Song Form and Mainstreaming in Hip-Hop Music

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Introduction

Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson—record producer, drummer for The Roots, and bandleader for *The Tonight Show*—remembers exactly where he was the day "Rapper's Delight" (Sugarhill Gang, 1979) first received radio play.[1] In his memoir *Mo' Meta Blues* (2013), Thompson recalls wondering whether he should remain in front of the radio to listen, or race for a cassette tape to record as much of the song as he could. He opted to grab the cassette, recalling that "[the song] sounded like it might go on for another five or six minutes" (23). Thompson's gamble paid off: the song *did* go on for a while longer, and he was able to record some of it. The original 12" single of "Rapper's Delight" runs for an astounding 14 minutes and 36 seconds, making it one of the longest songs to ever chart on the *Billboard* Hot 100.

While few have been anywhere close to as long as "Rapper's Delight," charting hip-hop songs have used a variety of formal sequences, some of which substantially differ from the verse-chorus paradigm that has pervaded various popular music genres since the 1960s. Salt-n-Pepa's 1987 hit "Push It" peaked at number 19 on the *Billboard* Hot 100. This song features lengthy ad-lib vocal sections and instrumentals while squeezing in two verses almost as an afterthought. More recently, Kanye West and Jay-Z's collaboration on "Otis" (2011) earned them a Grammy Award and substantial chart success; this song is strophic (it lacks chorus sections), a formal paradigm that has all but disappeared from popular music.[2] "Rapper's Delight" was released in hip-hop music's nascency—no formal "norms" existed yet, at least not in the recorded medium. "Push It" emerged during the genre's so-called *Golden Age*, when experimentation was generating a flourishing stylistic diversity in hip hop. And "Otis" came out when hip-hop music was on its way to becoming synonymous with mainstream popular music: inter-generic permeability was becoming—and remains today—the norm.[3] Over time, the formal structure of hip-hop music has become consolidated in the verse-chorus image of mainstream popular music. But how did hip hop's formal conventions evolve—from "Rapper's Delight" to

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the present day—and what can this evolution tell us about the mainstreaming of this genre?

This paper explores the evolution of song form in North American recorded hip-hop music, tracing the genre's origins as a live musical practice, through its commercial ascent in the 1980s and 1990s, to its ubiquity in—and dominance of—mainstream popular music in the twenty-first century. I conduct an analytical study of form across 160 hip-hop songs (see the appendix) released since 1979 to support the three main contributions of this paper. First, I offer a taxonomy of song section types, investigating how texture, timbre, lyrics, and singing function as the main agents of formal sectionality in hip hop. I codify two principal section types, *verse* and *hook* (similar, but not identical to a chorus section), and two looser-defined section types, *instrumental*, and *loose-vocal*, using song examples to illustrate each section type and to discuss these sections' musical function and/or origins in live performance practice.

Second, I present three formal paradigms that are built up from these four section types, proposing that the form of many, if not most, hip-hop songs can be described using one of these paradigms. I classify these as *verse-hook*, *strophic*, and *long verse*. I evaluate how the paradigms reflect live hip-hop performance practice (including battling, hyping, and the cypher) and its antecedents: the live hip-hop performances of 1970s New York (which gave rise to hip-hop music) and the African American oral tradition of toasting (long, recited poems). In doing so, I propose a viewpoint that considers hip-hop form through the cultural underpinnings of this genre, rather than in the image of song forms used in other popular music genres.

Finally, I investigate how a gradual shift in focus toward *verse-hook* songs can be understood in relation to hip-hop music's ongoing mainstreaming. I propose three metrics to gauge this shift in focus: the emergence of hooks as a distinct section type, the rise in popularity of sung hook sections (including by guest artists), and the specific characteristics of hook sections: their quantity, their point of first arrival in a song, and their proportion of the song's total duration. Viewing hip-hop music's development through the lens of song form thus represents both its roots in African American vernacular culture and assimilation into mainstream popular culture; following blues, R&B, rock 'n' roll, soul, and other genres in traversing this path.

Hip hop's crossover has been discussed from a variety of perspectives. Nelson George (1988) and Mark Anthony Neal (2005) have written about the schism that occurred in the 1980s whereby some Black artists became massively successful through their new appeal to white mainstream audiences (such as

Michael Jackson or Lionel Richie) while alienating their earlier—mostly Black—fanbase. Amy Coddington (2018) has explored the role of radio producers as tastemakers in cultivating a divide between the pop-rap of MC Hammer and Vanilla Ice and the underground music of A Tribe Called Quest and other *Golden-Age* artists. Murray Forman (2002), Roni Sarig (2007), and I (2019) have each investigated the vanishing idea of space and place in hip-hop music as it has become increasingly mainstreamed. And numerous others, among them Jeff Chang (2005) and Loren Kajikawa (2015), have noted the increasing consumption of hip-hop music by white audiences.[4] My aim is to build on this discussion of hip-hop's mainstreaming by focusing on song form; more specifically, the ever-expanding role of the hook section in hip-hop music. The hook's increasing prevalence, its earlier placement in song forms, and its incorporation of singing all evince hip hop's subsumption by mainstream pop music.

Song Sections and their Functions

Hip hop is like most other popular music in that its formal sections are ordered in a song to imbue it with variety, contrast, and some degree of trajectory. I characterize song sections in hip hop by whether they participate in the *core sequence* of a song, or function as *framing areas* to this core. The core sequence of a song normally involves verses and hooks, but may also include instrumental or bridge-like sections. Framing areas normally involve sections with looser organized vocals (such as ad-hoc "hype" vocals) or instrumental sections. The main difference between the core sequence and its framing areas concerns the tightness of sectional organization: core sequences are normally the more tightly organized of the two.[5]

Research on form in popular music has grown substantially since 2000, but almost none of it explicitly deals with hip-hop music.[6] Corpus studies by Jay Summach (2012) and Jeffrey Ensign (2015) study song form in a broader array of popular music—using *Billboard* charts as corpus sources—but such charts have traditionally excluded hip-hop music.[7] Scholarship on form in popular music has expanded to include specific formal paradigms (Spicer 2004, Osborn 2013), artist-specific research (Covach 2006, Stephan-Robinson 2009), song sections (Attas 2015, Summach 2011), and genres such as EDM (electronic dance music) (Iler 2011, Osborn 2019, and Barna 2020). Research on form in EDM sets important precedents for the present study. First, EDM songs are composed to create and moderate the flow of energy on the dance floor; the formal design of

this music does not always lend itself well to the context of radio play.[8] EDM's practical function as a dance-oriented music resonates strongly with early hip-hop music, whose main context of dissemination was at dance-infused gatherings. Second, EDM song forms rely more on musical parameters such as texture and timbre, and less on melody and harmony. This again suggests parallels with hip-hop music, which has traditionally foregrounded aspects of texture, rhythm, and timbre.[9]

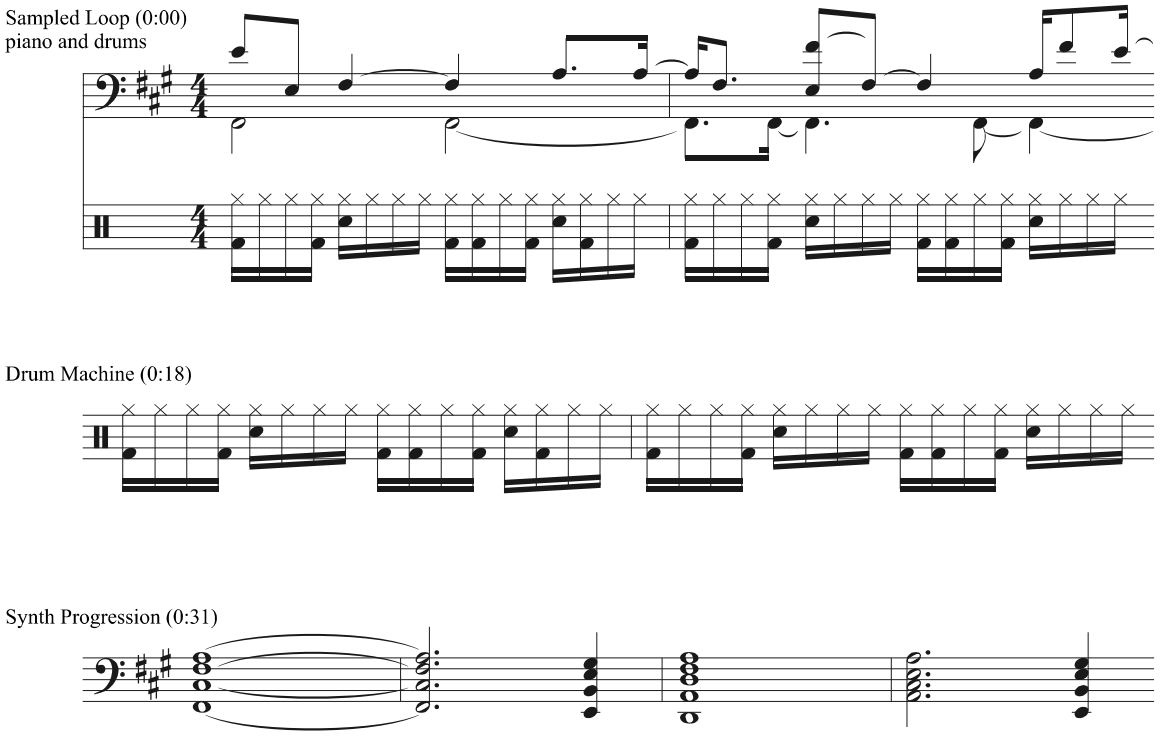
The above scholarship provides a blueprint for how a bottom-up (rather than top-down) study of form in hip hop might look: a taxonomy and description of song section types according to their internal characteristics, an examination into how these sections function in a complete song, and whether any formal paradigms arise. Nearly all hip-hop songs feature some combination of verses, hooks, and instrumental sections, and share similarities with formal paradigms used in other popular music. Although I define these section types according to their internal musical and lyrical characteristics, their functionality or "effect" they express to the listener (after Doll 2017, 8–9) in songs can vary.[10] In general, verse and hook sections conform to specific musical and lyrical criteria and express consistent functionality within a song, while instrumental and loose-vocal sections are less standardized in their content and functionality.[11]

Verse

Verses have been a constant fixture in recorded hip-hop music since its inception; they facilitate the song's main narrative arc (if one exists) or provide commentary on the song's thematic topics. As in popular music, hip-hop verses are usually "lyrically variant but musically invariant" (Ensign 2015, 27), meaning that each successive verse utilizes new lyrics and flow rhythms over the same beat. Michael Berry (2018) writes that the 16-measure verse has become the standard length in hip-hop music.[12] The ubiquity of even-numbered verse lengths is unsurprising: since rhymes normally punctuate the ends of measures and rhymes are often patterned in couplets, it follows that the mensural length of most verses will be a multiple of two.[13] Although even-numbered verse lengths may be common, my data suggests that they also vary widely in length.

Berry also notes that the beat layer (what he calls "the music") typically remains unchanged across a verse, often repeating a looped sequence that may be one, two, or four measures in length (and occasionally longer).[14] Exceptionally, the beat layer's texture can also gradually change or intensify

through the course of a verse. It may also contrast the musical texture of the hook section, drawing another similarity to other genres of popular music. Example 1 demonstrates some of these characteristics in the beat for "Hard Piano" (Pusha T, 2018), where textural elements are periodically introduced and removed. The piano/drum sample from "High as Apple Pie – Slice II" (Charles Wright and the Watts 103rd Street Rhythm Band, 1970) is supplemented first by a drum machine, and then by a synthesizer-generated chord progression.



Example 1: "Hard Piano" (Pusha T, 2018). The excerpts above detail the different textural layers that are introduced during the introduction and first verse of the song.

Hip-hop verses are forums for MCs to orate, narrate, display musical and lyrical dexterity, and connect with listeners. Their varied length, quantity, and rhythmic and lyrical content may reflect a number of *a priori* factors: how they were composed and recorded in-studio, how a live-based performance practice influenced their construction, or what demands (often commercially driven) were imposed by record labels or other industry actors. Consider, for example, "Roxanne's Revenge" (Roxanne Shanté, 1984) and "NY State of Mind" (Nas, 1994). Both songs feature exceptionally long verses, which may signal looser organization than in songs with consistent 16-measure verses. But these long, irregular verses make more sense when considered in the context of how they were recorded. Shanté allegedly recorded "Roxanne's Revenge" completely

freestyle (unrehearsed and uncomposed) and in a single take; a herculean feat for any MC, much less a 13 (!) year old with no prior recording experience.[15] "NY State of Mind" features two long verses of different lengths; but these were also recorded in a single take.[16] The spontaneity that permeated the recording of these verses arguably influenced their length: in Shanté's case, the long duration, and in Nas's case, the variance in duration between verses.

