

Lesson and Activity Excerpted from the Tanenbaum Curriculum *COEXIST*

# Hip-Hop Lyrics

**Lesson Overview:** Students will learn about Hip-Hop as a form of communication and activism. Students will also learn how to critically read lyrics and how to identify bias or influence in an author's writing.

**Grades:**  
**6-8, 9-12**

**Principles for Inclusive Education**

**Explored:** Teaching and Learning about Cultures and Religions, Preventing Prejudice, Promoting Social Justice

**Skills:** Religion, Literacy, Social Studies

**Materials:** Hip-Hop Lyrics info kit (included)

**PREPARATION:**

Prepare handout of lyrics for students in the class. There is also the suggested option of preparing a compact disc player and buying or downloading the suggested songs to play in the classroom. This lesson is best done in conjunction with Tanenbaum Center's Hip-Hop Artists Lesson, specifically as a follow up activity to the Hip-Hop Artists activities.

**PROCEDURE:**

In this lesson, students will be introduced to several Hip-Hop artists and learn about the influence of their religious beliefs on their lyrics. Students will analyze lyrics in the context of religion and worldviews and understand the role that religion plays in an individual's identity.

This lesson is written as an independent activity, but if it is presented after having completed Tanenbaum's Hip-Hop Artists Lesson, then it should be modified by skipping steps one and two.

**Step One:** Tell the students that they will begin a lesson which will be bringing Hip-Hop into the classroom. You may want to give some background on Hip-Hop as an important social and musical movement which has been embraced by those who feel marginalized.

**Step Two:** Write "Hip-Hop" on the center of the white or black board. Begin a discussion with the students by asking what they think about Hip-Hop. Focus on

one word answers and facilitate responses by asking what images come to mind, what Hip-Hop artists the students are familiar with, and what topics are often discussed through Hip-Hop. Create a word web with the students' responses.

**Step Three:** Discuss with students what they assume to be the religion of those involved in Hip-Hop. Explain that because Hip-Hop is a predominantly African-American musical genre, many Hip-Hop artists are Christian. Yet, Hip-Hop is also a popular musical form that many people from around the world can relate to. Ask the students why people of many different backgrounds might either like to listen to Hip-Hop or perform Hip-Hop themselves.

**Step Four:** (If the students have already completed the Hip-Hop Artists Lesson you may skip step four) Handout the Hip-Hop Lyrics: Artists' Religion handout. Have the students get into groups to read over the handout. Have them discuss:

- Which artists' religion surprised you?
- Why are you surprised?
- Does knowing any of the artists' religion help make sense of what you already know of them?

**Step Five:** Handout the Hip-Hop Lyrics handout. This can either be an individual activity or one done in groups, in which each group is assigned one set of lyrics. Have the students read over the directions, and then read them aloud yourself before they begin the activity.

**Step Six:** Have the students discuss their findings in their small groups. After an initial discussion of 5 minutes, ask the students to discuss in their groups the following questions:

- In what way has reading the lyrics with the knowledge of the religious tradition of the artist changed how you understand the meaning of the song?
- What is the context of the song? What is the message?
- Does each artist see religion as a constructive or destructive element?

**Step Seven:** Have the class come together as a large group and discuss what they have learned in this lesson:

- In what way has reading the lyrics with the knowledge of the religious tradition of the artist changed how you understand the meaning of the song?
- Does each artist see religion as a constructive or destructive element?
- Religion is an important aspect of identity as we have seen with these artists. Can you think of other mediums of art in which you have seen religion play a role?
- Do you see similarities in the messages of the different artists in their songs?

**Step Eight:** Follow up activities can include the following:

- Ask students to profile a favorite singer/ songwriter (if possible, Hip-Hop artist). The student should complete a brief biography on their chosen artist and then analyze one of their songs to identify how their religion and overall identity influence their lyrics. The final products can be presented to the class.

# Hip-Hop Lyrics

Read through the following lyrics and see if you can identify religious motivation and world views. Underline key words and phrases that helped you come to your conclusions. Put a star next to lyrics you have heard before or are familiar with.

## Glossary:

- Abi - Arabic word meaning “my father”
- Buddhas – Sanskrit word meaning “awakened” which is used in Buddhism to describe a person who has become fully enlightened and has experienced Nirvana.
- Hashem – Hebrew word for God, meaning literally “the name”
- Shaitan – Arabic word meaning “Satan”
- Umi – Arabic word meaning “my mother”

## Beastie Boys – Jewish/ Buddhist

**Song: Bodhisattva Vow      Album: The Ill Communication**

If Others Disrespect Me Or Give Me Flack  
I'll Stop And Think Before I React  
Knowing That They're Going Through Insecure Stages  
I'll Take The Opportunity To Exercise Patience  
I'll See It As A Chance To Help The Other Person  
Nip It In The Bud Before It Can Worsen  
A Change For Me To Be Strong And Sure  
As I Think On The Buddhas Who Have Come Before  
As I Praise And Respect The Good They've Done  
Knowing Only Love Can Conquer In Every Situation  
We Need Other People In Order To Create  
The Circumstances For The Learning That We're Here To Generate  
Situations That Bring Up Our Deepest Fears  
So We Can Work To Release Them Until They're Cleared  
Therefore, It Only Makes Sense  
To Thank Our Enemies Despite Their Intent

## Talib Kweli – Christian/ Muslim/ Humanist

**Song: Hell      Album: not applicable**

They got us thinkin' that Muslims like to make bombs  
But real Muslims believe in paradise and resist the Shaitan.

