

Book Review: Justin A. Williams, *Rhyming and Stealing: Musical Borrowing in Hip-Hop*. University of Michigan Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-0472-11892-2 (Hardcover). 280 pages. \$60.00.

Reviewed by Andrew McIntosh¹

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Misattributed to Elvis Costello and proliferated on the web, the quote “Writing about music is like dancing about architecture” is pertinent to hip-hop in both the quote’s intention and its misinformation. If there is any newly developed academic field as adamant in its purpose but murky in its definition, surely hip-hop studies qualify. No one taking up a pad and pen to analyze hip-hop does so without having a clearly stated mission to demystify and invariably to celebrate a popular African American music culture that is as ubiquitous as it is hard to identify. But what is also at stake, especially when a study attempts to recognize a sensible chronology of the aesthetics of hip-hop culture, are thorny issues of cannon and essentialism. Maybe the question we should ask is this: can we write about the architecture of a music that makes people dance?

Justin William’s *Rhyming and Stealing: Musical Borrowing in Hip-Hop* takes up this cause wielding the sometimes obtuse but imaginative theories of ethnomusicology. After digesting the heavy verbiage of William’s approach, we are left with an inventive take on the “imagined community of hip-hop” that values not only production of the music by its creators but its reception by audiences. Further, it is an analysis of the industry itself from recording techniques through advertising campaigns to the places and spaces in which the hip-hop listener experiences the music. As new technologies and/or the shifting socio-economic landscape alter production and reception, Williams deftly notes the change in the sound and ideas of hip-hop music from the 1970s to the turn of the century.

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