Hook

Hook sections in hip-hop music are somewhat analogous to choruses in other popular music genres: their lyrics usually remain fixed over the course of the song, quote or hint at the song's title, and often contrast the function of the verse lyrics. Hook sections normally comprise a single, self-contained section, but two-part hooks are occasionally used, such as in "Money Ain't a Thang" (Jermaine Dupri ft. Jay-Z, 1997), where the first part of the hook begins on the lyrics "In the Ferrari" and the second part on "Y'all wanna floss with us."[17] If the verse involves narrative, the hook might comment on that narrative. In protest-based songs, the verse may describe an issue while the hook incites a call to action.[18] Hook lyrics can be rapped or sung, and, until recently, the hook was normally the sole location for singing in hip-hop songs.[19]

I prefer to call these sections hooks (instead of choruses) because, while their functional role may parallel choruses in popular music, they fulfill this role in different ways.[20] I agree with Paul Edwards's statement that hip-hop hooks are "designed to 'hook' the listeners" (2009, 187) and propose that they do so through a level of lyrical repetition and fragmentation not normally seen in popular music—an extreme example would be "Gucci Gang" (Lil' Pump, 2017), where the title lyric is rapped no fewer than 20 times in each hook. Furthermore, hip-hop hooks do not rely on many of Temperley's features of chorus sections (2018, 160), especially those concerning melodic and harmonic parameters as well as formal ordering. Instead, hip-hop hooks—when defined against characteristics of verses—are built on subtle textural shifts, the presence of singing, sampled or instrumental riffs in the beat layer, and the aforementioned fragmentation. While some songs feature sung hooks that sound remarkably similar to a standard pop chorus—such as "Juicy" (The Notorious B.I.G., 1994)—others feature incessant repetition of title lyrics, such as "93 Til' Infinity" (Souls of Mischief, 1993). Still others have hardly any lyrics at all, and an instrumental motif assumes central importance, such as in "Grindin'" (Clipse, 2002).

In my taxonomy I call on several criteria for defining hook sections. First, a hook section contains intelligible vocals—either sampled, rapped, or sung. Second, these vocals usually reference the title of the song or are repeated and fragmented.[21] Third, the hook section remains musically and lyrically invariant throughout the song, usually (but by no means always) alternating with verses. Another criterion of hook sections involves their textural distinction (I stop short of conflating this with intensification or thickening) from the verses.[22] While many of these stylistic features are also ubiquitous in pop choruses, the near-total lack of melodic and harmonic differentiation between verses and hooks in hip-hop music, combined with the greater emphasis on fewer, more repeated lyrics, warrants a separate definition of the hip-hop hook that distinguishes it from the pop chorus.[23]

Instrumental

Beyond verses and hooks, other song sections in hip-hop music are less consistent in their content and functionality. While it might seem straightforward to define instrumental sections by virtue of them lacking live-performed vocals, their texture and musical content occasionally position them well to function as hook sections. In this sense then, category and function diverge for instrumental sections. These sections involve only the beat layer; no live-performed vocals are present. The beat layer comprises a combination of instruments, computer-produced sounds, scratching or other turntable-generated sounds, and samples. Samples may involve vocals, and paradoxically, instrumental sections may actually contain vocals by virtue of their participation in the beat layer. But these vocals are unintelligible: they may be short fragments, scat singing, or other brief utterances. If the vocal samples involve intelligible lyrics, it is more likely they are imbuing the section with a hook-like quality, and could thus be interpreted as hook sections.

Amanda Sewell writes that "lyric [vocal] samples have many different uses and applications in sample-based music: layered against newly-rapped lyrics in an adjunct function, scratched into a track's introduction or an interlude between verses, or substituted into a rapped lyric" (2013, 54).[24] Vocal samples in an "interlude between verses" quite often contribute appreciably to the song's lyrics, either by referencing the song's title or commenting on the song's narrative or theme in some way. Vocal samples may thus participate in establishing the hook-like quality in a song section, especially when the vocal samples reference the song title, such as in "Watch Me Now" (Ultramagnetic

MCs, 1988) or "Hold It, Now Hit It" (Beastie Boys, 1986). By contrast, unintelligible vocal samples carry less potential to imbue such hook-like qualities. In "It Ain't Hard to Tell" (Nas, 1994), verses alternate with sections that feature a denser beat-layer texture, a sampled saxophone riff, and sampled female scat vocals. These sections are almost hook-like, but for their lack of intelligible vocals I classify them as instrumental. These three songs expose an inconsistency with how instrumental sections function: when they are positioned between verses, their internal content—especially vocal samples—may cause them to express hook-like qualities of varying strength and salience.

The opening thirty seconds of "Watch me Now" illustrate this blurry boundary by juxtaposing different types of vocal samples. The first 18 seconds contain numerous whoops and cries originally performed by James Brown; some of his signature vocal gestures.[25] But these vocal samples are unintelligible as lyrics, and thus help define this introduction as an instrumental section (0:00–0:18). Immediately following this section, the "Watch me Now" sample (from "It's Just Begun" by The Jimmy Castor Bunch [1972]), imbuing the section with hook-like qualities, helping define 0:19–0:27 as a hook (indeed, it is the "Watch me Now" section that returns after each verse). By attending to the varied intelligibility and narrative function that vocal samples may exhibit, I thus interpret them as alternately contributing to instrumental or hook sections. The looser-knit nature of instrumental sections and their variegated placement within song forms suggests a wider array of functional purposes for them, including dancing, repose from the vocals of the verses and hooks, and a space to showcase the musical contributions of DJs and beat producers. Indeed, hip hop's earliest musical manifestations showcased beats, along with their creators; rapping came later.

Looser-Organized Vocal Sections

Live-recorded vocals in hip-hop music are not restricted to verses and hooks: looser-organized sections may contain ad-hoc, ametric vocals, skits, or may simply involve rapping or singing in a section that does not function like a verse or hook. Many songs feature ad-hoc vocals that characterize sections in their framing areas, but less often within the core sequence. These ad-hoc vocals occasionally function as "hype" vocals: ametric vocals that usually serve the rhetorical purpose of enhancing anticipation of the song's main lyrical content. A prominent example of hype vocals in hip-hop music can be found in the music of Public Enemy, where group member Flava Flav effectively functions as a "hype

man."[26] Other ad-hoc vocals might be less hype-based and more about connecting directly with listeners or other artists. These may include "shout out" sections (normally at the end of songs) or more introspective lyrics performed in an ametric fashion, such as when Anderson .Paak discusses his personal finances (0:50) in "CUT EM IN" (2020). Ad-hoc vocals are noticeably more common in hip-hop music than they are in other popular genres. They are so common, in fact, that this type of vocal also appears within and throughout verses and hooks (a notable example being producer Sean Combs's frequent vocal injections in the rapped performances of Notorious B.I.G.). This prevalence likely has much to do with hip hop's origins as a live musical genre centered around the DJ (who is now commonly referred to as the producer). The outdoor hip-hop parties of 1970s and early 1980s Bronx and Queens featured the DJ as performer; any vocalizing was usually done by the DJ, or in deference to them.[27] This vocalizing was not the main focus and was ad-hoc or spontaneous in nature. As hip hop established a tradition of recorded musical output, the hype/ad-hoc vocals remained a central part of some artists' personal styles.[28] As can be seen from the aforementioned types of looser vocal practices in hip-hop music, loose vocal sections are highly variegated and serve a variety of different musical functions.

I have established flexible descriptions of four main types of song section in hip-hop music. This framework allows for a systematic encoding of song forms across a large corpus of repertoire. These encodings in turn reveal several prevailing formal paradigms in hip-hop music. The next section explores these paradigms, proposing some possible locations and trajectories for their development.

Formal Paradigms

To better understand how sections combine to create whole songs in hip hop, I draw on a recent corpus study where I analyzed 160 songs released between 1979 and 2017 (Duinker 2020). This corpus was generated from two source lists: *Rolling Stone*'s "100 Greatest Hip-Hop Songs," and the Grammy Award category for Best Rap Song. While my main analytical goal was to investigate aspects of rhythm and meter, I also annotated each song's form by section type and duration. Example 2 displays my annotation method for the song "Hate It or Love It" (The Game ft. 50 Cent, 2005). "Hate It or Love It" begins with a nine-second ad-lib vocal section followed by a series of verses and hooks performed by the song's two MCs, The Game and 50 Cent. From 2:53 until the song's conclusion, the beat layer continues with no vocals from either MC—there is,

however, a female vocal sample embedded in the beat layer that does not contribute appreciably to the song's lyrics. I have thus encoded this final section "instrumental." The annotation of "Hate It or Love It" reveals a commonality in hip-hop form: hook sections are typically the same durational length across an entire song, while verses are more likely to vary in length.

Formal Region	*Section Type*	*Elapsed Time*	*Duration (s)*	*Notes*
framing area	voc	0:00	9	50 Cent (hype vocals)
core sequence	vs1	0:09	28	50 Cent
	hk	0:37	21	
	vs2	0:58	37	The Game
	hk	1:35	20	
	vs3	1:55	38	50 Cent and The Game
	hk	2:33	20	
framing area	inst	2:53	33	includes fadeout

Example 2: Formal annotation for "Hate It or Love It" (The Game ft. 50 Cent, 2005). Section-type abbreviations are used as follows throughout this paper: voc = loose vocal section, hk = hook, vs = verse, and inst = instrumental. All sectional durations documented here should be interpreted +/- one second: durations were calculated from real-time elapsed time measurements, meaning slight inaccuracies in the order of one second were common.

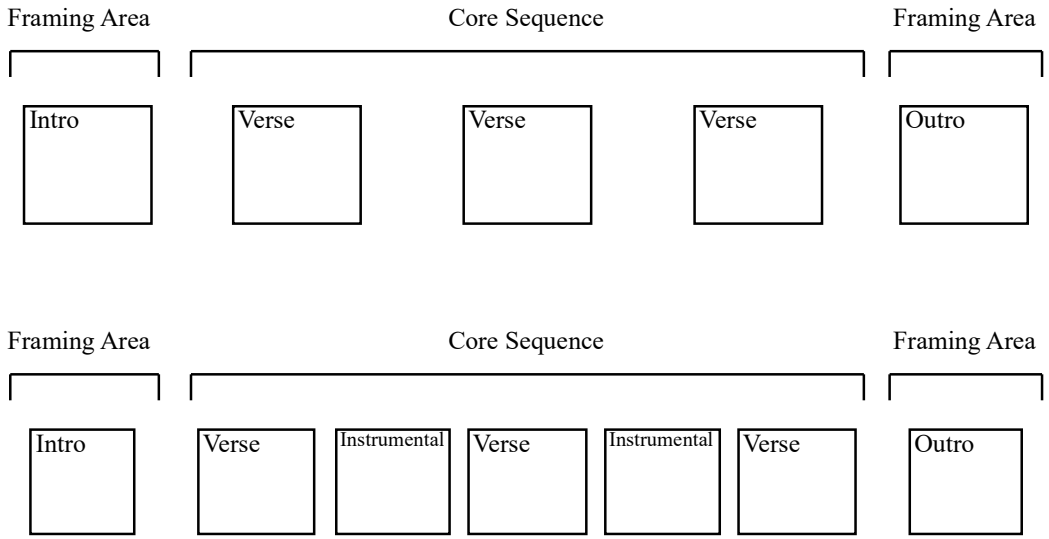
The song's form is straightforward: "Hate It or Love It" features discrete framing areas and a tangible core sequence of verses and hooks. But many other songs exhibit more irregular forms. Consider the original 12" release of "Push It" (Salt-n-Pepa, 1987), whose form is annotated in Example 3. The song's first verse appears at 1:31—this is quite late for a first verse—and besides a few other verses and hooks, the remainder of the song is loosely organized: the entire duration leading up to the first verse, for example, is an amalgam of instrumental passages, hype vocals, and chanting. No clear sectionality emerges here, yet no one section type (of my four) is clearly established. I have therefore chosen to denote this a hybrid of instrumental and looser vocal section types (hence "inst/voc" in the annotation). Such hybrid sections appear to be common in framing areas, but their outsized presence as in "Push It" (the framing areas make up 60% of the song's duration) is rare. As a party-oriented song, "Push It" features these extended loose sections primarily to aid the song's danceability.[29] "Push It" thus reveals the importance of considering performance context and function of songs when evaluating the sectionality of their forms.

