

# The Emergence of Estonian Hip-Hop in the 1990s

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## Abstract

In this article I trace the ways in which hip-hop as a global form of expression has become indigenized in post-Soviet Estonia. Hip-hop's indigenization coincides with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. After the dissolution of the USSR, dominant Estonian social discourses eagerly celebrated re-entering the European-American world and embracing its values. The uncensored global media outlets accessible after 1991 and rapid developments in information technology shortly thereafter were crucial to the history of Estonian-language rap. Hip-hop artists' extensive involvement with new media and technologies reflects an extremely swift transition from ill-equipped to fluent manipulation of technology, which affected cultural production and structures of participation in various sociocultural spheres. While hip-hop culture emerged in the South Bronx during the early 1970s as a radical voice against increasing economic hardship and social marginalization, Estonian hip-hop was established in the early 1990s and developed in the context of a rapidly growing economy, rising living standards, and strong national feeling within a re-independent Estonian state. Hip-hop artists' production vividly reveals both the legacies of Soviet rule and the particular political economy of post-Soviet Estonia.

Hip-hop, with its roots in expressive Caribbean, African-American, and Latino cultures, has become fundamental to millions of peoples' identities worldwide, a fact which necessitates making sense of the specific ways hip-hop functions in diverse communities and cultures. As Tony Mitchell states, "[rap] has become a vehicle for global youth affiliations and a tool for reworking local identity all over the world" (2001: 1–2). Strong local currents of hip-hop indigenization have taken root across the world, including in Europe (e.g. Bennett 2000: 133–165; Krims 2000: 152–197; Mitchell 2003; Brown 2006; Helenon 2006; Barrer 2009; Helbig 2011). As proposed by James Lull, the process of the indigenization or reterritorialization of a musical genre from a globally available popular culture is a helpful framework for examining the appropriation of rap in Europe as the emergence of a new cultural territory. As Androustopoulos and Scholz interpret Lull's concept, "an indigenized cultural pattern is integrated into the artistic repertoire of the host society, and, as a consequence, [...] the pattern is now appropriated as a native form of expression"

(2003: 468). To invoke Tom Boellstorff's notion of "dubbing culture" (Boellstorff 2003), indigenized rap "is more than just a quotation: it adds a step, first alienating something but then reworking it in a new context" (2003: 237, cited in Keeler 2009: 6). In this article, I trace the process of hip-hop indigenization in Estonia since the late 1980s by providing hip-hop community members' own insights about developments in hip-hop and society in general.<sup>1</sup>

One significant reason behind the broad and rapid indigenization of the rap genre might lie in its readily available "fantasies of masculine power" (Keeler 2009: 9). Ward Keeler's captivating, if controversial, analysis of Burmese and U.S. rap stresses the importance of a certain "social" vision in which the MC,<sup>2</sup> and those who take pleasure in identifying with the MC, project a fantasy of absolute power over others, with no hint of accompanying obligation or responsibility" (Keeler 2009: 10). As bell hooks reminds us, the "notion that a real man proves his manhood by remaining rigidly attached to one's position, refusing to change [...] reveals the emotional immaturity that

<sup>1</sup> I am deliberately ambiguous about the identity of my interlocutors in order to protect their privacy. A selected list of formal interviews and a selected list of correspondence with my interlocutors are to be found at the end of this article.

<sup>2</sup> MC (sometimes spelled emcee), short for Master of Ceremony, is an alternative title for a rapper. MCing forms one of the five pillars of hip-hop culture (other four being graffiti, Bboying, DJing, and knowledge).

underlies much hip-hop sentiment” (2004: 152). Another reason that attracts large numbers of young men could be, as Simon Warner notes,

perhaps the very fact that [rap’s] musical components were, technically, relatively simple to replicate and that its core was a lyric-based message made it an adaptable, user-friendly structure onto which far-flung performers could graft their own local subjects, their own narratives, their own concerns (Warner 2004: 164).

Therefore, while combining models and idioms from hip-hop in the US with local musical and linguistic idioms, rapping in local languages has become “an innovative form of musical and linguistic expression” across Europe (Larkey 2003: 140). The usage of local language is not the only relevant feature of indigenized rap in Europe. The extensive use and mixing of samples, a central practice in hip-hop, from local popular music, films and other media, but also from local traditional music and even classic poetry, enables rappers to express their viewpoints on local issues not only in a local language but also through sonic citations that are often comprehensible and relevant exclusively to cultural insiders.

Even though glocalized, rappers in Europe seem to base the topics of their lyrics on the American models. According to Androutsopoulos’s and Scholz’s content analysis of rap lyrics (2003), the two most common categories in European rap are self-presentation and, most importantly, social criticism. Therefore hip-hop, turned into a vehicle for “espousing the causes of ethnic minorities” and making “political statements about local racial, sexual, employment, and class issues” (Mitchell 2001: 10), is produced both by local rappers from majority populations as well as by members of minority/immigrant groups. Additional lyrical topics are the local or national hip-hop scene, parties and fun, love and romance, and scenes from everyday life (Androutsopoulos and Scholz 2003: 471–472). While hip-hop artists in Estonia affirm their cosmopolitan identities through producing and performing a globally prominent form of expression, they simultaneously articulate their national identity through these same processes.

In 2009, when I first contacted Estonian hip-hop artists in order to learn more about the poli-

tics and poetics of hip-hop in Estonia, DJ Paul Oja, one of the most prominent Estonian-language rap producers and DJs, started his reply to my email by saying: “Hey, you cannot take rap as a homogeneous thing. There are so many different approaches. Every music differs depending on who makes it” (email communication with DJ Paul Oja, September 2009). Therefore, in order to put Oja’s recommendation into action, it is necessary to pay attention to “so many different approaches”, and not only to relate to a local rap scene through the templates of U.S. hip-hop scholarship. As scholars continue to document and theorize the effects of global hip-hops, considering the historical and sociopolitical processes that shape them, it is first and foremost a sensitive ethnography that can account for these effects, which in turn leads scholars necessarily beyond the conventional models applied in the field of traditional hip-hop studies. In other words, it would be unfruitful in the Estonian case to follow the disciplinary models of U.S. hip-hop scholarship, including, for instance, analysing rhymes or linking the ethnic backgrounds of the artists to positions of social and cultural resistance (cf. Bynoe 2002). In the Estonian case, in fact, it proves more insightful to track the political and sociocultural events and processes that contributed to the adoption, localization, and, most significantly, diversification of hip-hop practices among a small and homogeneous group of artists in Estonia during the 1990s.

On the other hand, however, this diversification of Estonian-language hip-hop has occurred through the production and circulation of “cultural elements [that] communicate a sense of shared participation in a single space” (Urban 2001: 25). While affirming their cosmopolitan, urbane identities through participation in a global form of expression, Estonian hip-hop artists devotedly articulate their national identity through their production. Therefore, the local and global, increasingly intertwined, simultaneously continue to compete with and claim their independence from one another (cf. Appadurai 1990). Furthermore, it is precisely this kind of friction emerging from the on-the-ground synergy of the local and global that deserves the closest study (cf. Tsing 2004). Even as popular music scholars have underplayed the influence of national identities on popular music (e.g. Frith 1993; Harley 1993), ethnicity/nationality/race and, in certain cases, the

nation-state, have maintained and increased their central role in popular music production (Cloonan 1999).

In an attempt to sum up Estonian-language rap, which emerged in the early 1990s, it seems difficult to come up with any unifying themes in terms of the content of rhymes or the aesthetics of beat-making: there are stories about competitive binge drinking as well as making pancakes with grandmother, and beats range from reggae to heavy metal and drum'n'bass. There is also an immense variety in rappers' rhyme schemes as well as in beatmakers' (*biidimeistrid*)<sup>3</sup> and producers' use of production software and know-how. Additionally, there is no homogeneity in terms of the hip-hop artists' public image and style of dress: You can encounter bohemian rappers in self-knitted sweaters, plaid shirts, and corduroy pants, as well as swaggering producers with baggy pants, way-too-big hoodies, baseball hats, and flashy jewellery. At the same time, the emphasis on being an Estonian and being involved in the "Estonian business" (*ajame eesti asja*)<sup>4</sup> binds together this diverse group of exclusively male, middle-class ethnic Estonians who have, in most cases, a good education and, where applicable, well-respected public personas. Using modes of speech from the social world in order to publicly think about, enact, or perform national identities proves the characteristic and unifying feature of hip-hop artists in Estonia (cf. Berger 2003: xv).

