

Helbig, Adriana. 2011. "Brains, Means, and Lyrical Ammunition": Hip-Hop as Empowerment Among African Students in Kharkiv, Ukraine. *Popular Music* 30/3: 315-330.

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# ‘Brains, means, lyrical ammunition’: hip-hop and socio- racial agency among African Students in Kharkiv, Ukraine

ADRIANA HELBIG

Department of Music, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh  
E-mail: anh59@pitt.edu

## Abstract

In the last decade, multi-racial hip-hop scenes in Kharkiv, a predominantly Russian-speaking eastern Ukrainian city close to the Russian border, have fostered the development of socially-conscious hip-hop among African students. Drawing on musical elements from their respective home countries, the US and local hip-hop traditions, African male youths use Ukrainian-, Russian- and English-language lyrics to express concerns about socio-economic status, personal struggle and racial inclusion. This study analyses how African musicians use hip-hop as a social means through which to fight the escalating violence against dark-skinned foreigners and migrants. It draws on ethnographic data to identify several ways in which African-performed hip-hop has influenced contemporary public opinions regarding ‘black’ identity in eastern Ukraine.

## Kharkiv, Ukraine’s hip-hop capital

Kharkiv’s largest claim in Ukraine’s popular music sphere is the wide-held national belief that it is the birthplace of hip-hop in Ukraine. More than a decade ago, Kharkiv’s first hip-hop group Tanok Na Maidani Kongo (‘Dance on Congo Square’) rose to nationwide fame when it won the ‘Dance Music’ award at the prestigious Ukrainian-language popular music festival, Chervona Ruta.<sup>1</sup> This 1997 song was titled ‘Zroby meni hip-hop’ (‘Make Me a Hip-Hop’) and is acknowledged as the first public performance of a hip-hop song in a national music competition in Ukraine.

Borrowing from a variety of influences within hip-hop from the United States, Russia, Ukraine and throughout Africa, hip-hop musicians in Tanok Na Maidani Kongo’s hometown have developed the genre in directions that were unforeseeable a decade ago. Numerous small multiracial hip-hop scenes associated with amateur hip-hop recording studios in Kharkiv have been created by local university students and students from African countries such as Uganda, Kenya and Nigeria who study at Kharkiv National University and share an interest in hip-hop music and culture.

Notions of place, as tied to representations of city life, are a very important characteristic of Kharkiv’s hip-hop styles. Scholar Murray Forman, among others, identifies place as a defining trope through which hip-hop musicians in the United States personalise individually represented experiences in song lyrics and hip-hop

50 videos (Forman 2002). In Kharkiv, hip-hop songs and videos draw on what Ian  
51 Maxwell refers to as a US-informed 'social imaginary' – local representations of  
52 place that align with US-based images that local artists have not experienced first-  
53 hand (Maxwell 2008, p. 80). For instance, young hip-hop musicians who have the  
54 financial means to film accompanying videos to their songs in Kharkiv do so against  
55 the backdrop of dilapidated Soviet-era high-rise apartments. Such video represen-  
56 tations emphasise not only local experiences of economic deprivation but simul-  
57 taneously index an awareness of how such tropes function in US-based hip-hop.

58 Taking into consideration a variety of discursive elements within hip-hop music  
59 in Kharkiv, this article first takes a step back from the music itself and focuses on the  
60 ways the scenes function, paying specific attention to the roles African musicians  
61 play in the production and, as will become evident from the ethnographic data, legit-  
62 imisation of hip-hop in Kharkiv. Ethnographic research conducted in the summers of  
63 2007 and 2008 based on interviews with musicians, producers and recording studio  
64 technicians, as well as on observations of hip-hop events such as breakdance and rap  
65 competitions, reveals that Kharkiv's hip-hop scenes are delineated by networks of  
66 young men associated with particular recording studios. At the time of research,  
67 these studios, close to 15 in number, were not professionally established to the degree  
68 where they might be known for a particular style of hip-hop. Significant in this early  
69 stage of studio developments are the interpersonal and interracial relationships forged  
70 among young male musicians who work to foster new modes of entrepreneurship in a  
71 post-socialist economy. Generally speaking, their professional goals focus on strength-  
72 ening local music industries to help guarantee an income from music.

73 Coming from diverse cultural and class backgrounds, participants bring a wide  
74 variety of understandings and opinions as to what constitutes 'hip-hop' in Kharkiv. At  
75 hip-hop parties in clubs throughout Kharkiv, DJs commonly play a wide variety of US  
76 hip-hop, Russian- and Ukrainian-language hip-hop, and hip-hop music from countries  
77 in Africa that African students incorporate when asked to deejay. Local media, entrepre-  
78 neurs, musicians and producers within Ukraine's music industries categorise all forms of  
79 rap-based music as 'hip-hop'. Such processes have been observed by Andy Bennett and  
80 others who argue that definitions of hip-hop culture are continuously 're-made' by  
81 people who appropriate the genre across the world (Bennett 2008, p. 133).

82 My ethnographic research at events marketed as 'hip-hop'-related reveals that  
83 local hip-hop culture broadly encapsulates rapping, MC-ing, DJ-ing, breakdancing,  
84 graffiti, skateboarding and, increasingly as a result of growing corporate sponsorship  
85 of hip-hop events, BMX biking. BMX bikes are expensive and are marketed, alongside  
86 other forms of hip-hop culture, for young men of relative financial means. In Kharkiv's  
87 social context, hip-hop functions as an articulation of growing middle-class identity and  
88 a sense of urban cosmopolitanism influenced by and determined by one's access to  
89 Western cultural knowledge. Amidst rising post-socialist consumerism, African stu-  
90 dents in Kharkiv capitalise on certain aspects of African American identity associated  
91 with American hip-hop in Ukraine and use the genre as a critique against increasing  
92 racism in the post-Soviet sphere as well as a mode of socio-economic integration.

