



LIFE LESSONS HIP-HOP

50 empowering lessons on creativity, self-help and mental wellbeing from hip-hop's most influential voices.

Grant Brydon has interviewed some of the biggest names in hip-hop, including Pharrell Williams, J. Cole, Flo Milli, Big Sean and Dreezy. Inside, he shares inspirational advice gleaned from these one-on-one interviews to help you take control of your own narrative and make simple outlook changes with major positive consequences.

"Grant Brydon compiles many of the major keys from some of the most prolific voices in hip-hop and draws a through-line to the hearts of their success stories... An entertaining and informative read" – Kathy Landoli, author of *God Save the Queens: The Essential History of Women in Hip-Hop*

"A brilliant tapestry of story and artistry by a seasoned journalist whose love for hip hop flourishes" – Ciesay, co-founder of PLACES+FACES

**50 REFLECTIONS
ON CREATIVITY,
MOTIVATION,
WELLBEING
AND MORE**



LIFE LESSONS
HIP-HOP



£14.99



ISBN 978-0-2415-6708-1

Printed in Slovakia

9 780241 567081

FSC

Copyright © Dorling Kindersley Limited 2022

GRANT BRYDON

**FOREWORD BY
BRANDON 'JINX' JENKINS**

LIFE LESSONS
FROM HIP-HOP

Copyright © Dorling Kindersley Limited 2022

Copyright © Dorling Kindersley Limited 2022

LIFE LESSONS
FROM HIP-HOP

GRANT BRYDON



CONTENTS

Foreword	8	Chapter 3 Authenticity	40
Introduction	10	SZA Decide Who You're Going to Be	42
Chapter 1 Motivation	14	J.I.D Get Comfortable in Your Own Skin	44
J. Cole Define Success	16	Kari Faux Don't Look for Validation	46
Joey Bada\$\$ Everybody's Success is Different	18	Wikt Embrace What Makes You Different	48
Flo Milli Commit to Inspiration	20	Chapter 4 Reinvention	50
Lil Peep It Doesn't Take Much	22	Mac Miller Reinvent Yourself	52
Kaash Paige Be a Leader	24	Denzel Curry Switch It Up	54
Chapter 2 Creativity	26	Trippie Redd Be Distinctive	56
Travis Scott Embrace Your Influences	28	Chapter 5 Mental Wellbeing	58
070 Shake Create Feelings	30	Big Sean Take Time Off	60
Kenny Beats Don't Over Think Shit	32	Big Sean Talk to Someone	62
BROCKHAMPTON Don't Be Afraid to Start Over	34	Noname Get Out of Your Own Head	64
Ebro Darden Don't Lose the Connection	36	Isaiah Rashad Embrace Escapism	66
Cam'ron Allow Ideas to Pollinate	38	Dreezy Manifest Confidence	68
		Baby Tate Be Kind to Yourself	70

Copyright © Dorling Kindersley Limited 2022

Chapter 6 Balance	72	Chapter 9 Focus	104
Big K.R.I.T. Maintain a Good Work/Life Balance	74	Nas Focus on What's Important	106
Smino Unplugging is the Move	76	Anderson .Paak Pay Attention to Detail	108
Joe Kay Maintain a Healthy Body and Mind	78	Rick Ross Deliver the Best Product You Can	110
Chapter 7 Relationships	80	Cardi B 4000 Work Small	112
Pharrell Williams Be Empathic	82	Freddie Gibbs Integrity is Timeless	114
NIGO The True Meaning of Collaboration	84	Chapter 10 Resilience	116
Combat Jack Make People Feel Comfortable	86	Kehlani Hard Work Beats Talent When Talent Doesn't Work Hard	118
Gucci Mane Be the Ultimate Connector	88	Action Bronson Don't Be Discouraged	120
Boldy James Family is Everything	90	Westside Gunn Go Against the Grain	122
slowthai Let People Know How You Feel	92	Wiz Khalifa Be Open to Opportunity	124
Chapter 8 Patience	94	Chapter 11 Curiosity	126
Danny Brown Learn to Sit With It	96	Nipsey Hussle Be a Student of the Game	128
Future Let Them Catch Up	98	Pusha T Embrace Change	130
Snoh Aalegra Learn from the Journey	100	Swizz Beatz Get Out of the Box	132
Baby Tate The Power of Boredom	102	Pharrell Williams Stay Curious	134
		About the author and illustrator	136
		Mental health resources	138
		Acknowledgments	139
		Index	140