Formal Region	*Section Type*	*Elapsed Time*	*Duration (s)*	*Notes*
framing area	inst / voc	0:00	91	features hype vocals
core sequence	vs1	1:31	16	
	hk	1:47	13	
	inst / voc	2:00	27	
	vs2	2:47	12	
	hk	2:59	16	
framing area	inst / voc	3:15	77	includes fadeout

Example 3: Formal annotation for "Push It" (Salt-N-Pepa, 1987). The "inst/voc" sections are so named for their hybridity—they integrate aspects of instrumental and loose vocal section types—and are notable in their comparatively long duration.

The remainder of this section is organized around three prevailing formal paradigms: strophic form, verse-hook form, and long-verse form.

Strophic Form



Example 4: General schema for strophic-form songs. These songs typically include a core sequence that is bounded by framing areas. The core sequence may include a succession of verses (upper diagram), or a succession of verses interspersed by instrumental sections (lower diagram).

Strophic-form songs generally feature a core sequence comprising multiple verses that either proceed in immediate succession or are interspersed by instrumental interludes. Such interludes typically lack hook-like qualities. Example 4 provides a general schema for strophic forms in hip hop. Notable in strophic-form songs is the near-total absence of hook sections; in this way,

strophic form is quite similar to Covach's "simple verse form" (2004, 73).[30] The long single version of "Rapper's Delight" (Sugarhill Gang, 1979) constitutes a textbook example of strophic form. An instrumental section begins and concludes the song, framing the core sequence of four verses rapped in immediate succession.[31] "King of Rock" (Run-DMC, 1985) follows a slightly different trajectory. With no introductory framing area, the first verse begins immediately at the song's outset. The eight verses of this song are always followed by instrumental sections of varying lengths, laden with rock guitar soloing; the alternation of these sections makes "King of Rock" a strophic-form song.

While parallels can be drawn between the strophic-form hip-hop songs and the "simple verse" and "AAA" forms used to describe other popular music, I hesitate to use such parallels as a defining characteristic of strophic hip-hop songs. I prefer instead to contextualize strophic form in the tradition of live hip-hop performance. An important aspect of hip hop's performance tradition is the cypher: an informal group-performance context where various MCs take turns freestyling either atop a DJ-produced or beatboxed beat, or a cappella.[32] Michael Newman describes cyphers as involving "improvised round-robin rapping" (2005, 401), while H. Samy Alim qualifies them as "highly competitive lyrical circles of rappers" (2006, 6). James Braxton Peterson (2014) and Roderick Pullum (2019) have suggested that the term "cypher" emerged into common hip-hop parlance through the influence of the Five-Percent Nation.[33]

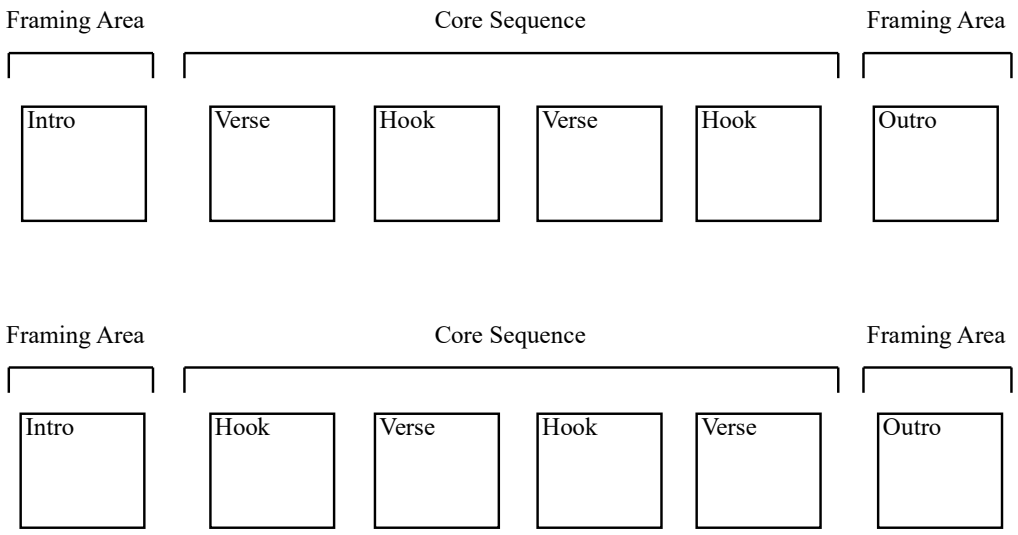
Though cyphers typically have no set requirements regarding the number of MCs participating or the length of their verses, the general form they follow involves the introduction of a beat followed by a succession of freestyle verses, rapped by different MCs. The musical and lyrical foci of cyphers are intertextual references, unifying chains of rhymes, and communication between MCs in the cypher (such as calling one another by name to spit the next verse, or through put downs). Hooks generally play no important role in cyphers. While the cypher is a less formal, live performance practice, its analogy in recorded hip-hop music can be seen through the "posse cut," which is a song that features different rappers (usually associated with one another, occasionally through a common record label) on each verse. Several well-known posse cuts appear in the corpus, "Scenario," "The Symphony" (Marley Marl et al., 1989), "Flava In Ya Ear (Remix)" (Craig Mack et al., 1995), and "Fuckin' Problems" (A$AP Rocky et al., 2013) among them.[34] "The Symphony" represents perhaps the truest resemblance to a cypher of these posse cuts: a brief intro featuring Marley Marl is followed by successive verses rapped by Masta Ace, Craig G., Kool G Rap, and

Big Daddy Kane, respectively, each MC concluding his verse by naming the next MC who is due up to rap.

By drawing parallels between cyphers, posse cuts, and strophic form, I aim to show that, in live hip-hop performance practice, the lyrical, structural, and musical focus of the song is often centered around the verse. Verses are what cyphers and rap battles (another chief format for freestyling) are made of. Verses figure prominently in strophic hip-hop songs. And verses are the platform across which a collection of MCs come together to contribute to posse cuts. The verse—however it is structured—is the main conduit of communication and exchange in hip-hop performance, and its centrality to the cypher, posse cut, and strophic-form song traces a through-line between these practices.

Verse-Hook Form

Verse-hook form chiefly involves what its name suggests: verses and hooks. The general schema of verse-hook form is detailed in Example 5. Like the verse-chorus paradigm referenced by Covach (2004), Temperley (2018), Ensign (2015), and others, verse-hook songs in hip hop feature a core sequence of alternating verse and hook sections. This sequence occasionally includes instrumental or loose-vocal sections, but my corpus data suggests that such interventions are uncommon. Rarer still are verse-hook songs where multiple verses or multiple hooks (these could perhaps also be characterized as two-part hooks) occur in immediate succession.



Example 5: General schema for verse-hook songs. The chief variable in these songs involves the ordering of verses and hooks, as shown between the two formal trajectories above.

Three songs encapsulate these various affordances of verse-hook form. In Example 6a, the formal sequence of "99 Problems" (Jay-Z, 2003) constitutes a textbook example of a verse-hook form. A brief a cappella rapped introduction previews the hook lyrics, before the core formal sequence runs through three verses, each followed by a hook.[35] The song concludes with an instrumental section—repeated iterations of the basic beat loop—complemented by various hype vocals.

By contrast, "Lose Control" (Missy Elliott, 2005), shown in Example 6b, features loose-vocal framing sections (mainly featuring hype vocals by Fatman Scoop) and a core sequence that contains two pairs of verses and hooks. Loose vocal sections occur after the first hook and again after the second verse. The first of these features guest artist Ciara in a rapped/sung performance: more metric than hype vocals normally are, but less tightly organized than Elliott's verses and hooks. The second loose vocal section features a repeated chant-like performance by Elliott and Fatman Scoop.[36]

Finally, the radio edit of "Ladies First" (Queen Latifah ft. Monie Love, 1989) as detailed in Example 6c involves a verse-hook core form (with no framing sections) that features a changing number of verses between each hook. The four hook sections in this song appear at the opening, after verse 2, verse 4, and verse 7, respectively. This means the song's eight verses appear in groups of two, two, and three. While "Ladies First" and "Lose Control" depart from the schema shown in Example 5, the general alternation of verses and hooks in their core sequences identify these songs as verse-hook forms.

Formal Region	*Section Type*	*Elapsed Time*	*Duration (s)*	*Notes*
framing area	hk	0:00	6	features hook lyrics
core sequence	vs1	0:06	40	
	hk	0:46	11	shorter than other hook sections in the song
	vs2	0:57	62	
	hk	1:59	20	
	vs3	2:19	52	
	hk	3:11	21	
framing area	inst / voc	3:32	23	hype vocals

Example 6a: Formal annotation for "99 Problems" (Jay-Z, 2003). This song features discrete framing areas and a balanced core sequence of three verses and three hook sections. Within the core sequence, the first hook section is notably shorter than the following two.

Formal Region	*Section Type*	*Elapsed Time*	*Duration (s)*	*Notes*
framing area	voc	0:00	18	hype vocals
core sequence	vs1	0:18	32	
	hk	0:50	14	
	voc	1:04	17	rapped / sung
	vs2	1:21	30	
	voc	1:51	16	chanting
	hk	2:07	13	
framing area	voc	2:20	87	chanting

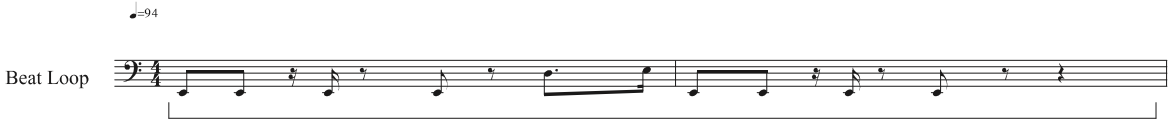
Example 6b: Formal annotation for "Lose Control" (Missy Elliot ft. Fatman Scoop and Ciara, 2005). A number of different loose-vocal sections feature in both the framing areas and core sequence.

Formal Region	*Section Type*	*Elapsed Time*	*Duration (s)*	*Notes*
core sequence	hk	0:00	22	short instrumental tag at end
	vs1	0:22	14	
	vs2	0:36	18	
	hk	0:54	4	
	vs3	0:58	18	
	vs4	1:16	18	
	hk	1:34	16	
	vs5	1:51	18	
	vs6	2:09	35	
	vs7	2:44	18	
	hk	3:02	20	
	vs8	3:22	20	
(framing area)	inst	3:42	8	quick fade out

Example 6c: Formal annotation for the radio edit of "Ladies First" (Queen Latifah ft. Monie Love, 1989). This version of song, while verse-hook in composition, avoids an introductory framing section and features differing numbers of verses between each hook. Its core sequence also begins with a hook and concludes with a verse, a formal ordering not common in rock/pop music (Temperley 2018) but quite prevalent in hip-hop music.

Example 5 also indicates that the core sequence of verse-hook songs may begin with either a verse or a hook. This flexibility departs from the formal conventions of rock-pop music, where a song's first verse is likelier to occur before its first chorus.[37] Temperley (2018) has classified the ordered pairing of verses and choruses as "verse-chorus units," or VCUs, generating a more efficient way to encode the form of many pop songs. While it is tempting to apply

the VCU concept to hip-hop music, perhaps with the alternate acronym VHU (*verse-hook unit*), the directionality embedded in the VCU concept implies that the verse normally comes first.[38] This assumes that the verse points toward the hook/chorus, which can be achieved through harmonic, textural, melodic, lyrical, or other means. Such explicit directionality between verses and hooks (in that order) is by no means paradigmatic in hip-hop music.[39] "Hypnotize" (The Notorious B.I.G., 1997) exemplifies the non-teleological relationship between verse and hook, the form of which is detailed in Example 7. While the song's core sequence is indeed ordered verse-hook (and not the other way around), a number of lyrical and textural features mask any sense of buildup or directionality from each verse into its following hook. First, the beat's texture does not change between these two section types. The basic beat loop is quite sparse, consisting only of a two-measure loop performed by bass and drums. A momentary guitar flourish marks each eight-measure hypermetric unit, providing some structural waypoints amid the decidedly complex metric patterning of The Notorious B.I.G.'s (henceforth Biggie) flow.



Measure	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**	**11**	**12**	**13**	**14**	**15**	**16**	**17**	**18**
Guitar Flourish	X								X								X	
Beat Loop	x		x		x		x		x		x		x		x		x	
Song Section	**verse 1**																	

Measure	**19**	**20**	**21**	**22**	**23**	**24**	**25**	**26**
Guitar Flourish							X	
Beat Loop	x		x		x		x	
Song Section	**hook**							

Example 7: Basic beat loop and formal annotation for "Hypnotize" (The Notorious B.I.G., 1997). The first and second verses each run for 18 measures. As shown for the first verse, this mensural length creates a misalignment with the hypermetric structure jointly generated by iterations of the 2-measure beat loop (small x) and guitar flourishes (capital X), which repeat after 8 measures.

