

Braggadocio/Battling Form

Bragging and boasting, known as braggadocio content, have always been an important part of hip-hop lyrics and are an art form all in themselves. This type of content, combined with put-downs, insults, and disses against real or imaginary opponents, makes up the form known as battle rhyming.

Dray, Das EFX

I'm still from [that] era—I came from the era of bragging [and] boasting. Our stuff was more of “Ooh, did you hear what he said?” type of lyrics. That's what we were going for.

Big Daddy Kane

As an MC from the '80s, really your mentality is battle format, so when you're writing a rhyme, the majority of the time you're writing a bragging and boasting rhyme about yourself being the nicest MC. Really what your focus was, was to have a hot rhyme in case you gotta battle someone, so that was your main focus, not really making a rhyme for a song.

Braggadocio

Braggadocio rhymes can take a number of different forms, from simply saying that you're the best MC ever to getting deeper and wittier with the boasting.

Myka 9, Freestyle Fellowship

Through the '80s, you had Kool Moe Dee, Ultramagnetic MC's, the early days of LL Cool J, Rakim, KRS-One, where they were very, very technical, where they were talking about physics and talking about metaphysics and things like that.

An example of this is in Eric B. & Rakim's "No Omega":

I'm the Alpha, with no Omega,
Beginning without the end, so play the . . .

Here, Rakim describes himself as the first letter of the Greek alphabet (Alpha) and then says there is "no Omega," which is the last letter of the same alphabet. So he is saying he can flow forever because he begins but doesn't end—but he says it in a technically inventive way.

Different artists have their own ideas about what inspires the braggadocio form, from the competitive nature of hip-hop to the struggles of young black men in America.

Guerilla Black

Every MC, he feels like he's the best, and I guess you have to have the arrogance and the bravado to feel like that, to be able to be in this game, because the competition is real hot out there.

Esoteric

A lot of my stuff stems from old-school hip-hop, braggadocio ethic, where my shit is better than yours and that's the bottom line. I was raised playing basketball and everything, a very competitive sport, and I kinda looked at hip-hop in the same way.

MURS

When you're a young, black male in America, you feel powerless—you feel like you don't have a voice, you're disenfranchised—so when you get the microphone, you wanna just pump yourself up. I think that's where all of the bravado comes from, where all the braggadocio comes from.

Braggadocio, like most content forms, can be mixed with other techniques.

Paris

Most material back in the day was centered around the MC and bragging about “greatness” and “skills,” [so] I had some of that in my material along with my social commentary.

Vursatyl, Lifesavas

On my first record I probably spent more time talking about how dope I am. As you grow, you want to use that vehicle to talk about other things besides bragging and boasting, though I think bragging and boasting has its place, and I think hip-hop should always keep that.

Battling

Battle raps appear on a lot of records, but they are also often recited or freestyled off the top of the artists’ heads in live battles, where MCs will perform on the same stage to see who has the better verses.

40 Cal, Dipset

A battle is straight like fighting. I think about it like this—if what I’m doing right now is just straight NBA games as far as making tracks and putting them out, putting out albums, then battling would be like the three-point and the dunking contests. That’s how I compare it—when I’m battling, I’m just doing extracurricular shit, that’s the three-point contest and the dunking contest. If you watch basketball, a lot of people who [win those contests], they’re not always the nicest [best all-around] people in the NBA, but they’re nice at that particular craft.

Many artists make battle rhymes one of their main forms of content. Some consider them a key component of being considered a great MC, because they are often written purely to impress people technically.

Esoteric

Pretty much my favorite thing to do is battle-oriented lyrics. A lot of the battle-oriented tracks come from the beat—if I get a really murderous beat, I’m gonna try to come up with some murderous rhymes. It doesn’t really have to stay on a particular theme as long as I’m letting you know I’m not to be fucked with, the other MCs are gonna get decapitated, things like that.

Big Daddy Kane

If you’re looking to be accepted as the nicest MC, then I guess your battle rhymes are gonna make you come across that way, because they’re like, “Yo, did you hear what he said? Oh my goodness,” because they’re listening to the rhymes that you’re saying, like as far as how nice you are or the incredible stuff you’re saying.

Knowing a variety of different ways of rhyming is a big part of battle raps. Your goal is to outdo the person you’re battling.

Akil the MC, Jurassic 5

The whole basis of being an MC is kind of like competitive in its nature. He shoot a three pointer, you want to come back and make a three pointer, [but] make a three pointer with a left hand. It’s still a three pointer, but you want to try to outdo them or at least equal them.

Knowing a wide variety of MCs and their styles is also important if you want to be good at writing battle raps.

will.i.am, Black Eyed Peas

[If you know the history of different MCs,] you know how to approach a person if a person wants to battle you. If a person battles you and they're coming with [a certain style], it's like, OK, I know where this [guy] is getting that shit from, he's got a little 2Pac in him. I'm gonna fuck this [guy] up, with some 2Pac, and I'ma add 2Pac and mix 2Pac with Chuck D, and I hit them—boom—and I hit them from every single angle.

Battle rhymes can be aimed at a specific person, or they can be written just with general insults. The writing process may be different depending on which option you choose.

Royce Da 5'9"

It's only difficult to write battle rhymes when it's somebody dissing you that you don't really know nothing about, because then you're wondering, what do I say about them? So if it was like a diss track, I probably wouldn't do it if I didn't know enough about the person. As far as just regular spitting rhymes that's not about anybody in [particular], but that can apply to people, I kind of started off doing those, so that's always gonna be there. What makes it a different process is the mind frame that I'm in coming to the table, like knowing that I gotta come up with just regular spitting battle-sounding rhymes, I'll come in that mind frame.

A lot of MCs gain experience and confidence by writing battle rhymes and learning how to battle other MCs. Papoose notes, "Basically I feel like hip-hop is all about confidence, and I gained that confidence when I was younger because I used to battle a lot as a kid."