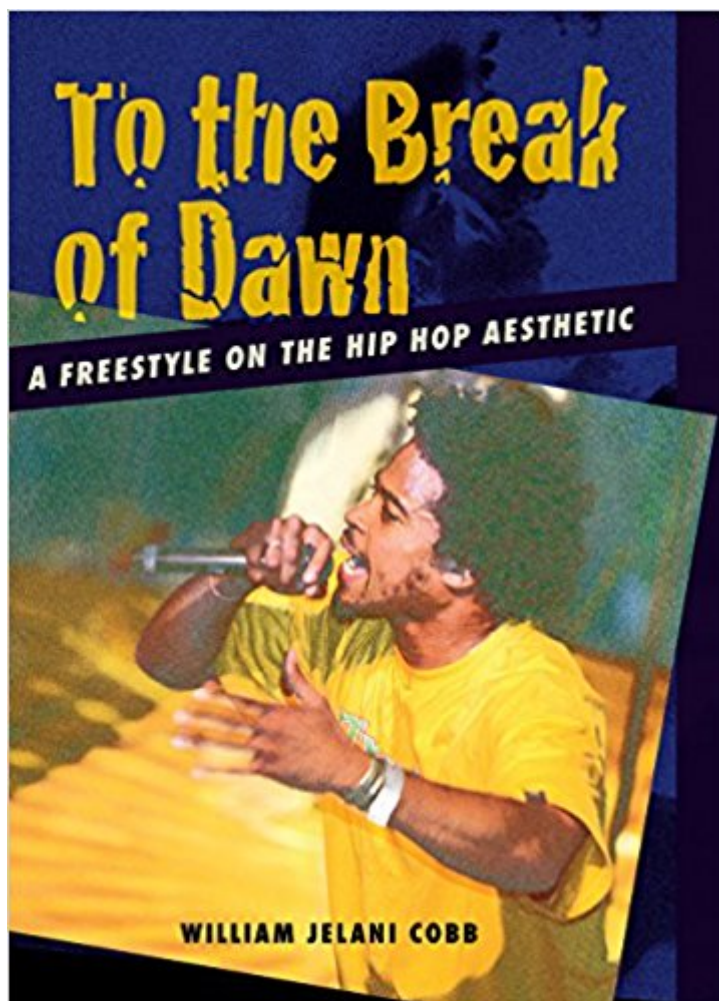


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To The Break Of Dawn: A Freestyle On The Hip Hop Aesthetic



Synopsis

2007 Arts Club of Washington's National Award for Arts Writing - Finalist

With roots that stretch from West Africa through the black pulpit, hip-hop emerged in the streets of the South Bronx in the 1970s and has spread to the farthest corners of the earth. *To the Break of Dawn* uniquely examines this freestyle verbal artistry on its own terms. A kid from Queens who spent his youth at the epicenter of this new art form, music critic William Jelani Cobb takes readers inside the beats, the lyrics, and the flow of hip-hop, separating mere corporate rappers from the creative MCs that forged the art in the crucible of the street jam. The four pillars of hip hop—break dancing, graffiti art, deejaying, and rapping—find their origins in traditions as diverse as the Afro-Brazilian martial art Capoeira and Caribbean immigrants' turnstile artistry. Tracing hip-hop's relationship to ancestral forms of expression, Cobb explores the cultural and literary elements that are at its core. From KRS-One and Notorious B.I.G. to Tupac Shakur and Lauryn Hill, he profiles MCs who were pivotal to the rise of the genre, verbal artists whose lineage runs back to the black preacher and the bluesman. Unlike books that focus on hip-hop as a social movement or a commercial phenomenon, *To the Break of Dawn* tracks the music's aesthetic, stylistic, and thematic evolution from its inception to today's distinctly regional sub-divisions and styles. Written with an insider's ear, the book illuminates hip-hop's innovations in a freestyle form that speaks to both aficionados and newcomers to the art.

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Hip-hop "freestyle," according to Cobb, assistant professor of history at Spelman College, is an extension of "the dozens" — exchanging barbs using "the rapid-fire calculation of speed chess combined with the language virtuosity of a poetry recital." Cobb subtitles his book a freestyle, and on literally every page he displays a tremendous command of language and history as he "examines the aesthetic, stylistic, and thematic evolution of hip hop from its inception in the South Bronx to the present era." But make no mistake: this groundbreaking work is an artfully constructed and vividly written look at "the artistic evolution of rap music and its relationship to earlier forms of black expression." Cobb brilliantly displays how hip-hop has its own aesthetic in five sections: hip-hop's relationship to ancestral forms of African-American culture; the history of its aesthetic evolution; its use of the "entire palette of poetic techniques