The first verse is 18 measures long, meaning the hypermetric guitar flourish occurs for a third time, in m.17. Instead of marking the beginning of a new, unfolding, eight-measure hypermetric unit, this flourish punctuates the last two measures of the verse, after which the hook arrives with no hypermetric

markers. Biggie's flow performance also contributes to the anticlimactic conclusion of the verse. In the first verse in particular, his flow patterns and choice of lyrics create a dense, complex web of possible groupings, depending on whether rhythm, meter, lyrical syntax, or subject matter is considered.[40] This lyrical complexity makes it difficult to anticipate closure at the end of the verse. As a consequence, when Biggie raps "Packin, askin' 'who want it?' / You got it, nigga, flaunt it, that Brooklyn bullshit, we on it" at the beginning of m.17, not only has the guitar flourish made this passage sound like an initiating gesture in a new eight-measure unit, but the flow gives no solid indication of conclusion. It simply ends; a string of rhyme chains, backward and forward lyrical references, and segues in subject matter, all quietly and unmarkedly yield to the hook section.

Long-Verse and Other Forms

Strophic and verse-hook songs constitute the vast majority of the corpus. Of the 160 songs represented, 123 (77%) are verse-hook while a further 24 (15%) are strophic. The remaining 13 (8%) either feature a single long verse (long-verse form) or follow a formal path distinct from the paradigms discussed here. "Roxanne's Revenge" (Roxanne Shante, 1984), "Paid in Full" (Eric B. & Rakim, 1987), "Children's Story" (Slick Rick, 1988), and "Brooklyn Zoo" (Ol' Dirty Bastard, 1995) are all examples of long-verse forms. Each begins with an introductory framing area, contains a core sequence of one long verse, and concludes with either a hook-like section, ad-hoc vocals, or instrumental section. The long-verse form draws to mind an earlier type of Black American vernacular oral tradition: the toast. Toasts were long poems that were delivered in an informal style.[41] These long poems usually featured some sort of trickster figure (i.e. Shine or the signifyin[g] monkey) surmounting odds that are stacked against them; hustling their way through the narrative.[42] Classic examples of toasting set to music include Gil-Scott Heron's "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" (*Pieces of a Man*, 1970), and Rudy Ray Moore's "The Signifyin' Monkey" (*This Pussy Belongs to Me*, 1971); indeed, both these performers have been cited as stylistic precursors to hip-hop music.[43] Philadelphia-based Schooly D's version of the toast *The Signifyin' Monkey* ("The Signifyin' Rapper," 1988) is perhaps the truest example of a toast being performed in a hip-hop setting in that it literally adapts a toast (but does not exclusively feature metric rapping), and "Children's Story" (Slick Rick, 1988) is an example of how the toast concept has been fully adapted into a rapped performance. "Children's Story" flips the toast convention

on its head, instead purveying a cautionary tale where the hustling protagonist does not come out on top; indeed, he ends up dead. Long-verse songs follow a number of narrative arcs that relate back to toasts: the verses in "Roxanne's Revenge" and "Brooklyn Zoo" are both diss-laden and self-aggrandizing.[44] While tropes of put-down and self-aggrandization are certainly ubiquitous to hip-hop lyrics in general, when they pervade a long-verse song's lyrics, two key elements of toasting are reflected in a hip-hop performance.

Section Type	*Elapsed Time*	*Duration (s)*	*Notes*
voc	0:00	10	hype vocals
inst	0:10	8	introduction of beat layer
hk?	0:18	12	unclear section type
inst	0:30	17	
vs1?	0:47	39	unclear section type
inst	1:28	17	
voc	1:43	17	
inst	2:00	17	
hk	2:17	12	
inst	2:29	17	
voc	2:46	17	
inst	3:03	34	
hk	3:37	13	
inst	3:50	90	
voc	5:20	17	
vs2	5:37	38	
inst	6:15	90	

Example 8: Formal annotation for "The Breaks" (Kurtis Blow, 1980). The varied sectional ordering of this song, as well as its divergent section lengths (notably the two 90-second instrumental sections toward the end) render it difficult to classify as "verse-hook" or "strophic." Identification of framing areas and the core sequence is complicated by the sectional ordering. One might interpret the core sequence as beginning at 0:18, but quantity of instrumental and loose-vocal sections weakens its ability to function as such, with standard alternations between verses and hooks or instrumentals.

In the corpus, songs with formal sequences classified as "other" were very few, although they warrant mention on the grounds of their functional purpose. Two notable "other" songs include "The Breaks" (Kurtis Blow, 1980) and "Push It" (Salt-N-Pepa, 1986); these both fall into the Adam Krims's genre of "party rap," which he describes as being "designed for moving a crowd, making them dance, or perhaps creating or continuing a 'groove' and a mood" (2000, 55). Listening to either of these songs with this description in mind

makes the "party rap" designation seem obvious for both of these songs, and also suggests why such songs rely less on a tightly organized structure of verses and hooks. As shown in Example 8, the formal patterning of "The Breaks" looks something like verse-hook, but includes a number of instrumental breaks, two of which are each 90 seconds long. These extended looser sections reveal the primary function of the song: a medium for dancing. Rather than suggest that dance-functioning music cannot contain verses and choruses, I use these examples to illustrate that instrumental sections can (and often do) figure just as prominently as verses or hooks in party-, or dance-oriented hip-hop songs.

Form and the Mainstreaming of Hip Hop

The mainstreaming of hip-hop music has been discussed in context of the radio's role as tastemaker (Coddington 2018), the influence of *Billboard* chart categorizations (Harrison and Arthur 2011), and the appropriation of Black musical traditions and culture (Neal 2005 and George 1988). Coddington argues that top-40 radio station producers, in order to reach their targeted demographics, preferred to play hip-hop records that mainstream audiences could understand and tolerate. The stripped down, aggressive style of artists like Run-DMC, Public Enemy, and LL Cool J did not fulfill this role, as did the comparative musical tameness of artists like MC Hammer, Vanilla Ice, and Milli Vanilli. Coddington aptly observes the growing rift between pop rap and underground, politically charged rap music that emerged in the late 1980s. She also notes, however, that the sound world of pop rap eventually permeated hip-hop music, such that an artist like The Notorious B.I.G. could juxtapose lyrics about his hard-edged, drug-selling upbringing with a slickly produced beat that bore closer resemblance to M.C. Hammer than Public Enemy.

This mainstreaming of hip-hop music in the 1980s and 1990s thus appears to have been a multi-step phenomenon. Firstly, a less controversial, softer brand of hip-hop music was marketed to a wide demographic. Such marketing bypassed the more confrontational and political arm of hip-hop music, whose artists such as Public Enemy and N.W.A. were experiencing their own, smaller commercial breakthrough. Secondly, more accessible musical styles were combined with confrontational, profanity-laden, and uncompromising lyrics, creating an uneasy balance between radio-ready musical accessibility and provocative lyrical subject matter less well-suited for mass-market radio play—this combination can be seen in the artists on the Death Row (Dr. Dre, Snoop

Dogg, and Tupac Shakur), and the Bad Boy (The Notorious B.I.G. and Lil' Kim) labels. This two-phase process eventuated a number of successfully charting singles by artists such as Shakur and The Notorious B.I.G.—a marker of mainstream success for this new hybrid of pop-rap beats and hardcore lyrics.[45]

How does this process of mainstreaming relate to evolving trends in song form? To conclude this paper, I present a number of statistic-driven observations regarding song forms and their evolving usage in hip hop. Each involves the hook section in some way: a gradual increase in prevalence of verse-hook songs, an increase in sung hooks, hooks appearing sooner in songs' formal sequence, and the proportion of a song's total length taken up by hooks. In contrast to the verse, the hook evolved from an infrequently used formal section to a central feature of nearly every hip-hop song today.

The Emergence of the (Sung) Hook

When "Rapper's Delight" was released in 1979, it had an immediate and long-lasting impact.[46] The idea that rapping—as opposed to singing—could be featured in a radio-worthy song was novel, and this song would play an outsized role carving out a space in the recording industry for hip-hop music. Musically speaking, "Rapper's Delight" was not particularly groundbreaking.[47] The song's beat was a recorded interpolation of the song "Good Times" (1979), released earlier that year by the R&B/disco band Chic.[48] But while "Good Times" contains an identifiable chorus section, "Rapper's Delight" does not. Instead, "Rapper's Delight" features a string of rapped verses in its core sequence, with instrumental sections serving its framing areas.[49] While some of the song's lyrics have hook-like qualities (such as the opening lyrics by Wonder Mike, "I said-a hip hop, hippie to the hippie ...," and Big Bank Hank's "Hotel, motel …" line), these lyrics do not form autonomous song sections—they appear within longer verses performed by those MCs.

"Rapper's Delight" thus qualifies as a strophic song. Indeed, many other old-school hip-hop songs (those released in the late 1970s and early 1980s) are strophic.[50] As documented in the appendix, 15 of the 40 corpus songs released between 1979–1989 are strophic, while another 15 are verse-hook (the remaining 10 are either long-verse form or do not easily fit any one of the three paradigms). The contrast between this balance of types and the rest of the corpus is stark: after 1989, across the remaining 120 corpus songs, only 13 are not verse-hook, and perhaps most striking is that 10 of these 13 appear before 1996. As far as this corpus is able to explain general trends in hip-hop form, then, verse-hook form

had firmly, and indeed almost exclusively, become the standard paradigm used in hip-hop music by the mid 1990s.

Popular songs that are expected to do well on the charts are often released in two versions: a single version (sometimes called the "radio edit"), and an album version. "Rapper's Delight" was released in five versions, each with a different duration, none of which featured a hook section.[51] By contrast, the two versions of Queen Latifah's Afrocentric feminist anthem "Ladies First" (1989) follow markedly differing formal sequences. The album version of this song features no hook sections, but the radio edit of the song does (the forms are compared in Example 9); the famous music video for "Ladies First" corresponds to the radio edit version.

Album Version		**Radio Edit**	
Section Type (Elapsed Time)	*Duration(s)*	*Section Type (Elapsed Time)*	*Duration(s)*
inst (0:00)	18	hk (0:00)	22
vs1 (0:18)	13	vs1 (0:22)	14
vs2 (0:31)	18	vs2 (0:36)	18
inst (0:49)	5	hk (0:54)	4
vs3 (0:54)	18	vs3 (0:58)	18
vs4 (1:12)	18	vs4 (1:16)	18
inst (1:30)	36	hk (1:34)	16
vs5 (2:06)	18	vs5 (1:51)	18
vs6 (2:24)	36	vs6 (2:09)	35
vs7 (3:00)	17	vs7 (2:44)	18
inst (3:17)	42	hk (3:02)	20
		vs8 (3:22)	20
		inst (3:42)	8

Example 9: Comparison of formal sequences in the album version and radio edit of "Ladies First" (Queen Latifah ft. Monie Love, 1989). Accounting for the one-second discrepancies, corresponding verses are the same length in each version. An eighth verse and four hook sections are added in the radio edit, and all instrumental sections (save for a short fadeout) are removed.

As Tricia Rose (1994) and Robin Roberts (1994) attest in their analyses of this video, the hook section figures prominently in the song's advocation of community among women MCs, and in a more general sense, of solidarity in the Black feminist movement.[52] The challenging lyrics of the verses, aggressively rapped (by Latifah and guest MC Monie Love) over a hard-sounding beat, contrast the gentler-sounding hook, which involves singing and a shift to the major mode.[53] The addition of the hook section in this radio edit dramatically

alters the course, message, and ethos of "Ladies First," while making it more musically palatable for radio and television play.

The Sung Hook

The mere presence of a hook does not fully explain its role as mainstreaming agent; its musical content is equally important to consider. Hook sections in all 23 verse-hook song in the corpus released before 1993 either feature rapping, sampled vocals (either sung or rapped), or, more rarely, vocals sung by the MC(s) themselves. Examples of these scenarios include, respectively, Melle Mel rapping all the hooks in "The Message" (Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, 1982), sampled vocals in the hook sections of "Slow Down" (Brand Nubian, 1990), and the earnest singing by Biz Markie in the hooks of his song "Just a Friend" (1989).[54] Beginning in the mid-1990s, hip-hop songs started consistently featuring hooks sung by guest artists: David Ruffin Jr. on "Gin and Juice" (Snoop Dogg, 1993), members of the girl group Total on "Juicy" and "Hypnotize" (The Notorious B.I.G. 1994 and 1997), Roger Troutman on "California Love" (Tupac Shakur and Dr. Dre, 1995), and Reggie Green and Sweet Franklin on "Dear Mama" (Tupac Shakur, 1995). The juxtaposition of hardcore rap lyrics centered around crime, drugs, and material wealth with smooth, R&B-style vocals has been identified by Coddington as central to the commercial success enjoyed by Puff Daddy and The Notorious B.I.G., and by Krims as a defining feature of *don rap*, his term that describes the merging of *reality rap* (gangsta rap) and *mack rap*, which Krims situates as central to the "mack" or "pimp" personas adopted by certain MCs and groups (2000, 62–63). This occasionally tension-laden juxtaposition was immensely successful from a commercial standpoint.[55] "Hypnotize" and "California Love" both reached number one on the *Billboard* Hot 100, "Dear Mama" and "Gin and Juice" broke the top 10 on the same chart, and these four songs as well as "Juicy" each reached number one on the *Billboard Hot Rap Songs* chart.