FOREWORD

BY BRANDON ‘JINX’ JENKINS

I can't remember the exact quote, but I think podcaster Taxstone who something like, "You can raise a kid on Jadakiss lyrics." Man, I felt that shit. Growing up in New Jersey in the 1990s and 2000s, I was bombarded with heavy doses of lyric-packed raps from some of the East Coast's greatest emcees. The era was brimming with artists who wanted to make you dance but—more importantly for me—the genre was also home to self-appointed professors and autobiographers ready to share instructions to live by: The LOX, Mobb Deep, Cam'ron, Biggie, Hov—too many to name off the dome.

Even though I was often listening to music with friends, and discussing the lyrics, this relationship with the music felt singular, as if the advice was only being shared with me, from the artists I chose to listen to. My own compass.

Later, the illegal beauty of Napster proved to me that this genius lived everywhere, beyond the jurisdiction of my region and immediate taste. Getting

older, more intelligent, more articulate, and more traveled, opened me up to conversations with others that revealed they too were inheriting wisdom from young men and women in the culture. And not just in the music. It was in the magazines, the radio interviews, in the liner notes of the albums. It was everywhere.

Hip-hop plays in all these spaces. It's not just a soundtrack or a groove to dance to. In its full form, it's a school of thought, damn near a religion. And its participants are both instructor and student: Clergy and congregation. It's that same beautiful dynamic that is as much utility as it is ornament. For all its desire and decoration, hip-hop is home to a growing set of schematics about how to go about (and how not to go about) this thing we call life. How to get up, get out, and get something. How to maintain your stance. How to pivot at life's most important junctures. How to look in the mirror and be cool with the person looking back.

This practice isn't strictly from the mouths of emcees when they're confined to the recording booth; it's ingrained in all of us who love this shit, at all times. We are cells constantly ricocheting our perspectives off one another in this living organism that is hip-hop.

Speaking to Grant over the years, reading his work and collaborating with him, it's clear that he's gifted. It's like he has super-human vision. No, he can't see through bank vault doors or tell you what's behind a brick wall. What I'm referring to is his ability to look beneath the surface, beyond the immediate, digging deep toward the soul of his subject—whether that be an artist's creative process, the essence and history of an underground movement, or embracing the spectrum of a person's emotional range.

As a writer—or honestly, just a person living with a smartphone—I'm sure we'd all like to believe our strength comes from our ability to produce: to move the pen, to publish, and to have something to

“IN ITS FULL FORM, [HIP-HOP IS] A SCHOOL OF THOUGHT, DAMN NEAR A RELIGION”

say, all the time. But Grant has shown, time-and-time again, that there is an immense power in listening and simply being present—especially when it comes to hip-hop culture. And he uses that superb vision of his to peer beneath the culture's top layer, zoom in, and focus on the essence. Be it in song or conversation. He sees the inherent value of the community and its most prominent minds. He knows, like I know, that if you're looking for it, hip-hop can guide your path. It can be your compass.

Copyright © Dorling Kindersley Limited 2022

INTRODUCTION

I believe in hip-hop as a powerful force for personal development. Since its inception, the expression of self has been at its core. For the young Black and Latinx people in the Bronx in the '70s, hip-hop was a way to use their voices, resisting control by the system that continues to oppress them. It will always belong to these communities. As it has continued to amplify voices, its power has inspired, educated, and motivated people from every corner of the planet. Hip-hop was viral before we ever used that word to describe pop culture phenomena.

