

Interlude 8: Music's Crown

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“What do kings matter anymore!” (Fourth and Final Part, 3
– Conversation with Kings)

Somewhere Nietzsche proclaimed, “Without music life would be a mistake[, the] German imagines even God as a songster” and “God has given us music so that *above all* it can lead us upwards.”

What is clear is that, for Nietzsche, and following on the meditation “Conversation with Kings” from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the highest is not related to the authority of hereditary monarchy, but to the expression of music. One could hypothesise that if the “first men” were the “songsters,” we would be closer to the “highest,” and even closer to the “rulers of the earth.”

This theme of music and “kingly authority” is underexplored philosophically, but very much expressed in 20th century popular culture, from ideas of Elvis Presley as the “King of Rock” or Michael Jackson as the “King of Pop” or Johnny Cash as the “King of Country.”

However, there is no genre that actualises the notion of the “King” more explicitly (or with more life), than that of Hip Hop/Rap. In the aforementioned genres, there is a way in which the “King” is perceived as a static notion, representing now deceased greats, and in genres like Metal or Punk, the idea of a “King” is negated as an outdated mode of identification. But in Hip Hop/Rap, this negation is itself negated, the “King’s Crown” is affirmed and actively sought, constantly at stake in competitive

battles for the “height of the songster,” either regionally (as in “King of New York”) or globally (as in “King of the Game”).

This active and lively use of the notion of “King” keeps the genre inventive and constantly reviving itself through a striving for greatness in the abyss, and in the appearance of vocal lightning, it strikes from above. Moreover, the legitimacy of the crown is connected to the most close and intimate dimension of the body, as an excess of the body that cannot quite be reduced to the body: *the voice*, which permeates global culture as a disembodied (holy) spirit.⁵¹⁴ Hip Hop/Rap, perhaps, has the most free-form use of the voice in the art form of music, and at the same time, to win the crown, one does not only need to be lyrically skilled, but also *real*. This realness should be understood in both Nietzschean and Lacanian terms. From the Nietzschean angle, realness involves connecting the voice to one’s own knowledge, written in and won through “blood” (originally: on the streets, in the hood, or the trailer park). From the Lacanian angle, realness involves the capacity to articulate the *impasse of being itself*, the way in which *being currently appears as lacking, problematic, contradictory, false*.

Now, if we are to think this angle of connecting the voice to knowledge won through blood articulating the impasse of being itself, let us consider some practical examples. The genre of hip hop rose to musical dominance globally in the 1990s-2010s. The most commonly recognised “Kings” in the 1990s include figures like 2pac, Notorious B.I.G., Jay-Z, and Nas. All of these figures were *literally at war with each*

⁵¹⁴ Here I follow Mladen Dolar and his revival of the Lacanian idea that the voice is one of the “paramount embodiments of the *objet petit a*” (object-cause of desire), see: Dolar, M. 2006. *A Voice and Nothing More*. The MIT Press. Consequently, the voice as an object can be understood as a “lever” of thought. In the context of hip hop/rap as a permeation of global culture, I am claiming that the voices of this genre are *moving contemporary thought itself as “dancing thought.”* For a concrete explication, see: Objekt lil a’s “God’s Love” (Interlude 2).

other, with the war between 2Pac and Notorious B.I.G. actually leading to death (and ultimately a type of martyrdom). Through these battles, some of the greatest music in the genre was produced, including tracks like “Who Shot Ya?” (1994) by Notorious B.I.G., “Hit Em’ Up” (1996) by 2Pac, “Takeover” by Jay-Z (2001), and “Ether” by Nas (2001). While the deaths of Notorious B.I.G. and 2Pac have led to their retroactive immortalisation as the genres key breakthrough global stars, the survival beyond death of figures like Jay-Z and Nas have led to their global recognition as representatives of the rise from nothing, to not only something, but more than something, *kingly icons of the voice*.