One of the main reasons for this abundance in making hip-hop in Estonia lies in the local music industry, or, more precisely, in the lack thereof. Due to the minuscule size of the market, major record labels have not taken any interest in Estonian-language popular musics. Some Estonian-language rap circulates on compilation albums put out by local independent labels, usually owned by an active member of the hip-hop scene, while the majority finds its public outlet through social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, SoundCloud, MySpace, and various Estonian hip-hop community websites. Therefore, since there

is no industry-driven pressure and convention to produce rap in certain ways, local artists have the freedom and the urge to experiment with and modify their styles from one track to another. Simultaneously, the ever-present need to express one's national belonging and loyalty in a globally omnipresent musical genre tints virtually every aspect of hip-hop production in Estonia.

### Fieldwork experience and methodology

I have been working with hip-hop artists from the Estonian-language hip-hop scene since early 2009. My research is based on correspondence, open-ended interviews (23), and participant observations. I have communicated with various artists via email, GoogleChat, Facebook, and Twitter, as well as face-to-face while interviewing them and attending their live shows during my trips to Estonia. I also kept a fieldwork diary in order to keep notes about the observations. Additionally, I was allowed to take a large amount of photographs and videos of hip-hop performances. The data was gathered between 2009 and 2014. My years of fieldwork – both face-to-face and virtual – have yielded a substantial body of fieldnotes, photographs, and recorded interviews with hip-hop artists. I also have live show recordings from a range of performances.

As Laudan Nooshin (2011: 93) states in her article about hip-hop in Iran,

Hip-hop might be regarded as the migrant music par excellence in that its migration has been almost entirely effected through mediation and rarely through the movement of "tradition bearers". As such, it is interesting to explore the new meanings that music acquires in contexts that are culturally distant from its origins.

Following Nooshin's observation, I focus here on the new meanings that hip-hop artists in Estonia have created while modelling their production on hip-hops from all over the world. How exactly do they incorporate media, technology, and me-

<sup>3</sup> A local term explained to me as used for the individuals who come up with a catchy loop or a set of loops but have no knowledge or aspiration to develop it into a full-length track. This will be done by producers.

<sup>4</sup> Briefly, the widely used expression of "minding Estonian business" refers to the vernacular interpretation of the first paragraph of the Constitution that states that everyone's involvement is necessary to "guarantee the preservation of the Estonian people, the Estonian language and the Estonian culture through the ages" (English translation available at: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/530102013003/consolide> (last access 20.08.2018)).

diated global musics into their production? How do they negotiate simultaneously participating in a small Estonian-language hip-hop community and a vast transnational, multi-lingual scene that constantly exchanges and transforms sounds, trends, and ideas?

### **A Brief History of Popular Music in Estonia**

Hip-hop is by no means the first non-Estonian popular music genre that local musicians have indigenized and used to fashion a simultaneously local and global sense of self. Although the first independent Estonian nation-state only emerged in 1918, ethnic Estonian musicians were active during the first two decades of the twentieth century in the world of popular music in the Governorate of Estonia, the westernmost region of the Russian Empire. At that time, audiences would gather at a popular music event expecting to hear a potpourri of fashionable German and French opera and operetta tunes, arranged for piano, chamber ensembles, or wind ensembles. During the 1910s, local elites gradually adopted new dances such as the cakewalk, Boston, one-step, two-step, and tango in order to follow Western European trends. The social dance scene significantly enlivened popular musical life and created new groups of musicians who supported themselves by playing at dance parties (Lauk 2010: 51–52). Additionally, the song industry slowly picked up and, heavily influenced by German Schlager, resulted in hit songs using German tunes but with Estonian-language lyrics (Ojakäär 2000: 18).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, American popular music and dance genres such as ragtime and early jazz reached enthusiastic European audiences, resulting in the foundation of dance bands across Europe. In 1918, the first Estonian jazz band (The Murphy Band) was established, and a gradually increasing number of Estonian musicians learned to play ragtime and organized themselves into groups following Duke Ellington's big band model (Ojakäär 2000: 122; Lauk 2010: 56). Jazz enjoyed the status of the most sought-after popular music in Estonia throughout the 1920s and 1930s. During this period, increasingly accelerated transnational exchanges in many areas of life, including music, took place largely through technology. Publishing and rapidly developing communication technologies such as radio broadcasting, which started in 1926,

made possible the spread of musical sounds and cultural practices.

Popular music and culture in the Soviet Union – which encompassed Estonia in 1940–1941 and 1944–1991 – incorporated several trends. On the one hand, popular culture was largely co-opted by official culture, made widely available through a state system of distribution, and was often perceived as kitsch by mass publics (Beumers 2005; Reiman 2010; Reiman 2011). On the other hand, the popular musics craved by the masses were of “Western” origin, and their consumption was ideologically prohibited. Anxiety in the Soviet Union over jazz as “the symbol of bourgeois decadence” and the need to provide “good but accessible music in opposition to [the ‘light genre’ of jazz]” invigorated lively debates about the nature of “mass music or song” that would influence the masses’ “musical tastes and psychology” (Frolova-Walker and Walker 2012: 275–283).

Therefore, jazz in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, rock and roll in the 1950s, British beat in the 1960s, and punk rock in the 1970s were all obtained and circulated via underground markets and unofficial channels. The underground functioning of a “second economy”, usually sustained by sailors and their collaborators, gave people access to all sorts of Western goods, including records and sheet music. In the Estonian case, since Estonia was the westernmost region of the USSR and had close geographical proximity to Finland, Finnish TV and radio channels were illegally received using home-made antennas.

In order to consume the novel sounds and artistic inspirations acquired via illegal mass media channels and black markets more freely, Estonian popular musicians worked extensively on making Estonian-language covers of “Western” pop hits. Striking examples from the perspective of indigenization and the contemporary intellectual property discourse include Sven Himma and Mahavok's cover of the 1981 hit “Who Can It Be Now?” by Men At Work; and Marju Länik, Jaak Joala and Kontakt's 1983 cover of “Tonight, I Celebrate My Love” by Peabo Bryson and Roberta Flack. Mahavok's reinterpretation of Men At Work's “Who Can It Be Now?” illustrates how accurately all the sonic features were reproduced in Estonian covers and how Estonian-language lyrics did not necessarily follow the message and sentiment of the original text. To fast-forward to the 1990s, when Estonian

hip-hop artists started making music, specific parallels between Soviet-era cover songs and emergent Estonian hip-hop appear: it was crucial to sound similar with but differ lyrically from other global hip-hops. Hence, Estonia-specific cultural references, slang, and themes were introduced into hip-hop.

### **New Developments in Mass Media and Popular Culture in the early 1990s**

After re-independence in 1991, the state faced the complicated task of re-establishing democratic political institutions and implementing neoliberal economic structures while providing the necessary economic support for its citizens during the challenging transitional years (Raun 2001: 253–255). Open public debate about the country's past, present, and future as well as all kinds of artistic production bloomed once rigid Soviet-era censorship mechanisms had disappeared. Radio and television broadcasting had begun in Estonia in 1926 and 1955, respectively, and were the two main mass media that served as propaganda tools for the Soviet regime (Miljan 2004: 397–398). Needless to say, censorship of radio and TV programmes as well as print media was rigorous (cf. Zetterberg 2009: 557).

The uncensored nature of public expression starting in 1991 was somewhat challenging for the older generations, who had grown up and been educated in Soviet Estonia and who were acculturated to rigid censorship and to never expressing one's true opinion. The younger generations, in contrast, eagerly embraced the sense of freedom and liberal outlets for self-expression that had become widely available. However, complete adjustment to a liberal public sphere was not effortless even for young Estonians born around 1990 with no first-hand experience of the Soviet way of living. It required a conscious effort to overcome cautiousness in expressing one's opinion in private contexts – a habit acquired during Soviet occupation and deeply rooted in communal self-preservation.

In addition to a restructuring of public culture, the collapse of the Soviet Union required the complete restructuring of Estonia's economy. By

embracing neoliberal principles,<sup>5</sup> an extremely fertile ground for all kinds of small businesses was created. Among these was a rapidly growing number of new communications companies importing global TV channels. As graffiti artist Marx explained in his interview for this study, he and other Estonians welcomed the previously inaccessible Western European and American TV channels with open arms. It should be noted, however, that Finnish TV had been accessible, although illegally, since the 1950s in some regions in northern Estonia, including Tallinn. These benefited greatly from their geographical proximity to Finland, which was just 50 miles north across the Baltic Sea. By manipulating TV sets, antennas, and radios, it was possible to receive Finnish media. In this way, northern Estonia was the only place in the Soviet Union where one could see Western TV (Tarm 2002). Needless to say, this practice, though illegal, was nevertheless widespread. For Estonians' aspirations toward economic and eventually political independence, the "Finnish link" proved crucial, as described by several members of the Estonian intelligentsia (Mikecz 2011: 180, 181):

We watched Finnish TV [already in the 1950s]. It was, in some way, a window to the western world... we could compare all the time our life and Finnish life in detail and of course our dream was as soon as possible to be as, how to say, as rich and happy and nice as Finland... In all that Soviet time Finnish TV was observable in half of Estonia. It was like a window to the West all the time. All that time a normal person in Tallinn knew the Finnish language, at least passively because his major TV was Finnish TV. And it was impossible that something happened in the world and they don't know in Tallinn. Of course we knew it immediately. We heard about Chernobyl from Finnish TV, not Soviet TV.