I made the pilgrimage to New York City in my late teens, where I had the privilege of hearing from pioneering MC Grandmaster Caz. He spoke about how hip-hop takes things that already exist and combines them with something to create something new: an athletic shoe with a pair of jeans, a rap verse with a soul sample or, in the early days, the electricity from a street light powering a sound system.

Hip-hop is without a doubt one of the most important art movements that the world has ever seen. But as the culture has expanded across the globe, it's transformed into something so much more—something words fail to describe. You can catch it through the way someone wears their clothes, the way they hold themselves, the way they talk, and the way they think. Hip-hop motivates those who engage with it to move forward on their quest towards self-actualisation.

Hip-hop has shaped my identity. It's been the lens through which I've engaged with the world since I was a kid. Growing up, I was obsessed with finding new artists, and then deciphering the subjects in their lyrics. This led me on a journey of discovery, into film, art, dance, sport, and popular culture. It helped me find my friends and become a part of a global community. Above all, hip-hop helped me to consider my identity, my values, and my principles, and what I

Copyright © Dorling Kindersley Limited 2022

want to represent during my time on Earth.

While it had served this purpose subconsciously during my adolescence, a major turning point in my life—and the first interview that appears in this book—was when I interviewed J. Cole in 2014. Driven by the “hustle hard” and “no days off” mentality of hip-hop’s entrepreneurial spirit at the time, I was obsessed with productivity and career progression. I had never taken the time to consider the importance of self-care, or even the person I was outside of my work. I hadn’t yet realized that I was allowing work-related anxiety to burn me out, and I was overlooking much of what I had to be thankful for. Cole’s words brought me back into myself and changed the way I perceived the true wisdom that my favourite artists were imparting through their lyrics, as well as my approach to the work that I was doing as a journalist.

Shortly after this, I was given a copy of psychotherapist Richard Carlson’s

self-help classic *Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff*. I then began to conceptualise this book, which has taken me the past eight years to refine. I hoped to create something that humanizes artists who are often drained of their personhood until they become memes and caricatures to be packaged and sold. I look to each and every person who I have had the pleasure of sharing an interview with as a mentor in their own way. These are some of the lessons I’ve learned from conversations with the most creative, successful, and inspiring minds of our generation. My aim is to identify teachable moments so others can hopefully experience a small part of the transformative effect that this wisdom has had on my own life.

Hip-hop is much more than a genre of music, so expect to read about people in these pages who have interacted with the culture in a broader sense, from R&B superstar Ke\$ha and pioneering podcaster Combat Jack, to fashion icon NIGG and New York radio-heavyweight

Ebro Darden. I’ve always tried to allow my curiosity to be my guide, and to stay as open-minded as possible, which has led me to interview a broad range of insightful people, and I wanted that to be reflected here.

I have chosen to use a collective “we” that unites myself and you, the reader. Of course, we are all different, and this is important to acknowledge from the outset. The lessons here are my own interpretations, and, like any interview, may not always be exactly what the artist themselves intended for me to take away from our conversations. However, they have all impacted my life in some way, and I want to acknowledge the positive impact that they have had on me.

That also means it’s likely that you will read something in here that affects you in a different way than it has me. All 50 of these short features are starting points to broader conversations that you can take into your life and consider for yourself, or with people around you. Your

personal interpretation is very welcome, and I hope you walk away from reading this book with some new ideas to help you on your own journey.

“HIP-HOP IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT ART MOVEMENTS THE WORLD HAS EVER SEEN”

I’m so grateful to everyone that has answered questions throughout my career. There are so many more heroes of mine and people for whom I have the utmost respect than I could possibly have fit into these pages. I thank everyone who has tried to help satisfy my curiosity, but hope that—just like Pharrell Williams—my curiosity is never satisfied.