History professor Cobb delivers his disquisition on hip-hop's place in the larger cultural landscape in a manner resembling the rapper's flow that he says is, along with break dancing, graffiti art, and deejaying, one of four pillars of hip-hop. Despite the effort, he may leave readers neither actively nor enthusiastically involved in hip-hop culture baffled or disinterested. He makes many cogent points (e.g., "Hip hop has intentionally not produced the equivalent of blues standards like 'Stagger Lee' or 'C.C. Ryder,' because hip hop has no room for 'standards' in the traditional sense") as he describes hip-hop's growth and cultural reach, but his cozy, occasionally idiosyncratic verbiage and underlying seeming assumption that hip-hop is the pop-cultural be-all and end-all may just undercut the book's appeal. Still, this is vital stuff for hip-hop fans eager to know more about their favorite cultural idiom's development and underpinnings, and for the edification of the merely curious who are willing to immerse themselves in hip-hop for the sake of better understanding. Mike Tribby

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What William Jelani Cobb does with "To The Break of Dawn" is very similar to what the great writer/author and music critic Amiri Baraka did in 1963 with his earth shattering book, Blues People. Cobb's focus on the aesthetics in hip hop, as seen primarily through its lyrics, and its connection to the African American musical continuum arrives not a moment too soon. As every other car commercial and sports endeavor welcomes hip hop as its soundtrack of commerce, Cobb reminds us that this music emerges from people who were once commodities themselves. The experience of dehumanization created the unique aesthetic of Black music in America and despite the diamond grillz and the posh Atlanta estates "To The Break of Dawn" asserts and proves that rap music still pays homage to field shouts and work songs. Cobb's credentials as historian and social critic serve

the reader well as he connects the dots between American history and hip hop aesthetics, but the reader is best served by Cobb's clear love of hip hop, his personal knowledge of the music as kid from Queens, and his adroit and clear writing style. One need not be a member of a historical society to enjoy "To The Break of Dawn." Cobb's clear, funny and incisive prose makes this a book that everybody, from dad in the den listening to old school Bobby Womack to the kid in the basement listening to the best of the dirty south, can understand and more importantly enjoy.

I enjoyed the imagery connection in this book. Cobb has a way of drawing you in to his experiences and allowing you to explore with his wording. This is an excellent read. I respect the book because he kept it real throughout the entire novel. Simply relating his experiences with hip hop with the history.

William Jelani Cobb actually succeeds in breaking down true hip hop for a few simple reasons:1) He's one of the best cultural writers we have out there (see his Essence contributions as an example)2) He's not afraid to speak truth (and not feestyle with multi-syllable words in order to create an uppity hip hop theory that excludes the very members of its group)3) He is a child of hip hop, like Chuck D. said.If you're tired of people trying to grind hip hop's meaning down to a minutae of a granule of a spray paint residue with their overly academic hypothesis and their inability to actually pick up a De La Soul CD and listen to the music, then you need this book.Down with the posers.

In my opinion, the :Hip Hop experience is the most recent expression of the "African-American musical idiom" which was injected into the veins of American music when the frist African arrived on the North American shores. This author is correct in suggesting that "hip hop(has been dropped) into the vast well of commercial mediocrity (where it has been" diluted and altered in way to apeal to a wider public...'Eileen Southern) and that new and more facinating "musical innovations...are sure to come." When will the pilfering end???????

On page 10, Jelani Cobb lists several other works on hip hop, including Chang's _Can't Stop, Won't Stop_, Neal and Foreman's _That's the Joint_, and Rose's hugely influential _Black Noise_. In doing so, Jelani Cobb seems to hope that _To the Break of Dawn_ will build upon the important work these other authors have contributed to rap and hip hop scholarship. It doesn't come close.Unfortunately, _To the Break of Dawn_ lacks the originality and sophistication of these other

works. The connections Jelani Cobb draws between the rapper and the bluesman, for example, are not at all new, nor are his attempts to identify other important antecedents of rap music. (David Toop's *Rap Attack* still sets the standard for teasing out the multifaceted and complex lineage of rap.) And while Jelani Cobb's chronology of the changes in rap music is admittedly on-point and helpful, he never offers any insightful analysis to back it up. For example, during his discussion of the importance of comparison in rap lyrics, he cites the following Big Pun rhyme: "The prerogative to chase girls who look provocative / Terror Squad rock ice whiter than Yugoslavians." Then he follows up with this devastating piece of analysis: "In doing so he [Big Pun] deliberately compared the clarity of his diamonds with the fair skin of Eastern Europeans." Unfortunately, this is about as good as it gets. What Jelani Cobb fails to realize is that in 2007, most people---certainly those who would buy his book---don't need this kind of simple translation anymore. It's surprising that an academic wouldn't (or couldn't) take things to a higher level. That said, this book might be a useful primer for a middle school student who likes rap but doesn't know much about it or for a curious parent who wants to know more about what his or her child is listening to. But for rap fans who have a basic understanding of the genre and its history, this isn't going to add anything new. As a final point, the book wasn't edited particularly well. The index is misnumbered in places, and I circled at least a few typos during my first read-through. This is hardly Jelani Cobb's fault, but these problems made an already disappointing experience a little more so.

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