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The Bridge: 50 Years of Hip Hop. 2021–2022

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PODCAST REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS DE BALADODIFFUSION

The Bridge: 50 Years of Hip Hop.

2021–2022. Hosted by Nasir Jones and Minya Oh. Produced by Spotify and Mass Appeal Records.

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Ever wonder what hip hop legends talk about behind closed doors? *The Bridge: 50 Years of Hip Hop*, a podcast hosted by rap legend Nasir “Nas” Jones and radio personality and journalist Minya “Miss Info” Oh, dives into candid conversations with hip hop legends to amplify untold stories. *The Bridge* symbolizes a connection between the past, present, and ever-growing future of hip hop artists. It is an invitation for listeners to be excited about the future of hip hop music and culture. The show premiered on November 16, 2021, with weekly drops until June 21, 2022, creating a total of thirty-four episodes. Although the series is now on hiatus, the co-hosts explore where hip hop culture is headed and remain eager to be an integral part of its constant evolution.

The show is produced by Spotify and Mass Appeal Records. Each episode is titled after its guest, providing a snapshot of each artist invited to have a conversation. This allows listeners to interact with the series prior to clicking play, aiding listeners to binge listen, sporadically listen to their favourite artists, or to introduce themselves to someone new. Listeners can also access short video clips of select interviews on Spotify’s YouTube channel.

Hip hop music first emerged in the South Bronx neighbourhood of New York

City in the early 1970s. The series explores the fifty-year history of the musical genre that produced five decades of musicians who have carried on and reimaged the sounds and culture of hip hop. *The Bridge* forms connections between artists that created the urgent and constant reinvention of hip hop as an art form from the 1980s to the present. The hosts have conversations with prominent musicians of the 1980s and 1990s, including Roxanne Shante, Doug E. Fresh, and DJ Jazzy Jeff. They interview artists who have reinvented themselves to transcend time and remain relevant fixtures in hip hop culture—Snoop Dogg, Mary J. Blige, and Idris Elba. Oh and Nas also show appreciation for newer artists, like Cordae and Burna Boy. The episodes that I have selected to review highlight the many metaphorical bridges built by hip hop music and culture. The reviewed episodes are discussed chronologically to demonstrate the expansive conversations, themes, and guests that contribute to the show’s overarching theme of hip hop’s fifty-year evolution and future.

The Bridge is hosted by two friends with a shared passion for hip hop history, culture, and the future of hip hop. Minya Oh, a self-described “Korean girl from Chicago,” began writing music reviews as an intern under the pen name “Shorty” at Source Magazine. The “bridge” between her and Nas began to develop in 1994 when she reviewed his album *Illmatic*. During the first episode of the series, Oh reflects on her experience listening to *Illmatic* on a “bright yellow Sony Walkman.” As a music reviewer, Oh awarded the album

the esteemed “Five Mic” honour, writing, “Now, I’m not one to sweat the next man, but... I must maintain that this is one of the best hip hop albums I have ever heard.” The podcast’s title *The Bridge* refers to the legendary Queensbridge Houses, a public housing development in the Long Island City neighborhood of Queens, New York City. This is a place that triggers nostalgic memories for Nas, as listeners are invited into his early introduction to hip hop as a young person immersed in his neighbourhood’s creativity.

During the first episode, the series sets the tone of intimate discourse surrounding snapshots of hip hop history. Nas and Oh are joined by Nas’s younger brother Jabari Jones, aka “Jungle,” as they discuss their journey “both before and after that first step into greatness.” Growing up with a father who was a musician, Nas reflects on the profound impact music had on him at an early age as he states, “Hip hop was the first thing I breathed in the morning and the last thing I heard when I fell asleep” (02:48–02:54). Nas and Jabari discuss shared experiences, ranging from escaping gunshots in the park during a live hip hop concert as kids to their wild and “destructive” ways as young talent in a big industry. They became known for their huge entourage and partying ways to the extent that the Notorious B.I.G. asked Nas, “How come a fly dude like you— your parties are so crazy? I can’t go to them” (29:55–30:04).

Beyond moments of their own personal hip hop culture experiences, the first episode lays the foundation of connections to come for the series. As the hosts and their guests reach back to the past to envision the future of hip hop, moments of reminiscence become part of the core

of the series. For example, during the episode, Oh asks, “What makes someone a legendary artist?” Nas emphatically centers the group Run DMC as hip hop pioneers whose novel approach to rapping intersected with their take on fashion, style, and personal branding. This moment foreshadows a later episode where Nas recalls searching for Rev Run’s name in the Yellow Pages as a kid in 1983. In episode 10, the hosts are joined by Rev Run as he discusses his journey as an eighteen-year-old trying his hand at a new genre of music to becoming hip hop royalty alongside group members Jam Master Jay and DMC. The podcast series makes it accessible for listeners to engage with their favourite artists; it is the 2023 equivalent of kids flipping through the Yellow Pages to access an artist.

The Bridge highlights the influences of sound that extend far beyond artists in New York City. The show amplifies the metaphorical *bridging* of hip hop connecting southern sounds, West Coast rap, and northeastern pioneers of the genre. In episode 19, Nas and Oh sit down with Yolanda “Yo-Yo” Whitaker, whom Nas describes as a young woman rapper “who had what it took to hang with the emcee that many would consider to be the best at the moment.” Originally from Compton, California, Yo-Yo got her start in the 1990s as a protégé under hip hop legend Ice Cube. Here, listeners gain a West Coast perspective of hip hop twenty years into its legacy.

The podcast also exposes the pain and heartbreak hip hop culture can elicit. What stands out most in episode 19 is the candid conversation around the ongoing stigmas women face in the industry, a fact that motivated Yo-Yo to “divorce hip

hop.” Oh goes on to assert that “a lot of parts of being a woman had to be hidden.” This is one example of the many dynamic conversations highlighting the struggles of being a female in hip hop; bridging the gap between gender and respect within the industry. Throughout the series, listeners can expect to learn about the humbling, often unspoken, experiences behind the glitz and glamour of chart-topping hits, awards, and parties. Nas touches on the role of the artist in being intentional with evolving through the rise of stardom, saying: “The celebration is over. I’m in the game now. Now it’s time to get behind the wheel ... and really turn this thing around and make it professional, make it right.”

The core of the podcast series is the intersections of the past, present, and future of hip hop. The emphasis on the future of hip hop is illustrated in episode 33, titled after its guest Joey Bada\$\$, which offers what Oh calls a “refreshing, honest dialogue between two emcees.” Raised in a Caribbean family from Brooklyn, New York, Bada\$\$ reflects on the empowerment he felt growing up in the shadow of hip hop, listening to Jay Z, Nas, and the Notorious B.I.G., explaining, “For me, I like to represent the top tier, you know what I mean? The highest level or just the rawest purest form of it.” The episode explores how Bada\$\$ has managed to connect his passion as a musician to his Oscar award-winning acting career and details his transition from underground to mainstream hip hop honours. Joey Bada\$\$ articulates the ever relevant state of hip hop music, saying, “As long as the world is moving, we’ll have shit to rap about.” Both the hosts and guests express confidence in the longevity and creativity

that hip hop continues to spark in artists and listeners fifty years on.

The Bridge captures pivotal moments that Nas and Oh took part in, witnessed from a distance, or had no clue had ever taken place within the fifty-year span of hip hop. *The Bridge* does not limit itself to only discussing the past fifty years of music but looks ahead to the next fifty years to come. Each podcast episode feels like a warm and welcoming reunion among friends. The show offers a space for artists to control their narrative, speak their truth, and discuss their influence on hip hop culture. 🌿