Following Finnish TV and radio became a national pastime and created an underground industry within the official TV and radio repair stations, since radios and TVs needed to be readjusted (the Soviet Union used different broadcasting standards from Finland).

<sup>5</sup> I use the term here to indicate a system of economic policies such as privatization, austerity, deregulation, and free trade.

For Estonian hip-hop artists, TV, radio and print media from Finland served as their primary source of information. Kozy, a rap pioneer born in 1975, first learned about rap in the late 1980s via Finnish media, particularly radio. His experience vividly portrays the extent to which Estonians fashioned themselves according to the information and knowledge acquired from Finnish media. Here is how Kozy described this process to me in 2009:

For me, in order to learn more about hip-hop, it was definitely a Finnish radio station that was called Radiomafia at that time, now it is Yle X. I listened to that and recorded with an old reel-to-reel machine in order to get an overview of new musics. Somehow, already around 1988 or so I was certain that rap was the coolest music ever. I also listened to heavy metal but I thought "Walk This Way" was super as was Beastie Boys' "Fight For Your Right", but when I asked to play rap at my school dance, the cold reaction and the demand for Chris De Burgh by others made me a little doubtful at the same time. Later, MTV became freely available and I also need to admit that I was following Vanilla Ice and MC Hammer, not to mention Raptor, MC Nikke T, Hausmylly, and Murkulat [rappers or rap groups from Finland]. Whenever I got to go to Finland, a Finnish youth magazine Suosikki was the best source for information [about local and global rap].

I made the final decision to quit listening to heavy metal and become exclusively a rap fan in 1991 when LL Cool J's "Mama Said Knock You Out" was released. I really liked Public Enemy even earlier because it sounded wild, especially "Bring The Noise" featuring Anthrax, since I was a devoted thrash fan at the time. And so it all started: At first it felt all wild and alternative: Public Enemy, N.W.A., Ice T, Run D.M.C., KRS One, Gang Starr, etc., then later I got additionally interested in Afrocentric and jazz-influenced stuff like A Tribe Called Quest, Jungle Brothers, Arrested Development, etc.

Kozy's encyclopedic knowledge of the US and Western European hip-hop gained him a central position in the local hip-hop community. Although mostly known outside hop-hop circles as one of the MCs from the Estonian rap "super

group" A-Rühm (A-Team), Kozy has been interested in DJing since he was a teenager and has been the heart and soul of a weekly radio show "Linnadžungel" (Urban Jungle) since it first aired on one of the state-funded national broadcasting stations in 1995. In "Linnadžungel", Kozy promoted both foreign and local hip-hop artists and educated his listeners about the histories and aesthetics of hip-hop. As several younger hip-hop artists told me, listening to "Linnadžungel" on Monday nights was like a religious ritual for them when they first took an interest in hip-hop. One MC described his experience with the show:

I think I was 14 or 15 or so. Completely accidentally I was listening to the radio in my mother's apartment in Lasnamäe just before falling asleep and for the first time I heard Kozy playing a hip-hop track in "Linnadžungel". I had never heard anything like that. I was completely mesmerized. This foggy evening, this slightly broken radio, this channel-surfing session and then finding "Linnadžungel" with this hip-hop track – I will never forget that evening and that moment and I am sure I secretly decided to start rhyiming exactly then. And I started to listen to this show every week, religiously.

For a younger generation of hip-hop artists who have just started to make music, catching Kozy's attention, or better yet his approval, and being played on Kozy's show is considered the most important initiation into the local hip-hop scene. Connections with people working in radio stations are eagerly sought, as they have been since Estonian hip-hop first started to take off. People working in radio stations were not only able to negotiate airplay through personal connections but also to help hip-hop artists use studio space in the radio station, usually quite secretly and after-hours, for mixing and recording. In times of societal restructuring, it is the close cooperation between mediators, such as radio hosts, and musicians that results in new modes and aesthetics of acceptable popular music (Tucker 2010: 557). Having close connections with radio people is exactly how Cool D, an MC, producer, and the first Estonian hip-hop artist to release an album, managed to start making music in the first place.

## Technological Literacy and e-Estonia

Another process underway at the end of the 1990s was a technological one. The uncensored global media outlets that opened up after 1991 and the rapid developments in information technology shortly thereafter are crucial to understanding the history of Estonian-language rap. Hip-hop artists' extensive involvement with new media and technologies requires an examination of the ways an extremely swift transition from ill-equipped to fluent manipulation of technology has affected their cultural production and structured their participation in various sociocultural communities.

The rapid economic growth that brought with it a higher standard of living and the "e-Estonia" project granted a broad part of the population easy access to computers and high-speed Internet connections. The "e-Estonia"<sup>6</sup> project, which was launched in the mid-1990s, was a large-scale, state-funded initiative that supplied every educational institution with computers and a high-speed internet connection.

The Estonian national information technology programme was launched in February 1996 by President Lennart Meri with the goals of modernizing the Estonian educational system, creating conditions for the formation of an open learning environment, and adapting the nation to the demands of an information society (Miljan 2004: 471). The immediate objective was to put a computer in every classroom in every school in Estonia, and to rapidly introduce information and communications technology (ICT) in the public and private sectors. By 2000, four years later, ICT access had moved Estonia into the front ranks of Internet use in Europe.

The Tiger Leap Foundation, founded to develop and expand the reach of computer and network infrastructure, was established in February 1997 as a non-profit body consisting of the Ministry of Education and 37 computer companies and private individuals to organize the execution and financing of the programme. Initially, to the general public, Tiger Leap became associated with the slogan "one computer for every twenty pupils". The Foundation rapidly evolved a three-level strategy, with the national level developing

the target programme, the national level coordinating the supply of computers and skills, and, at the local level, each school implementing the ICT programme for the learning and utilization of IT resources (ibid.: 471).

The educational part of the programme provided training for teachers, computers and software, assisted in setting up Estonian language educational databases for schools, and encouraged pupils to set up chat rooms and online newspapers. The Tiger Leap programme caught the imagination of the Estonian population and became the motor of the virtualisation of the Estonian economy and the public sector. To encourage Estonians to use IT outside work and education, the foundation provided a large number of public-access Internet sites around the country. As early as 1999 almost all government forms were accessible to the public on the Internet, and the administrative reform of 2000 began by making all internal documents available online to eliminate paper jams. All ministries, including the prime minister's office, sent Christmas cards in 1999 online only (Miljan 2004: 471). By 2000, Cabinet meetings used only documentation read on computer screens, and travelling ministers participated in cabinet meetings by laptop Internet connection. In 2002, the Tallinn City Council inaugurated its own advanced Tiger Leap to increase the number of computers in the schools from one per 42 pupils to one for every 10 by 2005; and that June, a programme funded by banks and telecom firms was inaugurated to teach computer and Internet access skills to 100,000 computer-illiterate adults in Estonia (Miljan 2004: 471–472).

Additionally, government funds subsidised Estonian families who invested in these technologies. As a result, it has been possible ever since to manage the virtual paperwork related to banking, schooling, and even national-level voting without leaving one's home. One producer told me about his grandmother living in the countryside with an outhouse and no running water but enjoying the benefits of high-speed internet thanks to "e-Estonianization". One of the most visible symbols of Estonian e-society is NATO's Cyber Defence Centre with its global e-military based in Tallinn.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Read more at <http://e-estonia.com/> (20.08.2018).

<sup>7</sup> Additionally, although founded by Scandinavian businessmen, Skype software was developed by a team of Estonian IT specialists in 2003.

Similarly, access to global TV channels via satellite dishes, which proliferated after the collapse of the Soviet Union, was welcomed with open arms by Estonian viewers.

