Hosted by MICHAEL SERAPIO

NEWS IN REVIEW

MAESTRO FRESH WES: Canadian Hip Hop History

JANUARY 2020

CBC NEWS

curio.ca
MAESTRO FRESH WES: Canadian Hip Hop History

Video duration – 11:36

Wes Williams, better known to many as Maestro Fresh Wes, is often called the Godfather of Canadian hip hop. He sprang on to the music scene in 1989 with the release of his song “Let Your Backbone Slide” from debut album Symphony in Effect. It was the first rap single certified Gold in Canada. In 2019, this groundbreaking anthem became the first hip hop song to be inducted into the Canadian Songwriters Hall of Fame. Williams, who studied law and political science at Carleton University, not only became a recording artist and producer but an actor, author and motivational speaker. Here, he takes the time to go back to a shopping mall in Scarborough to show us where it all began.

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- Beirut; Medellin; Port-au-Prince (Interrupt This Program)
- Rhyme Pays: Hip Hop and the Marketing of Cool (Marketplace)
BEFORE VIEWING

1. Make a list of as many hip hop artists as you can. Try to make a list of at least ten (10) hip hop artists.

2. Maestro Fresh Wes, the so-called Godfather of Canadian hip hop, contends that Canada is an influential presence in the world of rap music and hip hop culture. Does your list reflect this perspective?

WHILE VIEWING

1. What was the name of the song that put Maestro Fresh Wes on the musical map in 1989?
   a. ❑ Nothing At All  
   b. ❑ I Know Your Mom  
   c. ❑ It Takes Two  
   d. ❑ Let Your Backbone Slide

2. Besides being the first gold record for a Canadian rap song, Maestro Fresh Wes’s breakout hit was inducted into the Canadian Songwriters’ Hall of Fame in 2019. ☑ TRUE or ☑ FALSE
3. Maestro Fresh Wes’s real name is:
   a. ❑ Wesley Snipes           c. ❑ Wesley Crusher
   b. ❑ Wesley Williams         d. ❑ Wesley Moraes

4. Maestro Fresh Wes worked the graveyard shift at the Parkway Mall so that he could:
   a. ❑ Work on his demos and write songs.
   b. ❑ Earn enough money to support his record label.
   c. ❑ Pay his family’s expenses.
   d. ❑ Both (b) and (c).

5. Who introduced Maestro Fresh Wes at the 1990 Juno Awards?
   a. ❑ Bruce Cockburn           c. ❑ Tom Cochrane
   b. ❑ Drake                   d. ❑ Geddy Lee

6. In which Juno category was “Let Your Backbone Slide” nominated?
   a. ❑ Dance                   c. ❑ Rap
   b. ❑ Rock                   d. ❑ Hip hop
7. Of all the songs in his library, Maestro Fresh Wes’s favourite is:
   a.  ❑ Nothing At All
   b.  ❑ I Know Your Mom
   c.  ❑ Let Your Backbone Slide

8. The Maestro Fresh Wes song that provides social commentary on the situation of Indigenous people in Canada is called:
   a.  ❑ Nothing At All
   b.  ❑ I Know Your Mom
   c.  ❑ Let Your Backbone Slide

9. Maestro Fresh Wes is considered the “Godfather of Canadian hip hop.”  ❑ TRUE or ❑ FALSE
TALK PROMPT #1

Consider pausing the video and giving students the opportunity to talk to an elbow partner for a few minutes or use these questions as part of a class discussion.

Pause the video after Maestro Fresh Wes talks about “Let Your Backbone Slide” becoming the first rap song inducted into the Canadian Songwriters Hall of Fame, “...it’s good for me but great for the genre of music — it’s great for hip hop. We started from the bottom and now we’re here doing international things. Canada, we’re the top of the global food chain when it comes to music, you know. And I’m honoured to be a part of that – that people acknowledge what I did. And I got a slogan, don’t make records, make history. ‘Let Your Backbone Slide’ is part of that history. The cultural impact that it made in this country is monumental. So, I’m glad that I wrote it. And this is where I wrote it, right here.” – @ 000:00 to 04:28

1. What job did Maestro Fresh Wes have at the time he wrote “Let Your Backbone Slide”? What was he up against in the battle to get his music heard?

