CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

How Do You Capture Four Decades of Hip-Hop? Very Broadly.

"The Smithsonian Anthology of Hip-Hop and Rap," a 129-song boxed set, has a very challenging (and maybe impossible) goal: pinning down a constantly evolving genre.

By Jon Caramanica

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In 1990, hip-hop was in the throes of an identity crisis. That summer, MC Hammer released "U Can't Touch This," his flashy, breakout single that, thanks to the flamboyant fashion and quick footwork in its video, became a pop music phenomenon. Hot on its heels a few months later was Vanilla Ice's "Ice Ice Baby," which sampled "Under Pressure" by Queen and David Bowie and became the first hip-hop single to top the Billboard Hot 100.

While wildly popular in the pop mainstream, both songs were — in differing but related ways — derided in hip-hop, kept at arm's length. Rap music, then still barely over a decade old, had only just begun to reckon with attention from outside the genre's walls. These hits — including one from a white rapper, no less — were different, nigh unprecedented phenomena.

And yet here they are, back to back in the middle of Disc 5 of "The Smithsonian Anthology of Hip-Hop and Rap," a 129-song collection and boxed set due out Aug. 20 that acts as a foundation, primer and master narrative of the genre's growth from 1979 to 2013. They come right after "The Humpty Dance" by Digital Underground and "Me So Horny" by 2 Live Crew — different sorts of breakouts by bug-eyed humorists from opposite ends of the country — and just before Brand Nubian's strident "All for One," which arrives like a mean sentry striving to restore order.

In 2021, with hip-hop the dominant musical force in popular culture globally, there's little to debate: MC Hammer and Vanilla Ice's blockbuster songs are eruptions and intrusions that in retrospect sound inevitable. Hip-hop long ago reconciled with its pop ambitions, and then became the very core of pop music itself. Along the way, it became a very wide tent.

MC Hammer's 1990 smash "U Can't Touch This" was a conundrum for rap at the time of its release. Today, it has a place in hip-hop history. Tim Roney/Getty Images

To properly anthologize the genre in full is to reckon with its contradictions, its competing narratives and its inconsistencies. By this measure, the "Anthology" is an impressive work of scholarship, design and logistics. It is, of course, unavoidably flawed too, the point of departure for a shadow collection of exclusions, alternate histories and near-misses.

Released on Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, the "Anthology" is part of the African American Legacy Recordings series, co-produced with the National Museum of African American History and Culture. To select the songs, an advisory committee of around 40 artists, industry figures, journalists and academics compiled an overarching list of approximately 900 options. From there, a 10-person executive committee met in November 2014 to winnow it down. Some adjustments were later made for logistical reasons. (In 2017, the Smithsonian raised around $370,000 via Kickstarter to help fund production, research and licensing for the box.)

"I'm envious of what the rock world does," said Chuck D of Public Enemy, a member of the executive committee, referring to how rock 'n' roll consistently takes stock of, and celebrates, its own history. "I was interested and jump-started this idea because I got tired of us not being treated like the royalty that the genre is." (Chuck D said he abstained from the actual final vote — "I ran out of the room.")

Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" and "Bring the Noise" are both included in the "Anthology." Jack Mitchell

Dwandalyn R. Reece, the museum's associate director for curatorial affairs and curator of music and performing arts, said she expects, but would love to avoid, the inevitable. "I know people will look at the anthology as a canon, but that was not our intention," she said. "This is *a* story, not the definitive story. What I hope for the anthology is that it starts a dialogue."

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Whether or not it constitutes a canon — "I eschew the concept of canon," said Cheryl L. Keyes, the chair of U.C.L.A.'s department of African American Studies and a member of the executive committee — the collection is a tour led with intention through hip-hop's many phases, regions and ideologies.

The producer 9th Wonder, also a member of the executive committee, framed the conversation around selection in terms of standards, which is to say, "songs supposed to be known by the next generation coming up," he explained. "We're basically creating a foundation for something that doesn't exist. It exists in barbershops, it exists in your house with your friends, but on paper and concrete, a lot of stuff really doesn't exist."

Beginning in the late 1970s, "The Smithsonian Anthology" takes in hip-hop's earliest recordings (Sugarhill Gang, the Treacherous Three, Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five, etc.). It covers party music (Sir Mix-A-Lot, Ludacris, Lil Jon & the East Side Boyz) and gangster rap (Geto Boys, Schoolly-D, Ice-T). There's a sprinkling of white rappers — Beastie Boys, Vanilla Ice, House of Pain, Eminem, Macklemore.

The "Anthology" does a sturdy job of capturing the history of women in hip-hop — too often in the past considered primarily in relationship to men — from the Sequence and Salt-N-Pepa to Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown all the way up to Missy Elliott, Lauryn Hill and Nicki Minaj. "They are fully represented and represented in the most respectable way," Keyes said. "They're not there to tantalize the male fancy."