So it all sounds the same to me  
But when they say one's right and the other's wrong it just sounds like game to me.  
It's like God skipped the church and came to me.  
No that ain't vain to me.  
It's just a particular way I came to see  
The difference between those that claim to be  
Religious, and those that say they spiritual  
And recognize that life is full of miracles.

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Based on his interpretation of what the words is sayin'  
Lookin' for God but ended up doin' the work of Satan.  
Religion creates division make the Muslim hate the Christian,  
Make the Christian hate the Jew,  
Make rules of faith that you condition to and God'll follow.  
God forbid you go to hell,  
But if you've ever been to any Ghetto then you know well...

### **Mos Def – Muslim**

**Song: Umi Says      Album: Black on Both Sides**

Put my heart and soul into this song (yes yes)  
I hope you feel me  
From where I am, to wherever you are  
I mean that sincerely  
Tomorrow may never come  
For and me  
Life is not promised  
Tomorrow may never appear  
You better hold this very moment very close to you (right now)  
Very close to you (right now)  
So close to you, So- close to you (your moment in history is right now!)  
Don't be afraid, to let it shine

My Umi said shine your light on the world  
Shine your light for the world to see  
My Abi said shine your light on the world  
Shine your light for the world to see

### **Kanye West – Christian**

**Song: Jesus Walks      Album: College Dropout**

Now hear ye hear ye want to see Thee more clearly  
I know he hear me when my feet get weary  
Cause we're the almost nearly extinct  
We rappers are role models we rap we don't think  
I ain't here to argue about his facial features

Or here to convert atheists into believers  
I'm just trying to say the way school need teachers  
The way Kathie Lee needed Regis that's the way I need Jesus

**Matisyahu – Jewish**

**Song: King Without a Crown**

**Album: Shake off the Dust... Arise**

Strip away the layers and reveal your soul  
Got to give yourself up and then you become whole  
You're a slave to yourself and you don't even know  
You want to live the fast life but your brain moves slow  
If you're trying to stay high then you're bound to stay low  
You want God but you can't deflate your ego  
If you're already there then there's nowhere to go  
If you're cup's already full then its bound to overflow  
If you're drowning in the water's and you can't stay afloat  
Ask Hashem for mercy and he'll throw you a rope

# Hip-Hop Lyrics: Artists' Religions

## 1. Beastie Boys – Jewish/ Buddhist

The members of the Beastie Boys Michael Diamond (Mike D), Adam Yauch (MCA), Adam Horowitz (King Ad-Rock) and Michael Schwartz (Mix Master Mike) were all born and raised Jewish. Adam Yauch converted to Buddhism in the mid-1990s. All the members are from New York, and their heritage is mentioned in many of their songs. They are the highest selling Hip-Hop group and the fourth highest selling Hip-Hop artists (behind Tupac Shakur, Eminem, and Jay-Z).

## 2. Talib Kweli – Christian/ Muslim/ Humanist

In the past Talib Kweli has identified as Christian and as a 5 Percenter, a branch of Islam. Currently he says he respects religion in general and he tries to put that into his work. His first name in Arabic means "student" and his last name translates in Swahili to "true". He brings that truth to many of his songs, condoning what he sees as injustice and promoting constructive means of alleviating social strife.

## 3. Mos Def - Muslim

Mos Def (born Dante Terrell Smith in New York) was first exposed to Islam at age 13 by his father. He became a Muslim at age 19 after getting to know Muslim rappers including Ali Shaheed Muhammad and Q-Tip of the group A Tribe Called Quest. Mos Def has helped to popularize socially conscience Hip-Hop and challenge the promotion of violence in gangster rap. He is also known as an actor and was part of critically acclaimed films such as *Bamboozled*, *Monster's Ball*, and has appeared on *Chappelle's Show* and HBO's *Def Poetry*.

## 4. Kanye West – Christian

Kanye West became a born again Christian after surviving a terrible car crash in 2002. He makes his faith known in many of his songs, including "Through the Wire" and "Jesus Walks." He has used his place within the Hip-Hop community to challenge images and lyrics promoting violence and homophobia. He was very active in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the racial strife that was illuminated by the disaster.

## 5. Matisyahu – Jewish

Matisyahu is the Hebrew name of Matthew Paul Miller. He is a member of the Chabad-Lubavitch branch of Hasidic Judaism. As an Orthodox Jew he wears traditional clothing such as a *kippah* (head covering), has a beard, and does not perform on Shabbat (Friday night through Saturday night). He is known for combining Reggae music and spiritual Jewish lyrics. His album *Youth* was Billboard magazine's number-one "Digital Album" in 2006.