### 93 Soviet/post-Soviet 'African' identities

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96  
97 The growing number of migrants from East Asia, Central Asia and the African con-  
98 tinent has contributed to rising racial discrimination throughout Ukraine (Ruble

99 2005, 2008). Contemporary race relations, however, are strongly rooted in Soviet-era  
100 race discourse (Matusevich 2007). The Soviet Union viewed itself in global political  
101 discourse as a racially blind society in contrast to the United States. Soviet officials  
102 emphasised racially motivated economic inequality in the United States as an  
103 example of exploitation within the capitalist system where one group benefits at  
104 the expense of another.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to segregation policies in the United States, the  
105 Soviet government extended opportunities for free education to citizens from devel-  
106 oping countries with the intent of teaching and spreading socialist ideology.  
107 Beginning in the 1950s, students came from Uganda, Kenya, Nigeria and other social-  
108 ist countries throughout Africa with whom the Soviet Union had good relations.  
109 Kharkiv, with its well-known medical and technological university programmes,  
110 drew a significant number of African students, as did universities in Leningrad  
111 and Moscow. Prior to the Soviet Union's collapse, there were approximately 50,000  
112 African students living and studying in the USSR (Quist-Adade 2007, p. 158).<sup>3</sup>

113 Historian Maxim Matusevich explains that Africans were perceived differently  
114 from other foreigners. They came to the Soviet Union to gain an education that  
115 would contribute to social and economic advancement in their home countries.  
116 Because the opportunity for economic and social mobility was not possible for citi-  
117 zens of the Soviet Union, this general attitude set Africans apart ideologically from  
118 other students (Matusevich 2007, p. 362). Africans, unlike students who were  
119 Soviet citizens, also had the right to travel outside the Soviet Union for summer  
120 break, often to Western countries such as the UK. They returned with hard currency  
121 and Western goods including jeans, which were not readily available in the Soviet  
122 Union (Matusevich 2007, p. 362). Realities and perceptions of access to Western com-  
123 modities helped imbue African students with a certain social status within the uni-  
124 versity context.

125 Today this relationship differs due to changed attitudes among Ukrainian citi-  
126 zens regarding their own class status and a self-conscious awareness of Ukraine's  
127 economic status in relation to developing countries. During my first fieldwork  
128 trips in the early 2000s, people often expressed their anxiety over Ukraine's economic  
129 collapse in relation to their perceptions of poverty on the African continent.  
130 Ironically, many African exchange students claim that they are financially better  
131 off than their non-African university colleagues.<sup>4</sup> Such imbalances in wealth and per-  
132 ceptions of wealth contribute to a racism couched in economic discourse.

133 Close to 20 years after the fall of the Soviet Union, new class positions have soli-  
134 dified with a significant division between those with money, power and privilege,  
135 and those with significantly less access to new forms of social status (Patico 2008).  
136 Due to the growing division between classes, foreigners in Ukraine are perceived  
137 by the government and by local populations as economic competitors (Ruble 2008)  
138 and are cast into newly reconstituted racially marked economic identities of white  
139 and black.<sup>5</sup> When I asked local non-African interlocutors to elaborate on their under-  
140 standings of what it means to be white, middle-aged and college-aged, people  
141 repeated an often-heard phrase that they want to be treated like *bili liudy* ('white  
142 people'). It appears that whiteness is a Western-mediated identity that demands dig-  
143 nity, fairness and respect. In the Soviet era, whiteness was not articulated as a racial  
144 category but was embedded within divisions of political and economic power among  
145 ethnic groups within the Soviet Union. The Russian and Ukrainian designator  
146 *chernyi/chornyi* ('black') was applied throughout Soviet history to various  
147 non-European groups such as Roma (Fikes and Lemon 2002, p. 498).<sup>6</sup> The Soviet-era

148 Russian-language term for perceived racial identity, Neger ('Negro'), is still often used  
 149 in colloquial conversation, but students from Africa are quick to contradict such a term  
 150 in conversation due to its negative (for them) association with slavery in the United  
 151 States. They do, in turn, answer to the nominator 'African American', a term alongside  
 152 'African', 'Afro-Ukrainian', and the biracial designator, mulat, that non-Africans use to  
 socially reference Africans in Ukraine.

153 The incorporation of new terms is directly related to the continued presence of  
 154 African students, the growing number of African migrant workers, and the recent  
 155 increase in familiarity with African American figures in post-Soviet media.  
 156 Scholars Jessica and Eric Allina-Pisano have noted that the term 'African' functions  
 157 as a separate discursive category in relation to people's uses of the term 'black' in  
 158 the Soviet era and reflects the development of a separate relationship within  
 159 post-Soviet society toward people from Africa in relation to other dark-skinned  
 groups (Allina-Pisano and Allina-Pisano 2007, p. 191).

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### Post-socialist relationships between race, racism and music

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They killed a Negro ('Ubili Negra')

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The dead snake does not hiss  
 The dead goldfinch does not chirp  
 The dead Negro does not play basketball  
 Only the dead Negro does not play basketball

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Aj ja ja jaj! They killed the Negro.  
 They killed the Negro, they killed him.  
 Aj ja ja jaj! The sons of bitches did him in for nothing.

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Hands folded on his stomach  
 Third day without food or water  
 The Negro lies and does not dance hip-hop  
 Only the dead Negro does not dance hip-hop

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Aj ja ja jaj! They killed the Negro.  
 They killed the Negro, they killed him.  
 Aj ja ja jaj! The sons of bitches did him in for nothing.

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His mother was all alone  
 His mother invited a witch doctor  
 He played the tom-tom and Billy got up and walked  
 Even the dead Negro heard the tom-tom and walked

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196

It's ok that he's a zombie  
 He still got up and walked

197 Zombies can play basketball, too!  
 198 (Zapreshchennye Barabanshchiki 1999)

199  
 200 The video for 'Ubili Negra' features the Russian members of the band playing in  
 201 an upscale lounge bar. In an adjacent room, an African is seated at a desk and  
 202 attempts to study. Corresponding to the lyrics, the African student forgoes his  
 203 studies to shoot hoops and dance in the lounge with the band. The identity of the  
 204 African as intellectual is overshadowed by layers of stereotypes gleaned from US  
 205 music videos and television programming that began to circulate on Russian televi-  
 206 sion by the mid-1990s. The calypso-style accompaniment and the sonic punctuation  
 207 added by steel drums index an aural sense of pan-Africanness. As global hip-hop  
 208 scholar Lee Watkins observes, 'the experiences of memory and trans-local exchanges  
 209 are inscribed in the African body's musical expressions and musical behaviour'  
 210 (Watkins 2004, p. 135). Though the African in the Russian video is clearly made to  
 211 represent an African American, the calypso rhythm reinforces local notions of globa-  
 212 lised 'African'-based identity as physically mediated and embodied.

