I wrote most of this book while listening to the radio. Public radio has been a constant companion, a sober voice in our increasingly insane times. And the dial—yes, it's still a dial—in my car was reliably tuned to Hot 97, a way of keeping up with hip-hop radio in the present as I plunged deeper into its past. But I wasn't always listening to radio in the sense we tend to imagine it. Just as often it was MP3s of historical broadcasts of rap radio, downloaded or ripped from the internet or acquired from tape collectors generous enough to share their quarry. Other times it was live web streams from the outskirts and undergrounds of New York or London or Los Angeles or Manchester or any of the burgeoning world capitals of dance music, uncanny in the resemblance they bear to the underground programs of the 1980s. It's been a long time since radio was limited to the canonical form it takes in our imagination, if it ever was just that. Still, one thing connects these disparate broadcasts: they all express their time and place in sound, inimitably.

This book is the story of one such time and one such place, New York City in the 1980s. It's about how a group of DJs, entrepreneurs, and fans took an art form rooted in vinyl, aerosol, and the body and converted it into FM waves. All historians think their time period is exceptional, and I'm no exception. Few places have hosted a convergence of so many of their era's defining themes as New York in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Individuals and institutions; policy and politics; race and space; class and status; sound and subjectivity—it's all there. Historians have variously described the 1980s as a period of "fracture" and as a period of "synthesis." The history of rap radio shows that both characterizations are true.

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Listening to the history of rap radio can show us how, for better and for worse, popular culture and politics collided in 1980s America.

What I want to demonstrate by examining radio is something that, on the surface, seems obvious: that rap didn't enter the recording studio a fully formed genre. Its success was never predestined and, as intrinsically appealing as rap can be, its audiences were constructed over time, not present from the jump. The argument that I make throughout this book is that radio played an instrumental role in the aesthetic, social, and commercial development of hip-hop. It helped make the genre what it is. The horizon of this argument might be expressed simply: no radio, no rap. In practical terms, unpacking a formulation as nebulous as "rap radio" means looking outside and around both rap and radio. Radio, like few other mediums, is impacted by the tides of the times. National politics matter. Radio is heavily regulated by the federal government, meaning that who can access radio and what can be broadcast is limited by rules the FCC and legislators establish during any given administration. Further, radio is a cutthroat industry, and audience demand for particular kinds of music and types of information determines what goes on the air. A station's life and death can be determined by how well its management and programming staff understand the tastes and desires of those on the other end of the receiver. And radio is public in ways that few mediums are. For the last century, radio has been one of the most widely used communications mediums in the world, found in the homes and automobiles of the richest and poorest in America alike, in the largest cities to the most remote outposts. Which is all to say that writing a history of radio—no less rap radio—means cueing in to how all of these forces bore on those sending breakbeats through the air.

What does this mean in practice? It means that the history of rap radio isn't just one of DJs and MCs in the studio—though most of this book is devoted to following them into the studio and to listening closely to their broadcasts. It's also a history of Reagan-era regulatory policy. It's a history of post–civil rights activism. It's a history of the music industry and the deep historical will to commodify Black sound and Black expressive labor. It's a history of individuals finding a public source for self-expression in the fecund ruins of postindustrial New York City.

I want to take this time set the stage for the stories that follow for two reasons. First, one of my goals has been to expand what histories of radio and histories of hip-hop can be. This book would not be complete without attending to the unique mix of social, musical, technological,

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political, commercial, and individual histories all converging on the radio studio. I want this history to be a model of the kinds of stories that are available when we place the medium at the center. The second reason is to set expectations. This book is about hip-hop in the 1980s. That's why we're all here. But in order to tell the story I wanted to tell, I had to take the time to outline the social and political stakes of the era. So, while a chapter-length treatment of, say, broadcast deregulation might not seem relevant, to leave it out would be to ignore a force that inarguably shaped hip-hop (it also seemed particularly appropriate to our current moment to linger on the incipient merger of information and entertainment in American mass media). Same goes for the passages detailing radio ratings methodologies and advances in broadcast marketing strategy. It's obvious to the point of meaninglessness to say music never exists in a vacuum, but it bears repeating.

I also need to acknowledge that this history is not "complete." Old school hip-hop heads and information fiends will notice some glaring omissions: the World's Famous Supreme Team doesn't get nearly enough attention; Hank Love and DNA are in the background, but never the fore; the students who broadcast hip-hop at New York University's WNYU-FM, as well as students at Columbia University's WKCR-FM, Hofstra University's WRHU-FM, and Fordham University's WFUV-FM, and the rest of the students who brought their energy and talent to putting rap music on college radio are conspicuously absent; the underground post-punk and downtown mix shows that incorporated rap barely missed the temporal cutoff point; I only gesture at the fact that Public Enemy, among many other artists, got their start in radio at Adelphi University's WBAU-FM, and the group's Bomb Squad credit radio as an inspiration for their production strategies. No doubt readers and fans will find others. And this is just where radio hosts are concerned. When you start expanding the field of omissions out to the station workers, the friends, the mothers, and everyone else who played midwife to hip-hop, the field of possible histories expands infinitely. Not to mention that this history played out differently in cities across the United States and across the world. At an early stage in writing, I was drawn to this project as one of "completing" hip-hop history, of adding new voices and individuals to the mix, only later to realize how naïve that was. Still, histories of rap have privileged recording artists and gravitated toward a few highly public figureheads. Those without lengthy discographies or cultivated public personas didn't always receive as much credit as they

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deserved—all in all a different kind of historical distortion. In one of our first conversations, DJ Chuck Chillout told me that he would consent to an interview because "a lot of guys are getting left out." He's right. Rap has a pantheon and a canon. I hope this history has broadened, if only a little, the kinds of stories that constitute hip-hop and radio history.

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