Many middle-class parents thought it was just a fad when their adolescents and teenagers started wearing baggy jeans that sagged below their hips in imitation of hip-hop culture. However, it did not pass. Almost 30 years after hip-hop got its start in the black urban scene of the 1970s, this complex, riveting mixture of sound, rhythm, dress, attitude, and poetics has become a universal, underground culture for youth resistance around the globe, maintains Halifu Osumare, a faculty member at the University of Hawaii, Honolulu.

In 1999, rap--one of four components of hip-hop culture --became the top-selling music genre in America. "It began in black and Latino American communities, but you can’t go to any youth culture in any capital city on the globe today where you won't find rappers talking about their marginalization using similar lyrics, similar music, and similar dress," Osumare points out. She has found, in research on hip-hop cultures in Japan, England, France, and Germany, that youths in each region adapt American patterns to their own demographics:

* In London, marginalized East Indian youth blend Indian melodies and Hindi with English rap as a street form of protest.

* In Paris, poor Jewish, Middle Eastern, and West African youth coming out of the projects use hip-hop styles and rap to talk about their poverty and police brutality, as exemplified in a French video called "La Haine" ("Hate").

* In Japan, female hip-hoppers use the genre to defy gender restrictions for women.

"Hip-hop has become a universal tool for talking back to the mainstream of any society," Osumare notes. However, the very success of this genre has created something of a schism in hip-hop culture, according to Osumare and Michael Barnes, a graduate student in sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, who is also a disc jockey and was one of her teaching assistants when she taught a course on "Power Moves: Hip-hop Culture and Sociology" at Berkeley.

Community-based underground rappers are drowned out by the mass appeal and commercialization of the big-time, best-selling artists, some of whom are marketing a gangster persona with songs that focus on wealth, possessions, and crime, often with a misogynistic attitude toward women, Barnes argues. Although the "gangsta" style arose in New York, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles in the early 1990s as an authentic expression of the grinding poverty, mass unemployment, and prison experience of ghetto youth, he believes it has been appropriated in recent years by "studio playas," who don’t come from that background and are in it only for the money.

"These guys are ultra capitalists who glorify materialism. Whether these playas are as rich as they say they are is up for debate, but they definitely appeal to the outlaw, antiestablishment tendencies of American culture, and the music industry capitalizes on that. You can't tell in the beginning if a studio playa comes from poverty, as he claims, but if he becomes famous, he can't hide it, and authenticity matters. It certainly does. Now you hear songs not just criticizing the establishment, but calling [other rappers] out, saying, 'This isn't right for hip-hop culture. Fine. You're making money, but what are you going to do for the community?'

"Hip-hop is incredibly diverse," Barnes maintains. "More underground artists are doing substantive, in-depth social criticism, and you're starting to see more youth-based movements based on hip-hop." He says the activism of hip-hop culture shows itself when a large number of artists come together to put out an entire album on specific issues, such as the "Hip-hop for Respect" album, done in reaction to the Amadou Diallo shooting in New York; "Mumia 911," dedicated to Mumia Abu-Jamal, who is on death row in Pennsylvania for killing a police officer; or "America Is Dying Slowly," an album on the ravages of AIDS in the black community. Only by listening to their music do outsiders know what is going on with urban youth, whether black, Asian, Latino, or of any other ethnicity, Barnes insists.