

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Alchemy of Hip Hop

Marcus Gray · Saturday, June 27th, 2020

Part 1



Hip Hop's Alchemical Intuition

My early twenties were often spent in a quasi trance state sweating out energetic banter, twirling on a dirty dance floor somewhere in the depths of Los Angeles' underground. On any given night I could be found marathon dancing as a form of personal alchemy. Although I would not know that I was until much later.

Music was a ritualistic container for me and dancing was my seance. I would assign a task to each movement with the intention to heal and explore myself. Movements become emotion, sent within to untangle blocked energy, childhood trauma more often than not to send love to a sore knee. Dancing was the way I cast my spells. It was my intuition that led me into this dance trance *alchemy*, and hip hop. Hip hop was the soil that held space for my intuition.

Hip Hop is popular culture. Far above and beyond all other genres of art and music hip hop continues to capture the imagination of billions of youth all over the world. Perpetually ensuring its relevance into the foreseeable future. Its ability to resonate with the spirit of what is cutting edge as a universal aesthetic and the vulnerability of the human condition is profound and reveals its deep connection to the human spirit and its heroes' journey.

I feel a deep connection to hip hop as do so many. Not just because I am a black male born in the United States, but because of the transformation I have seen the culture undergo as it has evolved in my 40+ years on earth. It has taken an intuitive path into chaos and expansion similar to my own.

Filled with trauma, injustice, reflection, guidance, celebration, divine imagination and transcendent ecstasy! Hip hop's evolution has been one planted within a fertile field of innocence, emotion and intuition. I'm interested in identifying a pattern within that fertile field by assigning the stages of hip hop's growth to the ancient system of alchemy.

My personal path has included a feverish study of myself in companion with a study of ancient wisdom traditions, shamanism and natural sciences. Wisdom that I was either led to or stumbled upon. Wisdom that held out tools to me on how to raise myself into a more focused, competent, coherent, compassionate, insightful and complete being.

A being with a worldview that is able to expand with more knowledge without fear of discarding an old belief. It is faith in your worldview that makes life a lot easier to navigate. Little did I know that much of this wisdom had its roots in the idea of breaking myself apart and recreating myself from scratch. In my opinion, this principle is at the essence of hip hop.

As a culture I recognize that hip hop is made of many individuals going through their own becoming. This evolution can be much more satisfying and inspiring with tools left by the ancestors. With these tools we can build a frame through which to view ourselves, the idea of culture and the true nature of reality. With this view we are able to see the true potential of hip hop culture as we align it with our new understanding of universal principles.

Alchemy is rooted in universal law. Meaning if most things nurtured by nature are left to their own devices they will eventually evolve towards what we can concede is a more perfect state. Now I know what you're thinking, everything dies! Entropy is a universal law as well. Yes, entropy is a law of thermodynamics.

It states that everything tends to fall towards disorder if no energy is reinvested into the system. But the truth is alchemy exists within this law. In fact entropy exists within alchemy! You see entropy is an actual step on the path of transmutation.

On the largest scale aware to me, it is alchemy at work, pulling all of existence into states of optimal energy usage and order. But when this law is identified and applied to a living system such as a civilization, a culture or even an individual, nature must work with the powerful consciousness of the human beings at the center of the system to transmute the energy, perception and emotion. Because human consciousness is typically not as stable as a rock in nature it makes moving this energy through the 7 steps of alchemy a little more challenging when consciousness is involved. This is ultimately what alchemy is about.

It is a tool for consciousness to work with as it moves through invalid preconceptions, acculturation and beliefs in order to emerge a truly conscious and highly effective processor of reality. But whether it is a culture or an individual, energy tends to get stuck as it moves due to all of the external influences.

Especially when the culture of individuals isn't aware of this tool and how to use it. In this article I will attempt to do my best to teach hip hop culture how to utilize this ancient spirit tech. First a little history lesson.


“Alchemy, basic with a touch of wild wonder
Alchemy, we made this to take your style under
Metal frame, walking through a, metal game with a limp, tight grip
Determined not to let time slip
This is Alchemy, iron b-boy and all his glory
Alchemy, hold it from the colder sob story
Metal frame, walking through a, metal game with a limp, tight grip
Determined not to let time slip”

— *Aesop Rock*

The Alchemists

When most in the West think of alchemy they think of an eccentric old wizard in a black hooded robe and a long beard shuffling through brittle scrolls in a dingy catacomb beneath a castle somewhere in Europe. Their medieval chemistry laboratory filled with boiled dragon's teeth, sacred geometry and rattling beakers vomiting putrid epiphany into vials of mystery in search of the "elixir of life" or "philosopher's stone," the alchemist's magnum opus.

Although there were alchemists solely interested in the art because of its apparent promise of endless riches by turning lead into gold. An account of the lives of most alchemists would lead us to believe that they were concerned with things spiritual more than things temporal. They were people inspired by a vision, a vision of a being made perfect, of being freed from disease and of limitations both mental and physical, standing godlike in the realization of a power that even at this very moment of time lies hidden in the deeper layers of consciousness, a vision of being made truly in the image and likeness of the one divine mind in its perfection, beauty, and harmony.

These men and women are the grandparents of science itself. They were spiritual people, mystics, concerned with understanding the mysteries of the natural and supernatural world. 

What alchemy is actually fixated on is spiritual development – with the end goal being a state of awareness, completion and harmony. What many won't know about alchemy is that this study has been reflected in cultures around the world for thousands of years before it reached Europe.

In China references to alchemical work are to be found in myths and legends of ancient china. Chang Tao-ling the first Taoist Pope born A.D 35 is said to have devoted himself wholly to study and meditation, declining all offers to enter the service of the state.