212 Despite a disclaimer at the beginning of the song that it does not promote vio-  
 213 lence against Africans, the song was very popular and people sang it with an alterna-  
 214 tive chorus: 'They killed the Negro, it's ok, we don't care' (Reitschuster 2004). Racial  
 215 violence against Africans has risen dramatically in Russia and Ukraine. Eighty-eight  
 216 per cent of Africans who were surveyed by researchers from the Kennan Institute for  
 217 Advanced Russian Studies in 2001 stated that they would not have moved to Ukraine  
 218 had they known 'what experiences were in store' (Ruble 2005, p. 164).

219 African students in Kharkiv use hip-hop to fight back against this type of  
 220 racism and to gain a voice and presence in a city that is unwelcoming of them.  
 221 Their efforts are fruitful to the extent that popular music's formative role in public  
 222 politics has a long history on the territories of Ukraine. In the Soviet Union, ethnic  
 223 Ukrainian popular musicians fought against Moscow's linguistic and political  
 224 oppression by using the Ukrainian language and various anti-government topics  
 225 in their lyrics (Bahry 1994; Wanner 1996). This Soviet-era ideology about the  
 226 power of popular music has carried over into the first decades of Ukraine's indepen-  
 227 dence and casts musical genres within political frameworks and ideological camps.  
 228 This imbues all forms of popular music with a great deal of power to influence the  
 229 direction of various social and political movements as evidenced by the role of  
 230 music during Ukraine's movement for independence (Bahry 1994) and the anti-  
 231 government corruption campaign in 2004, commonly known as the Orange  
 232 Revolution (Helbig 2006; Klid 2007). In post-independence civil discourses, political  
 233 leaders representing the Roma minority (Helbig 2005) and the Crimean Tatars  
 234 (Sonevytsky 2009) have used music to draw attention to minority rights agendas.  
 235 Various forms of identity politics regarding ethnicity and gender have also been  
 236 called into play by Ruslana Lyzhychko, winner of the 2004 Eurovision Song  
 237 Contest, who frames notions of female strength and beauty within an exoticised  
 238 search for ethnic Ukrainian musical roots (Wickström 2008).

239 As regards issues of race, my research points to a direct correlation between the  
 240 increased use of the highly charged term 'Afro-Ukrainian' in political discourse and  
 241 the growing participation of African students in Ukraine's popular music scenes,  
 242 hip-hop among them. The prefix 'Afro' is much more commonly used in Ukraine  
 243 than in other post-socialist countries such as Russia. I propose two possible reasons  
 244 for this occurrence. First, as witnessed by the 2004 Orange Revolution, citizenship is  
 245

not defined by ethnicity in Ukraine and the nominator 'Ukrainian' is understood as both an ethnic and civic category. This understanding is greatly influenced by continued cultural and political conflicts among Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians, Russian-speaking Ukrainians and ethnic Russians as to which group, if any, can function as the dominant representative of Ukraine's population (Bilaniuk 2006). Differences in religion, language and customs throughout the country allow for strong regional identities but a less cohesive national identity.

The second factor that has contributed to the use of the nominator 'Afro-Ukrainian' is the number of popular figures in the Ukrainian media who have a biracial identity. During the Soviet era, African men who married or had children with Russian and Ukrainian women were forced to leave their families because Soviet bureaucrats did not allow African students to overstay student visas and forbade Soviet citizens to emigrate (Quist-Adade 2007, p. 155). Mothers and their biracial children suffered great prejudice during the Soviet era. Myroslav Kuvaldin and Karolina Ashion, children of such mixed unions, among others, work as lead announcers on Ukraine's music television station M1, founded in 2001. Karolina Ashion, daughter of a Nigerian father and a Ukrainian mother, leads a Hollywood gossip show and reads business news for M1. Myroslav Kuvaldin, who met his Nigerian father only recently with the help of a reporter from the BBC, is a strong proponent of Ukrainian music. In the mid- to late 1990s, he was part of the musical group, *The View*, which mixed reggae with Ukrainian folk sounds.

Public figures such as Kuvaldin and Ashion, categorised as mulat ('mixed-race') in Ukraine, have established a voice for racialised Others, including African students, within the niche opened by the influx of African American music videos onto Ukrainian television. Cultural images of African Americans circulated via global music industries add many complex layers to how Africans and people of African heritage residing in Ukraine today express themselves through music and how their social positioning is perceived by others. For instance, certain upscale clubs in Kiev hire Africans as bartenders to authenticate their status as a hip-hop/R&B club. According to club owners, the physical presence of black bodies reinforces the cultural and material status of the club itself and the club's visitors.<sup>7</sup> African DJs are sought after and there are many Africa-themed dance events throughout the city. In Kharkiv, producers feel it is important for the small local hip-hop recording studios to have musicians from any African country signed to their label as a sign of hip-hop legitimacy. According to Mayne G, a rapper from Uganda who studies electronics at Kharkiv National University:

When you get on a stage, of course, Ukrainians love a black, you know, it's something new . . . You go to different cities where blacks are very rare. So you can get really applauded on stage, of course if you are good. (Interview, Kharkiv, 1 June 2007)

While African students and migrants by no means constitute a majority population in any part of Ukraine, US music videos and Hollywood movies that feature African Americans are a regular part of programming on Ukrainian television and airwaves. As Anatoly Alexeyev, a producer at Age Music explains:

American hip-hop is the fashion legislator [zakonodatel' mody]. To be the best here, we have to know the newest releases from the United States. Earlier it was more difficult, but now it is easier with the development of the Internet, and so on. As soon as something fresh is released, we hear it here immediately. (Interview, Kharkiv, 1 June 2007)



295 US hip-hop influences popular culture in Ukraine beyond specific hip-hop mili-  
 296 eus as well. Popular Ukrainian television shows such as *Tantsiujut Usi* ('Everybody  
 297 Dances') now feature a hip-hop dance category. In episodes of the show in 2008,  
 298 African American hip-hop dancers such as Kenny Marcus were hired as judges  
 299 and as dance trainers. Interviews with these persons regularly appeared in various  
 types of media during the duration of the show's season.