Sung hooks—whether recorded by guest artists or the song's MC(s)—have remained a fixture in verse-hook songs since the 1990s. But while sung hooks usually form one of the most memorable parts of a hip-hop song, the identity of their singers has not always driven this memorability or contributed to the song's commercial appeal. Think of the well-known "Biggie Biggie Biggie, can't you see?" hook from "Hypnotize" (The Notorious B.I.G., 1997)—itself an interpolation of "La Di Da Di" (Slick Rick and Doug E. Fresh, 1985). Even though nearly everyone who listened to top-40 radio or watched MTV in the 1990s will

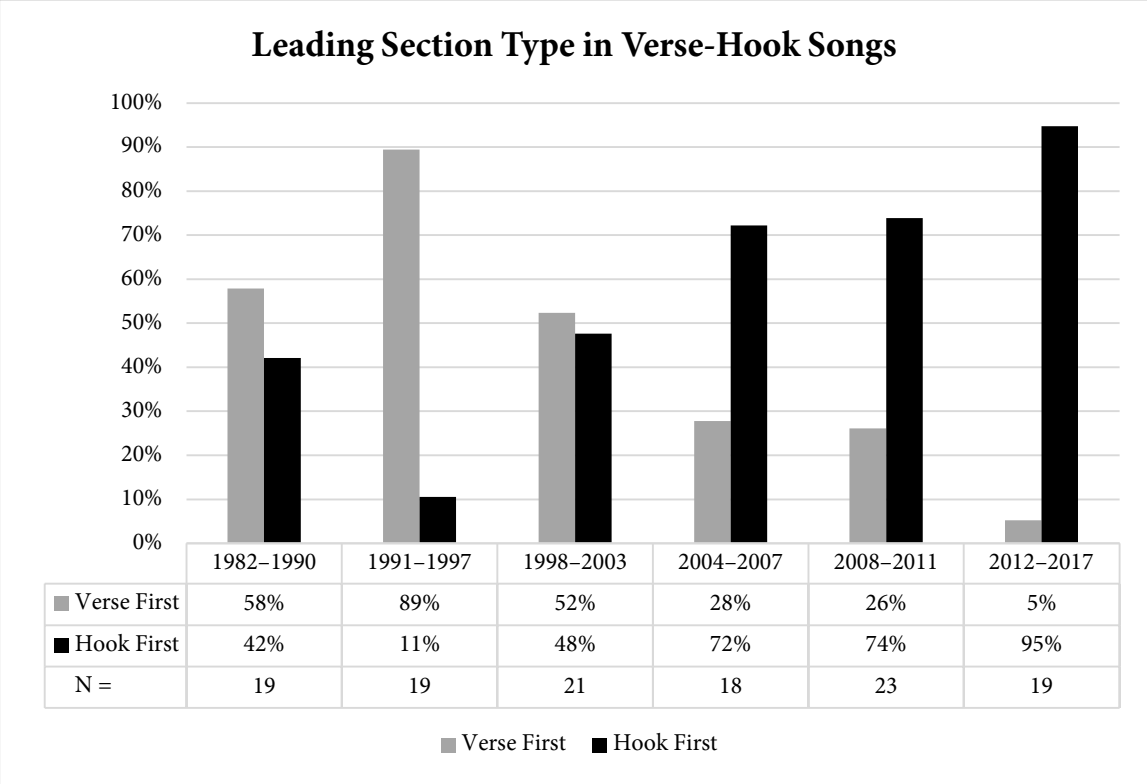
know how this hook goes, very few will likely know who sung it (Pamela Long from the group Total). These optics have changed dramatically in songs released in the past two decades. Faith Evans was already a well-known artist when she sung the hook on "Missing You" (Puff Daddy and Faith Evans, 1997), a song dedicated to her late ex-husband Christopher Wallace (The Notorious B.I.G.), but her involvement with Sean Combs and Bad Boy Records arguably raised her profile more than she did theirs.[56] Guest hooks sung by artists such as Justin Timberlake, Alicia Keys, and Rihanna—all of whom have garnered wide, mainstream appeal in their careers—were undoubtedly a commercial boon for the hip-hop songs on which they appeared.[57] This combination of rapping and singing in the hip-hop industry has led to a specific Grammy award for "Best Rap/Sung Collaboration" (now called "Best Melodic Rap Performance").

By referencing the guest hook paradigm in hip-hop music, I do not mean to imply that the aforementioned songs would have failed commercially without their guest features, but rather that the presence of guest pop artists opened up an avenue toward massive mainstream appeal which would have otherwise been difficult to attain. While Jay-Z, for example, was already a successful artist and entrepreneur by the early 2000s (culminating with his critically praised 2003 "retirement album" *The Black Album*), 11 of his 14 top-five appearances on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart—including all four of his number ones—and 13 of his 22 Grammy awards have been earned through rap/sung collaborations.[58] The collaboration-driven fusion of pop and hip hop has been furthered still by hybrid artists who both rap and sing, such as Drake, Mac Miller, Travis Scott, Young Thug, and Nicki Minaj. Though Justin Bieber is not generally considered a hip-hop artist, his 2020 album *Changes* is replete with soft-sounding trap beats atop which his breathy vocals recall the sound world of Drake and his longtime collaborator Noah "40" Shebib.

Formal Ordering and Balance

The final section of this paper investigates sectional ordering and balance in hip-hop songs. Of the 123 corpus songs that were classified as verse-hook, 47% featured a verse first, while 53% featured a hook first. This balance between hook-first and verse-first songs becomes skewed when considered over time. Example 10 plots all the verse-hook songs in the corpus in six time periods, each selected for their relatively even distribution of songs ($17 < n < 24$ for each time period).[59] While the 19 verse-hook songs released between 1982–1990 show a relatively even balance of verse-initiating and hook-initiating forms, more recent

songs appear to favor a hook-first form. In fact, just one of the 19 verse-hook songs released after 2011 had a verse appear before a hook.

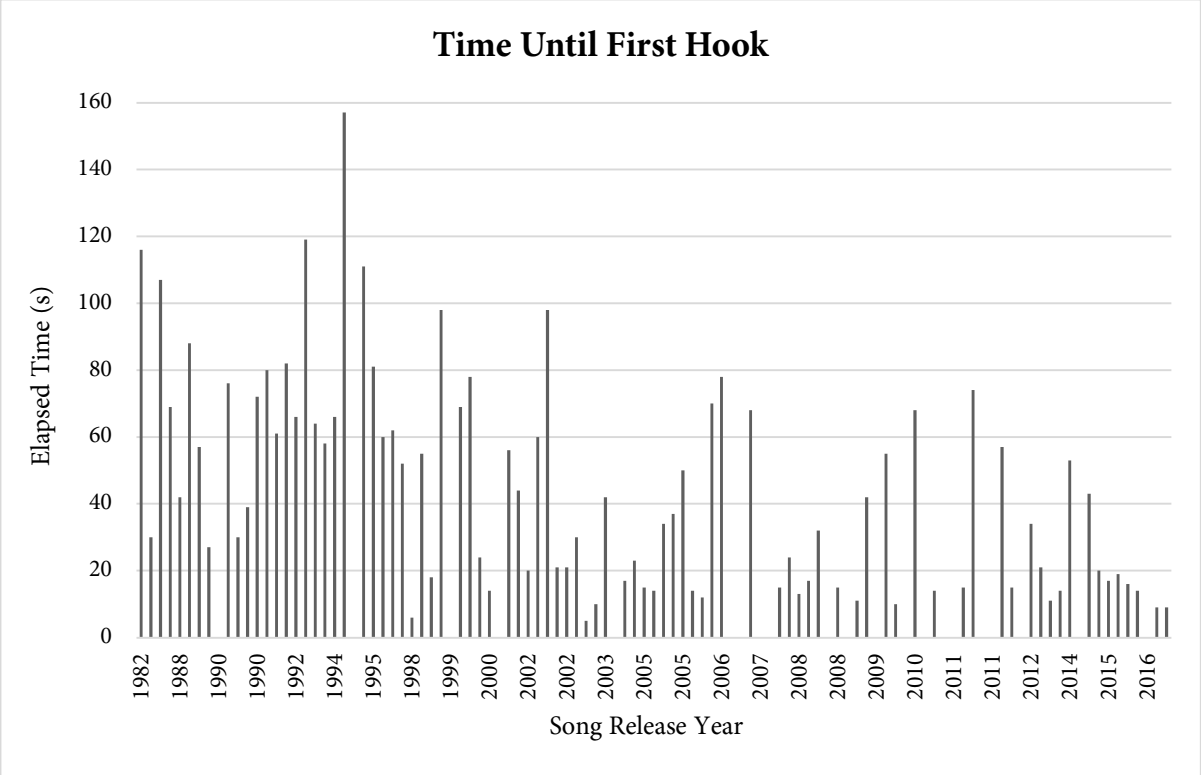


	1982–1990	1991–1997	1998–2003	2004–2007	2008–2011	2012–2017
Verse First	58%	89%	52%	28%	26%	5%
Hook First	42%	11%	48%	72%	74%	95%
N =	19	19	21	18	23	19

Example 10: Leading section type in verse-hook songs. The time periods were selected to suit two criteria. First, that all songs in a particular year would be included in the same period. Second, that the periods be populated as evenly as possible, given the first criterion.

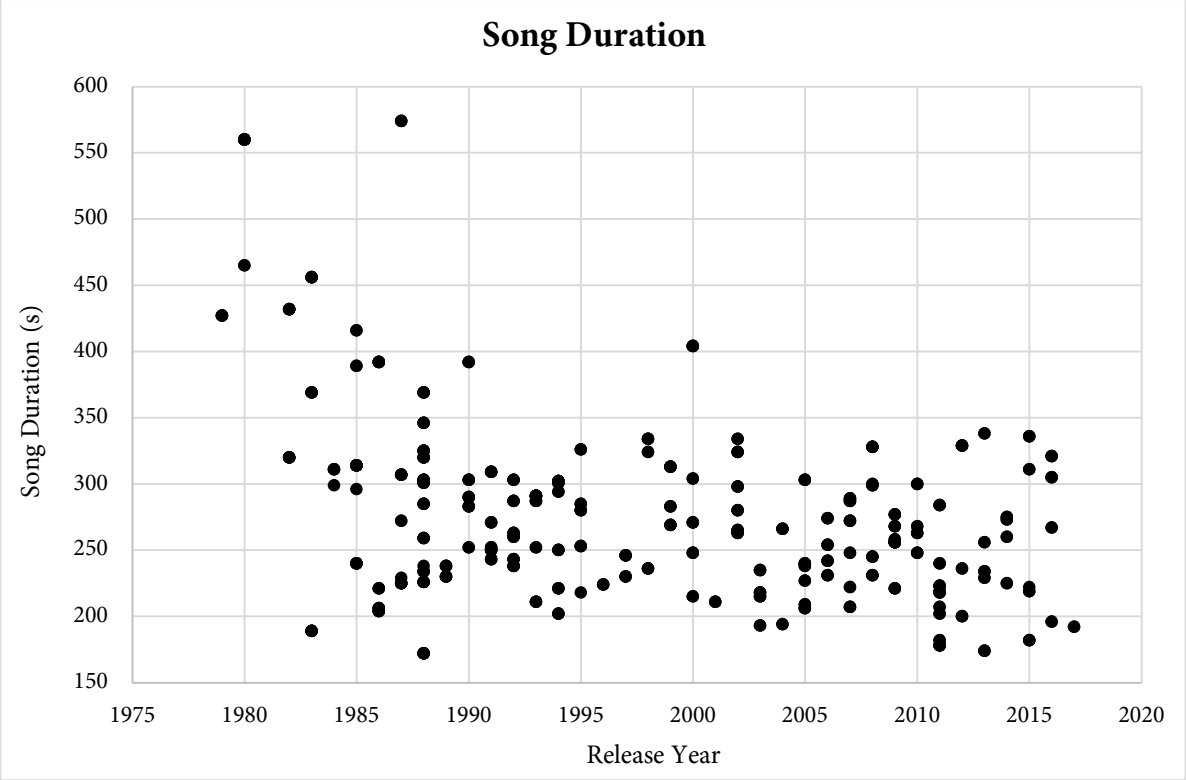
What do these observations tell us about the mainstreaming of hip-hop? They suggest—again—that hip-hop song forms are evolving to gradually foreground the hook at the expense of the verse. The significance of formal ordering can be examined through music consumption patterns and habits. Hubert Léveillé Gauvin's 2018 study on musical form and the theory of attention economy tested several hypotheses on a corpus of popular songs released between 1986 and 2015. For each song, he determined how much time passed before the first vocal entry, and before the first mention of the title lyrics. His hypothesis was that, due to the way music is consumed via streaming services with seemingly infinite choice at listeners' fingertips, recent songs have been written in order to better immediately capture listeners' attention.[60] The working assumption here is that because of an abundance of choice, listeners are less likely to listen to an entire song, instead switching songs after a limited amount of time.[61] Léveillé Gauvin's research showed that the average elapsed time before first vocal entry and title lyric decreased by year, meaning these features are

heard, on average, sooner, in more recent charting pop music. Assuming that hip-hop hooks normally feature title lyrics, we can apply Léveillé Gauvin's hypothesis to a determination of how soon hook sections appear in hip-hop songs.[62] Example 11 plots this statistic over time, and the results here echo Léveillé Gauvin's findings: hook sections generally appear sooner in recent songs than they do in older songs.