Copyright © Dorling Kindersley Limited 2022

Copyright © Dorling Kindersley Limited 2022

CHAPTER ONE

MOTIVATION

DEFINE SUCCESS

J. COLE

“What does success look like to you?” I’ve asked hundreds of artists the same question, and the answers vary massively. The most common responses make reference to core values such as happiness and security, particularly in the context of friends and family. Interestingly, a large percentage of the responses I’ve received begin with a

qualifying statement that success is not about money. After asking so many successful people for their definition of success, my main takeaway has been that it is different for everyone, and when setting off on a quest for self-improvement, it’s worth asking: how do we achieve success if we don’t yet know what it is?

J. Cole was in London a few days before the release of *2014 Forest Hills Drive*. I met up with him and he urged me to consider my own definition of success: “You’re doing something you love and you’re being productive in it—really getting out into the world and creating things you want to, and that’s the joy right there,” he said. I’d mentioned that the music I loved often celebrated monetary success, but excessive wealth didn’t seem particularly realistic through my burgeoning career as a freelance music journalist.

“But by focusing on money that doesn’t exist, you’re not appreciating fully the blessings that you’re getting from your dream,” he continued. “It’s pulling you away from the moment, it’s steering you the wrong way.”

Ahead of releasing *2014 Forest Hills Drive*, Cole returned to his hometown of Fayetteville, North Carolina, where he’d purchased the house he grew up in (which his mother had lost to repossession), and in the process had come closer to his own idea of success. This he defined at the time as “finding out what’s important in life and living that everyday—or trying to.”

Cole admitted that earlier in life he’d also assumed success came with a price tag. “I didn’t want to worry about bills or anything financial, and I thought that would be happiness,” he recalled. “I

“EVERY STEP WAS NECESSARY FOR ME TO COME TO THE UNDERSTANDING I’M AT NOW”

got to a level where I don’t gotta worry about bills or anything financial and [I] was like ‘Wait, I ain’t happy yet?’”

The process of returning home to North Carolina, after studying in New York and relocating to Los Angeles, helped Cole gain perspective. “Now I see my whole life from an aerial point of view and I see it was absolutely necessary that I left,” he explained. “It’s absolutely necessary that everything that happened in my career happened; every step was necessary for me to come to the understanding I’m at now, which is way more centered around love and appreciation. [What’s important to me is] a real genuine connection to people and to yourself, basically.”

Each journey toward finding our personal definition of success will be unique, but that question of “what does success look like?” is a worthwhile consideration to carry with us. Like anything in life, success is a process, but we can only reach our destination if we know where we’re trying to go.

EVERYBODY'S SUCCESS IS DIFFERENT

JOEY BADA\$\$

It's vital to ensure that the success we're working toward is our own. It is unlikely that we will feel fulfilled by creating a copycat version of someone else's vision. Success isn't one size fits all, and just as nobody's definition is the same, neither are the journeys that help us to get there.

Although it can sometimes be tempting to replicate steps that have

been fruitful for others, Joey Bada\$\$ told me he's learned that everyone's success is different.

Joey believes that this is even more difficult to realize in the age of social media, where much of our time is spent observing and consuming the highlights of other people's lives. "When you're exposed to so much externally, it's hard

not to compare or measure yourself against what you're seeing going on around you," he explained.

It's helpful to separate ourselves from what we see others doing, whether they're celebrating career milestones, or relationship goals, or attending events we aren't at. Evaluating our own lives and experiences by comparison is not helpful, and furthermore it can also lead us to be resentful and jealous, rather than celebratory of other people's wins. By separating our own success from that of our peers, we're able to feel joy for other people's achievements without judging ourselves against them.

"At the end of the day, there's always going to be someone who is more advanced than you, or further in life than you are," Joey accepted. "But that is no reason to measure up your own life or your own success because everyone's path is different."

