

# H-Net Reviews

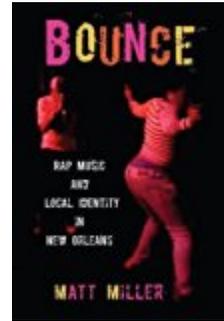
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Matt Miller.** *Bounce: Rap Music and Local Identity in New Orleans.* American Popular Music Series. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012. xii + 214 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55849-936-2; \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55849-935-5.

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Bounce is a style of New Orleans rap that employs chanted phrases, call-and-response participation, and local themes and references. Compared to rap styles that view music primarily as a vehicle for social commentary, bounce recordings and performances in New Orleans often diminish the meaning of the narrative, instead using the rhythmic qualities inherent in language—highlighted through repetition—to create musical interest and to promote audience participation. The text that is used is highly repetitive and self-referential, often sexually explicit, and sometimes violent. Bounce is regarded as a grassroots, homegrown form of music and dance—one that remains local and that purposefully distinguishes itself from the mainstream values reflected in mass marketed rap.

Recently, bounce has been indirectly entering the national mainstream consciousness to an unprecedented degree. This is due in part to such events as pop singer Miley Cyrus's twerking spectacle at the 2013 Video Music Awards, which spurred heated social, racial, and feminist debates and introduced the idea of bounce to a much larger audience. Scholarly accounts have been sparse on the subject prior to the text in question. However, good resources that do exist include a project and resulting website entitled *Where They At: New Orleans Hip-Hop and Bounce in Words and Pictures*, compiled by photographer Aubrey Edwards and journalist Allison Fensterstock (accessible at <http://www.wheretheyatno1a.com>) and a 2008 music documentary, not yet released to the public, entitled *Ya Heard Me?* directed by Matt Miller and Stephen Thomas.

*Bounce: Rap Music and Local Identity in New Orleans*

fills the void for a comprehensive account of the history of bounce. Miller's main thesis is that New Orleans bounce artists maintain a local aesthetic, one that directly connects to the everyday experiences of audiences in the city and that is housed in the continuum of New Orleans culture as it developed over time. In addition to providing a descriptive account of the musical characteristics and history of bounce music, Miller theorizes on what bounce might say about African American identity in New Orleans. He posits that bounce is an example of a syncretic tradition formed by a syncretic community, and that bounce's self-referential qualities help to shape local identity. While celebrating the ultra-local, this place-based musical identity concurrently exists within an awareness of national practices and values. Miller states that, through musical style, lyrical content, and public discourse, bounce artists and audiences collectively contribute to the distinctive sociocultural, place-based identity that bounce represents. Like most musical traditions originating in New Orleans, bounce invites active participation and shares many musical characteristics that together define the "New Orleans sound."

In chapter 1, Miller provides a brief historical overview of African American life and culture in the city, explaining how cultural influences—from colonial powers to the musical practices of West Africa and the Caribbean—combined with other forces and traditions to inform the development of a unique and highly localized cultural identity in New Orleans. Chapter 2 provides a short explanation of the national rap scene, describing how rap in the early years (1980-91) was consumed, performed, and produced in New Orleans. Miller references early DJs such as DJ Carriere, Slick Leo, and

Captain Charles, and stresses the importance of neighborhood events, such as block parties, for maintaining a sense of the collective local musical sensibility. He introduces early rap groups and recordings of the era (including projects involving Mannie Fresh, Mia “Mia X” Young, and Gregory D), and explains the importance of geographical references in early New Orleans rap.

Next, Miller describes the 1992-94 development of bounce itself, as a particular style of rap distinctive to New Orleans. It began with the 1991 song, “Where Dey At” by Kevin “MC T. Tucker” Ventry with Irvin “DJ Irv” Phillips. Miller explains how Tucker’s choice of samples and stylistic elements, adopted from the recording “Drag Rap” by the Queens, New York, duo, the Showboys, paved the way for a new subgenre of music. Stylistic elements, including the motive from the television show *Dragnet*, a repeating pattern known as the “Triggerman bells” (or the “bells”), and the use of the Roland 808 drum machine, met the needs of a particular rap sensibility already extant in New Orleans. Other artists, such as DJ Jimi, Silky Slim, and Juvenile, followed with recordings of the same style. Miller describes the founding of Cash Money Records in 1992. He also discusses bounce dancing and P-popping (a dance move that highlights the up-and-down shaking of the buttocks). He explains that bounce dancing is alternatively described as a degrading exploitation of women or as a liberating form of self-expression, depending on context, audience, and point of view. He also describes, in great deal, the kind of criticism that bounce music received in local media.

