MITCHELL OHRINER, *FLOW: THE RHYTHMIC VOICE IN RAP MUSIC* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). ISBN 9780190670412, 248pp, £25.99 (hardback).

Mitchell Ohriner's *Flow* opens with a particular contention, namely, that an overemphasis on the sociocultural aspects of rap music within academia has resulted in an under appreciation—and consequently a paucity of study—of artists' technical cachet. To date, there has yet to be a comprehensive study of the rapper's rhythmic voice, and Ohriner's study sets out to address precisely this concern, building upon earlier work by Kyle Adams, Martin Connor, Adam Krims, Felicia Miyakawa, Justin Williams and others. Through an overtly theoretical and analytical approach to rap music, this book aims to answer fundamental questions, such as what musical features do rappers refer to when they flow about flow? How do we conceive of accent in relation to flow? How is groove articulated? Rather than look to regional variation and context, something which is attended to in Gilbers et al.'s fascinating study of prosody and rap flows on the East and West Coast, Ohriner's assessment is drawn from a corpus of seventy-five hip-hop tracks that are representative of the entire genre in this author's opinion.[1]

This book is overtly tied to a computational model, and as such Ohriner weathers potential critiques of his method head-on in its introduction. His positionality is laid bare. Ohriner is white, middle class, and didn't listen to hip-hop in his youth. Trained in music analysis, with a specialism in composition, he wasn't brought up on Stretch and Bobbito and *Yo! MTV Raps*. Instead, his entry into the form was motivated by a particular fascination with its 'rhythmic vitality' and the means by which critical questions around rhythm, music, and speech could be answered through attending to its 'ideal ecosystem' of instrumental productions and lyrical prowess (xxviii). Rather than lament his computer-driven approach, at the expense of traditional ethnography, he foregrounds a particular value in quantifying hip-hop's complexity. For Stuart Allen Clarke there exists 'an enormous appetite [within US political culture] for images of black men misbehaving',[2] while Tricia Rose has written of a decided prejudice towards rap music at the expense of Western classical music, which is seen

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1 Steven Gilbers, Nienke Hoeksema, Kees de Bot, and Wander Lowie, 'Regional Variation in West and East Coast African-American English Prosody and Rap Flows', *Language and Speech* (November 2019), https://journals.sagepub.com. doi: 10.1177/0023830919881479.

2 Stuart Allen Clarke 'Fear of a Black Planet', *Socialist Review*, 21, no. 3-4 (1991): 37–59.

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as 'the highest legitimate standard for musical creation'.[3] Ohriner's approach, however, can act as a rebuttal to such criticisms, through robust, reproducible research that unequivocally locates virtuosity, complexity, and compositional assuredness in a form typically lambasted by lazy stereotyping that foregrounds explicit lyrical context as a means to negate its role as an art form.

The book is split into two sections. The first is remarkably thorough and sets up Ohriner's approach to flow through five intriguing chapters. Section Two then applies these methods to the work of three rappers (Eminem, Black Thought, Talib Kweli) whose respective oeuvres offer substantial opportunity to unpack more challenging relationships between groove and metre, and flow and beat.

Chapter 1 demarcates the parameters that actually constitute flow. This is cleverly approached by focusing on moments wherein rappers 'flip the flow', and consequently locating what has changed. There are four main factors, namely syllable duration, rhyme duration, flipping the position of the rhyme, and flipping the intervals between rhymes. This approach departs from what Ohriner determines as a 'prescriptive law of flow' (10)—a viewpoint favoured by writers such as Paul Edwards,[4] that sees raps as continuous and subservient to the beat—towards a method that accounts for intervals between rhymes and syllables, in addition to the patterns and actual sounds of words: 'an emcee's flow can be poor, but not solely because syllables are not well aligned with the beat' (12).

Chapter 2 sets up the corpus of rap songs, leaning heavily upon Leonard B. Meyer's seminal work on style and critical analysis.[5] Ohriner is therefore tasked with selecting pieces that are 'stylistically representative' in order to examine divergences from the norm (32). To do so, Ohriner collates a 225 emcee meta list from a number of publications, and from this he extracts a 'random sample' that offers diversity in terms of 'chronology, geography, stylistic register, and genre type' (37). Despite this, no artists from outside the United States are included. This is disappointing, since a study solely of US rappers cannot claim to be global in outlook. Furthermore, I would have liked to have been presented with more insight into Ohriner's shortlist. While subsequent analysis is computational, both the choice of publications—XXL being a strange choice, for example, owing to the commercial furore each year surrounding its

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3 Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1994), 65.

4 Paul Edwards, *How To Rap* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2010).

5 Leonard B. Meyer, *Explaining Music: Essays and Explorations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 6.

'freshman list'—and the regions cited—which do not necessarily reflect the full geographical scope of emcee output—require a human input that is not quite as random as Ohriner asserts.[6] Nonetheless, the subsequent analysis of rhythm, accent, and groove in this corpus, from Chapters 3 to 5, is fascinating.

Accent is notoriously difficult to represent, yet Ohriner examines both accent's relation to metre and accent variation in speech before depicting it in graphical representations of flow through the use of different sized dots. These are visually striking and effectively depict how patterns of accentuation pertain to the overall trajectory and feel of an artist's flow. He then looks at flows that have identical accent structures and tempos, but sound different because of the nature of the rhyme schemes. This is evocatively demonstrated with shrewd examples taken from Philadelphia MC Black Thought's artistic work, which appears again in Part Two.