Beyond the 90s, the battles for the King’s throne, while still involving competition risking life itself, have been increasingly metaphorical. Key figures like Eminem, 50 Cent, Lil’ Wayne, and Kanye West (in the 2000s), and Drake, Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole and Mac Miller (in the 2010s), constantly reinventing their style and reviving the genre through self-referential and competitive battles for lyrical supremacy. In these battles there is an emerging sense of a “royal lineage” and a tradition won from *bleeding for greatness*. For example, Eminem would always frame himself as continuing 2Pac’s legacy through working with Dr. Dre:

“Don’t Give a Fuck, White Pac”
(Say What You Say (2003))

50 Cent would attempt to make himself the face of New York in relation to the originator of New York’s style: Notorious B.I.G.:

“Real B.I.G. style watch the kid break it down”
(Realist Niggas (2002))

Lil' Wayne would literally stage the opening of (arguably) his most successful album, *Tha Carter III* (2008), with a song where Jay-Z would metaphorically pass on the crown ("Mr. Carter" (2008)):

"[Jay-Z to Lil' Wayne] I took so much change from this rap game, it's your go

[Lil' Wayne] It's my go, yeah"

Moreover, Kanye West and Jay-Z made history with a joint album called *Watch the Throne* (2011), where they attempted to solidify themselves as capable of "co-rule."

This competition has continued into the next generation (2010s). Consider one of the most infamous (and excellent) verses in hip hop history, where Kendrick Lamar not only cements himself as among the greatest, but also explicitly threatens his peers with annihilation, in "Control" (2013):

"I heard the barbershops be in great debates all the time /
'Bout who's the best MC: Kendrick, Jigga, and Nas /
Eminem, Andre 3000, /
The rest of ya'll /
New niggas, just new niggas, don't get involved /
[...]
I'm usually homeboys with the same niggas I'm rhymin'
with /
But this is hip-hop, and them niggas should know what time
it is /
And that goes for Jermaine Cole, Big K.R.I.T., Wale /
Pusha T, Meek Millz, A\$AP Rocky, Drake /
Big Sean, Jay Electron', Tyler, Mac Miller /
I got love for you all, but I'm tryna murder you niggas /
Tryna make sure your core fans never heard of you niggas
/
They don't wanna hear not one more noun or verb from
you niggas /

What is competition? /
I'm tryna raise the bar high /
Who tryna jump and get it?"

When Nietzsche suggests that God gave us music to lead us upwards, we should connect it to Kendrick Lamar's emphasis that he is trying to "raise the bar high / Who tryna jump and get it?" Through music we mediate a striving and overcoming with the most high irreducibly constituted by tension. Perhaps this is what makes Hip Hop unique. In mastering the art of keeping the King's crown "in active play" and solidified by the *real voice*, it makes the implicit (our unconscious desire for real Kingly authority), explicit.

This could be related to what I hypothesise in *Enter the Alien*: that the omni properties of God (the most high: potence, benevolence, presence, science) are meant to be interpreted, not in terms of a supernatural Other world, and not in terms of a teleological end-process (the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel), but rather as a constant and persistent paradox internal to and self-similar with, the phenomeno-logical historical process itself.⁵¹⁵ In this way of thinking, God as an omni-potent/benevolent/present/scient spiritual entity/field, becomes by losing and returning itself through our drives, and perhaps especially, the voice (and vision) of the real. This means that the pathway to deeper dimensions of power, goodness, presence and knowing, must be driven by affirming the paradoxical expressions of the real voice (with knowledge won through blood capable of articulating the impasses of being) and governed by real vision (the capacity to see the positivity in the negativity).

⁵¹⁵ Last, C. 2022. Necessity of Absolute Knowing. In: *Enter the Alien: Thinking as 21st Century Hegel*. Garner, D. & Last, C. (Eds.). Philosophy Portal Books, Independent Published. p. 284-304.

Consequently, when Zarathustra and the Two Kings recognise that Kings do not matter today (in the form of hereditary monarchy), we should not see this as meaning that the notion of Kings as such is disappearing from the earth, but that our mechanism of validating Kings requires rethinking. As argued here, what the past decades of Hip Hop/Rap music reveal, is that it is the musical *voice of the real*, where Kingly authority emerges and is transmitted. It is the voice of the highest man who has won by hard-experience and competitive striving, the properties that allow for lightning strikes from above. The central feature of Hip Hop music and its validation of the greatest, is that it is based on a certificate of “realness.” From this striving and striking, *perhaps*, Kingliness (through deepening dimensions of power, goodness, presence, knowing) becomes Godliness: “why be a King / when you can be a God?” (Eminem, “Rap God” (2013)).