300 To a certain extent, the media in Ukraine fosters an indexical relationship  
 301 between African Americans and music, and positions hip-hop musicians as people  
 302 who are held to different rules and norms from the rest of society. These tropes  
 303 are naturalised and play out in everyday interactions among Africans and  
 304 non-Africans in Ukraine. When pulled over by traffic police in Kiev, some African  
 305 students feign to be popular reggae or African American hip-hop musicians.<sup>8</sup>  
 306 More often than not, the police believe their claims and excuse them from fines.  
 307 On the one hand, this exchange between alleged musicians and local authority  
 308 figures attests to the strong influence that US-based music genres have on interracial  
 309 relations in post-Soviet society. On the other, it shows that certain stereotypes regard-  
 310 ing 'being black' carry over as well. Racial profiling by police is a typical occurrence,  
 as is racially motivated violence by skinheads.

311 Perhaps the most commonly articulated stereotype regarding African hip-hop  
 312 musicians, however, is that they are rich, because that is how African Americans  
 313 are primarily depicted in hip-hop videos featured in the Ukrainian media. This racial  
 314 stereotype among Ukrainian citizens has shifted significantly from the 1990s, when  
 315 the dominant belief was that all Africans were poor.<sup>9</sup> This stereotype was based  
 316 on and reiterated through development statistics that placed Ukraine alongside  
 317 African countries near the bottom of the world economic spectrum immediately fol-  
 318 lowing the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today, there is a general feeling that Ukraine  
 319 has reinstated its relative position 'above' African countries and is moving towards  
 320 an economic and political status that would contextualise it as a 'European' state.  
 321 This is articulated in the cultural sphere through music projects such as ethno-pop  
 322 singer Ruslana Lyzhychko's visit to South Africa during which the singer's webpage  
 323 featured her dancing in plainclothes with people in traditional Zulu dress.<sup>10</sup> The  
 324 Ukrainian media positioned the singer as an 'explorer' of a far-away land who  
 325 finds a common language with a local tribe through a rhythmic dance. Similarly,  
 326 Ruslana's 2008 album *Amazonka*, recorded at the Hit Factory in Miami, features col-  
 327 laborations with hip-hop artist T-Pain and rapper Missy Elliot. While the song with  
 328 T-Pain 'Moon of Dreams' is one of lost love, it is not a song of biracial romantic inti-  
 329 macy. Despite his greater global fame, T-Pain takes a background role in terms of  
 330 physical representation in the music video and vocals. Ruslana sings the verses  
 331 and T-Pain's rap is confined to an aural framework determined by the Ukrainian  
 332 singer's eclectic ethno-dominatrix style. As much a commentary on race as it is on  
 333 gender and East/West expressions of financial mobility, this example reinforces the  
 334 argument that in the post-Soviet sphere, people determine their relationships to  
 335 each other in terms of money and status within racialised frames.

### 340 Post-Soviet economics of hip-hop

341  
 342 In the last 10 years, the revived Ukrainian music industries have become centralised  
 343 in Kiev.<sup>11</sup> Though the majority of popular musicians from large cities have relocated

344 to Kiev, student hip-hop musicians in Kharkiv try to uphold the city's image as a  
 345 place for musical innovation. Hip-hop scenes find representation on local radio  
 346 stations, but are not promoted on the national television channels accessible in the  
 347 city. The national music television station, M1, plays a variety of hip-hop and R&B  
 348 music videos from the United States and Russia. Since the Orange Revolution in  
 349 2004, musicians with political connections such as Tanok Na Maidani Kongo receive  
 350 the most airplay. For the most part, however, information regarding breakdance,  
 351 graffiti and rap competitions in Kharkiv, dance parties, and access to recording stu-  
 352 dios is spread via word of mouth, personal connections, ties among school friends  
 353 and posters that announce hip-hop-related events throughout the city. Despite his  
 354 enthusiasm for working as a hip-hop musician in Kharkiv, DJ Vas-sabi, a 22-year-old  
 355 musician of Ukrainian–Rwandan descent, contributes the small scale of local hip-hop  
 356 scenes to a general lack of resources among student musicians<sup>12</sup>:

357  
 358 In Kharkiv, when you advertise an R&B/hip-hop party . . . the DJ who is invited might not  
 359 really know how to play the music well, meaning that they don't always get a smooth  
 360 transition between songs. People who are dancing shouldn't hear the mistakes of the DJ –  
 361 the beats should flow one into another. It's hard to find places that can afford good  
 362 technology. Most DJs still use compact discs rather than records because the places can't  
 363 afford them. And not every DJ gets the chance to really practice because they don't have  
 364 regular access to good equipment. (Interview, Kharkiv, 6 June 2008)

365 Each hip-hop scene comprises groups of friends and student acquaintances  
 366 who produce music in makeshift studios. Studios organise hip-hop parties and rap  
 367 competitions throughout the city, featuring performers associated with their socio-  
 368 musical networks. As studios grow in influence and professional status, scenes  
 369 become increasingly split, focusing on a small number of more professional and  
 370 talented rappers who offer promotional capital for studio-organised hip-hop parties.  
 371 Studios and their accompanying scenes are diverse for many reasons. Each rapper,  
 372 whatever his ethnic background, brings to his respective group a different personal  
 373 relationship and individual experience. His musical influences on local hip-hop are  
 374 usually tripartite. Musicians/audience members contribute: (1) a personal relation-  
 375 ship to African American hip-hop through a history of listening influenced by  
 376 where he grew up and what types of music he has access to; (2) an individualised  
 377 experience with local hip-hop traditions in his country of origin; and (3) a socio-aural  
 378 style of music/dance expression that takes into account local conditions of his experi-  
 379 ences in Ukraine.