2. Why is the induction of Maestro Fresh Wes and “Let Your Backbone Slide” into the Canadian Songwriters’ Hall of Fame so significant?
3. How did he get his MC name?

4. Do you agree with Maestro Fresh Wes’s premise that Canada is at the top of the global food chain when it comes to music? Name some of Canada’s top musical stars and acts.

TALK PROMPT #2

Watch the video until the end. – @ 04:29 to 11:36

1. Why did Maestro Fresh Wes feel like his songwriting was groundbreaking back in the 1990s?

2. Why do people call Maestro Fresh Wes the Godfather of Canadian hip hop?

3. Do you think Maestro Fresh Wes is correct when he says that part of rap music involves “taking someone’s head off lyrically”? What does he mean by this?
AFTER VIEWING

In the following episode of the CBC Radio show *q with Tom Power*, you can listen to and read the history of the song “Let Your Backbone Slide” as told by Maestro Fresh Wes, his former manager Farley Flex and Davis from the production duo First Offence: [www.cbc.ca/1.5220502](http://www.cbc.ca/1.5220502)

Use the radio show and accompanying article as a resource and write your own history of “Let Your Backbone Slide.”

Length: 150-250 words.
Listen I want an explanation. Why are Mohawks being kicked out of their reservations?
And being put in misery.
You’re stealing the land to create sporting facilities.

The Native man of the land is who you’re killing.
And then got the nerve to celebrate Thanksgiving.
Claiming every man is equal.
I hate to see what y’all got planned for my people.

– Lyrics from the song “Nothing at All,” Maestro Fresh Wes
THE STORY

Minds on

Listen to the Maestro Fresh Wes classic “Let Your Backbone Slide” before reading The Story that follows. As a class, share your thoughts about the song. You can find the song at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=CsPSØIN-úY

Making history

Maestro Fresh Wes has always lived his life by the motto: Don’t make music, make history.

Wes Williams, known by his rap name Maestro Fresh Wes, is referred to by some as the Godfather of Canadian hip hop. (Photo: Evan Mitsui/CBC)
In the fall of 2019, Maestro Fresh Wes made history again when his groundbreaking hip hop classic “Let Your Backbone Slide” was inducted into the Canadian Songwriters’ Hall of Fame. The song was released in 1989, when hip hop music was in its infancy in Canada, far from the Bronx borough of New York, where the genre was born.

At the time, there were no record labels and no promoters — just grass roots rappers like Wesley Williams (the Maestro’s real name) busting their rhymes at parties and in the clubs. In fact, when “Let Your Backbone Slide” became enormously popular, Canada’s premier music awards, the Junos, was blindsided and the nomination committee found themselves with a bit of trouble. Here was a song that everyone was talking about and they had no category to nominate it in. The solution: throw it in the Dance category in 1989 and, in 1990, create a rap category so Maestro Fresh Wes and the fledgling Canadian hip hop scene had somewhere to land.

“Rapper’s Delight”
Maestro Fresh Wes started his career in the Toronto suburbs of North York and Scarborough. He came from a musical family — his father an accomplished saxophone player who loved music. When young Wesley was 11 years old, his father introduced him to the hip hop classic “Rapper’s Delight” by Sugarhill...
Gang. Williams, already trying his hand at poetry, was mesmerized by the song and knew that he wanted to become a rapper. For the next 11 years that is exactly what he focused on, dedicating every bit of his spare time to writing rhymes and performing raps, making demos and acting as an unwitting pioneer for the hip hop movement in Toronto. Eventually he got his big break, appearing on MuchMusic’s Electric Circus. His performance landed him a record contract and, in 1989, “Let Your Backbone Slide” made Canadian music history.

**Overcoming the odds**

The impact of Maestro Fresh Wes and “Let Your Backbone Slide” cannot be understated. Here was a performer and a song that overcame all the odds to set the stage for a number one hit. Ground-breaking doesn’t really do justice to what the song did for Canadian hip hop. “Let Your Backbone Slide”, while a quintessentially hip hop/rap song, managed to appeal to people across the country and across genres. Lovers of rock, country, pop and rhythm and blues were all pulled into the vortex that the song created. Suddenly, hip hop and rap were getting radio play and the popularity of the genre began to grow. “Let Your Backbone Slide” became the first Canadian hip hop song to chart in the top 40, eventually achieving gold and platinum...
status while remaining the best-selling Canadian hip hop song for 20 years.

