

REPORT

Decoded – The process



CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION



Introduction

Hip hop has always been more than just music – more than just beats and rhymes alone. It's full of emotive storytelling, cultural expression and poetic skill. In just over 50 years, it has grown to become one of the world's most influential music genres (BET Awards, 2023), yet its lyrical complexity and depth are too often left overlooked or even dismissed as just entertainment. Decoded exists to change just that. It's an interactive platform carefully designed to help listeners to dig deeper – to really listen, understand and appreciate the intricate layers of the craft embedded deep within the bars.

While hip hop competes with traditional poetry in its complexity leading MCs “make the familiar unfamiliar through rhythm, rhyme, and wordplay” (Bradley, 2009, p.14). Despite this, it doesn't benefit from the same extensive amount of accessible tools for guided analysis. Decoded steps in to close that gap, encouraging listeners to see hip hop for what it really is – modern-day poetry layered with techniques, stories and culture. The goal is



Introduction

simple but necessary: turning passive listening into an active listening experience. Some of the best MCs have drastically changed the way we experience and relate to spoken word, and deserve consideration alongside the giants of American Poetry (Bradley, 2009, p.14). Decoded provides listeners with the tools to break down lyrics, learn to understand the craft and ultimately, tune in with fresh ears.

This report documents the journey of Decoded, from its earliest spark of an idea to its final execution. It looks at the cultural and educational context that initially inspired its concept, maps out the current landscape of lyric-based resources and highlights where the project carves out something new. It also details the design thinking and intentions, visual identity and technical decisions that bring the site to life – an educational, typographically driven, casually authoritative space that reflects the genre it celebrates.



Introduction

As a self-proclaimed hip hop fan with a love for creative arts, I have long been intrigued by the hidden meanings and techniques woven into the music I love. This project combines my passion for hip hop music, my interest in education and my dedication to design – transforming curiosity into an accessible and engaging learning experience.

By unscrambling the art of lyricism, Decoded rewards with deeper listening – for listeners who listen.

CONTEXT & BACKGROUND



Cultural Context

2.1

Hip hop can be traced back to the early 1970s in the Bronx, NY, as a raw expression of street culture that voiced the relatable struggles and joys of everyday life. From block parties, underground cyphers and rap battles to passing mixtapes hand to hand, over the decades, it grew to become a global force that influences mainstream language, fashion, and even politics and education (Laurence, 2024). While its impact reaches far beyond the initial beats and hooks, at its heart, it's an art form rooted in storytelling, wordplay and mastery and manipulation of language.

Today, hip hop sits as one of the most popular genres of music worldwide. Recent data shows that nearly a quarter of all streams on Spotify are hip hop tracks (Spotify, 2023), evidence of its substantial cultural reach. On existing platforms similar to Decoded, like Genius – often described as the world's largest collection of annotated lyrics (HuntScreens, n.d), hip hop consistently features in top charts and is repeatedly highlighted in editorial



Cultural Context

2.1

content. With millions of visitors per month, each looking for the meanings behind bars and punchlines, these statistics prove what we already know: that there is demand for deeper understanding, even if not everyone has the tools to decode it themselves.

The genre has gained wider recognition in academia and the literary field. A key moment for hip hop and its evolution was Kendrick Lamar being the recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 2018 for DAMN (The Pulitzer Prize, 2018). Not only was it the first of its kind – a non-classical, non-jazz piece of work to win the prize. This milestone signified overdue acknowledgement of hip hop as a form of literacy. Its layers of metaphors, cultural commentary and complexity rival the depth found in work by William Shakespeare or T.S. Eliot – yet there still remains a gap in how we are taught to read and appreciate it line by line. Why shouldn't we be taught to unpack verse by Lupe Fiasco or Andre 3000 in the same way we dissect a sonnet or stanza?