380 More established rappers share their music at competitions sponsored by  
 381 hip-hop clothing and accessory shops in Kharkiv such as Stuff Skateshop. The cor-  
 382 porate element within Kharkiv's hip-hop scenes limits participation to teens and uni-  
 383 versity students who visibly display financial means. They buy clothes at newly  
 384 established hip-hop shops rather than at the Barabashova Bazaar<sup>13</sup> because bazaar  
 385 clothes carry the stigma of sameness, low quality and lack of critical choice of per-  
 386 sonal adornment, a crucial marker of post-Soviet status. Other expenses include  
 387 breakdancing lessons, graffiti paint, studio recording time and computers for record-  
 388 ing/mixing music. The price of admission to hip-hop parties, usually free for women,  
 389 varies for men from US\$5–10 depending on the club's reputation. This fee constitutes  
 390 a half-day's wages for a young professional in Kharkiv. It seems that in the early  
 391 2000s African students relied on their financial means to gain access to the scenes.  
 392 Today, the cultural capital associated with 'blackness' plays a much more important

393 role in determining the relative ease through which African musicians are integrated  
394 into Kharkiv's hip-hop milieu.

### 397 Kharkiv's hip-hop studios as sites of socio-racial agency

398 The majority of hip-hop recording studios in Kharkiv are small establishments that  
399 students have put together in basements of buildings on the outskirts of town.  
400 Most consist of a home computer and a sound booth with a microphone, along  
401 with makeshift studio controls for sound. For example, the walls of the small  
402 Boombox Records studio are soundproofed with 20 pairs of old jeans. Most studios  
403 are funded through personal financial means. Increasingly, certain studios have  
404 received support from corporate sponsors such as local radio stations, local hip-hop  
405 shops and national political parties that seek youth support in the region. The young  
406 men who run the studios purchase recording equipment, set up sound studios,  
407 record, produce and distribute CDs, market and organise various hip-hop parties,  
408 competitions and other events. The Internet has also increasingly become a viable  
409 resource for music distribution in Ukraine (Helbig 2006). Several studios with greater  
410 financial capital have websites and list-servers through which new artists and music  
411 are advertised. Male musicians who run small independent hip-hop recording stu-  
412 dios in Kharkiv learn from each other how to produce, market and earn profits  
413 from the music they record and release. Better produced CDs may be picked up  
414 for distribution by hip-hop labels such as Moon Records in Kiev for further nation-  
415 wide distribution. The distribution of Ukrainian-made CDs abroad, however, is still  
416 quite minimal.

417 Many songs composed by African and local hip-hop groups associated with the  
418 small hip-hop studios have made it onto nationally and internationally distributed  
419 compact discs such as 'Ukrainskymy slovamy: Zbirka Ukrainsko-movnoho  
420 hip-hopu' (With Ukrainian words: a collection of Ukrainian-language hip-hop) pro-  
421 duced by Age Music Studios in 2006. Other CDs circulate locally and are distributed  
422 via hand-to-hand networks at bazaars and at various rap, graffiti and breakdance  
423 competitions. Rappers from Kharkiv perform with musicians from abroad at corpor-  
424 ate and politically sponsored hip-hop events in Ukraine's larger cities such as  
425 Kharkiv, Kiev, Dnipropetrovsk, Odesa, as well as Yalta. Some are also invited to par-  
426 ticipate in hip-hop events in Russian cities close to the Ukrainian border. Many  
427 hip-hop musicians believe St. Petersburg offers greater financial opportunities, but  
428 most express hopes for local investments into Kharkiv's music industries so they  
429 may make a living from music in their home town.

430 African students rarely travel outside Kharkiv for fear of racially motivated vio-  
431 lence. Fears of racial attack among Nigerians, Kenyans and Ugandans influence the  
432 local hip-hop culture with a strong civil rights stance. According to Gomez and  
433 Dami, two Nigerian hip-hop musicians studying at Kharkiv National University,  
434 the rising number of racially motivated murders are rarely reported in the national  
435 media:

436  
437  
438 Sometimes when we are in a hip-hop club, our friends say, don't go out now, don't go out.  
439 There are some crazy people out there who can hurt you. Skinheads. So most of the time,  
440 we walk in groups. So if anyone wants to attack us, our friends provide security for us.  
441 They killed nine Nigerians. They killed a Ghanaian girl. Right in front of the police, the  
442 police won't do anything. It's important to bring attention to the Ukrainian government that

442 this is happening to us. Just last week I had a fight with a Russian boy. He said they don't want  
 443 innostrantsi (foreigners) in the country. In Kharkiv they beat you. In Kiev, they kill you.  
 444 (Interview, Kharkiv, 5 June 2008)

445 African student groups such as AfroRasta sing about interracial communication, as  
 446 evidenced by their English-language reggae/hip-hop song 'Peace and Love', issued  
 447 on a reggae compilation album by Age Music in 2006 (Figure 1).  
 448

449 Just another one,  
 450 Looking for my way back home.  
 451 When I hear a voice say  
 452 'Freedom's not so far'  
 453 From the life we're livin' in  
 454 So many fighting for nothin'  
 455 So many dyin'  
 456 All a fucking waste  
 457 Love is what you're fighting for  
 458 Love is what you're seeking for  
 459 Hey guy, hey guy. . . .  
 460 Hope the Lord could hear my voice  
 461 From this fight we're fighting for  
 462 Hey guy, hey guy . . .  
 463 Da blond, da noir,  
 464 Da mama, da papa,  
 465 Da little one singing the melodies  
 466 Of love and peace,  
 467 Peace and love . . .  
 468

465 The relationship between 'da blond, da noir, da mama, da papa' points to the grow-  
 466 ing number of interracial marriages, though from a male perspective. African  
 467 women's experiences are marginalised in local hip-hop, perhaps explained by the  
 468 significantly smaller number of female students from Africa and attitudes among  
 469 African men that deem participation in hip-hop culture inappropriate for middle-  
 470 class African women. Non-African women sing back-up on hip-hop recordings  
 471 and participate in other aspects of hip-hop culture in Kharkiv such as graffiti and  
 472 breakdancing.