**Stick to Your Vision**

For his part, Maestro Fresh Wes followed the success of “Let Your Backbone Slide” with what can only be described as a relatively understated musical career. He was never really able to replicate the success of his seminal single, something he spoke of in his poignant song “Stick to Your Vision.”

Eventually he diversified his career, going beyond the realm of an MC and songwriter, taking on roles in acting (he appeared as a teacher in the CBC hit *Mr. D*) and as a motivational speaker. In a career spanning 30 years, hip hop legend Maestro Fresh Wes has lived up to his motto – making music and making history.

**TO CONSIDER**

1. How has Maestro Fresh Wes lived up to his motto?

2. What problem did the Junos face with the success of “Let Your Backbone Slide”?

3. Why does the term “ground-breaking” fail to do justice to what Maestro Fresh Wes did for Canadian hip hop?
ACTIVITY #1: Canadian Hip Hop Artists

WARNING: The lyrics of some of the following songs may contain coarse language. Be sure to clear your song choices with your teacher before sharing them as part of any classroom discussion.

Part A  Focus on the Maestro

Listen to the following Maestro Fresh Wes songs:

- Let Your Backbone Slide
- I Know Your Mom
- Nothing at All
- Stick to Your Vision
- Die Empty

For each song, answer the following questions:

1. What is the theme of the song?
2. What do you like about the song?

3. What don’t you like about the song?

* Please be specific in your answers.

Part B  Focus on Canadian hip hop

Listen to five (5) songs by other Canadian hip hop artists. Choose a mix of songs from the following, or from an artist of your choice:

- Drake
- Kardinal Offishall
- K-os
- Haviah Mighty
- Tasha the Amazon
- Saukrates
- The Weeknd
For each song, answer the following questions:

1. What is the theme of each song?
2. What do you like about each song?
3. What don’t you like about each song?

* Please provide as many details as you can.

After you have listened to all of the songs for this activity, write a short reflection on one of the following questions (aim for a response of 3-5 sentences):

- How much of an influence do you think Canadian hip hop artists are having on the rap world?
- Were there common issues that these artists exposed in their songs?
- Did you hear ideas or ways of thinking that help you think differently about your own experiences? Explain.
ACTIVITY #2: Creating a Survey

The International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI) released its 2019 Music Listening Report and determined that the following genres are the most popular worldwide:

1. Pop
2. Rock
3. Oldies
4. Hip-hop/Rap
5. Dance/Electronic
6. Indie/Alternative
7. K-Pop
8. Metal
9. R&B
10. Classical

The report surveyed listeners aged 16 to 64 in Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom and United States.

**TASK: Create and conduct a survey**

**Step 1**

In a small group, create and conduct a survey of fifteen (15) people that asks them to rank the musical genres they enjoy — from their favourite (#1) to their least favourite (#10).

On the following page is a list of musical genres that you can use.
**Musical genres**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Genre</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blues</td>
<td>Hip hop/Rap</td>
<td>Pop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bluegrass</td>
<td>House</td>
<td>Reggae</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classical</td>
<td>Indie/Alternative</td>
<td>R and B</td>
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<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td>Rock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dance/Electronic</td>
<td>Jazz</td>
<td>Ska</td>
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<tr>
<td>Folk</td>
<td>K-Pop</td>
<td>Soul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funk</td>
<td>Metal</td>
<td>Other (genre not listed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gospel</td>
<td>Oldies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Step 2**

Organize your data to determine the overall top ten choices of the people you surveyed.

**Step 3**

Share your findings with your classmates. In your presentation, focus on what surprised you in the survey results.
A BRIEF HISTORY OF HIP HOP

Hip hop culture and music is a blend of: (1) disc jockeying or DJing, (2) b-boys - dancing, also called breakin’), (3) rapping, also called emceeing or MCing, and (4) graffiti art, also called tagging or muralism.

While hip hop is a relatively recent phenomenon, some claim that the true roots of the genre go back to ancient Africa. Over the millennia, African cultures have placed a high value on poetry delivered through the oral tradition. This poetry has emerged in a number of different media and, according to some hip hop historians, without the African grasp and love of poetry, the creativity of hip hop never would have come to fruition. Others point to the evolution of African-American music over the course of the 20th century as the catalyst that led to the emergence of hip hop.

