Ja'Neen Nichols

Instructor Name

ENGL 345

8 May 2019

Final: Hip Hop Family Tree 214

The *Hip Hop Family Tree* is a historical and educational comic book authored by Ed Piskor, which highlights the emergence of early hip hop culture, illustrating notable characters and events in the form of comic book characters. Comic books enjoy a unique position in portraying American fiction, which Piskor used to document a fascinating encyclopedic history of the initial years of hip hop in an entertaining way. The four volumes of *Hip Hop Family Tree* take the reader from the early 1970s when hip hop used to be a low-budget entertainment staple to the mid-1980s when Hip Hop started to be embraced as a manifestation of American culture (Piskor). The paper will examine Ed Piskor’s narrative and illustrations in the book as packaged and compiled into four treasury editions by Fantagraphics, exploring the various techniques and historical portrayals used by the author. Both the historical narrative and the visually innovative illustrations, used by Piskor in his four volumes will appeal not just to entrenched hip-hop fans but also to those with marginal affinity to the genre, who will find the historical portrayal both educational and satisfying.

The historical era depicted by Piskor in the first volumes starts from the 1970 period and covers Hip Hop history until 1981, while the second volume spans events and prominent figures between the years 1981 and 1983. Both volumes pay homage to hip-hop history as they portray its early development and genesis. The following volumes cover the time periods between 1983 and 1985 where newer shifts within hip hop culture could be observed. There are a number of unique techniques used by Piskor in the depicting the various eras covered in *Hip Hop Family Tree.* Among the most prominent technique is the use of Ben-Day Dots as an artistic style to cover the 1970s and 1980s period, which is similar to the prevalent comic book styles during that period. The Ben-Day Dots is a technique very similar to the pointillism style of illustration. Small colored dots are used that are either widely-spaced, closely-spaced, or overlapping depending on the color, effect, and the optical illusion that needed to be created. The pulp comic books of the 1960s and 1970s were known for their use of Ben-Day Dots processed in four colors. The technique would create complex shading in the illustrations through a relatively inexpensive technique and allow the use of various colors to generate flesh tones (Little). Furthermore, Piskor drives the narrative through dialogue and script with the cartooning and character designs steeped in street culture, while exaggerating some character depictions for comic effect. A limited four-color palette was used by Piskor to create weathered-looking pages which reflects the comic book culture of the era, since only these palettes were available to the comic book creators at the time. Similarly, the lettering draws inspiration from the 1970s and 1980s graffiti artists which draw the attention of the readers to important rhymes and dialogue, with emphasis placed on syllables and keywords especially during emcee battles to help readers understand the rhythm involved. A style reminiscent of Marvel Comics trading cards during the 1990s is used to develop the back of each issue (Little).

Additionally, the graphic renderings used by Piskor show a clear inspiration from the popular cassette covers, promotional photos, and album covers of the time, locating the images within their temporal frames. The narrative approach is unhurried generally, giving extensive coverage to significant events such as the Harlem-World throw-down between Busy Bee Starski and Kool Moe Dee. Piskor used 41 frames over 4 pages to capture the full raps while replicating the rhymes delivered by each performer in a way that captured the distinctive flow of words during the performance. The narrative, however, is not always linear and there is frequent use of diversions to narrate important battles and encounters which had historically defined the genre. Moreover, Piskor especially emphasizes character development while covering these historical events to help contextualize these events for the reader. Yet sometimes, the portrayal of artists venture into grotesquery even as many are portrayed in a recognizable way. For instance, Russel Simmons, who was a hip-hop record company founder, manager, and a promoter is shown as a gap-toothed, cross-eyed person (Piskor). While a character such as Melle Mel is drawn like a superhero with a muscular physique. The portrayal of characters here is symbolic as Melle Mel was a ‘beast’ on stage, metaphorically. Finally, the paper selected for printing the book is slightly yellowed and has a thick heft which also depicts something historic and of age. The selection helps draw the reader into the historical connotation of the events portrayed (Forman).

