Heart and Soul
Dan Charnas tracks the hip-hop industry, from 1968 to 2008
BY AMY LASKOWSKI

More than 30 years ago, hip-hop subculture thrived mainly in New York City’s Harlem and the Bronx. Even as hip-hop grew in popularity among young people, those who held the power to popularize the genre—record companies, radio stations, and MTV—wanted nothing to do with it, fearing it was “too black.”

In *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop* (New American Library/Penguin), Dan Charnas (CAS’85, COM’85) examines hip-hop, particularly the business deals that made the industry what it is today. To understand how hip-hop became so culturally ingrained, Charnas writes, it’s necessary to understand the talent and recording industry executives who negotiated contracts and hunted for the next big star. A hefty 672 pages, the book often reads like a novel, bringing the characters—such as emerging moguls Russell Simmons and Rick Rubin—to life.

In hip-hop’s early days, kids looking to make a quick buck would spin records at local parties, rhyming along with the music. As they progressed and learned how to use turntables, the crowds and competition grew. In the 1990s and 2000s hip-hop surged, as well-known rappers like Tupac Shakur, the Notorious B.I.G., and Sean “Puff Daddy” Combs gained huge followings. Charnas credits hip-hop with helping the United States resolve long-standing racial issues, bring the country together, and educate a generation.

Charnas has written for *The Source* magazine and the *Washington Post* and worked for Profile Records and Def American Recordings. He earned a master’s at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism, where he was awarded the school’s top honor, a Pulitzer Traveling Fellowship. He is also a Kundalini yoga instructor. *Bostonia* spoke with him about his book and about what hip-hop means to America.

*Bostonia*: The idea for the book came from a magazine article you proposed, yet never published, about the first generation of white and ethnic entrepreneurs whose disco-and-dance record labels were saved by hip-hop music. How did the book evolve?

*Charnas*: Actually, this book has its genesis, at least its spiritual genesis, at Boston University. I graduated in 1985. I was a communications and liberal arts major and an editor of the *Muse*, part of the *Daily Free Press*.

Hip-hop was surging in cultural importance while I was in Boston. I
minored in African American studies—my senior thesis was on racial segregation in the music industry. It analyzed white America’s relationship with black culture over several hundred years. At the end of the thesis I forwarded the notion that hip-hop could actually help resolve the ambivalence that white America felt towards black folks and black culture. Hip-hop was vitally important in educating and preparing a generation for a new multicultural society.

The book tracks from 1968 to 2008 and ends at Barack Obama’s election. I think in many ways hip-hop has been a part of setting up the conditions for that to have occurred. I think, ultimately, that’s the importance of hip-hop in the late 20th and early 21st century. I wanted to write a book that would really place hip-hop in American history.

Can you explain the title?
“The Payback” is an old song by James Brown. It’s a song about revenge—someone took his girl, so he’s going to mess this guy up. When you say “the big payback,” it’s very well known to people in hip-hop culture. But it’s also a triple entendre. It’s called “the big payback” because there are a lot of people who invested their lives, their fortunes, their reputations, and everything in the notion that hip-hop could be as powerful as any American music culture that preceded it.

But in another way it’s payback meaning revenge on America, meaning mainstream American culture took so much from black culture and black people.

What was the most difficult part of writing the book? Were there stories that people didn’t want told?
I would say the prospect of getting access to everyone was very scary. I didn’t get everyone, but I got the most important people. The few folks I didn’t get I could report around, meaning I could get their story without actually talking to them. I would say the hardest part was working a full-time job in media and writing this book at night with a new wife and a new baby. I’m still tired.

A big complaint about hip-hop is the amount of violence and misogyny in the lyrics. Do you believe that’s true? Is it changing?
One of the things I say in the intro to the book is that a lot of people feel that hip-hop is not worthy because it’s materialistic, vulgar, and misogynist. I think those conclusions are unfair. Those are not hip-hop’s ills—those are America’s ills, and hip-hop is a child of America. And as hip-hop became more mainstream, it adopted those values of materialism, of celebrity worship. I’m not saying that that stuff didn’t exist in the music before it became successful, but that those were real experiences that came from the milieu in which this music happened.

I think that as subcultures become mainstream, they do become debased. I think that one of the things that we lost in hip-hop is that it used to be very diverse. You could have political hip-hop and comic hip-hop and female rappers along with male rappers, and there was this very much back-and-forth, give-and-take on the hip-hop scene. But we lost a lot of that. Because things have become so successful, for many people it’s more of a path to cashing in than it is something you do for the love of it.

Do you think there will be any more hip-hop moguls like Russell Simmons or Jay-Z, or are they a dying breed?
Hip-hop tended to breed people who thought like businesspeople, because they were on the outside. Russell Simmons had to do what he did and Jay-Z had to do what he did because there was no one doing the work on their behalf.

I’m going to put Damon Dash in there with Jay-Z, because as a team, when they were rejected at labels, they made their own—existing institutions didn’t work out for them. Russell Simmons made his own institution, his own industry.

Now that there are institutions, I think there are people who don’t feel the need to be entrepreneurial. But then again, the music industry is falling apart, so everyone needs to be entrepreneurial. Who is next I’m really not sure. All of our current moguls were made during a time when the music industry was a lot more powerful than it is now. I don’t know what hip-hop culture is going to produce next; all I know is that it won’t look like the hip-hop of previous years. It will surprise us all.

You’ve described the book as the story of “a generation of African Americans carving out their own economic space in corporate America.” What was the typical route to hip-hop success?
Hip-hop started as the kids in the Bronx who couldn’t afford to dress up, who weren’t old enough to get into Harlem nightclubs, so they made their own parties instead. They created their own cottage industry. And then there were echoes. Institutions turned hip-hop away because they didn’t think it would make money. Even if they did think there was money to be made, the racial, inner-city part of it scared them.

Take Russell Simmons. No one wanted to mess with his art, so he took artists into his small fringe music label, and that grew. Rap music was turned down by MTV, so smaller video shows sprang up to fill the void, and the same thing happened with radio stations, too. For many years there were no pop radio stations playing rap music, so KDAY in Los Angeles filled the void.

The phenomenon of being shut out pushes you to do your own thing. Take the rappers that have started their own clothing companies, like Roc-A-Fella founders Damon Dash and Jay-Z. Rocawear, started by the two, has a chance to be an enduring American brand. That’s how you know hip-hop has had a lasting effect on our society.

My dad wears a Sean John tie, not because it’s hip-hop, but because it’s good. That’s the only reason people wanted programmers to play hip-hop—because it was good. It was America.