists. Finally, any business that profits from the labor of musicians should be legally required to have an outside agency—such as a musicians' union or volunteers from an organization such as Accountants for the Public Interest—audit their financial records to make sure that revenues are properly accounted for. Businesses found in violation should be given hefty fines, to be paid to the laborers, to dissuade dishonest accounting.

A community that supports its working musicians is one that stands a better chance of being supported in return. Making it in the music business is a challenging proposition under the best circumstances. Initiatives and policies such as those suggested above would demonstrate that Chicago acknowledges and appreciates the cultural, social, and economic value of a thriving local music scene and the musicians who create it. Rather than breeding the next generation of hip-hop moguls, who only want to get paid, communities would benefit from protecting

and valuing the contributions of its working musicians. As the present study demonstrates, rappers certainly fit this description.

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