Of course, once we begin to experience a level of success, it's natural for our understanding of success to expand and evolve. After blowing up in his teens with his 1999 mixtape—which was more reminiscent of classic Golden Age hip-hop than on trend with the contemporary sounds of the time—Joey continued to build his career as a rapper by staying true to his own vision. While he's continued to hit new milestones in music, he has simultaneously been

developing a career as an actor, recently winning an Oscar for his starring role in the short movie *Two Distant Strangers*.

Had Joey been following someone else's blueprint too closely, he might have missed that fork in the road which led him into a whole new career path. "It could be easy to miss or overlook your own opportunities if you're caught up on what's going on with somebody else," said Joey. "My formula is not going to work for everyone. And it's the same thing with your formula."

Now, a decade since 1999 dropped, Joey is as proud of the timeless cult classic as he was when he released it—a testament to the way he's traveled unflinchingly along his own path since the very beginning. The key, Joey said, is to never lose sight of what is motivating you at the beginning of your journey, before there were comparisons to any external factors: "You can never make it more about wanting to be successful than it is about wanting to do what it is you do."

While it's good to be inspired by those around us, the more deeply we internalize factors from the outside—often by comparing ourselves to others—the more we will struggle with finding the success that is truly our own. If we can filter thoughts and ideas through our own personal values and beliefs as much as possible, we will be much more resilient in reaching our own definition of success.

Copyright © Dorling Kindersley Limited 2022

COMMIT TO INSPIRATION

FLO MILLI

Inspiration is all around us. We can find it everywhere. But in order for it to have an impact, we need to actively engage with it. We need to make a commitment. This can be something that seems relatively simple in the moment, but can quickly be amplified. That droplet of an idea we could have so easily allowed to float by can become a pivotal moment in the trajectory of our lives. Flo Milli committed to finding inspiration through the seemingly minor act of buying a notebook.

Flo's grandmother had always told her to dream big, and one day when she arrived home from school and turned on the TV she was hit with the stimulus that would spark a new obsession. As had become routine, she tuned in to the BET channel just in time for the iconic music video show *106 & Park*. It was October 2010 and Nicki Minaj was on the show promoting her debut album *Pink Friday*.

"I was just amazed by how much fun she was having," Flo recalled. "And I wanted to do shit that I could have fun doing and make money. So when

I saw that I was just like, 'I wanna try this shit.'"

That's when Flo decided to act on that feeling of inspiration: "I started buying notebooks from Walmart and I used to write songs in them. And I went to school rapping: I would rap for my class, rap for my best friend and her mom—they used to always tell me I was gonna be famous. It was just me falling in love with it for real."

"THEY USED TO ALWAYS TELL ME I WAS GONNA BE FAMOUS"

Flo started a group called Pink Mafia with some friends and together they'd write songs which they kept in a ring binder. They would perform the songs at talent shows and her friend's parents' restaurant, but by the age of fifteen the rest of the girls weren't



interested in rapping. But Flo remained committed. "A year later, I started going to the studio and actually rapping," she said. "That's when Flo Milli came about."

Making a commitment to the inspiration that struck her that evening has paid off. As one of the most exciting rappers of her generation, Flo Milli stands out by sticking to a music-making approach that was born from watching *106 & Park* and writing in her notebooks. "She has a bit of an old-school approach,

as far as lyrics go," her A&R, Skane Dolla, told me. "That's what attracted me to her. She's lyrical with the punchlines and that's my era of hip-hop."

When you're hit with inspiration, it's important to act on it. No matter how insignificant it may seem, try to make a commitment to follow up on these moments of creative revelation. Explore possibilities and avoid putting obstacles in your way: you never know how far an idea could take you.



**IT DOESN'T
TAKE MUCH**

LIL PEEP

It's easy to feel like we need more than we have in order to create. But some of the most innovative artists have been able to change the landscape of music with surprisingly little.

