

Hanif Abdurraqib, Never Go Ahead in the Rain: Notes to a Tribe Called Quest

Brody Trottier

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[See table of contents](#)

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relations playbook while management was busy drafting a new set of rules.

This book's relatively minor limitations do not diminish its considerable strengths. *Managerial Control of American Workers* effectively covers a broad topic in an accessible manner. It should in particular find its way on to the syllabi of undergraduate courses on business history, labor history, and the sociology of work. It likely will not be read in undergraduate business programs, even though students and instructors in those programs should be encouraged to pick up a copy of it. That is regrettable as students in business programs would quickly see that Frederick Winslow Taylor and Elton Mayo – possibly two of the biggest intellectual charlatans in American history – are shaping their lives more than Peter Drucker and W. Edwards Deming ever have.

JASON RUSSELL

Empire State College – SUNY

Hanif Abdurraqib, *Never Go Ahead in the Rain: Notes to a Tribe Called Quest* (Austin, University of Texas Press 2019)

IN THIS BOOK, Hanif Abdurraqib explores the personal, political, and cultural impact of the celebrated Queens hip hop group, A Tribe Called Quest. More than a standard biography, Abdurraqib uses the group to comment on the expansive socio-political context in which their music was created. Through a series of essays, Abdurraqib unfolds the history of A Tribe Called Quest while weaving in personal anecdotes to tell a grander narrative on music, race, politics, culture, and relationships.

Never Go Ahead in the Rain begins by contextualizing A Tribe Called Quest within the storied history of black music in America. Abdurraqib makes interesting musical connections, noting that A

Tribe Called Quest combined funk and horns in the same way Buddy Bolden mixed ragtime and blues to create jazz. (10) The sounds of A Tribe Called Quest drew on this legacy of black music. They are known for their extensive sampling of jazz records, repurposing another generation's sounds for a new era. (10) One of the tools Abdurraqib employs to reassert the themes he is developing is to recount memories from his childhood. For example, he recalls that hip hop was not always permitted in his home – for a time, rap was taboo – but A Tribe Called Quest was always an exception. (9) They had a unique cross-cultural appeal which Abdurraqib attributes to the warm and vital feeling of their sounds. (9) The fact that they were paying homage to their influences also makes them the ideal subject for this book, allowing Abdurraqib to make his broader commentaries.

The honest and thoughtful analysis of each of A Tribe Called Quest's albums is a notable highlight of the book. These analyses serve as a platform to develop fascinating and perceptive interpretations of the group's music. *The Low End Theory*, the group's sophomore album, is explored through a series of alternating letters addressed to the groups two MCs: Q-Tip and Phife Dawg. In this chapter, Abdurraqib confronts the political meaning of the "low end." For Abdurraqib, the album title refers to the downtrodden – those not heard and those unseen. (58) The political commentary of this album is contextualized within the beating of Rodney King, occurring shortly before the album's release. Like the media attention given to King, which brought to light the struggles of harassment by the police, Abdurraqib feels *The Low End Theory* develops characters that speak to the various ways people try to survive. (58) For instance, in "Everything is Fair", Q-Tip raps about his romantic interest of Miss Elaine, who asks him to sell weed

for her. (59) Abdurraqib argues that this story demonstrates the political message of the album. For Abdurraqib, the low end is the politics of everyday struggles; “the dark and endless humming of want, which opens the door and beckons us to all manner of ills.” (59) Abdurraqib praises the album for wrapping these political ideas in a danceable sound that celebrates the freedom to briefly forget. For fans of the album’s jazz-heavy production and clever storytelling, Abdurraqib offers a fresh and ingenious perspective on the album’s political message.

The emotional core of the book is found in the chapter “Family Business” which grapples with the death of Phife Dawg from diabetes in 2016. Addressing Phife Dawg, along with his mother, Cheryl Boyce-Taylor, and Q-Tip – we are given a glimpse into the meaningful connection Abdurraqib feels towards the members of A Tribe Called Quest. In these letters, Abdurraqib expresses the kinship he experiences with Boyce-Taylor – a fellow poet – whose loss of her son is paralleled with Abdurraqib’s loss of his mother. (154) With Q-Tip, Abdurraqib gives his condolences for the loss of his brother and contemplates the state of the world since *The Low End Theory* and Rodney King. (162) In his letter addressed to Phife Dawg – using his given name, Malik – Abdurraqib calls for a celebration. Reflecting on the significance of sugar in Abdurraqib’s own childhood, he does not dwell on Phife Dawg’s habits which lead to his death, but instead wishes to revel in what he loved, at least for a day. (167) These letters are an impactful and poignant tribute to a misunderstood genius.

There are numerous insights to be gleaned from *Never Go Ahead in the Rain*, especially for those with an interest in race and culture. Abdurraqib is able to reflect on his own life events and connect them to larger cultural experiences. For instance, he discusses how his knowledge

of hip hop was used as a sort of social currency growing up. Although Abdurraqib acknowledges he would not have been considered cool, he was able to exchange his knowledge of the newest and most interesting trends in music for a degree of social protection. (36) Another account details his religious reading of the rap magazine, *The Source*, which leads to a larger discussion of black media. Abdurraqib goes on to give a short history of *Jet* (a legacy black publication) and what that magazine meant for the civil rights movement – especially by printing uncensored images of the battered body of Emmitt Till. (115) These sorts of comparisons help to illustrate the cultural significance of hip hop in Abdurraqib’s life.

Abdurraqib’s background as a poet is on full display in his remarkable prose and extensive use of metaphor. Much like reading poetry, these essays are better experienced than summarized. Abdurraqib imparts on the reader a closeness to the characters found in the book. The intimacy of this book creates insight into why the band has resonated with so many fans, and why this cultural history of this music is important to evoke.

Although a familiarity with A Tribe Called Quest is recommended, the book can certainly be enjoyed by those who wouldn’t consider themselves fans. With *Never Go Ahead in the Rain*, Abdurraqib creates a lasting work with an ambitious scope. He obscures the line between social commentary, memoir, and biography. Most importantly, Abdurraqib constructs a worthy homage to one of hip-hop’s most innovative artists.

BRODY TROTTIER
University of Toronto