As a result of “e-Estonia”, Estonians acquired computer fluency and wider media literacy very quickly. This enabled previously ill-equipped hip-hop musicians to acquire computer fluency and wider media literacy in addition to being able to purchase media and manipulate the technologies necessary for independent music production. In other words, as noted by Peter Manuel in his work on “cassette culture”, “the spread of various forms of inexpensive, grassroots-based micro-media [...] provide[s] [previously] dominated social groups with an unprecedented degree of access to, representation in, and control of mass media” (1993: 3). DJ Paul Oja, Toe Tag’s beatmaker and producer and a close friend of and collaborator with all the A-Rühm members, describes his decision to start making beats in the mid-1990s thus:

I got very encouraged by the whole new digital direction in early 1990s music which proved that one didn’t have to have [traditional] musical instruments, band members [to play them], and a separate room for band rehearsals. One could make music in one’s own bedroom and not have to worry about what other guys might think about this music (email communication with DJ Paul Oja, December 2009).

Oja’s description hints at new kinds of artistic, communal, and masculine subjectivities (see Biehl, Good and Kleinman 2007) that became available as a result of the political and cultural transitions underway in Estonian society after the end of the Soviet regime. His decision to make digital music, using “technologies of wired sound”, became part of the process that announced “new logics of music creation and [empowered] local cultural and expressive values” (Greene 2005: 3).

At the same time, as MCs took advantage of democratized ways to make, record, and distribute (electronic) music and embraced “all-in-one” artistry, the need for effective beats, which meant the need for a highly-skilled producer, claimed a central place. Kozy and Genka, two MCs denigrating “a guy somewhere [who is] dictating what can or can’t be done” and promoting their autonomy and a “we make our own rules” attitude, would

most certainly not have been able to enjoy the popularity of their single “Popmuusik” (“Pop Musician”) without their beatmaker – the DJ and producer DJ Kritikal. It is a fact that “Pop Musician” is not a newspaper article or a poem but a piece of music that gained A-Rühm “access to channels of mass distribution and underpins their power and credibility” (Walser 1995: 194).

### “Everything started with music”

In 2009, three Estonian street-art enthusiasts – Tõnis Palkov, Uku Sepsivart, and Andres Siplane – published an in-depth overview of street-art history in Estonia *Haiguste ravi. Kontrollitud (The Cure for Illnesses. Checked)*. Palkov, Sepsivart, and Siplane note in the foreword of their publication that although street art in Estonia goes back at least to the early 1980s, it is mostly associated with post-1991 hip-hop. In an interview for the same publication, Bach, one of the first Estonian graffiti artists, reveals that even though street art undoubtedly existed before 1991, it was not the visual art tradition that inspired a new generation of artists. Rather, it was the hip-hop music that they heard then for the first time: “In terms of getting into street art, everything started with the [hip-hop] music that was new in our society and sounded radical to us” (Bach in Palkov, Sepsivart and Siplane 2009).

In the same interview, another graffiti artist and Bach’s close friend Marx describes the circumstances in which rap was first received, and pinpoints the media outlets, new and old, that eventually led to the emergence of Estonian rap (Marx in Palkov, Sepsivart and Siplane 2009):

At one point it became clear that punk was not quite enough any more. Since 1990 or 1991, we got to know more and more black music, mostly rap. Rap sounded new and fresh. Cable TV helped a lot, but also the good old radio. Besides being able to receive Filmnet via cable TV with its 1970s German soft-core porn, we also received until-then unreachable MTV, German Viva, and French MCM. New favourite artists emerged: “softies” such as Snap, MC Hammer, Technotronic, Vanilla Ice, C&C Music Factory, A Tribe Called Quest and “hardcore” rappers such as Ice-T, Public Enemy, and all sorts of other old-school stuff. Public Enemy impacted me so much that I started wearing

a large yellow clock around my neck and did it for years.

As Marx points out, and this holds true for many other young people living in the Soviet Union, punk was the preferred music during the 1980s. Punk provided the Estonian youth not only with a music that irritated their parents and grandparents but also a medium through which to express anti-establishment sentiments – which in late-1980s Estonia meant being anti-Soviet and pro-independence (Blackplait and Bloomfield 2009). When in late 1988 the Estonian Sovereignty Declaration that led to the formal declaration of independence on August 20 1991 was issued, radical anti-governmental artistic expressions lost some of their immediacy – epic nationalist rock ballads devoted to the liberated Estonian nation and state performed by contemporary pop stars won over several previous fans of punk. Others, such as Bach and Marx, started looking for a music that would sound “new” and “radical”. Bach’s and Marx’s musical quest relied heavily on radio, historically the most influential mass medium in Estonia, and on what was a novel source of sounds and information at the time – cable TV.

In later parts of the same interview, Marx returns to the crucial role of radio in the accumulation of hip-hop knowledge. In connection with radio, he mentions the first Estonian-language rap artist Cool D (Marx in Palkov, Sepsivart and Siplane 2009):

Very quickly I also managed to collect a lot of rap tracks on audiocassettes – it is funny how we all wanted so badly to own music in a physical form. Of course, at that time one recorded everything onto audiocassettes from the radio. I was really proud since I managed to record a whole cassette full of Cool D’s music since his brothers worked in a radio station [in Tartu] and played his tracks. Pretty cool – tons of “cunts” and “cocks” in Cool D’s lyrics were freely aired on the radio and I along with other guys eagerly recorded them and then duplicated the cassettes to circulate them among friends. I remember that I had all Cool D’s song titles written all over my backpack.

The use of radio in the early 1990s and the rapid impact of the Internet in the mid-1990s were crucial to the emergence and development of hip-hop in Estonia. Radio, user-friendly

and accessible to a variety of populations, has “regularly allowed new or silenced voices to enter the public sphere, especially in times of social or technological change” (Tucker 2013: 150; see also Taylor 2005). Certain radio hosts, promoting Estonian hip-hop artists’ works, may be regarded as cultural gatekeepers who “foster the feeling of belonging to a community” (Simonett 2001: 45). Meanwhile, rapidly increasing access to inexpensive, high-quality sound recording equipment facilitated the democratization of music production and distribution, which also helped mature the hip-hop scene in Estonia (cf. Théberge 1997; Peterson and Bennett 2004: 6).

Cool D, an idol of Marx and many other young Estonians since 1991, along with Genka, DJ Paul Oja, Revo, Kozy, and DJ Critikal – the five other “founding fathers” of Estonian-language rap – will be the protagonists of the next chapters. Starting in the early 1990s, these six musicians, by indigenizing hip-hop, played central roles in the liberalisation and commercialisation of Estonian popular culture that was brought about by the fundamental shift from Soviet state-controlled to post-Soviet capitalist-driven artistic practices.

Significantly, the Estonian hip-hop pioneers’ first productions coincide with the state’s re-independence process during the early 1990s and with the large-scale privatization process that accompanied the transition from a Soviet command economy to a free market economy (Gillies, Leimann, Peterson 2002). The adoption of neo-liberal economic principles by the political elite influenced citizens’ attitudes beyond economic realms. I would contend that early Estonian rap can be viewed as one of the outlets through which young Estonians adapted to the spread of “neo-liberal [attitudes] and practices in everyday life” (Stenning et al. 2010: 37–38). In their production, Estonian rap pioneers made sure they manifested their belief in individual and artistic freedom – expected from a group of musicians experiencing a transition to post-Soviet freedom of speech, or as many artists put it, “total freedom”. They also positioned themselves within the commercial realm of Estonian popular music, which implicitly manifested their belief in economic freedom and free markets as well. Hence, the story of Estonian rap is also a story of privatization and of the re-constitution of Estonian citizens as consumers.

### Cool D: The First Hip-Hop Artist in Estonia?

The story of Estonian rap, as told by various hip-hop artists, most often starts with Cool D, the first hip-hop artist, who started making music in the early 1990s and has rhymed exclusively in Estonian ever since his first productions. I first met with Cool D in the summer of 2013. Although I knew that throughout his successful music career – still going strong in 2013 after 18 years and nine albums – he has continued working in radio, I was somewhat surprised when he proposed that we meet at his workplace. Since I was used to hip-hop artists preferring to meet at a coffee shop or take a walk during our conversations, an invitation to meet at a radio station caught me somewhat off guard. This helped me, however, to realize something characteristic about Estonian hip-hop artists: all of them need to have day jobs to support their music-making, and the more stable and profitable a job one has, the higher the quality of one's hip-hop production. Consequently, the artists whom I talked with at coffee shops or in parks were the ones working flexible hours or part-time, or who were completely unemployed, and they kept telling me stories about their struggles as hip-hop artists. Cool D, however, had always worked full-time – in the summer of 2013 he was working as a full-time sound designer and editor for one of the most successful commercial radio stations in Estonia – and thanks to his day job he had successfully managed to maintain his national visibility as a hip-hop musician since his debut album came out in 1995.

