



Handout 5 - “It’s a war zone’: why is a generation of rappers dying young? ”

Sirin Kale, *The Guardian* (January 31, 2020)

Overdoses or violent crime have claimed Mac Miller, Juice WRLD and Nipsey Hussle. ‘It’s not a fairytale lifestyle,’ admits an insider – but should the business do more to protect its stars?

It might sound callous, but Jacob Thureson’s parents, Erik and Judy, were not too worried when they heard about his latest overdose. It had happened a couple of times already and the 18-year-old rapper had always made it out of hospital in one piece. Thureson, who performed under the name Hella Sketchy, was among the wave of emo-influenced trap rappers who came up using the music platform SoundCloud. He had recently relocated from the family home in Texas to Los Angeles after being signed to Atlantic Records.

As Erik drove to work, he cycled through a mental list of options: more inpatient treatment? Thureson had already been to rehab, twice. Ketamine therapy?

There would be no further plan of action. Shortly after Erik left for work, Judy received another phone call. Things were very bad, and they should come to the hospital now. Fourteen days later, on 27 June 2019, Thureson died.

Many young rappers have died in the past few years. Mac Miller died in 2018 aged 26 after consuming cocaine and counterfeit oxycodone containing the synthetic opioid fentanyl. Lil Peep died at 21 in 2017 – an accidental fentanyl and Xanax overdose. Juice WRLD died late last year after a drug-induced seizure aboard a private jet. It is believed he swallowed multiple Percocet pills in an attempt to hide them as police raided the plane. On New Year’s Day, a rare female death: Minnesota rapper Lexii Alijai, the victim of yet another accidental fentanyl overdose.

Alongside these deaths by misadventure, there are the victims of violent crime. Despite being accused of horrific abuse by an ex-partner, XXXTentacion enjoyed massive popularity before being killed in 2018 aged 20 as he was robbed outside a Florida motorcycle dealership. Pittsburgh rapper Jimmy Wopo – touted as the heir to local forebears Wiz Khalifa and Mac Miller – was killed in a drive-by shooting the same day. Two weeks later, 21-year-old Canadian rapper and Drake tourmate Smoke Dawg was killed outside a Toronto nightclub. In March 2019, Nipsey Hussle was shot dead outside his Los Angeles clothing store.

Many of these rappers engaged with their own mortality in lyrics that talked about death, drugs and depression. Death is everywhere in SoundCloud rap: the genre’s unofficial logo is a teardrop. Smokepurpp posed in a coffin in the artwork for his mixtape *Deadstar*, and Peep – often called the Kurt Cobain of his generation owing to his cherubic face, placid manner and dedication to his ever-spiralling nihilism – intoned: “Everybody tellin’ me life’s short, but I wanna die,” on his 2017 track *The Brightside*.

Looking at such lyrics, you might reasonably conclude that these rappers wanted to die. But while some of them did experience mental illness and addiction, their death wish was as much of an aesthetic as the pink hair and facial tattoos. So why did the nihilistic pose become a self-fulfilling prophecy, ending the lives of young people barely out of their teens? And what can be done to arrest it?

One problem lies in the way these rappers’ careers have built with unprecedented speed. While earlier generations of musicians might spend years gigging before being spotted, DIY rap stars have circumvented the record industry’s gatekeepers to accrue wealth and success – often while still in their teens – leaving them struggling to adapt to sudden fame. “Peep went from having no manager to being managed by a very large company that deals with high-profile artists, and with that came more money and more pressure,” says his friend and collaborator Adam McIlwee, who performs as *Wicca Phase Springs Eternal*.



In an industry that is ruthlessly dedicated to discovering the hot new thing, pastoral care can be nonexistent. Record labels often don't care about these rappers. "They know that when they're done, the next SoundCloud or Instagram rapper is behind them," says Calvin Smiley, an expert in hip-hop and social justice at Hunter College in New York. On an even more cynical note, he questions why Juice WRLD was carrying his drugs personally. "I've been around hip-hop artists, and the rule of thumb is that there is a friend who holds the drugs and takes the fall," Smiley says. "You wonder: where were his handlers? Where were the people giving him direction?"

The role of management is also coming under scrutiny. Peep's mother, Liza Womack, is suing First Access Entertainment, who managed the rapper. She claims that they encouraged drug use on Lil Peep's final tour, would obtain drugs for him, and pushed the rapper beyond the limits of "what somebody of his age and maturity level could handle emotionally, mentally, and physically". (First Access Entertainment did not respond to a request for comment, but in a legal filing has said its dealings with Peep were "purely of a business nature and not the type of special relationship giving rise to an independent duty of care".) Mcllwee claims that Peep had a fight with his management shortly before he died. "I know there was a show he did not want to play for whatever reason – and [the drug-taking] was him just showing the world he didn't really care."

Mcllwee says that labels and management should give artists time to recover. "If your artist is in trouble, you have to step in and say it's time to take a step back or re-evaluate the release schedule, the touring," he says. "So the artist can get healthy and have a long career. But that doesn't happen much, because long careers are boring."

There are signs that lessons are being learned. Giuseppe Zappala of Galactic Records manages Lil Tecca, the 17-year-old SoundCloud wunderkind whose track Ransom reached No 4 in the US and has amassed more than 650m plays on Spotify. He has learned to read Tecca's moods carefully: if the young rapper appears overtired, Zappala will clear the schedules. He ensures that Tecca has at least a day off between shows and that tours last no longer than five weeks. Sometimes he brings chefs on the road to ensure he is eating healthily. Sleep is another priority, although there is a limit to what Zappala can do, given that Tecca is a teenager. "There will definitely be times when Tec wants to go to the studio until 8am," Zappala sighs. "I say: 'That may not make the most sense, because you've got a show tomorrow at 1pm.' It's about trying to instil routine in him."