The "Anthology" gives space to the phenomenon that was Vanilla Ice. Mick Hutson/Redferns, via Getty Images

And career artists like Lil' Kim get their due. Gie Knaeps/Getty Images

It's reassuring to see early tracks by the Port Arthur, Texas, duo UGK ("Pocket Full of Stones") and the Memphis duo Eightball & MJG ("Comin' Out Hard") alongside their temporal peers from New York — too often the history of Southern rap has been told out of step with, and siloed off from, the rest of the genre. And it's striking to reflect on how thoroughly some innovations, edgy in their day, are either forgotten, or so completely absorbed into the genre — take, say, the melodic lightness of Nelly on "Country Grammar (Hot [Expletive])" — as to be unremarkable.

The collection stops in 2013 — the final song is by Drake, in his way the harbinger of a new era. But it's also a convenient moment to put a cap on reflection. Hip-hop is now almost fully decentralized; the genre is splintered sonically and thematically. Perhaps most tellingly, hip-hop is actually more tolerant now: more understanding of its intra-genre quarrels, more available to different participants, more open to sonic invention and revision. It's hard to police a genre's borders when the genre is the whole world.

So the "Anthology" captures hip-hop in its period of birth, its myriad growth spurts, its tugs of war, and finally, its full expansion into pop music. To quarrel over whether hip-hop should be given institutional treatment now would be quaint — in just 40 years, it has become bedrock. A collection like this — a position statement like this — is a relic of an era in which hip-hop had to fight to be taken seriously by institutions, whether they were museums, political bodies, technology companies or other creative industries.

Perhaps the most old-fashioned idea about the "Anthology" is its format — a heavy physical box, loaded with images and essays, and nine CDs in an era where CD players are increasingly rare. A less imaginative approach could have begun and ended with, say, a curated playlist on Spotify or Apple Music (in those environments, at least, no licensing fees would be required).

To select the songs, an advisory committee of around 40 artists, industry figures, journalists and academics compiled an overarching list of approximately 900 options. A 10-person executive committee winnowed it down further. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

The heft is intentional, though. “We want the next generation to learn about it, but we want them to learn about it the way we want them to learn about it,” 9th Wonder said.

But it comes with liabilities, as well. Some songs picked by the committee weren’t able to be licensed for inclusion on the set. There are no songs with Jay-Z as the lead artist — he only appears as a guest on Foxy Brown’s “I’ll Be.” Gaps like that underscore the inherent incompleteness of any project of this scale, which triggers an endless shoulda-coulda exercise: Is the best representation of Lil Wayne truly his grotesque Robin Thicke collaboration “Tie My Hands”? Cypress Hill’s “Insane in the Brain” over “How I Could Just Kill a Man”? Some artists (Nicki Minaj, Outkast, Eminem) are represented by their most pop-oriented successes, at times leaving more meaningful work behind.

“When it comes to putting hip-hop in the canon, you’re damned if you’re do, you’re damned if you don’t,” 9th Wonder added.

Proportionately, and perhaps inevitably, the “Anthology” is perhaps overindexed on the genre’s earliest years. Hip-hop grew widely in the 1990s and 2000s, making it harder to capture in a small sampling of songs. The ninth and most contemporary disc skews more issues-oriented than perhaps the genre itself was in that time span — of all the groupings, it feels the most proscriptive.

The “Anthology” does a solid job of capturing the history of women in hip-hop — too often in the past considered primarily in relationship to men — including Missy Elliott. Myrna Suarez/ImageDirect, via Getty Images

And there are the parts of hip-hop’s recorded legacy that fall outside of the scope of this project. There are no recordings of live jams or battles from the late 1970s or early 1980s, no tracks from the crucial mixtapes of the 1990s. That the project ends in the early 2010s means that it doesn’t have to reckon with a genre that has splintered widely across the internet, with plenty of micromovements leaving barely any physical trail at all.

Finally, there is also the tricky dance of assembling history with the benefit of new knowledge. “Planet Rock,” by Afrika Bambaataa & the Soulsonic Force, is undoubtedly a foundational track of the genre. But in the mid-2010s, Bambaataa was accused of child sexual abuse by multiple men. The “Anthology” also includes “Get Like Me,” a David Banner song that features the singer Chris Brown, who in 2009 pleaded guilty to assaulting Rihanna.

“We’re not the judge and the jury,” Keyes said. “There’s always personal drama in people’s lives, but it really has nothing to do with their art.”

That tension underscores one still-developing difference between how historical narratives can be told by institutions with the benefit of temporal distance and a wide lens and how they are written online, in real time.

For that reason, among others, the “Anthology” already feels ancient. The internet is both ahistoric and also full of looking-back lists. The assessments that take place there are finicky and ever-mutating. There is hardly ever a long view, and histories are never stable.

Hip-hop thrives in this space. It moves quickly and nonlinearly. It can be made casually and on the cheap, and disseminated widely. It is iterative, taking elements established elsewhere and stacking its innovations atop them, rarely staying still for long. There are slivers of the genre that aren’t in conversation with each other, which might not even be recognizable as related if heard side by side.

That’s a direct result, though, of the debates — now reconciled — captured on the “Anthology.” Pop ambition? Accepted. Melodic flexibility? Encouraged. Widespread regional participation? Demanded. Now that the quarreling is mostly settled, where the genre will go is boundless. Forty years from now, it will be bigger than any one box can hold.