Waiting in the reception area at the radio station, I was somewhat nervous about meeting the first Estonian hip-hop artist, an artist whom several younger rappers had mentioned during our conversations as their most important role model. My anxious feeling disappeared as soon as I noticed Cool D approaching me – barefoot and with a friendly smile on his face. He asked in an extremely easygoing manner whether his humble office was enough for our conversation or whether he should investigate the availability of a conference room. Another generalization about the Estonian hip-hop community crystallized during that moment: despite their presumptuous, hyper-masculine, glamorous stage personas, all the hip-hop artists I have met are regular, down-to-earth people who answer their own phones and emails,

do their own grocery shopping, and drive their own cars – and in some cases ride their own bikes or use public transport. In other words, the idea of a hip-hop artist as an unreachable and wealthy superstar does not exist among Estonian youth due to the DIY production model and the absolute lack of a music industry structured around major labels and images of stardom.

We walked toward Cool D's office, and after settling in he shared many stories about his teenage years and early music-making. He took pride in the fact that he comes from a musical family and had been musical since childhood:

My parents decided to send me to a state school [in Tartu] that had a strong performing arts focus, especially music. Later I joined a boys' choir and a mixed choir. Also, as an after-school activity I learned how to play percussion at a community music school. Playing percussion rooted the sense of beat and rhythm in me – a song is only good when it has a good beat.

Cool D is the youngest of three brothers, and while growing up desired to do exactly what his older brothers were doing. When his brothers got into DJing at the end of the 1980s, Cool D followed their lead and started listening to lots of different musics. This is how he discovered hip-hop and decided to start making his own hip-hop in Estonian. Since his brothers both worked at the radio station – Cool D wished to work there as well but he was still at high school at the time – he had access to radio recording equipment and was able to ask his brothers to help him with his music production. Throughout the early 1990s, Cool D and his brothers were working on his first tracks, which culminated in 1995 with the release of his debut album.

Cool D's *O'Culo* is considered the first Estonian hip-hop album (cf. Karell 2004; Vaher 2008). Although released in 1995, Cool D had produced many of the sixteen tracks, including the album's title track "O'Culo", in 1994. The production techniques for "O'Culo", which features densely layered short samples, exemplify the kind of beat-making and rhyming that is a hallmark of Cool D's early work, as well as of much subsequent Estonian rap. First, Cool D produced his instrumental tracks by gluing together samples from foreign

hip-hop. Sometimes, the gluing was quite literal, since Cool D started out producing and recording using reel-to-reel technology. He described his early bootleg beat-making in July 2013:

I made everything myself. Since I didn't have access to any beat-making equipment, I started combining layers and layers of excerpts of foreign hip-hop beats that I had recorded from MTV, first with my reel-to-reel recorder and then with my double cassette player. It is really mind-blowing to think back to the technological scarcity in which I started making hip-hop in the early 1990s – there were no computers, so absolutely no beat-making software available, let alone samplers or anything like that.

Secondly, Cool D's Estonian-language rhymes boasted exclusively about his superior qualities as a rapper and as an übermasculine young man. The sentiment in the rhymes of "O'Culo" is an excellent example of this kind of excessive braggadocio (see Figure 1).

The individual, artistic, and economic freedom that Cool D promotes in his "O'Culo" by bragging about his womanising as well as his savvy business skills to "steal beats and make [his] own songs out of them" coincided with the rapid privatization process in Estonia. In the early 1990s, state-owned assets were distributed free of charge to the general public through vouchers, which instilled a sense of "everything is up

for grabs" and "staying poor is one's own fault" in Estonian national culture (cf. Gillies, Leimann, Peterson 2002). The transition from a Soviet command economy to a neoliberal economy was a complex process during which Estonian people started to think of themselves either as "winners" (for instance, the budding strata of nouveau riche, who made their fortunes through privatization transactions) or "losers". In other words, social and economic inequality was rapidly growing during the early 1990s. Significantly, the acquisition of cultural capital was almost as highly valued as the growth of one's economic capital, and the best way to display one's cultural capital was to associate oneself with anything "Western".

Besides choosing to make hip-hop, Cool D had accumulated cultural capital through his impressive technological expertise, both in terms of having access to high-quality sound-editing and recording equipment as well as being able to manipulate the equipment fluently. Releasing a sixteen-track debut album in 1995 was something only a musician with close connections to high-tech institutions such as a radio station or a recording studio could do – no performing artist was independently able to afford equipment during the depressed economy of the early 1990s. As mentioned above, Cool D's two older brothers worked at a radio station in Tartu and helped him, sometimes without their employer's permission, to mix and record his music. They also played his tracks on the radio, mostly without having per-

**Figure 1.** The first twelve lines of Cool D's "O'Culo" (1994).

Kas on veel sellist nagu CLD  
Ma olen Cool D ja ma ei aja jama  
O'culo – elu näitab, mis ma teen  
Hull litapoeg, kes läheb mööda teed

Ma varastan rütmi ja teen sellest loo

Sina ennast kasvõi üles poo  
Kui sulle ei meeldi, mida ma teen  
Siis Cool D ütleb – käi perse  
Kui sinu kallid mees tuleb minu juurde ja küsib  
Cool D, mida nüüd sa teed  
Siis ma ütlen, et ma kepin sinu naist  
Sinu ema ja su õde, kui sa teada tahad tõde

Could you ever find anybody like CLD  
I am Cool D and I don't bullshit  
O'culo – you will learn about what I do  
I am an awesome son of a bitch who is walking  
here  
I steal beats and make my own songs out of  
them  
You can even hang yourself  
If you don't like what I do  
And Cool D says to you – go fuck yourself  
When your dear man comes to me and asks  
Cool D, what are you doing now  
Then I reply that I am fucking your woman,  
your mother, and your sister, if you wish to  
know the whole truth

mission to do so. Cool D remembers the reaction of listeners after his songs were played on the radio:

When I started to get serious about my music, being inspired by Tone LOC, Beastie Boys, NWA, Ice Cube, Public Enemy, etc., my brothers who worked at a radio station helped me with equipment in order to mix and record my first tracks. They even played some of my tracks on the radio, which got them hugely in trouble since people thought it was outrageous to hear songs with such a vulgar message on the radio. Once, even the mayor [of Tartu] allegedly called to the radio station's director and complained about my music.

In 1995, Cool D released not only the very first Estonian hip-hop album but also the first Estonian hip-hop video. The video for "O'Culo" is shot in black and white at two locations: a construction site and a radio station. Employing both an outdoor and a restricted indoor space within the same video demonstrates the relentless desire to achieve "total freedom" and, more importantly, to display it. Cool D's decision to shoot his first video in the radio station filled with what was, at the time, an impressive amount and variety of high-quality technology is a clear sign of feeling the need to exhibit his acquired cultural and technological capital, a kind of social performance rapidly spreading among Estonian youth. Additionally, by using a construction space as the second location in the video – where he traverses scaffolding while rapping – Cool D symbolically positions himself as the builder of the Estonian hip-hop tradition. This taps into what Tricia Rose calls "the contestation over public space", which, as she argues, represents a significant way in which power relations within a hip-hop culture and rap are negotiated:

The politics of rap music involves the contestation over public space, the meanings, interpretations, and value of the lyrics and the music, and the investment of cultural capital. In short, it is not just what you say, it is where you can say it, how others react to it, and whether you have the power to command access to public space. (Rose 1994: 124).

To sum up, it is impossible to overestimate the importance of radio in the emergence of Estonian rap. The relatively low cost of making radio widely accessible to economically disadvantaged populations, as well as the Soviet propaganda machine's strategies in representing radio "as something useful, something everyday, something everybody must have and listen [to]" (Taylor 2005: 250), prefigured radio's status for the first Estonian hip-hop enthusiasts. For early artists such as Cool D, radio was the medium through which one got to know the sounds and stories of American hip-hop. Furthermore, it was radio that provided avid music listeners and neophyte musicians with new tracks and, as I shall discuss later, with raw musical material. In the midst of the grave post-independence economic depression of the early 1990s, with skyrocketing unemployment and no record stores to even dream about, it was most common to record music from the radio with one's tape recorder. With its unique combination of affordances, radio not only allowed hip-hop artists to get to know and physically acquire new sounds but also fuelled hip-hop aspirations based primarily on musical sound, not visual images. In Cool D's case, radio also offered a physical studio space in which a financially disadvantaged young musician could gain access to sound manipulation technology such as high-end microphones and reel-to-reel recorders.