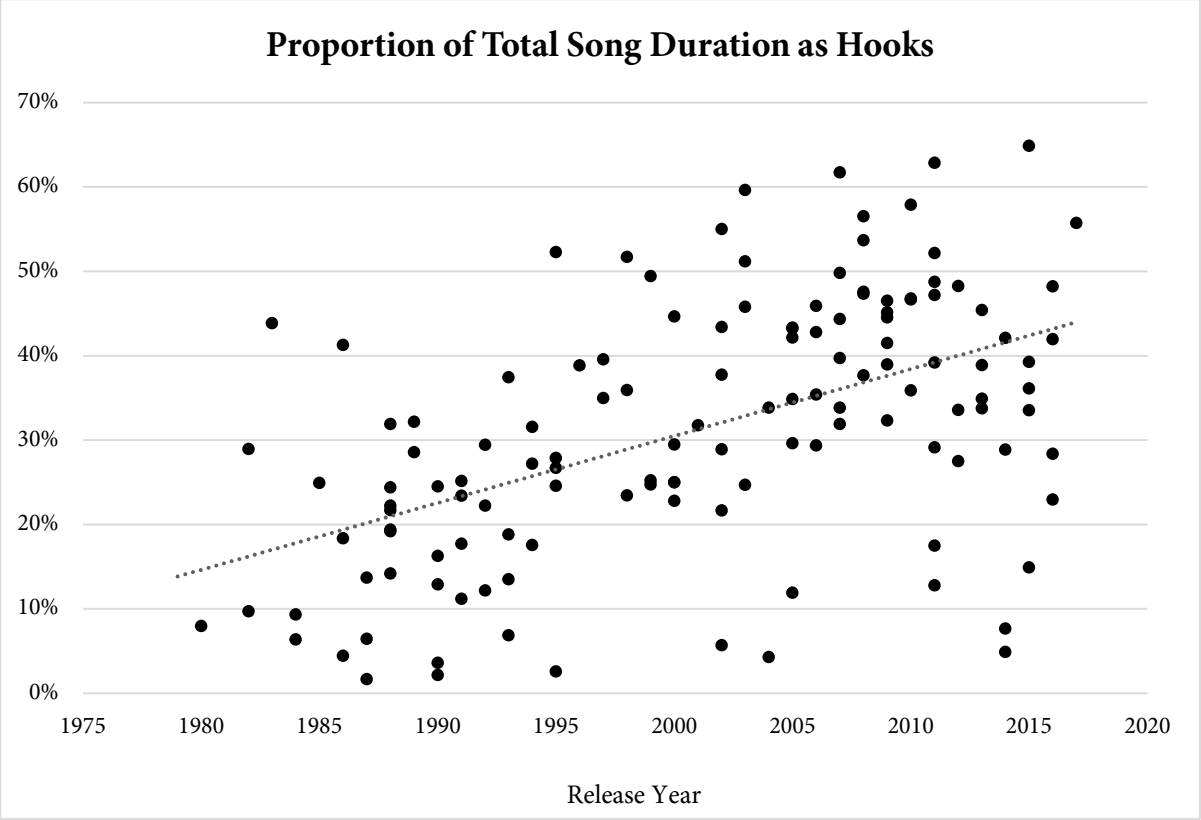


Example 11: Elapsed time until the arrival of the first hook section in 122 songs identified as verse-hook in the corpus.

We can also observe the hook's rising importance by measuring how much of a song's total duration they occupy. Example 12a plots total song duration in seconds for all songs in the corpus. As can be seen, apart from several long-duration outliers in the years prior to 1990, most songs tend to fall in a bandwidth of 3:00 (180 s) to 5:30 (330 s) for duration; this has not changed substantially over time. This observation is important to consider in light of Example 12b, which plots the proportion of total song duration taken up by hooks. The trendline here shows that the durational percentage of hooks is steadily rising. The charts featured in Examples 10–12 demonstrate that hooks are both arriving sooner and occupying an increasingly large share of the song's duration.



Example 12a: Song duration in seconds for all 160 songs in the corpus.



Example 12b: Proportion of song duration filled by hooks for all 160 songs in the corpus.

Conclusion

Song form is a musical parameter from which much can be learned about genre and style, performance practice, and in a broader sense, genre crossover. Since formal terminology is often used without being contextually defined, it becomes easy to forget how this terminology has been shaped by style, performance practice, and commerciality, and how it shapes our own reifying discourse of genre.

In the first section of this paper, I identified four section types in recorded hip hop, partly to invite further research on this topic, but also to foreground the subtle characteristics that distinguish hip hop's formal sections from those in other genres of popular music. I believe this foregrounding to be important because it calls attention to the pitfalls of defining formal features in hip hop using a terminology that has already been heavily theorized for rock/pop music. By using the term "chorus" to define hooks in hip hop, for example, we risk casting these sections in the image of popular music, which, at least initially, bore little influence over the formal construction of hip-hop music. A more appropriate argument—albeit one I have not taken here—would be that what once constituted a hook section in early hip hop has evolved into a pop-worthy chorus section in more recent rap-sung collaborations.[63]

With these discussions of section types established, I then investigated how section types form complete songs. While verse-hook songs appear to be the most common formal paradigm in hip-hop music, they were not common in hip hop's earliest years, when long-verse and strophic songs were more prevalent. I stressed that long-verse and strophic forms appear closely related to oral traditions of African American culture commonly cited as predecessors to hip-hop music in general and rapping in particular. Toasts—long, epic poems common in twentieth-century Black American culture—were often performed in a manner similar to rapping (albeit more rhythmically free), complete with rhyming couplets and phrases of similar length. The lyrical organization of toasts foreshadowed the hip-hop verse: their performances essentially involved proto-rapping, and their forms gave rise to the long-verse form in recorded hip hop. In a similar vein, strophic songs and posse cuts can be understood as a reflection of the cypher, a perennial locus of energy in collaborative and combative rapping.

Finally, I have argued that the mainstreaming of hip-hop music can be seen (among other ways) through a gradual shift in formal focus from the verse to the hook. Hooks first became more prevalent through the emergence of the verse-hook paradigm and their profile was further raised through guest sung

vocals by established pop stars. Their leading position in songs' formal sequences has also increased their importance, with more and more songs presenting the hook section earlier in the song (and occasionally right at the beginning). By focusing on hook sections, I risk overstating their role in the mainstreaming process and assuming a defined generic boundary exists between hip-hop and pop music where one simply does not exist. Indeed, merely invoking the term "crossover" implies that there is some border that a song, album, artist, or musical community traverses.[64] In reality, the threshold between hip hop and pop is porous and incompletely defined, perhaps more so today than ever before. But this permeable boundary between hip hop and pop is precisely what makes the hook—a section type that pervades nearly all pop music in some way or another—so appealing as an agent of mainstreaming in hip hop. Just like Temperley's observation that choruses slowly became standard in 1960s rock/pop music, hooks have slowly but surely infiltrated hip-hop music—a genre that once had very few of them, and now hardly exists without them.

A sense of irony can be gleaned, then, from the lyrics at the end of each verse of "Morris" (2014) by the Raleigh-based MC/producer Mez. Mez finishes each verse with the refrain lyrics: "Not too many know Morris [x2] / those that do know here be him and say that he needs a grave and a florist, chorus." The lyric "chorus" appears almost as an afterthought; the rhyme couplet "Morris / florist" has already been realized, and "chorus" arrives on the final off-beat of the measure. Following this utterance, a sparse instrumental section emerges—certainly not a hook (or chorus for that matter). In fact, the texture in this instrumental is sparser than the verse texture.[65] In this light, Mez's signaling of a chorus, however passing, invokes the expectation that one might occur—an expectation conditioned through the increasing prevalence of hook sections in hip hop—and also questions the very definition of "chorus" in hip-hop music. Mez thus reminds us that section types are fluid, constantly evolving, and unique in each musical genre in which they participate. Section types function as a venue in which we can view the tension between the musical mainstream and genres—like hip hop—that have historically been peripheral to this mainstream, yet are now quite thoroughly a part of it.

Notes

[1] Thompson writes "all the Black kids in Philadelphia who were listening to the radio that day have the same story. It [the song] stopped us in our tracks" (2013, 23).

[2] Temperley (2018) suggests that since the 1960s, the verse-chorus paradigm has supplanted strophic form (similar to his simple verse and AABA forms) as the standard song form preferred in rock music.

[3] Jenkins (2017) provides numerous examples of the inter-generic bleed between mainstream pop, hip hop, country, EDM, and other genres.

[4] Kajikawa: "Like professional sports, rap is a cultural arena in which the most prominent actors are black even though the majority of its spectators are not" (2015, 9). Chang: "The Black Thing you once couldn't understand became the 'G' Thang you could buy into" (2005, 420–21).

[5] By using tight as the operative criterion, I follow Caplin's notion of tight-knit and loose-knit ideas (1998, 17).

[6] Writings by Stephenson (2002), Covach (2004), Everett (2008), and de Clercq (2012) enumerate types of song sections, their possible orderings, and formal paradigms that arise from these orderings, but the repertoire these scholars focus upon is primarily what is broadly classified as the poorly-defined genre of pop/rock (Biamonte 2017 makes special effort to define pop/rock as "the constellation of genres and styles that has arisen around Anglophone pop and rock music in the latter half of the twentieth century, including rhythm and blues and heavy metal as well as genres with 'pop' or 'rock' in their names, but not country, hip-hop, industrial, or electronic dance music" (89)). Quite often, corpus-driven studies that are dedicated to analyzing song form—such as Summach (2012), de Clercq (2012), and Ensign (2015)—use music that appeared on the *Billboard* Hot 100 or a similarly general-scope chart. Especially before the mid 1990s, but also to some degree more recently, hip-hop music has been underrepresented on these general-scope charts, and as such has not garnered close attention in corpus studies on form. For his part, Summach acknowledges this gap, writing that "Walser 1995, Krims 2000, Manabe 2006, and Butler 2006, for example, all describe formal procedures in rap and electronic dance music that differ substantially from those that prevail in pre-1990s Top-20 music. Further study would clarify the extent to which the absorption of rap and dance into the mainstream after 1992 was eased by, or led to, hybridized formal conventions" (2012, 14).

[7] Summach's corpus study involved *Billboard*-charting songs released up until 1989, meaning he almost certainly would not have encountered hip-hop music. While Ensign's study focused on charting songs after 1989, he encountered more hip-hop music, yet still only comprising a small portion of his total corpus (he does not specify how much).

[8] Barna (2020) highlights this fact in her discussion of the "dance chorus"; a section type developed in EDM, though now frequently incorporated in mainstream pop music.

[9] Peres's dissertation (2016) focuses on how recording production techniques contribute to the proliferation of rhythmic, timbral, and textural elements as drivers of song form in recent pop music.

[10] Doll's theoretical framework is predicated on the listening experience, so he chooses to describe harmony in terms of the effects it creates to the ear, rather than conceiving of harmony in terms of "harmonic objects" (2017, 9).

[11] While this point may appear to undermine the utility of using these four section types to classify song forms, as I do here, instrumental and loose-vocal sections are rarely the chief determinant of a song's formal type. There are only a handful of songs in my corpus where instrumental sections might be interpreted to express hook-like qualities and thus change the definition of the song's formal type. Of the 24 songs identified as strophic in the corpus, no more than five or so—to my ear—present instrumental sections that are staunchly hook-like; "Mind Playing Tricks on Me" (Geto Boys, 1991) represents one possible candidate, where the instrumental sections between each verse feature a guitar riff that expresses a hook-like aesthetic.