473 African musicians' attitude regarding hip-hop as a political and socially con-  
 474 scious musical expression are made clear in the song 'Peace and Love' by  
 475 AfroRasta. The group's emphasis on racial relations mirrors the equal rights dis-  
 476 course evident within the genre throughout the African continent.<sup>14</sup> Mixing  
 477 English, Swahili, Russian and Ukrainian, song texts speak out against racial intoler-  
 478 ance and focus on the beauty of black bodies, evidenced by an excerpt from the  
 479 English-language song 'Club Fever' sung by the Black Beatles,<sup>15</sup> a hip-hop group  
 480 comprised of students from Kenya who recorded it at Kharkiv's youth-run Age  
 481 Music Studios in 2006:

482  
 483 Pump it up, feel the fever . . .  
 484 Strong combination,  
 485 Brains, means, lyrical ammunition,  
 486 No competition to my lyrical infection . . .  
 487 I ain't your passion,  
 488 I'm your poison,  
 489 Can you see my vision?  
 490 Better you feel my venom,  
 491 I'm the real Kenyan-born,

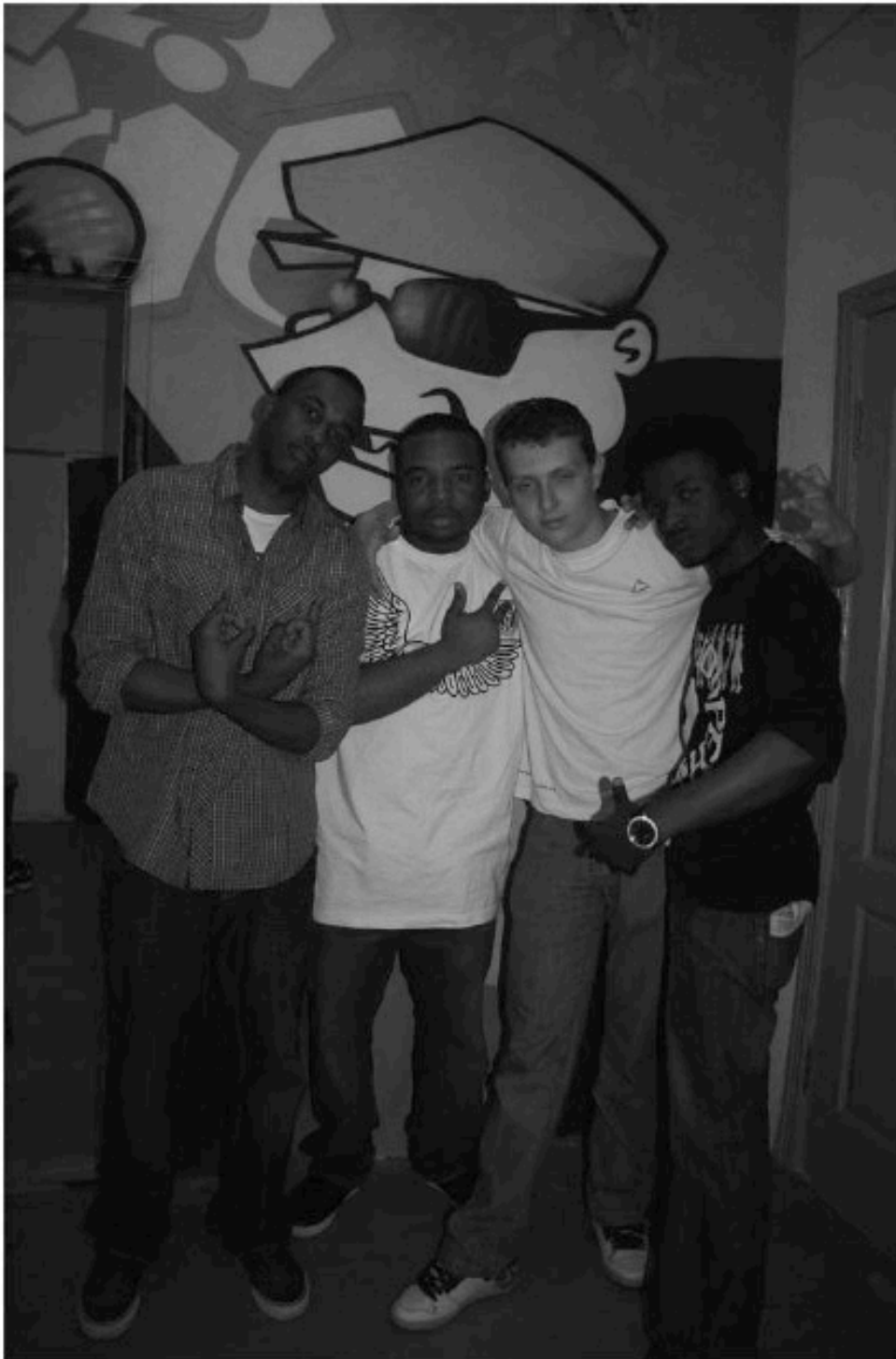


Figure 1. Nigerian hip-hop musicians and their Ukrainian producer at Kharkiv's Age-Music recording studio. Photograph by author, June 2008.

I'm hitting you raw,  
More than you wish for . . .  
From Kenya to Ukraina,  
Maximum kachenia (movement, swing).<sup>16</sup>

In this song and many others, the debate is physical, with an accent on black male bodies from Africa. The singers exhibit strength and confidence and offer an 'accept me or move out of my way' alternative to audiences who accept the singer

540 in sonic if not always in physical form. It seems that very few local listeners, the  
541 majority of whom I interviewed in Russian, understand the rapper's  
542 English-language lyrics. Though many Africans also rap in Ukrainian and Russian,  
543 my interviews with them were in English. The group Black Beatles comprises stu-  
544 dents who have just begun their studies in Kharkiv and have not gained fluency  
545 in either Russian or Ukrainian. This gives space for the singers to say what they  
546 wish while not directly engaging in antagonistic racially charged exchanges with  
547 their supporters. Local hip-hop listeners respond positively to English lyrics because  
548 it makes the songs sound more like American hip-hop.<sup>17</sup> The use of English by  
549 African hip-hop musicians, however, blurs the lines between African and African  
550 American identity.