But young rappers can face just as much pressure from outside the industry: "The environments where these kids come from – it's not a fairytale lifestyle," says Taylor Maglin, who discovered Wopo and managed him until his death. "It's a war zone, you know? Rivals get created, enemies get created." He believes that Wopo was murdered by disaffected members of a rival gang, who were envious of his success. (Wopo was allegedly a member of the Hill District gang 11 Hunnit, and was name-checked in a police indictment shortly after his death.)

XXXTentacion's lawyer, David Bogenschutz, says the rapper had "been concerned that someone would kidnap or kill him. He was generating money and notoriety." The day XXXTentacion was shot, it is believed he was stalked from his bank to the motorcycle dealership.

"The rap game isn't like any other industry," says producer Jimmy Duval, who worked with XXX. "There are a lot of guns and bullets flying around."

Smiley says that hip-hop's relationships with drugs has changed "absolutely". Earlier generations of rappers used drugs as a tool to accrue wealth, speaking about selling them as a way out of poverty, rather than using narcotics themselves (bar weed and alcohol). Once success arrived, drugs were used as a social

signifier: music videos depicting tables groaning with bottles of Hennessy and cocaine-dusted mirrors. That reality has shifted to a more flagrant form of glamorisation.

A turning point came at the turn of the 2010s, when rapper Juicy J helped popularise lean, then the drug of choice in Houston's chopped and screwed music scene. An addictive and dangerous concoction of soda, candy and prescription cough mixture containing codeine, references to lean oozed into rap: Lil Wayne celebrates it, Young Thug freely drinks it during interviews, and Juice WRLD said he was inspired to try lean after listening to Future. Roddy Ricch's hit track *The Box*, currently the US No 1, has an anthemic chorus with a line about drinking lean to "get lazy".

Rappers also began hitting party drugs such as MDMA and cocaine, as well as the prescription drugs OxyContin, Xanax and Percocet. Future celebrates "molly, Percocets" in his 2015 smash *Mask Off*. ("That is a horrible combination of drugs," says Duval of *Mask Off*: "The whole hook is you having a fucking heart attack.") The rapper Lil Pump posed with a Xanax-shaped cake to celebrate reaching 1 million followers on Instagram, a particularly brain-dead stunt given that counterfeit prescription drugs containing fentanyl have been blamed for the 10-fold increase in opioid-related deaths in the US between 2013 and 2018.

A culture of performative excess began to strangle the scene, viewed through the panopticon of social media, which encourages risk-taking behaviour, says Smiley: "You have to be on 24/7, because everything is about likes, shares and counting how many followers you have." Thureson posted videos of himself drinking lean on Instagram; when his parents confronted him, he claimed it was purple Gatorade. "He told me it was just the culture," his mum, Judy, says. Peep posed with prescription pills on his tongue hours before he died.

Braden L Morgan, known as producer Nedarb Nagrom, was Peep's roommate for three years. He believes Peep abused drugs to alleviate the pressures of touring, which he hated, and that hangers-on offering him drugs made things worse. "He was really nice and would say yes to everything, so he'd do whatever anyone offered him. And as he got more popular, more people wanted to be his friend, so they gave him the stuff more." He calls Peep's death a horrible accident. "He got unlucky. I have no doubt that if he hadn't passed away, he was going to chill out."

After so many deaths, a brutal comedown. "After Peep died, a lot of people stopped partying every day," says Morgan. He has seen drug use tail off among the young rappers he produces; Lil Pump and Smokepurpp announced they were quitting Xanax following Peep's death. "The younger kids don't do stuff as much, because they see all the shit that happened in the last few years." For those who do still indulge, drug-testing kits are becoming common. "No one was testing drugs before Peep died," says Morgan.

There are promising indications that the rap scene is beginning to course-correct. "There's enough of a bad taste in everyone's mouth that saying, 'go pop a molly' doesn't feel right now," says Duval. The backlash has been rumbling for a while: J Cole's 2018 diss track *1985* was scathing about SoundCloud rappers. "They wanna see you dab, they wanna see you pop a pill / They wanna see you tatted from your face to your heels."

As the narcotic aesthetic becomes less fashionable, rappers are becoming more mindful of the message they are sending to fans. Artists including Isaiah Rashad, Lucki, Travis Scott and Danny Brown have spoken out about prescription drug addiction. Sacramento rapper Mozzy has urged his followers to quit lean. Lucki, considered by some to be the father of SoundCloud rap, talks in *Freewave 3* about his mother looking up the effect of lean on his kidneys. Even Lil Xan, easily most cavalier artist in this group, has considered changing his name.



As Miller sang in his biggest hit, it is time to finally start practising some self-care. But the burden should not fall to individuals: as labels and management cash in on this wave, they must take greater responsibility for artist wellbeing. “You have to prioritise their health and happiness before music or fame,” says Zappala. “It’s tough being a successful artist, not knowing whether the people around you have genuine intentions.”

His goals for Tecca are clear. “I’m going to develop Tec into an artist who has a 10, 15-year career,” says Zappala. “When he’s 30, he’s still going to be relevant.”