[12] I define measures in hip-hop music by the near-ubiquitous underlying backbeat pattern of the drums in the song's beat layer. That is to say, one measure equals one iteration of a 4/4 backbeat pattern. By contrast, de Clercq (2016) defends the practice of determining measure length, and by extension song tempo, using absolute time as a determinant, citing perceptual studies that have shown a two-second timespan to be the ideal duration for experiential measures in subjects listening to popular songs. While de Clercq's findings are compelling, two factors led me to part from them in my approach. First, his chosen repertoire is pop and rock music. In general, these styles contain much more variance in phrase length of vocal lines, harmonic rhythm of accompaniment, and rhythmic variation of drum patterns than is found in hip-hop music. Second, the perceptual studies de Clercq cites mainly focus on tapping experiments. I posit that a more reliable indicator of tempo and measure perception would include a more embodied response to the aural stimuli, such as dancing. While I know of no studies that do this with respect to hip-hop music, I hypothesize that the results would show a more faithful correspondence to backbeat patterns as determinants of tempo and measure.

[13] Duinker (2021) unpacks rhyme structure in hip-hop flow in detail, relating it to phrase length and ultimately metric structure in hip-hop music. Central to this discussion is the assumption that rhymes typically occur at the end of measures and function as phrase-ending devices.

[14] See Berry 2018, 3. Duinker (2021) describes the variance in loop length in hip-hop beats, providing examples of 2-, 4-, and 8-measure beat loops.

[15] I use the term "allegedly" here because I can locate no concrete support for this claim beyond what has been written on online blogs and genius.com, a user-annotated lyrics site. It is clear, however, from listening to Shanté's original recording of "Roxanne's Revenge," that an element of spontaneity obtains, notably through her abnormal and often unpredictable breathing patterns. This observation lends support to the claim that "Roxanne's Revenge" was recorded in a single take, with no prior planning on breathing points.

[16] In an interview with the website *Complex* (Cho 2011), DJ Premier, the producer of "NY State of Mind," describes how Nas wrote his lyrics for the song in-studio and recorded them in a

single take, without having worked out his flow rhythms aloud prior to recording. Premier notes especially Nas's utterance at the beginning of the track "I don't know how to start this shit" as evidence of the spontaneity in this recording session.

[17] I interpret this song as containing two hooks by virtue of the length of repeated lyrics comprising the double-hook section (longer than is typical in hip-hop music), and the textural shift that occurs partway through these lyrics (which to my ear denotes a sectional break).

[18] Many of Public Enemy's hook lyrics fit this description, notably "Bring the Noise" (*It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, 1988), and "Fight the Power" (*Fear of a Black Planet*, 1990).

[19] Current and recently active MCs such as Drake, Young Thug, Mac Miller, and Chance the Rapper have extensively used singing (usually autotuned) in verses.

[20] Berry (2018) and Edwards (2009) use the terms hook and chorus interchangeably, while most other authors use one term or the other with no explanation.

[21] These repeated lyrics are quite often repeated iterations of a refrain that concluded the previous verse. In contrast to Temperley's approach for rock music (2018, 153–154), I allow for refrain lyrics to be part of the verse or hook, depending on context.

[22] Examples abound in hip-hop music where the sections interspersing verses (be they hook or instrumental sections) are less texturally dense than the verses. Several recent examples include "Norf Norf" (Vince Staples, 2015), "Morris" (King Mez, 2014), "Talk About It" (Dr. Dre ft. King Mez, 2015), and "Panda" (Desiigner, 2016).

[23] By "melodic and harmonic differentiation," I mean the following. First, the harmonic content of a hip-hop beat changes between verse and hook very rarely. Second, since hip-hop verses do not normally contain singing, there is scant potential for the melodic profiles of verses and hooks to be compared; the only observation that can be made in this regard is often the presence or absence of singing. It should be noted, however, that very recent hip-hop music is bucking both of these trends: the harmonic language of beats is becoming more sophisticated and more verses involve singing.

[24] Though not referring explicitly to instrumental sections as defined here, Sewell's use of the terms "introduction" and "interlude" raise a different question regarding instrumental sections; where in the song's chronology they typically occur. Instrumental sections as I have defined them here are free of any chronological information. I do not classify hip-hop song sections with regards to their ordering, mainly because the notion of a cohesive, autonomous song, with a distinct and predictable teleology, is antithetical to the geneses of hip-hop music, and only plays a marginal role even in recent, commercial hip-hop music. As a consequence, I define instrumental sections through their lack of performed vocals (by MCs appearing on the track) and/or vocal samples that appreciably contribute to the song's lyrical or narrative structure.

[25] The main sample in this instrumental section comes from "Get Up Offa That Thing" (James Brown, 1976).

[26] "Hype" vocals refer to the vocals that appear in a song's intro or outro sections, which are usually more ad-lib sounding, ametric, and usually set up the content of the song or introduce (occasionally self-introduce) the MC or MCs who will rap the verses and/or hooks. This practice of hyping can be traced back to The Kidd Creole, member of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five (see Jay Quan, 2002).

[27] Patrin (2020, 33) notes that by the early 1980s, the focus in live hip-hop performance had squarely shifted to the MC.

[28] Rapped/sung song sections that evade description as verses or hooks are comparatively rare, but have become more common of late. Many of these sections function somewhat similar to bridges in popular music, in that they provide contrast to the verses and hooks. Ensign (2015, 29–30) provides a summary of prevailing definitions of bridge sections, all of which invoke a sense of contrast from verses and choruses.

[29] Though Krims (2000) does not mention "Push It" in his discussion on party rap (one of his four rap genres), the musical and lyrical attributes of this song place it squarely in that genre. Indeed, the video released for "Push It" confirms its function as a party-oriented song.

[30] Ensign (2015) uses the term "AAA strophic form." I prefer "strophic form" over both this and "simple verse form" because the latter implies, to me, a static conception of verse, and the former implies a specific quantity of verses present (hardly a consistent statistic in hip-hop music).

[31] I interpret all the rapping in this song as verse-like, and not hook-like, though the lyric annotate website Genius.com provides a formal annotation of the song that includes hook sections (which the site calls choruses). In general, the formal annotations (and indeed also the lyric annotations) on Genius.com should be scrutinized, as it is an open-source website with user-generated data. That said, it is an invaluable starting point for any analytical study of hip-hop music.

[32] Pullum (2019) writes that "in the early days of hip-hop, it was used when a group of rappers, typically standing in a circle, would take turns exchanging verses for competition, practice or sheer entertainment."

[33] See Peterson (2014, 83–85).

[34] "Flava In Ya Ear" and "Fuckin' Problems" are not strophic songs, however.

[35] Although this initial hook section is short, the memorability of these lyrics causes imbue it with more hook-like than framing/introductory qualities.

[36] Despite the repeated, rhythmicized lyrics, this section does not function as a hook; it is not only less memorable than the hook sections in this song, it also occurs over the stripped-down beat texture common to the song's verses. It thus functions as a bridge between the second verse and the final hook.

[37] I know of no empirical data that supports this claim, and examples of chorus-initiating songs certainly exist (especially in recent mainstream pop music), but Covach's "verse-chorus pair" (2004) and Temperley's "verse-chorus unit" (2018) implicitly suggest a verse-chorus ordering,

rather than the inverse. Temperley's chart documenting sectional chorus features (2018, 160) suggests that they typically follow verses.

[38] I recognize the irony in my using the term "verse-hook form" for this paradigm while simultaneously jettisoning the term "verse-hook unit" because of the ordered relationship it implies. Any alternatives I could think of were just as problematic. "Hook-verse form" would imply directionality as well. Similarly, "hook form" misses the mark because some strophic and long-verse songs contain hooks as well, but not in the paired relationship with verses as found in verse-hook songs. Bungert (2019) notes the ambivalence of formal ordering that can occur in hip-hop music in his analysis of Kendrick Lamar's "King Kunta" (2015).

[39] Naturally, there are exceptions to my position here. Eminem's "Lose Yourself" (2002) provides a good example of how energy can be built and accumulated through the course of a verse, reaching a local climax and dissipating in the hook section. In the case of "Lose Yourself," that energy is inherent in the song's lyrics; the narrative arc traced by these lyrics arguably requires the type of energy build that both Eminem's vocal performance and Dr. Dre's beat production give to the song.

[40] See Duinker (2021) for a detailed analysis of the complexity of Biggie's flow performance in "Hypnotize."

[41] These toasts are distinct from the Jamaican sound-system cultural tradition of toasting, which involved deejays chanting over tracks played on large portable "sound systems"—large speaker arrays set up outdoors, usually on the back of a vehicle. While African American toasts draw parallels with long-verse hip-hop songs, Jamaican toasting has a more direct influence on the very practice of rapping itself.

[42] In the toast "Shine and the sinking of the Titanic," the protagonist uses his position below deck to learn quickly of the Titanic's impending sinking and thus enables himself to escape. In the "Signifyin' Monkey," the monkey-trickster figure is able to dupe both the lion and the elephant, tricking them into fighting each other rather than going after him (in some versions of this toast, the Monkey's trickery catches up with it).

[43] Both men have been described as "The Godfather of Rap": see O'Hagan (2012) and Baker (2002).

[44] Alim's discussion of narrative sequencing (2006, 93–101) draws parallels between Slick Rick's highly narrative rapping style and toasting. Rickford and Rickford (2000) and Smitherman (1977) also connect the toast to vocal delivery in hip-hop music.

[45] In *Complex*'s summary of every rap single to top the *Billboard* Hot 100, the authors (Turner et al., 2018) suggest a shift occurred in what type of rap songs were charting following the success of Coolio's "Gangsta's Paradise" (1995). After this point, singles by The Notorious B.I.G., Bone Thugs-n-Harmony, Puff Daddy, Tupac Shakur, and Dr. Dre began topping the charts.

[46] Thompson's own reflection on first hearing "Rapper's Delight" cogently sums up the song's impact: "Within a week [following its release] everyone had heard 'Rapper's Delight,' and the world was different forever" (2013, 24).

[47] By featuring rapping over an interpolated R&B/disco song, "Rapper's Delight" participated in the ongoing trend of repurposing breakbeats and other musical elements from the R&B, disco, and funk genres.

[48] Bernard Edwards and Nile Rodgers, the main songwriters in Chic, were eventually credited as songwriters on "Rapper's Delight" (Patrin, 2020). "Rapper's Delight" preserves the highly repetitive beat from "Good Times," recorded by session musicians hired by producer Sylvia Robinson.

[49] This formal summary holds true for all released versions of "Rapper's Delight": the single, the album version, the long single version, and the two 12" versions (short and long). While the quantity and length of verse and instrumental sections changes across these releases, no hook sections appear in any version.

[50] I understand the term "old-school" to account for all hip-hop music released before 1986. Bradley and DuBois (2010) define the old-school period as 1978–1984, while Perry (2004, 58) points out that the term "old school" as referencing this period of time was already in use in rap lyrics as early as 1988.

[51] "Rapper's Delight" was released as a single in two different lengths, as a 12" in two different lengths, and on the Sugarhill Gang's self-titled debut album in 1980.

[52] Rose writes that "taken together, the video and lyrics for 'Ladies First' are a statement for black female unity, independence, and power" (1994, 164–165). Roberts (1994) cites "Ladies First" as evidence supporting Rose's claims that "women rappers are vocal and respected members of the hip-hop community" (1991, 109).

[53] In the music video, the imagery also contrasts sharply between verses and hooks.

[54] The singing in the hook sections of "Slow Down" is mostly sampled from the song "What I Am" (Edie Brickell and New Bohemians, 1988).

[55] Krims reflects on the tension between hardcore lyrical subjects, which evoke affiliations of tough, urban masculinity and authenticity, with the perceived softness of R&B influences in 1990s don rap, giving the example of the parodically used female-sung hook in Ice Cube's "Giving Up the Nappy dugout" (1991). See Krims 2000, 85–86.

[56] Evans had already released her self-titled debut album in 1995, but her subsequent three albums (*Keep the Faith*, 1998; *Faithfully*, 2001; and the *First Lady*, 2005) all surpassed her original album in chart performance, and "Missing You" remains by far her most successful single.

[57] See for example "Dead and Gone" (T.I. ft. Justin Timberlake, 2008), "Empire State of Mind" (Jay-Z ft. Alicia Keys, 2009), "Love the Way You Lie" (Eminem ft. Rihanna, 2010), and "All of the Lights" (Kanye West ft. Rihanna et al., 2010). The reverse setup, where MCs provide a guest verse on a pop song also prevails in recent years: notable examples include "Crazy in Love" (Beyonce ft. Jay-Z, 2003) "American Boy" (Estelle ft. Kanye West, 2008), "Baby" (Justin Bieber ft. Ludacris, 2010), and "Bon Appetit" (Katy Perry ft. Migos, 2017).

