



Hip Hop Time Capsule: 1994

Rating: 8/10

Do you remember 1994? In the interconnected, on-demand world of 2008, fourteen years feels like a very, very long time ago. But some periods of life are more vivid than others, and the experiences of everyone's teenage years are always clearly remembered for life. For anyone who was in high school or college at the time, obsessed with the amazing and vibrant sounds of hip-hop of the era, 1994 meant a lot in terms of music.

Sure, we hear a lot about the "golden age" of hip-hop, but it isn't all revisionist bluster, and there's a reason for the nostalgia. In 1994 the genre was established but still unstructured, just beginning to enjoy the fruits of youth that would surge for most of the decade, and there was a very thin line dividing hip-hop's underground and mainstream cultures. The disassociation, however unofficial, might not sound like a good thing for the art form as a whole, but in practice, it was. In the mainstream groups like Wu-Tang Clan, Smif-N-Wessun, Group Home, Craig Mack, and Outkast - all of whom are featured on Hip Hop Time Capsule: 1994 - were all gracing the airwaves. Some of those heavyweights were just getting started on a long road to superstardom, while others would soon be fading back into obscurity. There also existed a parallel, low-budget world, especially on local access and cable television shows, that profiled the music of hip-hop's underground street scene and played videos that, in the pre-YouTube era, were coveted and hard to find.

Cue the grumpy old-timer complaining about how much better the past was and how nowadays, what you hear on the radio or see on TV just fails to compare to fourteen years ago. One essential fact is that the truly innovative, creative, and urgent groups that are today relegated to obscure web streams were, in 1994, given feature treatment on stations like New York's legendary FM station Hot 97 and cable channels like MTV. Back in the day hip-hop was raw, grimy and often darkly tinged, bearing little resemblance to the the inane party music assaulting us today. For anyone pining for a break from the cheap marketing and image cults of today's hip-hop game this new DVD, hosted by A Time Before Crack contributor James "Koe" Rodriguez, sets out to revisit the genre's bygone era. Exploring such a prolific and defining time within an art form as dynamic as hip-hop can be a difficult undertaking, and Hip Hop Time Capsule succeeds by fusing together some of the shining musical moments of the time with the previous decade's important social messages.

1994, the year Nas dropped *Illmatic*.

Throughout the film music videos from such luminaries as Channel Live, Gang Starr, DAS EFX, and Method Man are interspersed with various other segments that serve to

take us behind and above the music. "The More Things Change," a mini-documentary discussing the social climate of the time, is actually a pretty insightful look at the socio-political landscape of the early 1990s. But the focus of hip-hop begins and ends with the music, and a film about the genre circa 1994 must necessarily consider that year's classic Nas album, *Illmatic*. There's also a "Where are They Now?" segment of sorts, featuring updates on El Da Sensei of Artifacts fame and Tuffy from Channel Live. Bonus features with the film's DVD release include a wide variety of music videos from artists not covered in the feature (House of Pain, Da Bush Babies, Bahamadia, et cetera), and a slew of interviews, including an excellent one with the Gravediggaz.

Even diving into the heart of hip-hop in 1994 as well as this collection does, in 2008 it is hard not to notice the distinctly analog nature of Hip Hop Time Capsule's footage. For a maximum bit-rate, high-bandwidth audience, the film's audio and production values are not very appealing - in fact, many of the videos seem like they are dubs of dubs, which explains the muffled audio. But there's no going back fourteen years with HD cameras and re-capturing the glory of what the film considers to be "Hip-Hop's Last Great Year," and those days now exist only as grainy clips in a tiny, fragmented window on the past. Which is why time capsules are so romantic and so limited without memory. For those of us with a vivid nostalgia for this music as a soundtrack to our formative years, Hip Hop Time Capsule: 1994 provides a fond look back at a great musical era and offers up some tasty nuggets of classic hip-hop that other youthful activities may have caused us to forget.