'Club Fever', as an example of musically mediated racial exchange, brings forth  
551 many questions regarding scholarly approaches to analysing hip-hop in global con-  
552 texts. Much of global hip-hop scholarship is rooted in case studies that analyse pro-  
553 cesses through which US hip-hop styles are localised in non-Western contexts, with  
554 emphasis on genre appropriation and innovation (Mitchell 2001; Basu et al. 2006;  
555 Condry, 2006; Barrer 2009; Pasternak-Mazur 2009). While much research points to  
556 the global circulation of music via recordings, Andy Bennett identifies impromptu  
557 rap performances in clubs by African American GIs stationed in Frankfurt am  
558 Mein, Germany as an influential factor in the development of the city's hip-hop  
559 scenes (Bennett 2000, pp. 216–17). Similarly, African students produce hip-hop in  
560 Kharkiv while performing within a liminal space of negotiated identities influenced  
561 by local race relations and multinational interpretations of US hip-hop.

African musicians attempt to forge connections with local musicians in Kharkiv  
562 through hip-hop music as a black-identified genre within which they have something  
563 to say. Black skin colour itself – rather than musical experience or even interest in  
564 DJing and rapping – is enough of a way to enter into the Kharkiv hip-hop scenes.  
565 All are welcome to participate in recording sessions and if a musician exhibits less  
566 skill, the local person who runs the computer-controlled recording equipment assists  
567 the musician by supplying beats and various sonic elements. This process recalls  
568 issues raised by Louise Meintjes regarding the agency of the recording engineer in  
569 the recording studio (Meintjes 2003). Meintjes shows that the recording engineer  
570 has an understanding of the broader media sphere for which the recordings are  
571 intended, a situation that differs greatly when the rapper is a foreigner. Though  
572 the recording engineer exhibits a formidable role in relation to local rappers, often  
573 suggesting different ways of mixing beats or articulating and accenting various  
574 words in Russian or Ukrainian, his role (the engineer is almost always male) differs  
575 greatly during a recording session with Africans. First, he does not understand the  
576 language, whether English, Swahili or other and thus will not comment on vocal  
577 inflection or the rhythmic structure of the text. Second, drawing on a broader deejay-  
578 based cultural discourse that 'Africans mix better beats',<sup>18</sup> he takes recording cues  
579 from the musicians themselves, allowing the musicians full control over all aspects  
580 of the music recording process. Third, because students from Africa have relatively  
581 more financial means than local students involved in hip-hop, they can afford to  
582 buy more time in the recording booth. The extended time within the recording studio  
583 leads to more carefully balanced recordings.

The power shifts are clear and carry from the studio to other aspects of hip-hop  
584 experience such as dancing. At hip-hop dance parties, whether the DJ is African or  
585 not, a person of African heritage is almost always invited to dance on stage in  
586  
587  
588

589 front of the audience. His dancing validates the skills of the DJ but concurrently  
590 places the black body on display. Such actions and processes make club attendees  
591 aware of Africans 'in the house' and continuously circulate the indexical relationship  
592 between black bodies and hip-hop.

### 593 594 595 Socio-racial networks of hip-hop entrepreneurship 596

597 The social networks within Kharkiv's hip-hop scenes facilitate interracial exchange  
598 and create modes of socio-racial agency for African students in a post-Soviet context  
599 where discrimination against dark-skinned people is on the rise. Influenced by  
600 regional, African and US musical elements, the scenes serve as spaces where locals  
601 interact, befriend, and create musical and cultural bonds with people from different  
602 backgrounds. On the one hand, the genre develops in new ways that draw from a  
603 multitude of personal and musical experiences. On the other, it is highly dependent  
604 on interpretive frameworks of racial and musical identities mediated by hip-hop cul-  
605 ture from the United States. Musical meanings are rooted in histories of Soviet-  
606 African and Soviet-US, post-Soviet Ukrainian-African and Ukrainian-US as well  
as (broadly defined) African-US cultural exchanges.

607 Competing notions of 'blackness' determine the ways in which and the extent to  
608 which participants are racialised within multinational processes of interpretation that  
609 simultaneously support and limit interracial exchange. A further element within  
610 such exchanges is the notion of mutual financial benefit for African in relation to  
611 other local hip-hop musicians within Ukraine's transition economy. To some degree,  
612 both groups use operative notions of 'blackness' as it relates to hip-hop to gain agency  
613 within the scenes. Local hip-hop musicians turn to African musicians to validate the  
614 efforts of recording studios and to legitimise the genre on a local level. Africans  
615 draw on African American cultural capital to position themselves as closer to the ori-  
616 gins of the genre via racial identity. As the music industries in Kharkiv develop, signifi-  
617 cant will be the ways in which the relationships between music and racial identity play  
618 out within a more professionalised hip-hop milieu. How will talent be interpreted as  
619 studios develop their own sounds? Will racial identity be so obviously marked as  
620 scenes expand, perhaps, to include migrant musicians of East Asian or Central  
621 Asian descent, growing populations in Kharkiv? Will financial wealth continue to be  
622 a factor that determines entrance to the scenes? How will Kharkiv's hip-hop scenes  
623 relate to hip-hop in other cities within the developing nationwide distribution net-  
624 work? Though such questions fall well beyond the purview of this article, they provide  
625 a broader context within which Kharkiv's hip-hop scenes presently function. At least  
626 for the time being, it seems that the relationship between race, music and financial  
627 affluence is generally acknowledged by participants to be mediated via interpretations  
628 of images from US hip-hop industries. In turn, it has created opportunities for young  
629 men of different racial backgrounds to make music together and to respond creatively  
630 to contemporary social issues through globalised perspectives on interracial friendship.

### 631 632 633 Acknowledgements 634

635  
636 The research presented here has been funded by generous grants from the National  
637 Endowment for the Humanities, the American Councils for International Education

and the International Research and Exchange Board (IREX). The article was written during the author's tenure as Title VIII Supported Research Scholar in 2009 at the Kennan Institute (covering Russia and surrounding states) in Washington, DC. Special thanks go to Naila Ceribasic for her insightful comments regarding the earlier stages of fieldwork and analysis. Thanks are also due to Jane Sugarman, Lauren Ninoshvili and Daphne Carr for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this article. The author is also grateful to Tamara Polyakova, her research assistant at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, for her assistance with Russian song translations.

