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The Big Payback Book Analysis

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The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop - Book Analysis

By Isaiah Smith

I decided to do my analysis on *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop*. The 2011 book summarizes the history and rise of hip-hop in America. The author, Dan Charnas covers more than just the business side of the industry, he also details the effect that hip-hop had on changing cultural and racial boundaries in America. Starting with how hip-hop was created in the city of New York, the book tells the story of how it changed over the years to become a part of pop culture in America. Charnas does this by detailing major events that led to hip-hop becoming a prominent genre in the music industry. Each chapter is written to cover a period of time from the years of 1968 to 2007. The book goes through these time periods with different storylines from important people in that period. It connects these different storylines in a way that shows the growth of hip-hop. With each chapter and each time period, you get a clear idea of how hip-hop evolved and changed America.

Dan Charnas is a journalist who was born in New York. He earned a master's degree in Journalism from Columbia University and has worked extensively in the hip-hop music scene. He worked as a journalist for *The Source*, the first dedicated hip-hop magazine, and he also worked as a talent scout for Profile Records. As someone who has worked in the industry and has personally been involved with advancing hip-hop Dan Charnas has the credibility to write an accurate history of the genre.

Charnas does a great job of telling the story in a way that highlights the idea that there are many major players in the history of hip-hop. It seems as if there were so many key people to

credit for what hip-hop has become. While there are many people that contributed to the rise of the genre, I feel there are only a few that can be called a major player in the industry. To me these were the people that truly pushed hip-hop to the next milestone. The first to earn this title, to me, are the ones who started the genre. I would first consider the “rhyming” DJ’s such as DJ Hollywood to be important players, then the first set of “rappers” such as DJ Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. These are the people who started the rap culture in New York.

Just as important as the artists were to the rise of the genre, so were the labels who saw the commercial potential in it. The next set of major players for me are the first successful rap labels, Sugar Hill Records, Profile Records, Jive Records and Tommy Boy Records. At a time when no one else would sell or promote rap records, these labels did it successfully for a period of time. Sugar Hill Records is credited with the release of the first rap song and the other labels proved that hip-hop could be a commercial success. As hip-hop was becoming somewhat of a commercial success, Rick Rubin, Russell Simmons, and Run-DMC pushed the genre to the next level. Rick Rubin and Russell Simmons have done so much for the industry, but what is really memorable for me is how they helped establish rap as an art form. Rubin and Simmons had shared similarities on the way they believed rap should sound and produced records the way they wanted them to be heard. Russell Simmons had helped the group Run-DMC establish the first fashion trends to be seen in rap. He had told them what to wear, and there was a specific style to the group such as their white Adidas shoes. Run-DMC is memorable for breaking down race and culture barriers with their hip-hop and rock style. Because of their cross-over style, hip-hop started to gain the attention of white audiences.

The era of Run-DMC could be seen as the start of hip-hop becoming a mainstream genre in America. This leads to the next major player in the evolution of hip-hop, MTV. MTV was instrumental for growing hip-hop into a commercial success. MTV was responsible for bringing the genre into peoples homes, not only in America but in other countries as well. At one point *Yo! MTV Raps* was one of the highest rated shows on the network. For me the last memorable major player is Keith Naftaly, the former program director at KMEL in San Francisco. As rap music evolved, some of the lyrics and content were seen as too violent, too obscene, or “too black” for the radio. This wasn’t something that Naftaly believed. He believed that his audience was ready for the hardcore rap scene. Naftaly was first person on radio to play what was considered hardcore rap songs. This was something that was not being done anywhere else in the country. Naftaly had found great success in playing rap records on the radio and led his station to be number one in the area. Other radio stations began to take notice and eventually other major radio stations began to follow suit and started playing rap records as well. This closed the last major gap in hip-hop. Because of Naftaly, rap had finally made its way into the commercial radio world. While there are many other key artists and people that came after Naftaly, I feel this was the last big push hip-hop needed to become as big as it is today.

The history of hip-hop comes with a lot of ethical conflict, mainly racism in America. From the very beginning hip-hop had been seen as a genre by and for black people. In early hip-hop history, no white station would ever play a rap record. It took a long time for rap to make its way to white audiences. Because of groups like Run-DMC and The Beastie Boys, hip-hop was able to start breaking the walls between white and black audiences. In the beginning, not even MTV wanted to attach its brand with rap records because they feared the music was too black for their

viewers. Eventually rap made its way onto radios and onto MTV, and every time rap proved itself as a successful genre.

While the book is a history of hip-hop, it does provide some useful lessons for the current music industry. One thing I took from the book is that the music industry is never stagnant, and in order to survive in an ever-evolving industry you must evolve with it. A lot of the companies that didn't work out, like Sugar Hill Records or radio stations that went out of business, did not evolve with the industry. It seems like a lot of bad endings for people and companies in the book happened because they didn't change with the industry. Another point the book makes is connecting different people within the same story to show that networking is incredibly important. A lot of stories start with how one person knew someone they wanted to work with and that's how job opportunities and deals arise. There are so many instances in the book where people got where they were because they were connected, and that is something that I am sure is still true to this day. After reading the history of a music genre as big as hip-hop, my two biggest takeaways as a music professional would be to always evolve and to keep making connections.

The Big Payback is an absolutely fascinating read. The way it tells the history of hip-hop keeps your attention. Not only does it teach the history and business of the genre, it also shows how it affected and advanced black lives in America. It shows how hip-hop is more than just a genre of music, but a voice for the black community. I would definitely recommend this book to anyone whether they are a hip-hop fan or not. The book tells a great story for all readers.