### **"Rhyming in Estonian is really lame"**

Only a couple of hip-hop artists, while telling stories about the early days of Estonian rap, would concede that the celebrated "first Estonian rapper" Cool D was in fact perceived as a complete outsider during the early and mid-1990s. His outsider status was not so much about Cool D's geographical distance from Tallinn, where the hip-hop scene's core members lived – Cool D was born and raised in Tartu, about 180 kilometres away, and lived there until the end of the 1990s – but about his choice to rhyme in Estonian. His contemporaries all rhymed in English, and thought Cool D sounded "lame" with his Estonian rhymes. MC'Oll, Ove, and Droopy from Daraba Bastadz, a rap group from Pärnu, without explicitly naming Cool D, but clearly targeting his production, declared in an interview in 1997 that "rapping in a

foreign language sounds cool but as soon as one starts rhyming in Estonian, it gets really lame" (Valme 1997: 22).

Significantly, even when everything connected to "Russianness" was publicly condemned after 1991 – for Estonians everything "Soviet" had always been associated with "Russianness" – Russian-speaking rappers and their rhyming in Russian were considered cooler than Cool D. DJ Paul Oja, a leading hip-hop producer and DJ, is not alone in his opinion that Russophone hip-hop artists played a central role in the early history of hip-hop in Estonia (Oja 2007: 44–45):

During the early and mid-1990s, the majority of hip-hop artists in Tallinn were Russian-speakers. That makes sense, doesn't it, since Russian-speakers also comprise a large percentage of the population in Tallinn. Russian was also the most-used language in rapping, followed by English, while Cool D, the only artist rhyming in Estonian at that time, was considered an outsider and was mocked a lot because of his Estonian rhymes. Somehow, Russian really did sound damn good on a hip-hop beat and we, Estonians, admired the tough-looking and fast-rapping local Russians a lot during those early days.

Although Russian rappers were admired, Estonian-speaking hip-hop artists never rapped in Russian but chose to rhyme in English. All the tracks on the third Estonian hip-hop album – the first two were both by Cool D – were entirely in English. Released by Toe Tag, a rap group from Tallinn, *The Real Kuhnja*<sup>8</sup> *Homophobes* (1997) stood in stark contrast to Cool D's *O'culo* (1995) and *Sõnumid pimedusest* (*Messages From Darkness*; 1996). In addition to the English-language lyrics, the instrumental tracks on the album were not based on layered samples from foreign hip-hop but were digitally produced using music sequencing software.

It should be noted that, in comparison to the time when Cool D started making beats in the early 1990s, access to computers had significantly increased by 1997 when Toe Tag released their album. But as Genka, one of the members of Toe Tag, explained, he and his friends were never into cutting and pasting foreign hip-hop sounds in

the first place. Genka recorded his first track by recording his acoustic music-making:

I recorded my first track at home with two reel-to-reel players. First, I recorded myself playing "the drum part" on our couch cushions. When it was finished, I played it back while recording my rapping and my playing some kind of riff on the guitar with the other reel-to-reel player.

Genka also shared with me precise details about the foundation of Toe Tag and how beat-making rose to a new level:

Toe Tag was founded [in 1996] when I met Paul Oja, who owned a computer – a very rare thing at the time. It was an Amiga 500 and he also had Octamed on it. This was a very big deal and helped us start making beats of a much higher quality than my reel-to-reel attempts had ever been able to.

In describing how Toe Tag's first track was recorded, the role of radio in Estonian hip-hop history becomes even more prominent. DJ Paul Oja and Genka were the two founding members of Toe Tag and had divided up their responsibilities as band members. DJ Paul Oja's task was to work on the beats, or "backgrounds" (*taustad*) as DJ Paul Oja and other Estonian hip-hop producers referred to beats, and Genka came up with the rhymes after hearing Oja's beats. In late 1996, Revo, an MC, joined Toe Tag as its third member. Revo had access to a radio station in a suburb of Tallinn, which is how Toe Tag members created their first recorded track titled "Depend Upon". Genka shared the story with me in 2011:

When Revo joined us, we got to go give an interview on TOP radio in Pirita – Revo had connections in that radio station. After the interview, we had a chance to perform one of our tracks "Depend Upon" live and they recorded it. So, Paul had taken an audiocassette with the beats along, the radio people played his beats and we rapped live in the studio. That is how we recorded our first track.

### "Rhyming in Estonian is the only right way"

Soon after Toe Tag released *The Real Kuhnja Homophobes* in 1997, Kozy, one of the most prominent figures in the hip-hop scene thanks to his

<sup>8</sup> In Russian, "kuhnja" (кухня) means "kitchen".

weekly radio show, got an offer that gave him the idea to form an “Estonian rap superband”. In early 1998, Kozy was approached by an Estonian Red Cross representative with a request to create a song that would promote drug-free partying among Estonian youth. The song was supposed to premiere in April 1998 at a college fair for high school students in Tallinn.

Kozy only had a couple of months to come up with the finished track. He had previous experience as an MC but thought that a larger group of well-known MCs would have more influence on listeners. Therefore, Kozy summoned the three most respected MCs at the time and an up-and-coming producer to form the collective A-Rühm (A-Team). Kozy chose Cool D and Toe Tag’s Genka and Revo to work together, but their perspectives on Estonian-language hip-hop were diametrically opposed. The language issue was the first hurdle for the team to overcome.

As I described above, Cool D had rhymed in Estonian since his very first tracks. Instead of hoping to gain access to wider markets by singing in English, Cool D was determined to rhyme in Estonian and include in his rhymes a significant number of expressions from the social world around him in order to “publicly think about, enact, or perform [his Estonian] identity” (Berger 2003: xv). Scholars have noted that some languages present inherent challenges for hip-hop-style rhyming; for instance, Noriko Manabe discusses the “lack of a rhyming tradition and lack of accents” in Japanese (Manabe 2006: 29). In comparison with Japanese, Estonian-language rappers had relatively compatible linguistic resources to work with; Cool D could draw on a poetry tradition that focuses especially on end rhymes and dates back to the mid-nineteenth century (see Merilai 2003).

As Cool D explained to me in 2013, his immediate devotion to Estonian was as much about him being self-critical about his English as it was about making a full connection with audiences:

I dropped the idea of rhyming in English before I had even really tried it out. I realized immediately that I will never be even decently good rapping in English, even if I practised it 24/7. Most importantly, I was making my music for Estonian audiences, so it felt right to rhyme only in Estonian. I was confused, perhaps even annoyed, when some guys who even several years later [in the mid- and late

1990s] still rapped in English – I really thought it was just plain imitation and there was nothing original in it. Sure, I remember that all sorts of musicians, rock bands most often, felt the need to sing in English – I guess the influence from foreign artists was so great and making music in Estonian was seen as too unsophisticated or something.

To reconcile Cool D with Toe Tag’s Genka and Revo as “imitators” with “nothing original” to say was the most urgent matter for Kozy. As a member of A-Rühm, but also the initiator of the project, Kozy laid down the law, insisting that A-Rühm should rhyme in Estonian only. After all, as he put it, the anti-drug track was commissioned by an Estonian organization and was meant to target partying teenagers in Estonia and to explain local things in a local language. Kozy explained the situation:

My own first rhyming attempts were actually also in Estonian like Cool D’s – the difference is that I never recorded them. And I had always been into Estonian rhymes. Even when I respected my friends’ decision to rhyme in English, I always thought people should express their ideas and opinions in their native language. Anyway, the very next day after A-Rühm decided to rhyme in Estonian, Genka showed me his first Estonian-language rhymes and these were so awesome as if he had been rhyming in Estonian forever and I couldn’t understand why he had ever wasted any time with English.

Genka, without being explicit about the “one point” when he realized it was necessary to switch from English into Estonian in his rhyming, described the pivotal moment in Estonian hip-hop history as follows:

Since in the early 1990s there was no Estonian-language hip-hop available, it felt logical to rhyme in English since we listened to huge amounts of English-language hip-hop. At one point I realized, however, that when we want to mediate our thoughts and stories the most believable way possible, we have to rhyme in our mother tongue. As soon as I switched [in 1998], I have never gone back and rhymed in English any more – rhyming in Estonian is the only right way. It is also so cool to observe

how some of your expressions that you create in your lyrical production are adopted by the listeners and become a natural part of young people's vernacular.

Language conflict resolved, the result of working together for two months in February and March of 1998 was A-Rühm's first track "Viimane lumi" (Last Snow). The track featured alternating MCs in each verse, DJ Critikal's fast-paced, bass-heavy beats, and frequent police siren samples; it became an instant hit. An unprecedented amount of radio airplay for "Last Snow" marked a tipping point for Estonian hip-hop, bringing it into the sphere of mainstream pop.

Kozy's rhymes are an invitation to contemplate how rap operates in the Estonian public sphere and functions in youth cultures. At one point, Kozy declares:

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**Figure 2.** Four lines delivered by Kozy from A-Rühm's "Viimane lumi" (Last Snow).

