Film Review: We Were Hyphy

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**We Were Hyphy.** Directed by Laurence Madrigal. Produced by Caste G. Presented locally by KQED and distributed nationally by American Public Television, 2023. 57 minutes (TV-14). https://www.pbs.org/show/we-were-hyphy/

Hyphy is a subgenre or micro-subgenre of rap music. It was regional to the Bay Area and local to Oakland, San Francisco, San Jose, and Vallejo before the music became known nationally and internationally with E-40’s “Tell Me When To Go” and Too Short’s “Blow The Whistle.” These hit songs were released in 2006 and were produced by Atlanta’s Jonathan “Lil Jon” Smith. Lil Jon mixed elements of hyphy with Southern crunk styles. *We Were Hyphy* points to the video shoot and release of “Tell Me When To Go” as a highlight in the hyphy movement.

*We Were Hyphy* is described by the creators as “a love song to the artists, dance, music, clothes, cars, and people who came of age during the hyphy movement.” The film’s creators also announce the film as “a fun, nostalgic experience for those lucky enough to experience hyphy the first time around, and a tantalizing introduction to those discovering it now.” This description (offered on the PBS version of *We Were Hyphy*) is very accurate. The PBS version of the film is edited for time and content to fit broadcasting standards. The original director’s cut will be released on YouTube in 2024 and runs 1 hour and 24 minutes.

This interactive film review uses seven timestamps from the PBS version of *We Were Hyphy* to introduce the film, make a series of points about the film’s thematic content around hyphy culture and music, and draw conclusions related to studies of local Hip Hop culture and rap music elsewhere. *We Were Hyphy’s* content and coverage is closely related to local studies of Hip Hop and rap, especially the reviewer’s book *Rap and Politics: A Case Study of Panther, Gangster, and Hyphy Discourses in Oakland, CA (1965-2010).* The reviewer also worked as a DJ and producer in the area during the hyphy movement.

Timestamp 1 (00:04-01:59) marks the beginning of *We Were Hyphy*, introducing the narrator and subject matter. The narrator, Benjamin Earl Turner, “came of age during the peak of the hyphy movement.” The opening also contextualizes hyphy culture within its local and regional setting with local news clips, connections to “Turf Dance” culture, and viral “Whistle Tip” clips. Then, in early 2006, E-40’s “Tell Me When To Go” presented hyphy to an even larger audience.

Timestamp 2 (02:45-04:19) is also near the beginning of the film, delving deeper into the locale’s history in identity and social movements. *We Were Hyphy* presents the Bay Area as a “hub of counterculture,” with Black power, student anti-war, free love, and beat writer movements all taking prominent shape in the Bay Area. This is where the film mentions the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. The Bay Area is seen as “an epicenter for social movements,” and *We Were Hyphy* determines these social movements to be rooted in generational struggle, as “the children of parents who were involved in the ‘60s movements and the ‘70s movements” began to produce future
countercultures in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. This counterculture is also shown to have influence beyond the Bay Area.

Timestamp 3 (5:04-10:10) is also toward the beginning of the film, offering a deeper background of hyphy’s musical emergence and musicology. Describing hyphy music as a “sound and a speed,” the film explores hyphy as rooted in Todd “Too $hort” Shaw’s old school 808 drums and “Freaky Tales.” It is also rooted in mob music. Mob music is a style of rap from the Oakland and San Francisco area that grew to be popular in the period between the late 1980s and early 1990s. Mob music became a voice for the community, especially through artists such as Jacka. Hyphy is also rooted in the work of Rick Rock who migrated from Montgomery, Alabama to the Bay Area. The film recounts the transition from mob music to hyphy music as a changing of the guard, understanding that: “When something’s going on, whatever is born next is usually kind of the opposite.” Traxamillion is also understood as absolutely vital to the growth of hyphy’s sound.

Timestamp 4 (32:02-33:05) marks the middle of the film, contextualizing hyphy music and slang culture as products of migration and youth innovation. Calling it “slanguage,” the film presents Bay Area lingo at the intersection of “a southern drawl from all the families that moved from the South” to the East Bay and a Southern California surf lingo (which emphasizes the “hard R” in words). This slang would contain beginner words such as “hella” and “Ye!” (YEE) and more advanced vocabulary such as “yokin’,” “scrapin’,” and “cattin’.”

Timestamp 5 (40:46-45:08) marks the final third of the film and presents a myriad of issues related to liberation and struggle. The basic story is about how some local youth sought liberation through music, sideshows, ghostridin’, raves, and ecstasy and how the social reality of Oakland’s murder rate countered these feelings of liberation. Similar to the EDM and rave culture, ecstasy (in the local form of “thizzes”) became a drug popular on the hyphy scene. Thizzle use and consequences are analyzed in appropriate detail. The film insists the hyphy movement provided a “a moment of joy, frustration, and letting go.” The film also contextualizes this moment historically, as this culture was created by youth who were “impacted by the crack epidemic” in the 1980s. In the 1990s and 2000s, youth turned to rap to express the “the day-to-day social tensions on a local level.” The film also details the ongoing issues with downtown investment against neighborhood disinvestment, early issues with the housing market and gentrification, and most notably, issues related to the very high murder rate during 2006. During that year, 148 people were murdered in Oakland, when “The Town’s” population was less than 400,000. The last murder victim reported that year was the reviewer’s best friend and rap partner. It is very clear that We Were Hyphy helps explain much of the environment and conditions experienced by Bay Area youth at the time.

Timestamp 6 (47:07-49:26) is also near the previous timestamp, moving the discussion to the tragic loss of the rapper Jacka, the War on Drugs, and the overall experience of Black and minoritized Bay Area youth. The Jacka was murdered, Keak da
Sneak was shot multiple times (and paralyzed), and other rappers were also killed or attacked during this time. Mac Dre was killed in November 2004 (in Kansas City), and historically, this is not that far removed from these other losses experienced in 2006. Some of the overall street violence is rooted in the War on Drugs and the lasting “tension between police and community.” The film notes an “over policing of Black and Brown communities” during the time and Oakland Police Department’s status of being under a federal monitor based on prior activity.

Timestamp 7 (55:28-56:38) marks the end of the film, establishing the legacy of the hyphy movement. The film concludes with E-40’s “Tell Me When to Go” song and video as a high-water mark in the hyphy movement. The song involved other local and regional sounds (crunk via Atlanta’s Lil Jon), its video reached viewers and streamers worldwide, and the song and video were widely covered by news and print media. As the film concludes: “That was the era when we were the most unified. That’s when everybody was on one accord, riding. We need this little moment of fun again because it was so grimy and gutter, and we celebrating each other. We celebrating life. Those brief moments of we hear you. We made it.”

Overall, We Were Hyphy is an outstanding release that visualizes the experiences of many youths in the Bay Area in the early aughts (2000s). Simply put, it helps those who were there make a better sense of what was happening around them at the time. It also helps those who were not there, or who were only in certain pockets of the hyphy movement, better understand the movement as a whole. The film is tremendously accurate, entertaining, and educational. It should be taken as a model for visually documenting a local scene, as it takes eras of 1960s and 1970s counterculture and protest seriously, looks at local forms of Hip Hop and rap prior to hyphy, and contextualizes hyphy within local identity and social movement struggles. We Were Hyphy should be viewed alongside recent films related to the Bay Area experience during this era such as Fruitvale Station, Black Panther, and Sorry to Bother You.

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