I interviewed Lil Peep one morning while he wandered around the parking lot of the Anaheim Angels stadium, waiting to play Day N Night Fest, two months before the tragic events that would take his life much too soon. He'd recently released his *Come Over When You're Sober, Pt. 1* mixtape, which introduced legions of new fans to his boundary-blurring sound.

During our conversation he talked about the beginning of his journey in music-making, which began as an escape from depression. "I did what everyone else who inspired me in the underground did. You run into the Guitar Center, spend \$300, and then the whole world is in your hands," he explained. "Literally you just need to put in the hard work at that point. It doesn't take much, it doesn't take an insane recording studio. All of my biggest songs were made in my bedroom on a \$200 microphone."

Peep became one of the pioneering forces behind the fusion of emo melodies and trap rhythm that has continued to become increasingly prevalent in mainstream music. He made a huge impact on music in his short career, and

**"ALL OF MY
BIGGEST
SONGS WERE
MADE IN MY
BEDROOM ON
A \$200
MICROPHONE"**

did so by using his creativity to maximize what was available to him. The driving force behind Peep's music was how he fused his influences in a way that was authentic to him, and this happened without the need for expensive studio equipment.

Sometimes we can put off our ambitions, placing invisible barriers in our own path, such as the excuse that we need something that isn't available to us. Often this is just a defence mechanism which we're using to mask the fear that comes with pushing off from the starting line. There is usually a creative solution we can find to work around whatever we think we're missing, and finding this can be an adventure that leads to something pioneering and innovative.



BE A LEADER

KAASH PAIGE

In a world that's obsessed with followers, it can be more efficient to hop onto the latest trend in pursuit of overnight success than to stand up and contribute our own thoughts and ideas. There's nothing wrong with liking what is popular, but if we continue to blindly follow and never form our own opinions and identities, it's unlikely that we'll end

up feeling creatively, emotionally, or intellectually fulfilled.

During her senior year at high school, Kaash Paige made the decision to become a leader. She told me that throughout school she'd been content as a follower and had struggled to find her own voice or opinion. "Being in high school, you're around all of these

different egos, these different opinions, that you get lost," she explained.

Eventually Kaash decided to challenge herself. "I jumped off the porch and was like 'I want to be the artist that everyone's listening to,'" she recalled. She wanted her peers to be asking each other, "Have you heard that new Kaash Paige?", the same way they would about Drake's new releases.

There were a lot of kids rapping at Kaash's school, so tapping into her newly adopted leader mentality, she realized that taking an alternative approach would help her to stand out. She decided to lean further into singing than rapping, recording a track called "Dnd" over an instrumental by producer Dream Koala who she found on YouTube. Her instinct was correct, and the new melodic approach cut through the music that her peers were making. Soon enough "Dnd" became popular at school. The song's success far exceeded Kaash's expectations, and two years later a rerecorded version called "Love Songs" would become a viral hit, leading her to a deal with the iconic Def Jam Recordings.

Leadership does leave you vulnerable to criticism, which is perhaps the reason many people would prefer to remain a follower. Kaash has learned to accept that with everything she does, there will be people who talk negatively about it. "If you choose to live this

lifestyle, you're going to get talked about regardless, but anybody is gonna get talked about to the day they die," she explained. "That's just life in general."

Kaash tries not to concern herself with criticism—in fact, she has "overthinking kills" tattooed on her neck as a note-to-self—but when she does catch herself overthinking, she protects her confidence by reminding herself that all of the artists she loves the most go through the same thing. "I just like to always keep myself motivated and confident, because I never had that growing up," she said. "I always was super down on myself, never had any confidence. So now that I actually have that confidence, I just always try to stay happy and just try to keep growing."

There is great value in allowing ourselves the space to stand out by considering what we really feel, what we agree or disagree with, what we like or dislike, so that we can be authentic to who we really are. We can only be content fitting in for so long—eventually we need to step out and be true to ourselves if we're to live a full life.