## Endnotes

1. Volodymyr Ivasiuk (1949–1979) composed one of the most popular Ukrainian songs, 'Chervona Ruta' (Red Rue), in 1970. 'Chervona Ruta' became a megahit and won the Soviet Union's 'Best Song of the Year' award in 1971. Ivasiuk died in 1979 under mysterious circumstances – his body was found in a forest, and it is widely believed that he was murdered by the Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti (KGB), the Soviet State Security Committee. Using him as a symbol of Ukrainian national identity during the movement for Ukrainian independence, members of Rukh, the People's Movement for Restructuring in Ukraine, launched the Chervona Ruta Festival in 1989 in Chernivtsi, Ivasiuk's hometown, in western Ukraine. The festival takes place every other year in a different Ukrainian city and adheres to the policy of only featuring songs in Ukrainian (Wanner 1996). A hip-hop duo who run one of Kharkiv's small hip-hop recording studios won the regional competition to represent the city in the 2008 Chervona Ruta festival.
2. To counter such narratives, the US Department of State sent black musicians on tour to the Soviet Union. Positioning African Americans as leaders of music bands, the United States aimed to discredit Soviet claims of racial inequality. Louis Armstrong was scheduled to travel to the Soviet Union in 1957. Armstrong, however, cancelled his participation in the concert tour as a protest over events in Little Rock, AR, where white citizens and armed National Guardsmen barred nine African American students from entering the all-white Central High School.
3. Though education in Ukraine is no longer free for foreigners, many middle-class male students from countries that fostered educational ties with the Soviet Union opt to gain their university education in universities within the post-Soviet sphere (Allina-Pisano and Allina-Pisano 2007, p. 177). Kharkiv continues to have a particular draw, as do universities in Kiev, Odesa and Lviv.
4. This statement is subjective and is based on comments made by African students in interviews. They point to their clothes, means to travel to their home country during the summer months and ability to study abroad in Ukraine as several determining factors of financial status. Many African students, though not all, are of middle- and upper-class background.
5. Contemporary migration patterns have placed Ukraine as the fourth largest migrant-receiving nation-state in the world, following the United States, the Russian Federation and Germany (Mansoor and Quillin 2006, p. 3). According to a 2005 study conducted by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, there were 6,833,000 foreign-born people residing in Ukraine, a figure that constitutes 14.7 per cent of Ukraine's population of 48 million (Ruble 2008, p. 5). Fikes and Lemon use the Russian designator *chernyi*, while I use the Ukrainian word for black, *chornyi*.
6. Personal communication, identity withheld, Kiev, 5 June 2007.
7. Interview with Rastaman Davis, Kiev, 24 August 2006.
8. During my fieldwork trips to Ukraine in the late 1990s, my interlocutors often described
9. Ukraine's post-socialist economic collapse in terms of (Soviet-era) perceptions of poverty on the African continent. 'Ruslana in the Republic of South Africa'. Ruslana typically performs scantily clad in outfits that exoticise the musical culture of the Hutsul people in the Carpathian Mountains of western Ukraine. See [http://www.ruslana.com.ua/images/africa\\_sept06/index.html](http://www.ruslana.com.ua/images/africa_sept06/index.html).
10. Kiev has emerged in the last decade as the home of a professionalised music industry, helped in many ways by how people within the politicised music sphere during the 2004 Orange Revolution helped lift censorship from radios and television, solidified a nationwide distribution network for CDs, validated home computer music making and positioned the Internet as way through which people in Ukraine share music (Helbig 2006). Unlike other cities in Ukraine, Kiev attracts transnational music stars. Broader organisational events such as Kiev's hosting of the 2005 Eurovision Song Contest following Ruslana's win in 2004 (Wickström 2008), and a series of free public concerts by Elton John in 2007 and Paul McCartney in 2008 sponsored by oligarch-turned-cultural patron Viktor Pinchuk



687 have elevated Kiev to the status of a city that is  
688 now commonly included on Western artists'  
689 world tours. Hip-hop artist 50 Cent gave a concert  
690 in 2006 and the Rolling Stones came to Kiev in  
691 2007. In contrast, no major concerts by Western  
692 musicians have been sponsored in Kharkiv to  
693 date and many musical talents from Kharkiv  
694 have moved to Kiev, home of the major labels  
695 and the revived recording industry following the  
696 collapse of Melodiya, the Soviet Union's major  
697 state-owned record label.

698 12. DJ Vas-sabi is the son of a Ukrainian mother and  
699 a Rwandan father. His mother followed her hus-  
700 band to Rwanda rather than stay in the Soviet  
701 Union but the family moved back to Ukraine  
702 during the civil war in that country.

703 13. Kharkiv's sprawling Barabashova Bazaar, built on  
704 restricted vacant land above a subway station  
705 named after Akademik Barabashov, employs  
706 80,000 vendors from 23 countries (Ruble 2008,  
707 p. 6).

708 14. Numerous documentary films on hip-hop in  
709 countries throughout Africa point to a common  
710 trend of socially conscious hip-hop. See  
711 *Democracy in Dakar* (Nomadic Wax, 2007), *I Love*  
712 *Hip-hop in Morocco* (Rizz Productions, 2008),  
713 *Hip-hop Colony* (Emerge Media Films, 2006), and

Diamonds in the Rough: A Ugandan Hip-hop  
Revolution (Subterranean Network, 2007) for  
examples from Senegal, Morocco, Kenya and  
Uganda, respectively.

15. I was unable to interview musicians from this  
group because they returned to Kenya. Groups  
of university students, often dorm mates, com-  
pose and record whatever material they have –  
often only one song. Some stay in Ukraine  
while others return to their home country after  
completing their studies.

The use of the Russian word in these lyrics attests  
16. to foreigners' higher level of linguistic proficiency  
in Russian than in Ukrainian. This is due to the  
more prominent role that Russian holds in  
Ukraine's economic and media spheres, particu-  
larly in eastern parts of the country.

According to nationally known hip-hop musician  
Volodymyr Parfeniuk, whose stage name is Vova  
zi L'vova (Vova from L'viv), rapping in English  
17. might be construed as inauthentic and not  
being true to oneself. Vova is among the few rap-  
pers in Ukraine who raps in Ukrainian – the  
majority of hip-hop is in Russian. Interview with  
Vova zi L'vova, Kiev, 21 July 2007.

Interview with DJ Vas-sabi, Kharkiv, 6 June 2008.

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