Whatever angle the historians choose to take, there seems to be one point of consensus: modern hip hop was born on the turntables of Bronx DJ Kool Herc in the early 1970s. Kool Herc

had immigrated to the United States in the late 1960s, settling in the Bronx suburb of New York City. Kool Herc would DJ local block parties and introduced those in attendance to something called Jamaican dub music. This type of music involved playing the same record on two turntables with the DJ mixing the musical breaks together, in effect extending the instrumental parts of the song. The extended breaks left space for Kool Herc or other MCs to rap a message to those gathered at the block party. The message could be improvised or scripted – it didn’t much matter to Kool Herc.

These early block parties led to a surge in creativity. Kool Herc noted that his Bronx audiences didn’t much care for his reggae dubs so he started using blues, soul and funk songs. People loved it. Eventually other DJs started copying Kool Herc and New York became the birthplace of hip hop music.

For the rest of the 1970s, hip hop culture evolved in all four of the categories listed above. Eventually drum machines and synthesizers were added to the mix and the raps became more musical as well as more popular. By 1979, hip hop made the mainstream with Sugarhill Gang’s *Rapper’s Delight* and Fatback Band’s *King Tim III (Personality Jock)*.

The commercial success of Rapper’s Delight opened the doors for a slew of performers. Hip
hop acts like Run DMC, LL Cool J and the Beastie Boys made the genre a force to be reckoned with. These acts paved the way for the likes of Public Enemy, NWA, Dr. Dre (whose album *The Chronic* is regarded as one of hip hop’s best albums ever), MC Hammer and the Wu-Tang Clan. Eventually artists like Jay-Z and Nas were able to establish themselves as hip hop superstars while gangsta rappers Notorious BIG and Tupac Shakur were the inspiration behind the rivalry between East Coast and West Coast hip hop. From a borough of New York City to the world, hip hop had reached its first pinnacle.

By the late 1990s, hip hop record sales seemed to be dwindling, but along came Eminem to put the genre back on top. Following the success of *Slim Shady* in 1999, his album *The Marshall Mathers LP* became the fastest selling album of all time, with over 10 million copies sold.

Today, hip hop is dominated by Drake, Travis Scott, the Weeknd, and Cardi B. One has to wonder if Kool Herc could have imagined the many directions that hip hop would evolve into as today’s hip hopsters have created musical styles like alternative hip hop, crunk and snap music as well as glitch hop and wonky music. More than anything, the history of hip hop shows that creativity in music is never stagnant; there is always some new artist pushing the musical genre into other dimensions.
TO CONSIDER

1. When was hip hop born? Describe the process that saw this new musical genre evolve.

2. People often wonder about the difference between rap and hip hop. By definition, rap is a part of hip hop in the same way that breakin’ and tagging are a part of the genre. Do you agree with this assertion? Do you think that rap music is distinct from hip hop music?

3. Do you enjoy hip hop music? Why or why not?
SOURCES


VIDEO REVIEW – WHILE VIEWING (ANSWER KEY)

1. What was the name of the song that put Maestro Fresh Wes on the musical map in 1989?
   d. Let Your Backbone Slide

2. True. Besides being the first gold record for a Canadian rap song, Maestro Fresh Wes’s breakout hit was inducted into the Canadian Songwriters’ Hall of Fame in 2019.

3. Maestro Fresh Wes’s real name is:
   b. Wesley Williams.

4. Maestro Fresh Wes worked the graveyard shift at the Parkway Mall so that he could:
   a. Work on his demos and write songs.

5. Who introduced Maestro Fresh Wes at the 1990 Juno Awards?
   c. Tom Cochrane.

6. In which Juno category was “Let Your Backbone Slide” nominated?
   a. Dance.
7. Of all the songs in his library, Maestro Fresh Wes’s favourite is:
   b. I Know Your Mom

8. The Maestro Fresh Wes song that provides social commentary on the situation of Indigenous people in Canada is called:
   a. Nothing at All

9. True. Maestro Fresh Wes is considered the “Godfather of Canadian hip hop.”