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To the Break of Dawn: A Freestyle on the Hip Hop Aesthetic

William Jelani Cobb

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2007 Arts Club of Washington's National Award for Arts Writing - Finalist

With roots that stretch from West Africa through the black pulpit, hip-hop emerged in the streets of the South Bronx in the 1970s and has spread to the farthest corners of the earth. *To the Break of Dawn* uniquely examines this freestyle verbal artistry on its own terms. A kid from Queens who spent his youth at the epicenter of this new art form, music critic William Jelani Cobb takes readers inside the beats, the lyrics, and the flow of hip-hop, separating mere corporate rappers from the creative MCs that forged the art in the crucible of the street jam.

The four pillars of hip hop—break dancing, graffiti art, deejaying, and rapping—find their origins in traditions as diverse as the Afro-Brazilian martial art Capoeira and Caribbean immigrants' turnstile artistry. Tracing hip-hop's relationship to ancestral forms of expression, Cobb explores the cultural and literary elements that are at its core. From KRS-One and Notorious B.I.G. to Tupac Shakur and Lauryn Hill, he profiles MCs who were pivotal to the rise of the genre, verbal artists whose lineage runs back to the black preacher and the bluesman.

Unlike books that focus on hip-hop as a social movement or a commercial phenomenon, *To the Break of Dawn* tracks the music's aesthetic, stylistic, and thematic evolution from its inception to today's distinctly regional sub-divisions and styles. Written with an insider's ear, the book illuminates hip-hop's innovations in a freestyle form that speaks to both aficionados and newcomers to the art.

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