Cultural Context

2.1

From an educational perspective, hip hop is beginning to get the respect it deserves as an art form that is worth studying from. More higher educational institutions are putting it on the curriculum and even having courses endorsed by renowned artists such as Lupe Fiasco at MIT, where he is a visiting tutor for the class 'Rap Theory & Practice' (MIT, n.d). A step forward for the culture! On the contrary, this kind of learning is not easily accessible for everyone. There is still a gap for fans and listeners who want to study hip hop in their own terms, and on their own timing, outside of lecture halls.

Decoded can be placed right there. It recognises hip hop lyrics for what they really are: modern poetry, born of lived experiences and cultural knowledge, carefully crafted to connect, to question and to entertain. Providing tools to help listeners to break down techniques and understand the formation of lyrics. It closes the gap between listening as a casual fan



Cultural Context

2.1

and truly appreciating the lyrics.

BARRIERS TO UNDERSTANDING

Barriers to Understanding

Hip hop's success has created a growing audience wider and more diverse than ever before. Fans enjoy listening from every corner of the world, crossing different cultures and languages, and as a result, they carry their own barriers and boundaries. While the universal language of the music itself is not too difficult to understand, the crafted lyrical content is not always straightforward to decode. A bar that connects effortlessly with one community may fall on deaf ears to another. Not necessarily because the writing lacks any sort of quality, but rather because certain references, or wordplay, may be difficult to understand or interpret without context.

The complexity of hip hop's lyricism sits at the core of the problem. Artists often embed multiple techniques into a single bar. Be it multisyllabic rhymes woven across lines, the double entendres with multiple possible meanings, or the fact that it's all intertwined with slang rooted in local dialects and referencing cultural themes that require previous knowledge –



Barriers to Understanding

there are so many layers to unpack! To an untrained ear, this is easily overlooked, or even misconstrued as just ‘catchy bars’ of ‘cool rhymes’ when really, they’re so much more. For the casual listener, these layers may be invisible. For the invested fans, the process of uncovering the layers may be difficult and inconsistent.

There are existing platforms that attempt to bridge this gap, but they rarely provide the structured support and guidance that is needed for genuine understanding. Genius, for example, who consistently ranks as one of the most trafficked and influential lyric annotation platforms, draw in upwards of 150 million monthly visits (SimilarWeb, 2025), but their content relies heavily on crowd-sourced annotations. So, while some songs benefit from a plethora of annotations in meticulous detail, others are left astray – missing explanations or containing vague suggestions. In addition to this, annotations are often based on opinions or focused on the trivial side of the

Barriers to Understanding

lyrics rather than the technicalities of the literary content. Other resources, such as YouTube breakdown channels, often fall into focusing on trending artists or viral songs, resulting in inconsistent and sporadic analysis rather than a clear, structured outline. As a result, users' understanding can be inconsistent, biased and poorly influenced depending on the different sources.

While major universities such as Harvard and MIT (DeSmith, 2024; MIT n.d) are embracing and exploring hip hop as literature, the opportunity to study remains confined to a small, selected academic setting. So, what about the millions of fans who encounter hip hop daily on streaming platforms? For the majority, there are few well-structured or accessible ways for lyricism to be studied to the same depth. The educational resources are either sealed behind the institutional gates of academia or written in a language that makes them inaccessible to the wider audiences, the everyday fan who has

Barriers to Understanding

equal passion and curiosity. This ultimately creates a gap between the institutional recognition of hip hop as poetry and the tools available for everyday listeners to take critical understanding into their own hands.

The mismatch between hip hop's cultural weight and the resources available for its study is exactly where the problem becomes most pressing. We're dealing with an art form that acquires billions of streams annually, has major influence on fashion, language and even politics, and has earned recognition at the pinnacle of literacy levels. Yet, it lacks a carefully designed, widely accessible space for structured lyric analysis. For this exact reason, many listeners remain just passive consumers rather than active interpreters of the music.