He preferred to live in the mountains of Western China where he persevered in the study of alchemy and in cultivating the virtues of purity and mental abstraction. This demonstrates that alchemy was studied in China before the commencement of the Christian era and its origin must lie even further back in Chinese history.

An Arabic version of alchemy was also discovered in work accredited to Jabir (Geber), which was probably made around the ninth century. Geber's real name was Abou Moussah Djfar-Al Sell, or simply "The Wise One." Born at Houran in Mesopotamia, he is generally esteemed by adepts as the greatest of them all after Hermes. Geber's writing must be one of the oldest alchemical documents known as it corresponds to the teachings of Hermes Trismegistus.

Hermes teaches the unity of matter and the basic truth that all form is a manifestation from one root, the one thing or ether. Gebar was an adept student of alchemy and wrote many books that were either banned or burned during his lifetime. This led him to invent his own alphabet to encrypt his insights to the uninitiated. Geber was so skilled in his mysterious style of writing that it is from him that we derive the word "gibberish."

So where did the idea of alchemy come from? The great Egyptian "Deity," named by the Greeks "Hermes Trismegistus" but known as Thoth in Egypt, is thought to have been the founder of the art. Said to have lived about 1900 B.C., he was highly celebrated for his wisdom and skill in the operation and manipulation of nature, as a healer, teacher, philosopher and priest. Of the works attributed to him only a few fragments escaped the destructive hand of the Emperor Diocletian in the third century A.D.

The main surviving documents attributed to him are the Emerald Tablet, the Asclepian Dialogues, and the Divine Pymander. The famous Emerald Tablet (Tabula Smaragdina) of Hermes is the primary document of alchemy. There have been various stories of the origin of the tablet, one being that the original emerald slab upon which the precepts were said to be inscribed in Phoenician characters was discovered in the tomb of Hermes by Alexander the Great.

The Legend of “Hermes” himself is as mysterious as the origin of the tablets. It is said that he was a surviving resident from Atlantis who relocated to Egypt. Yes, Atlantis. Regardless of whether you believe Atlantis existed, the wisdom of Hermes and his insights into the nature of universal principles, and the elements remain profound in theory and action.

Lead Into Gold


Now for the fun part. What truly is alchemy? To the uninitiated it was rumored to be a mysterious process by which one could turn lead into gold. As we are now being initiated, I can decode for you the true potential of alchemy.

If we examine the concept of turning lead into gold metaphorically we begin to see that lead is about the heaviness, the impurities of our own being. This is what we want to purify and transform into “gold.”

Transmuting our corruptible state into an incorruptible state and coming into a more perfected state. In order to become an alchemist we must seek the philosopher stone within ourselves which is the product of the final stage of alchemy. Today we will approach this tool on its highest level. We will approach the philosopher’s stone as a state of being in the world.

Hermes Trismagistus received this name because he mastered the three levels of his being. The body, the soul and spirit. To do so he mastered the arts and sciences of metaphysics. Alchemy, astrology and theurgia. Theurgia being Ancient Greek for “Sorcery” or divine working.

Referring to a form of magic designed to allow for conjuration of, or communication with spirits or deities. Now keep in mind that science didn’t exist back then. You may laugh at the study of astrology or theurgia, but in those days those little lights in the night sky were not stars, they were twinkling mysteries that held patterns related to changes in the seasons and wisdom waiting to be unlocked for all humanity.

Anyone with an interest in these arts was an anomaly to say the least. To study these arts was  a luxury and left to the most affluent and brilliant minds in antiquity. These students of nature and consciousness were closer to priests than scientists.

Through their study of these arts they developed a deep understanding of their own consciousness. They understood how to bring the study of their consciousness into these arts. Using alchemy as a tool to refine their own hearts and minds. This understanding is illustrated in the phrase Solve Et Coagula. This is Latin for dissolve and coagulate or separate and recombine. In this natural process of separation and recombination Hermes identified 7 steps.

“First the principal subject of this Art... is Fire...it possesses a state and power of vivifying.”

The 7 Steps in the Alchemical Process



Calcination
 Dissolution
 Separation
 Conjunction
 Fermentation
 Distillation
 Coagulation

Alchemy is a system that gives flesh to natural processes. Processes that modern day chemistry followed in order to purify any substance. Alchemy is an ancient poetic way of illuminating these distinct stages of transformation seen in natural processes. Applied to one's life it's not difficult to see these same processes taking place.

Having a knowledge of these natural principles can help one remain conscious of the phase they are currently in as a tool to obtain guidance, wisdom, clarity, self mastery and other gifts of the spirit. By recognizing these steps one can make a conscious effort to work with the phase we are in and pass through it with purpose!

Although I NOW see how I personally have passed into many of these phases(not always passing through them. Sliding back and having to repeat a stage.). At the time I was moving on intuition and instinct in order to simply persevere through trying times, much like Hiphop. But, Becoming aware of these stages has made it much easier for me to push through difficult times as well as seek challenges, or fire, during serene times of reflection.

All in an effort to burn away any excess, invalid energy or beliefs quickly in order to continue to march toward my own expansion. To progress and improve is the will of nature. We can learn to work with life rather than allow it to happen to us. Willingness to walk into the fire is a wise first step in our own evolution. The danger is not the fire but rather what happens when we avoid the fire.

As we move forward into examining the steps of alchemy I am going to present each phase in the following way to maximize the lessons embedded in your Alchemical journey.

Explanation: I will give a traditional explanation of what the step is and the symbol sets and ideas it's associated with.

Cultural Reflection: I will give a reflection on where I see the culture connecting with this step.

Cultural Projection: I will give a reflection on the potential of the culture fully embracing this step. How it entered this phase and how it will exit this phase.

Personal Projection: I will guide the reader into their own potential when dealing with this step. I will offer simple challenges to help enter and exit each step with as much grace and ease as the

phase permits.

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