Miller describes the period of 1995-2000 as the era in which New Orleans rap broke through geographical barriers to reach national markets. Cash Money Records and No Limit Records had both launched New Orleans artists to the national mainstream, and they helped anchor the city as a new center for rap production in the “Dirty South.” Curiously, however, a barrier to bounce artists receiving national reception remained. Miller describes Michael “Mystikal” Tyler as a New Orleans rap artist who did receive national attention, but did so while distancing himself from the stylistic elements characteristic to bounce, and by extension, to New Orleans. Although he founded No Limit Records in Richmond, California, New Orleans native Percy “Master P” Miller did feature artists and producers from New Orleans, such as Mia X and Craig “KLC” Lawson. Master P even created a compilation of new southern artists, called *Down South Hustlers: Bouncin’ and Swingin’*, and later relocated to New Orleans. However, Master P also was selective in his inclusion of bounce elements in his recordings, instead

capitalizing on interests that did not rely on regional affiliation. Cash Money Records brought neighborhood names like Dwayne “Lil Wayne” Carter Jr., Terius “Juvenile” Gray, and producer Mannie Fresh to national prominence. Though Cash Money stayed more “true” to the values of bounce than No Limit did, the connections were at times tenuous.

In chapter 5, Miller describes a pre-Katrina stagnation and decline of the New Orleans rap industry from 2001 to 2005. Although Lil’ Wayne’s career exploded, both Cash Money and No Limit became increasingly detached from the grassroots rap and bounce scene in New Orleans. New companies (Take Fo’ Records) and artists (Jerome “DJ Jubilee” Temple) who did emerge during this time had difficulty reaching beyond the geographical and sociocultural barriers that defined the local aesthetic. Emerging “sissy rappers,” or “sissy bounce” artists (openly gay men, often performing in drag, who specialize in bounce), enjoyed a niche market during this time in New Orleans, but did not reach mainstream popularity elsewhere. Kenyon “Katey Red” Carter, for example, released a full-length album in 2000 on Take Fo’, the first such release by an openly gay or transgendered rapper in the city. The black New Orleans community has a long history of being more tolerant of musicians and performers who identify as gay or transgendered, compared to what is commonly found in other areas of the South. However, the idiosyncrasies of sissy bounce still translate as nonsensical, or else are welcomed as a novelty act, elsewhere. Lastly, the 2003 death of James “Soulja Slim” Tapp, a local gangster rapper, dampened enthusiasm in the New Orleans rap scene.

In the final chapter, Miller explains how the devastation resulting from levee failures following Hurricane Katrina in 2005 affected bounce artists and producers, and transformed the racial demographics of New Orleans. He explains that, although post-Katrina rap fostered healing, served as a vehicle for political activism, and reflected the high degree of resilience inherent in the city’s residents, it also encouraged a kind of disaster tourism through its sensationalized depiction of crime and corruption. Miller describes the growth in prominence and media exposure of sissy rappers, due in part to a resurging interest in the local; the meteoric rise in fame of Lil Wayne during this era; and the entrepreneurial creativity of artists and producers who struggled to stay in the city and the experiences of others who were displaced.

This text touches on several themes that could be of interest to scholars in American studies, anthropology,

ethnomusicology, and musicology—themes that would benefit from further analysis. For example, his brief mention of gender dynamics in performance, coupled with the changing demographics of the city, particularly around the growing interest in “sissy bounce,” opens the door for further conversations about sexuality, race, power, audience, performance, and representation. In addition, Miller often conflates bounce with other New Orleans and non-New Orleans rap. This is a logical and necessary connection to make, but the main topic sometimes loses focus in the process. Lastly, this text is a bit weak in up-to-date coverage; Miller filed his dissertation (on which this text is based) in 2009, and his initial re-

search covered through 2005. Thus, thanks in part to emerging media technologies, formerly obscure artists, such as Big Freedia, are currently enjoying national exposure. An exploration of how bounce has evolved over the last decade could be a potential area of interest for those interested in media access, in addition to the points mentioned above.

In conclusion, this work is an essential reference text; we might call it the “bounce bible.” It is best used in conjunction with other, more ethnographic works and films. Readers should be sure to visit Miller’s website, which features musical tracks that illustrate the text, at <http://mattmillerbounce.blogspot.com>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-ethnic>

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