See pole siin mõni vanemlik leksioon  
 Konkreetseid on räpid, riimid ja poos  
 Ma pole mingi maailmaparandaja  
 Kuid rokin mikrit, sest näib miskit öelda  
 on vaja

[This is not trying to be a parental lecture  
 It is just that my flow, rhymes, and pose are  
 straightforward  
 I am definitely not some kind of idealist  
 but I rock the mic since there are some things  
 I need to say]

Within these two couplets, Kozy determined for the wider audience what Estonian rap stands for and sounds like – from this track onward, Estonian youth associated Estonian rap with profane language, aggressive-sounding vocals, and a boomy, low-frequency bass drum section. Additionally, starting with "Last Snow", A-Rühm members asserted the legitimacy and authenticity of their artistry as "straightforward" and mature, though at the same time trying not to be "parental".

### "Popmuusik" versus "Pop Muzik"

Pleasantly surprised by their success, Kozy, Cool D, Genka, Revo, and DJ Critikal decided to start work-

ing on another co-production. After only two months, in the summer of 1998, another track by A-Rühm was being played multiple times a day on radio stations all over Estonia. The new single "Popmuusik" (Pop Musician) was even more explicit than the previous hit "Last Snow" had been. Once again, A-Rühm stirred up debates about freedom of speech and, more specifically, about hip-hop as a vulgar genre. "Pop Musician's" explicit rhymes were seen as playing on the border of wittiness and inappropriateness and were constantly at the centre of public discourse. Young Estonians enjoyed the track immensely with its derogatory rhymes and effectively produced beats, and voted it into second place on the annual Estonian national radio programme "Aastahitt" (Hit of the Year) in January 1999. The catchy sing-along chorus, which asked a mainstream pop musician not to "yell into my ear" and revealed a plan to "murder you, pop musician", quickly became an integral part of youth vernacular in 1998 (see Figure 3). Although foreign hip-hop had appeared in the top five in earlier years, including Coolio's "Gangsta's Paradise" in 1995, A-Rühm's "Pop Musician" was the first Estonian-language hip-hop that made it to the most prominent chart, which ranks the forty most popular local and foreign songs from the previous year based on listeners' votes.

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**Figure 3.** Chorus of A-Rühm's "Popmuusik" (Pop Musician).

Ära karju mulle kõrva, popmuusik  
 plaanitsen su mõrva, popmuusik  
 lase endal tasku, popmuusik  
 päkapikudisko, popmuusik

[Don't yell into my ear, pop musician  
 I am planning to murder you, pop musician  
 Piss into your pocket, pop musician  
 Brainless disco, pop musician]

The huge popularity of "Pop Musician", which on the charts was beaten only by a rock ballad, demonstrated how the hip-hop artists from A-Rühm had savvily carved out a previously uninhabited marketing niche in Estonian mainstream pop and promoted themselves as musicians who "express their own opinions and ideas", even when the expression is disrespectful and rude. As

Kozy put it in an interview given around the time “Pop Musicians” was released (Jänese 1999):

We don’t claim that pop music is bad in and of itself and that we are not part of it. The issue [that made them release the song] here is about the quality of this fucking Estonian pop music. It is made by a bunch of brainless guys and there is even no hope in sight that they will start to come up with anything original that would express their own opinions and ideas.

Genka continued Kozy’s criticism and declared in the same interview: “Listen, it can’t be a good band if it has a guy somewhere dictating what can or can’t be done” (ibid.). One could not imagine a more value-laden declaration of the individual, artistic, and economic “total freedom” that was becoming the norm in the re-independent and neoliberally inclined Estonia.

Paul Théberge reminds us how “an understanding of the various issues relating music and technical innovation cannot be separated from a broader analysis of contemporary social and economic relations” (1997: 5). Therefore, what is additionally significant about “Pop Musician”, besides Kozy’s and Genka’s statements, is how well they exemplify two simultaneously evolving processes in the Estonian popular culture and socio-economic realms in the 1990s. First, “Pop Musician” represented the localization of globally circulating modes of artistic freedom, which A-Rühm based on the genre of Estonian-language hip-hop, with its explicit use of foreign samples and anti-authoritarian, subversive rhymes, and on the adoption of independent, artistically “all-in-one” public personas to Estonian pop culture.

Secondly, in addition to shifting Estonian-language hip-hop from underground to mainstream status, A-Rühm introduced new (digital) techniques for producing and talking about the creation of popular musics in the Estonian context. These new techniques, made possible by “truly amazing technological developments coupled with a major price drop in digital recording and

signal-processing equipment” (Moorefield 2005: xvii), eroded the traditional separation between performer, engineer, and producer, making the artist(s) the embodiment of all three.

### DJ Critikal and His Beats

DJ Critikal’s<sup>9</sup> beats for “Last Snow” and “Pop Musician”, produced in 1998, illustrate the technological processes transforming Estonian popular culture and the public sphere in general. When DJ Critikal became interested in digital music-making<sup>10</sup> around 1994, he did not even own a computer. In late 1999, the first A-Rühm album *Laulmata jäänud laulud (Unsung Songs)*, which included “Last Snow” and “Pop Musician”, was released. The five years between making his first beats and completing a full album that he himself produced, recorded, and mastered, while holding a day-job during all of those years, demonstrates both a rapid increase in the availability of technological and financial tools and the committed, hard-working nature of the producer. In an interview, DJ Critikal has described the conditions and equipment at the beginning of his career as a producer:

First I didn’t even own a computer – I visited homies at night to learn stuff on their computer, it was a great time. I think it was around 1994 and 1995. I actually tried to produce some sort of primitive drum and bass stuff first. It was very difficult to make hip-hop stuff at that time: We couldn’t afford any decent sound cards, not to mention any mics or studio time. Somehow, I did make lots of beats but they remained without vocals for the most part. The program I was using was SoundClub, very old-school stuff. We didn’t have a sound card, we just connected a 286 computer directly into the amp with the Covox plug. [After] a few years with SoundClub I learned how to use a tracker called FT2 [FastTracker 2]. This is what I worked with to make beats for A-Rühm’s [album] *Unsung Songs*.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> DJ Critikal currently performs mostly under the stage name Bert On Beats and is signed under this name with the Berlin-based label Man Recordings.

<sup>10</sup> DJ Critikal grew up studying piano at a community music school.

<sup>11</sup> Interview available at the Estonian hip-hop community eh.ee website: [http://www.eh.ee/?main\\_id=13&text\\_id=123&highlight=DJ,Critikal](http://www.eh.ee/?main_id=13&text_id=123&highlight=DJ,Critikal) (last access 21.08.2018).

Working with FastTracker 2, DJ Critikal opens “Pop Musician” with a signature riff that reappears in the chorus as well as in the bridge, sampling (or imitating) a synth guitar riff from the 1979 international megahit “Pop Muzik” by the British artist M. Considering that “Pop Musician” aimed at drawing attention to the low level of Estonian pop music, it was a conscious choice to use a riff from “Pop Muzik” that critiques the mindless consumption of pop music. Here, by sampling from “Pop Muzik”, DJ Critikal bolsters the local meaning of resistance by drawing on a global artefact, acquiring prestige and credibility among Estonian youth who valued everything “Western”. At the same time, it is noteworthy that DJ Critikal’s engagement with “Pop Muzik” preceded a boom in sampling from and covering this song by many internationally prominent artists.<sup>12</sup> This shows how, by taking advantage of the technological resources becoming available in Estonia in the mid-1990s, DJ Critikal with his choice of riff for “Pop Musician” employs his deep knowledge of previous popular music styles as well as a refined sense for a catchy hook, to which his broad listening experience definitely contributes. He is also extremely up to date with global trends in production techniques in terms of putting together beats and mastering them within a short period of time:

You know, I am used to going through different stages during the production process as a whole – beat making and post-production are very connected. Of course, I do listen to the finished product later on and sometimes do a new mixdown, but usually I like to work from the start to the end within a single breath, as they say.<sup>13</sup>

This kind of working style became more and more common among (electronic) musicians during the 1990s. As Virgil Moorefield has observed:

[A] standard procedure is to [...] disappear into the studio for two weeks or so, “work twenty-hour days, sleep four or five hours, then get back to work”. [...] This method of working is reminiscent of how Giorgio Moroder and other disco producers went about making

music in the late seventies; at the time it was unusual, but now it’s the way most pop music is created (Moorefield 2005: 96).