A number of important aspects of Hip Hop history were emphasized by Piskor in various volumes. The first volume which covers the time period between the 1970s up till 1981, traces hip-hop’ emergence from community center parties in New York’s Bronx. Here, the experimentation of different beats by disc jockeys such as Kool DJ Herc is portrayed which energized the audience, alongside other leading industry figures and artists who played a key role in the emergence and evolution of hip-hop. Similarly, important live music events, artists and the band shifts of prominent groups such as the Zulu Nation are covered (Forman). Furthermore, interesting stories of artists who emerged after Herc was sidelined, such as Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash are covered, such as the incident involving a knife-wielding member and Herc. Performances that brought innovations into the genre during this time period are also covered, such as when looped drum tracks were first used by DJ’s to add rhymes alongside the use of microphone controllers. Similarly, producers, managers, and record label executives who nurtured the genre towards commercial success are also frequently featured throughout the first volume (Broome).



Figure - Excerpt from Hip Hop Family Tree Vol 1 depicting artistic choices, and narrative style

The time period between 1981 and 1983 is covered in the second volume where Piskor makes use of brief vignettes to portray the visibility and influence of the culture which began to develop around Hip-Hop, and how graffiti began to feature in major venues and art galleries in Manhattan. One such event in the second volume was the art show called “Beyond Words: Graffiti Based, Rooted, Inspired Works" at a prestigious club. Likewise, the inclusion of hip-hop dancers, musicians, and graffiti artists in major concern openings alongside the production of mainstream films which covered hip-hop culture of the era are featured. In addition, the second volume also covers the success of various artists and numbers such as ‘Planet Rock’ by Bambaataa, or ‘The Message’ by the Furious Five, until the emergence of Run-DMC and the west-coast rap scene. The subsequent period between 1983 and 1984 is covered within the third volume where the genre began to shift more attention towards visual art as artists such as Henry Chalfant and Martha Cooper rose to prominence. The last volume covered events and artists between 1984 and 1985 with an apparently lesser focus on the visual arts' aspect compared to the previous volume.

In covering various significant artists and events during the time period, there were a number of aspects left out by Piskor, while at the same time emphasizing certain aspects. For instance, the final issues do not feature too much content on visual art and its significance to the movement, however, social justice issues relevant to the movement are given substantial space especially in the context of a growing number of female hip-hop musicians during the era, who enjoyed considerable success. Among these women include N’Pepa and Roxanne Shante, whose careers are documented and who are also featured as cover arts for the volume. Moreover, Piskot also focusses a substantial portion of the fourth volume on the use and proliferation of drugs in low-income neighborhoods among those identifying themselves with hip-hop culture. The crackdown by the LAPD is also heavily featured within the narrative, and how deadly police confrontations started to become associated with hip-hop culture. Also featured are Black organizations such as MOVE who used politically charged hip hop music, recordings and lyrics to gain support for their political agenda, and their eventual confrontation with the police, thus Piskot explores the association of hip-hop with notoriety, crime, and drugs.

To conclude, the various controversial themes covered in *Hip Hop Family Tree* provide key insights into the art and visual culture associated with the genre and cultural movement. In particular, the drug use, misogynistic content, explicit language, etc are all frankly portrayed by Piskor to explore the various situations and themes which surround the genre and culture of hip hop. The frank depictions of such elements are possibly intended to offer readers and learners an insight into the various popular imagery and themes associated with the culture and are useful to initiate social justice conversations and classroom discussions. The comic book is initially intended as an educational resource to help younger audiences appreciate the cultural past of an important sub-culture in America. Thus, many elements related to the visual arts’ aspect of the movement have been left out for elements such as famous rap battles, social justice issues, and key innovations in the music itself, to allow audiences who may only have a marginal affinity with the music genre and culture to learn this important component of American history in an entertaining and satisfying way.

# Works Cited

Broome, Jeffrey L. "Hip Hop Family Tree Treasury Editions: A Book." *Arts* 8.5 (2019): 1-8. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/arts8010005>.

Forman, Murray. "Book Review: Hip Hop Family Tree, Volume 1 & 2." *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 27.3 (2015): 374-378. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpms.12137>.

Little, Matt. *Hip Hop Family Tree*. 20 August 2015. 8 May 2019. <https://www.cbr.com/hip-hop-family-tree-1/>.

Piskor, Ed. *Hip Hop Family Tree Collection*. Special 1st. Vols. 1-4. Seattle, Washington: Fantagraphics Books, 2014.