The book's most striking contribution, though, is in its mapping of vocal groove. Acting as a stark departure from Parliament Funkadelic's assertion that 'Everything is on the One',[7] Ohriner advocates for a more flexible model and looks to seven rhythmic grooves that can begin at any point, as opposed to commencing on the first division. This is achieved through yet another striking set of diagrams. Here, Ohriner constructs rotational polygons that attend primarily to intervals between accents rather than the positions of their enunciation. This robust visual representation is reminiscent of cracking a Caesar Shift in elementary coding, and is used to demonstrate how Eminem's 'Lose Yourself' and the last verse of '8 Mile' have the same 'Inter Accent Intervals' (<332_332> where each integer indicates the number of semiquavers between each accent) despite sounding radically different. This approach then allows a consequent exploration of rhythmic contour, and how the evenness of distribution in each of the seven groove classes affects the listening experience (83).

Following these intensely focused chapters, Ohriner's findings are combined to foster 'global features of flow' that are able to 'measure characteristics of delivery, rhythming, rhythm and groove' (104). This model is remarkably useful, and Ohriner makes good use of statistical methods to determine whether variation in parameters is sufficiently different to denote a deliberate approach from a performer—and thus a divergence from the norm—or if it was a coincidence. He firstly demonstrates the validity of the method through an analysis of average words per syllable, which shows how Kurtis Blow's 'The Breaks' and The Roots' 'What They Do' are statistically

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6 See Carrie Battan, 'Inside XXL's Freshman Issue', *The New Yorker*, (19 June 2017), https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/06/26/inside-xxls-freshman-issue

7 Parliament, *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein*, Casablanca (1976), (Vinyl Record, 33rpm), NBLP 7034.

different, with Black Thought's multisyllabic flow pattern obviously more intricate than Blow's party track. Secondly, it is shown to be particularly fruitful for examining syllable speed. Ohriner is able to debunk the widespread notion that 'new-school rap is faster than old-school rap', instead demonstrating how a trend in tempo decrease of instrumental productions has resulted in a *saturation increase* in terms of syllable usage: more syllables might be used, but the space afforded to perform them is far greater (107).

Despite these important advances, and notwithstanding Ohriner's fine examination of Talib Kweli's rhythmic playfulness and how it affords a particular insight into an emcee's swing and its relation to speech patterns, there are a number of considerations that slightly affect the book's 'representative' intentions and readability. Firstly, there is an underlying conviction that complexity is inherently good. While the importance of complexity to counter reductive assertions about hip-hop is a salient consideration, it often results in unfettered adulation for feats of technicality. For Ohriner, Eminem is rap music's Franz Liszt, rallying against 'the aristocracy of mediocrity', yet his overt displays of virtuosity—notwithstanding his intersectional privilege as a white man performing within an Afrodiasporic musical form—need to be more openly addressed. Nonetheless, the self-declared 'Rap God' appears consistently throughout, and while most usages of Slim Shady's work are well-founded, it becomes tiresome and certainly undermines a purportedly balanced employment of Ohriner's assiduously put together corpus.[8]

Secondly, it must be made apparent that this book is not for a casual reader. Ohriner's methods are often brilliant, but they are incredibly dense. Ohriner often spends time trying to elucidate theoretical formulae (of which there are many), self-fashioned terminology, and his use of modular frameworks, but there are moments when the explanations are not quite as clear as they could be, and certain equations are more assured than others. For example, his quantification of grooviness that features a penalisation for effort—and is calculated out through subtracting the quartic root of 'effortfulness' from the length of a groove—is, frankly, bewildering, whereas his equation for syllable speed is masterfully clear and effective (97).

Finally, Ohriner's use of tactus for defining syllable duration is arguably narrow in its understanding of listener disposition. A tactus is defined as 'the level of the metric grid to which a listener primarily entrains and is likely to tap along' (17). For Ohriner, hip-hop's tactus is located in the 'snare position' on beat two and beat four. This

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8 Richard Taruskin, 'Liszt and Bad Taste', *Studia Musicologica*, 54, no. 1 (2013): 87–104: 95. doi: 10.1556/smus.54.2013.1.7.

assertion aligns primarily with a 'boom bap structure', which is passable for certain performances, but is very different to the work of A$AP Rocky, for example, which appears in Chapter 2. This is surprising considering Ohriner's later acknowledgement that 'rap is a genre that has undergone a sustained trajectory of development' (37). To reduce all hip-hop tactus to boom-bap is a significant presumption, and this should be revised for future studies, especially those that consider the more recent work of performers such as Roc Marciano, Ka, and MIKE who often rap over very sparse productions that can feature little to no percussion.

Aside from these minor reservations, this is a fine and very important book. Despite the book's density, the model presented offers substantial and illuminating findings that will aid the understanding of flow. Aspects of Ohriner's model will certainly benefit scholars engaged with hip-hop performance, and it has real potential to augment studies of rhythm in poetic speech, such is the unique intersection between music and oratory contained within the art form. Ohriner ended the first chapter with a note on the 'considerable undertaking' that his book undoubtedly is, and questioned 'whether it is worth the effort' (29). And while defining and conceptualising flow and its myriad components is a daunting prospect, at no point did Ohriner shy away from the task at hand. The resultant tome provides much-needed analytical tools for an erstwhile unquantifiable phenomenon, formalising flow for future generations of scholars and students alike.

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