The four-beat-long riff appearing in “Pop Muzik” at 0:07 appears in “Pop Musician” unaltered – DJ Critikal uses the riff consisting of an ascending minor seventh and a descending major third (G $\sharp$ -F $\sharp$ -D $\sharp$ ; two beats, one beat, one beat, respectively) in the same key and in the same timbre of electric guitar blended with synthesized sounds. It is another conscious move to keep the riff as close to the original sound as possible, since it is possible in FastTracker to lower or raise a pitch. However, DJ Critikal has slowed down the tempo in comparison with “Pop Muzik” from 120 bpm to 100 bpm. It is possible that the change in tempo was necessary to give MCs a more relaxed framework in which to rap comprehensibly as well as to allow Estonian audiences to perceive the layers of kick drum, snare, sleigh bells, and a bass line closer to 90 bpm, which, as one Estonian producer explained, is believed to be most typical and “authentic” for a hip-hop track among Estonian hip-hop practitioners and followers.

DJ Critikal, being one of the two main hip-hop producers – alongside DJ Paul Oja – in the mid- and late 1990s was certainly a role model for every aspiring beatmaker and producer. As he expressed in an interview that appeared on the Estonian hip-hop community ehh.ee website, “To create and record a hip-hop track, you don’t need to be some sort of rocket scientist at all. A computer and a mic will do very well! It is even feasible to use your cell phone to make beats.”<sup>14</sup> In another online interview for the ehh.ee website, he encouraged young musicians to search for their original sound:

In terms of inventing the ways to make the technology work for you and your ideas for sound, it is important to dig real deep on the internet to find all the necessary instructions, since almost every trick for any kind of sound has been invented already, let’s face it. All you need to do is find the instructions, which can sometimes take forever. And during this quest

<sup>12</sup> Tricky, 3rd Party, Powerman 5000. Additionally, the song has been covered in the musical *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (2006).

<sup>13</sup> Interview available at: [http://ehh.ee/?main\\_id=13&text\\_id=163&highlight=DJ,Critikal](http://ehh.ee/?main_id=13&text_id=163&highlight=DJ,Critikal).

<sup>14</sup> Interview available at: [http://ehh.ee/?main\\_id=13&text\\_id=163&highlight=DJ,Critikal](http://ehh.ee/?main_id=13&text_id=163&highlight=DJ,Critikal).

for instructions and playing around with your software, you might end up finding your “own” sound and wouldn’t need these instructions any more after all.<sup>15</sup>

DJ Critikal’s statements about the accessibility of making beats while stressing the need to be methodical and creative inspired a whole generation of young men who started to play around with various types of music sequencer software and make music. His beats paved the way for Estonian youth – mostly attuned to and idealizing Euro-American forms of popular music, including United States hip-hop – to become receptive to Estonian-language hip-hop, which they could identify with as their own. DJ Critikal’s beats certainly boosted a positive reception for his music since they sounded very similar to any other hip-hop artist’s work from the United Kingdom or United States. The all-encompassing need prevalent in Estonian society, especially during the 1990s, to become an accepted part of “the West” expressed itself in the popular music scene through the conscious and diligent work of producing and consuming high-quality “Western-sounding” hip-hop beats.

By the time A-Rühm released the DJ Critikal-produced *Unsung Songs* in 1999, the Estonian-language hip-hop pioneer Cool D had already released four albums,<sup>16</sup> and Toe Tag with their producer DJ Paul Oja one.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, *Unsung Songs* can be regarded as the watershed in Estonian-language hip-hop that paved the way for MCs and producers such as Tommyboy and Chalice in the early 2000s. The later “all-in-one” hip-hop musicians were the leading figures in the “nationalization” of hip-hop in Estonia, as well as in providing the sounds of Estonian-language hip-hop with new and diverse qualities.

## Conclusions

Estonian hip-hop offers an illuminating case study for investigating participation in hip-hop as

a simultaneously global and local cultural form. As a by-product of the re-independence of the Estonian state in 1991, uncensored mediascapes reached Estonians more freely than ever before and resulted in the rapid restructuring of local cultural and popular spheres. As I discuss in this article, the large-scale privatization process that accompanied the transition from a Soviet command economy to a free market economy and the adoption of neoliberal economic principles by the political elite heavily influenced early Estonian hip-hop artists, who aimed to express in their production and performances their belief in individual and artistic freedom, or “total freedom”, as the artists themselves labelled these aspirations. Starting in 1991, early hip-hop artists modelled their appearance, sounds, and profane lyrical messages on globally successful West Coast gangsta rap as a sign of their cool “Westernness”. Hip-hop artists in Estonia, as elsewhere around the world, aspire to connect with trends and ideas from global hip-hops, but they do so using local materials: local language, lyrical themes and culture-specific samples combine to create unique sounds and statements. As many scholars have shown, the meaning of hip-hop differs radically among various host cultures, each with its own sonic and cultural voice. In Japan, for instance, hip-hop is embraced as a means of distinguishing oneself from the homogeneous mainstream and as a way to rebel against parents (Condry 2006). In Tanzania, young hip-hop artists try to reject the perception that everyone who makes or listens to hip-hop is a hooligan and use rhymes to educate their listeners about HIV/AIDS (Perullo 2005). Second-generation Turkish youths in Germany use hip-hop to address their lack of civil rights and a prevailing xenophobia (Cheeseman 1998). Hip-hop artists in Estonia make their mark by participating simultaneously in a globalized hip-hop culture and a local artistic project, expressing their recently acquired “total freedom”.

<sup>15</sup> Interview available at: [http://www.ehh.ee/?main\\_id=13&text\\_id=123&highlight=DJ,Critikal](http://www.ehh.ee/?main_id=13&text_id=123&highlight=DJ,Critikal).

<sup>16</sup> O’Culo (1995), *Sõnumid pimedusest* (*Messages from Darkness*, 1996), *Saaga läheb edasi* (*The Saga Continues*, 1998), *Pahade planeet* (*Planet of the Bads*, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> *The Real Kuhnja Homophobes* (1997).

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## Eesti hiphopi kujunemine 1990ndatel

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Triin Vallaste

Käesolevas artiklis on vaatluse all hiphopi kui globaalse eneseväljendusvormi algusaastad ja praktika Eestis. Hiphopi ja selle osana ka räppmuusika indigeniseerimine Eestis algas 1980. aastate keskel ja langeb kokku Nõukogude Liidu kokkuvarisemise protsessiga. Enne 1991. aastat toetasid räppmuusika arengut Eestis eelkõige ülemaailmsed tsenseerimata meediaväljaanded, mida levitati ja jälgiti Eestis mitteametlike kanalid pidi. Pärast Nõukogude Liidu lagunemist domineerisid Eestis sotsiaalsed diskursused, mis soosisid Euro-Ameerika maailma ja selle väärtuste kiiret ülevõtmist. Räppmuusika leviku ja viljelemise nurgakiviks alates 1991. aastast olid ametliku tsensuuri kaotamine ja infotehnoloogia kiire areng. Hiphopi ja räppmuusika algusaastad ja praktikate mitmekesisus annavadki olulise sissevaate mitmetesse üleminekuprotsessidesse 1980. aastate lõpu ja 1990. aastate Eestis, millest olulisim on üleminek kodukootud tehnoloogilistelt praktikatelt ametlikele ja järjest vabamalt kättesaadavatele.

Räppmuusika kujunemist ja mitmekesistumist Eestis on oluline analüüsida ka 1990. aastate alguse muutliku majanduskliima kontekstis. Üleminek Nõukogude Liidu plaanimajanduselt kapitalistlikule vabaturule põhjustas majanduslikke raskusi ja sotsiaalset kihistumist. Samas tagasid mitmed riiklikud infotehnoloogia initsiatiivid vaba ligipääsu internetile ja avasid tee arvutipõhiste muusikategemise protsessidele. Räppmuusika esimeste tegijate (Cool D, Toe Tag, A-Rühm) loomingu kajastuvad mitmed 1990. aastate majanduslikud ja sotsiaal-kultuurilised diskursused, näiteks majanduskasvu ebaõrdne jaotus, tarbimiskultuuri võimendumine ja Euroopa Liiduga liitumise ettevalmistamise protsess. Eestikeelse räpi esimeste tegijate jaoks oli oluline järgida USA ja Lääne-Euroopa hiphopi eeskujusid ja trende. Näiteks räpiti algusaastatel tihti inglise keeles. Räpiskeene laienemise ja mitmekesistumise tagajärjel hakati aga üha enam tähelepanu pöörama kohalike olude ja eripärade kaasamisele: räpiti eesti keeles ja kohalikest sündmustest, biidimeistrid kasutasid oma biitides kohaliku päritoluga sümboleid (näiteks varasemast popmuusikast, filmidest, raadio- ja telesaadetest). Lühikese ajaga sai räppmuusikast Eestis iseseisva helilise ja kultuurilise tähendusega eneseväljendusvorm.