[58] Rihanna and Jay-Z have a particularly interesting relationship in that Jay-Z was instrumental in launching Rihanna's career (well documented by Seabrook 2015) while Rihanna was pivotal in developing Jay-Z's commercial and critical accolades. Rihanna is not the only pop artist who

rose to fame with the help of the hip-hop genre: the then relatively unknown Bruno Mars gained widespread exposure early in his career for his hook performance on "Nothing on You" (BoB, 2010).

[59] In developing a corpus from pre-formed song lists, I encountered an imbalance of songs per year. This factor should be taken into account when interpreting Example 10.

[60] Léveillé Gauvin predicted that, over time: song titles would become short, song tempi would increase, the time before first vocal entry in songs would become shorter, and the title lyrics would be referenced sooner.

[61] Léveillé Gauvin cites Lamere's study (2014) that reveals the extent to which listeners use the skip button in Spotify: only 51% percent of listens involved songs played in their entirety.

[62] This assumption is accurate; only 15 of the 122 corpus songs identified as verse-hook do not feature the title lyrics in their hook sections.

[63] To be sure, terms like *instrumental*, *verse*, and *chorus* are sufficiently general that they can be used for most any pop genre, but careful consideration of their defining features in each genre is warranted in order to understand how they function in different generic contexts.

[64] See Brackett 1994, 777.

[65] Sparser textures in hook sections can also be found in "Blessings" (Big Sean ft. Kanye West and Drake, 2015) and "Blue Suede" (Vince Staples, 2014).

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Appendix

Year	*Artist*	*Title*	*Formal Paradigm*
1979	Sugarhill Gang	"Rapper's Delight"	S (strophic)
1980	Funky 4 + 1	"That's the Joint"	S
1980	Kurtis Blow	"The Breaks"	other
1981	Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five	"The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel"	other
1982	Afrika Bambaataa and the Soulsonic Force	"Planet Rock"	other
1982	Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five	"The Message"	VH (verse-hook)
1983	Grandmaster and Melle Mel	"White Lines (Don't Do It)"	other
1983	Rammellzee and K-Rob	"Beat Bop"	S

(Year)	*(Artist)*	*(Title)*	*(Paradigm)*
1983	Run-DMC	"Sucker MCs"	S
1984	Roxanne Shanté	"Roxanne's Revenge"	LV (long verse)
1984	U.T.F.O.	"Roxanne, Roxanne"	VH
1985	Doug E. Fresh and Slick Rick	"La-Di-Da-Di"	LV
1985	Doug E. Fresh and the Get Fresh Crew	"The Show"	S
1985	LL Cool J	"Rock the Bells"	S
1985	Run-DMC	"King of Rock"	S
1985	Schoolly D	"P.S.K. What Does It Mean?"	VH
1986	Beastie Boys	"Hold It, Now Hit It"	VH
1986	Beastie Boys	"Paul Revere"	S
1986	MC Shan	"The Bridge"	VH
1986	Run-DMC	"Peter Piper"	S
1987	Boogie Down Productions	"South Bronx"	VH
1987	Eric B. & Rakim	"I Know You Got Soul"	S
1987	Eric B. & Rakim	"Paid in Full"	LV
1987	Ice-T	"6 'n the Mornin'"	S
1987	Salt-N-Pepa	"Push It"	other
1987	Too $hort	"Freaky Tales"	VH
1988	Audio Two	"Top Billin'"	VH
1988	Big Daddy Kane	"Ain't No Half-Steppin'"	VH
1988	EPMD	"Strictly Business"	S
1988	L'Trimm	"Cars With the Boom"	VH
1988	Marley Marl et al.	"The Symphony"	S
1988	N.W.A.	"Fuck tha Police"	VH
1988	N.W.A.	"Straight Outta Compton"	S
1988	Public Enemy	"Bring the Noise"	VH
1988	Public Enemy	"Rebel Without a Pause"	other
1988	Rob Base and DJ E-Z Rock	"It Takes Two"	VH
1988	Slick Rick	"Children's Story"	LV
1988	Ultramagnetic MCs	"Ego Trippin'"	S
1989	Biz Markie	"Just a Friend"	VH
1989	De La Soul	"Me Myself and I"	VH
1990	A Tribe Called Quest	"Can I Kick It?"	VH
1990	Brand Nubian	"Slow Down"	VH
1990	Digital Underground	"The Humpty Dance"	VH
1990	LL Cool J	"Mama Said Knock You Out"	VH
1990	Public Enemy	"Fight the Power"	VH

(Year)	*(Artist)*	*(Title)*	*(Paradigm)*
1991	A Tribe Called Quest ft. Leaders of the New School	"Scenario"	S
1991	Black Sheep	"The Choice Is Yours (Revisited)"	VH
1991	Cypress Hill	"How I Could Just Kill a Man"	VH
1991	Geto Boys	"Mind Playing Tricks on Me"	S
1991	Naughty by Nature	"O.P.P."	VH
1992	Dr. Dre ft. Snoop Dogg	"Deep Cover"	VH
1992	Dr. Dre ft. Snoop Dogg	"Nuthin' but a 'G' Thang"	VH
1992	Ice Cube	"It Was a Good Day"	S
1992	Pete Rock and C.L. Smooth	"They Reminisce Over You (T.R.O.Y.)"	S
1992	Sir Mix-A-Lot	"Baby Got Back"	S
1992	The Pharcyde	"Passin' Me By"	VH
1993	Snoop Dogg	"Gin and Juice"	VH
1993	Souls of Mischief	"93 'til Infinity"	VH
1993	Wu-Tang Clan	"Protect Ya Neck"	S
1993	Wu-Tang Clan	"C.R.E.A.M."	VH
1994	Craig Mack et al.	"Flava in Ya Ear (Remix)"	VH
1994	Gang Starr	"Mass Appeal"	S
1994	Nas	"It Ain't Hard to Tell"	S
1994	Nas	"N.Y. State of Mind"	S
1994	The Notorious B.I.G.	"Big Poppa"	VH
1994	The Notorious B.I.G.	"Juicy"	VH
1995	Mobb Deep	"Shook Ones (Part II)"	VH
1995	Ol' Dirty Bastard	"Brooklyn Zoo"	LV
1995	Raekwon ft. Ghostface Killah, Method Man, and Cappadonna	"Ice Cream"	VH
1995	Tupac Shakur	"Dear Mama"	VH
1995	Tupac Shakur ft. Dr. Dre and Roger Troutman	"California Love"	VH
1996	Bone Thugs-N-Harmony	"Tha Crossroads"	VH
1997	Missy Elliott	"The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)"	VH
1997	The Notorious B.I.G.	"Hypnotize"	VH
1998	Jermaine Dupri ft. Jay-Z	"Money Ain't a Thang"	VH
1998	Lauryn Hill	"Lost Ones"	VH
1998	Outkast	"Rosa Parks"	VH
1999	B.G. ft. Big Tymers and Hot Boys	"Bling Bling"	VH
1999	Eminem	"My Name Is"	VH

(Year)	*(Artist)*	*(Title)*	*(Paradigm)*
1999	Jay-Z ft. UGK	“Big Pimpin’”	VH
2000	Dead Prez	“Hip-Hop”	VH
2000	Eminem ft. Dido	“Stan”	VH
2000	M.O.P.	“Ante Up (Robbing-Hoodz Theory)”	VH
2000	Outkast	“Ms. Jackson”	VH
2000	Outkast	“B.O.B.”	VH
2001	Missy Elliott	“Get Ur Freak On”	VH
2002	Clipse	“Grindin’”	VH
2002	Eminem	“Lose Yourself”	VH
2002	Jay-Z ft. Pharrell	“Excuse Me Miss”	VH
2002	Lil’ Jon and the East Side Boyz	“Get Low”	VH
2002	Missy Elliott	“Work It”	VH
2002	Snoop Dogg ft. Pharrell Williams	“Beautiful”	VH
2003	50 Cent	“In Da Club”	VH
2003	Black Eyed Peas	“Hey Mama”	VH
2003	Black Eyed Peas	“Let’s Get it Started”	VH
2003	Jay-Z	“99 Problems”	VH
2004	Kanye West	“Jesus Walks”	VH
2004	Snoop Dogg ft. Pharrell Williams	“Drop it Like It’s Hot”	VH
2005	50 Cent	“Candy Shop”	VH
2005	Black Eyed Peas	“Don't Phunk With My Heart”	VH
2005	Chamillionaire ft. Krayzie Bone	“Ridin’”	VH
2005	Kanye West ft. Jay-Z	“Diamonds from Sierra Leone”	VH
2005	Missy Elliott ft. Ciara and Fatman Scoop	“Lose Control”	VH
2005	The Game ft. 50 Cent	“Hate It Or Love It”	VH
2006	Ludacris ft. Pharrell Williams	“Money Maker”	VH
2006	Lupe Fiasco	“Kick, Push”	VH
2006	T.I.	“What You Know”	VH
2006	Yung Joc	“It’s Goin’ Down”	VH
2007	50 Cent	“Ayo Technology”	VH
2007	Kanye West	“Can' Tell Me Nothing”	VH
2007	Kanye West ft. T-Pain	“Good Life”	VH
2007	Lupe Fiasco	“Superstar”	VH
2007	Souljia Boy	“Crank That”	VH
2007	T.I.	“Big Things Poppin’”	VH
2008	Flo Rida	“Low”	VH
2008	Lil' Wayne	“Lollipop”	VH

(Year)	*(Artist)*	*(Title)*	*(Paradigm)*
2008	Snoop Dogg	"Sexual Eruption"	VH
2008	T.I. ft. Justin Timberlake	"Dead and Gone"	VH
2008	T.I., Jay-Z, Lil' Wayne, and Kanye West	"Swagga Like Us"	VH
2009	Drake	"Best I Ever Had"	VH
2009	Jay-Z ft. Rihanna and Kanye West	"Run This Town"	VH
2009	Jay-Z	"D.O.A. (Death of Autotune)"	VH
2009	Jay-Z	"On to the Next One"	VH
2009	Jay-Z ft. Alicia Keys	"Empire State of Mind"	VH
2009	Kid Cudi	"Day 'n' Nite"	VH
2010	B.o.B. ft. Bruno Mars	"Nothin' On You"	VH
2010	Eminem	"Not Afraid"	VH
2010	Eminem ft. Rihanna	"Love the Way You Lie"	VH
2010	Kanye West, Rihanna, Kid Cudi and Fergie	"All of the Lights"	VH
2011	Chris Brown ft. Busta Rhymes and Lil' Wayne	"Look at Me Now"	VH
2011	Dr Dre ft. Eminem and Skylar Grey	"I Need a Doctor"	VH
2011	Drake	"The Motto"	VH
2011	Jay-Z and Kanye West	"Otis"	S
2011	Jay-Z and Kanye West	"Niggas in Paris"	VH
2011	Lupe Fiasco	"The Show Goes On"	VH
2011	Snoop Dogg and Wiz Khalifa	"Young Wild and Free"	VH
2011	Wale	"Lotus Flower Bomb"	VH
2011	Wiz Khalifa	"Black and Yellow"	VH
2012	Kanye West ft. Big Sean, Pusha T, and 2 Chainz	"Mercy"	VH
2012	Macklemore and Ryan Lewis	"Thrift Shop"	VH
2012	Nas	"Daughters"	VH
2013	A$AP Rocky ft. 2 Chainz, Drake, and Kendrick Lamar	"Fuckin' Problems"	VH
2013	Drake	"Started From the Bottom"	VH
2013	Jay-Z	"Holy Grail"	VH
2013	Kanye West	"New Slaves"	other
2013	Kanye West	"Bound 2"	VH
2014	Common and John Legend	"Glory"	VH
2014	Drake	"0 to 100"	LV
2014	Nicki Minaj	"Anaconda"	VH
2014	Wiz Khalifa	"We Dem Boyz"	VH
2015	Drake	"Energy"	VH

(Year)	*(Artist)*	*(Title)*	*(Paradigm)*
2015	Fetty Wap	"Trap Queen"	VH
2015	Kanye West	"All Day"	VH
2015	Kendrick Lamar	"I (album version)"	VH
2015	Kendrick Lamar	"Alright"	VH
2016	Chance the Rapper ft. Lil' Wayne and 2 Chainz	"No Problem"	VH
2016	Drake	"Hotline Bling"	VH
2016	Kanye West	"Ultralight Beam"	VH
2016	Kanye West ft. Rihanna	"Famous"	VH
2017	Fat Joe and Remi Ma	"All the Way Up"	VH