There are also design problems to address. Much of the content available online for lyric analysis falls short of a good user experience. Sonic Hits and

Barriers to Understanding

Genius both offer an extensive amount of content for visitors to explore, but often overwhelm the reader with text-heavy content with an inconsistent tone and a cluttered interface, including many distracting adverts (SonicHits, n.d). YouTube explainer videos offer a different format of lyric analysis content, but still have their own set of limitations. Viewers follow the pace and flow of the video, which can make it difficult to skim, search, or revisit key points. While the recent addition of chapters improves the navigational experience as it starts to break down the video into smaller, digestible sections, it falls short of fully addressing the problem. Furthermore, the un-skippable advertisement disrupts the flow of learning and engagement, ultimately diminishing the overall experience. Even access to traditional academic resources is often restricted to paying visitors or written using language that is inaccessible to everyone. The current tools available do not fully consider how people want to interact with lyrics – actively, visually, and with control over the pace of exploration



Barriers to Understanding (Jervier, 2025).

BRIDGING THE GAP



Bridging the Gap

Decoded exists to address these problems head-on. Acknowledging both the cultural significance and the educational challenge of hip hop lyricism, it frames rap as modern-day poetry and provides an interactive environment for free exploration. By making the craft of lyrics visible, structured and accessible, Decoded bridges the gap between inconsistent crowd-sourced commentary and inaccessible academic studies. It responds to a rather simple but overlooked reality – millions of people want to more deeply understand the art they love (SimilarWeb, 2025), but lack the appropriate tools to do so.

Concept & Objectives

4.1

At its core, Decoded is designed to empower “listeners who listen” – fans who are curious about what lies beneath the surface of their favourite tracks. Unlike annotation platforms that prioritise popular tracks or academic sources that are restricted to specific audiences (HuntScreens, n.d), Decoded connects with the everyday listener. The platform positions hip hop lyricism not as just background noise, but as literature that deserves to be studied with the same care as any traditional text (Bradley, 2009, p.14).

3 objectives define Decoded:

1. Educational – to introduce users to techniques and poetic devices embedded within the lyrics.
2. Engagement – to make learning interactive, self-paced and ultimately enjoyable and inclusive.
3. Cultural – to highlight hip hop as a serious art form, while respecting its



Concept & Objectives

4.1

roots.

In theory, this means that a listener exploring Nas, Kendrick Lamar or Lauryn Hill can move from simply appreciating a rhyme just for the rhyme itself, to truly understanding the complexity of the structure, the cultural references and the way it connects to the broader roots of hip hop's traditions of storytelling.

Educational Approach

4.2

Decoded adapts methods often reserved for traditional teaching or classroom settings – annotations, close reading, and literary analysis (Schneider, 2006) – into a digital experience. No lengthy essays or extended academic lectures, but divided into manageable, clearly explained sections.

For example, a user exploring The Breakdown Room can click into Multisyllabic Rhyme and not only read the definition but also see an existing example of the rhyme itself. Rather than just being told what the technique is, users can “see it in action”. Similarly, the Glossary stands as a central knowledge bank, cross-referenced so that terms like assonance or alliteration are linked to examples and related concepts.

This approach mirrors how fans already interact with hip hop – quickly, visually, through snippets of shared knowledge, with fans’ increased



Educational Approach

4.2

consumption of short-form digital content (Richter, 2023). By including learning in the listening experience, Decoded removes the barriers of education and provides a more accessible, yet still thorough, form of lyric study.

Design Philosophy

4.3

Design is by no means an afterthought in the construction of Decoded; it's a tool in the teaching itself. With the site concept focusing on lyrics, typography and colour choices are vital to how the site communicates – clarity and legibility remain at the forefront of the site's success (Lupton et al., 2024). Lyrics are given visual priority, displayed with careful typographic consideration that makes them the focal point on the Lyric Anatomy page. Techniques and Rap Index terms are highlighted in accent colours inspired by hip hop graphic traditions – deep reds and bright contrasting colours drawn from classic album covers and graffiti.

Navigational elements are also designed with clarity in mind and to reflect the entire concept of the site. The breadcrumbs menu allows users to always know where they are in the hierarchy of The Breakdown Room – for example: The Breakdown Room > Rhyme & Sound > Multisyllabic Rhyme. This reflects the nature of the lyrics themselves – exposing the layers. Each



Design Philosophy

4.3

technique can be explored on its own, but is also shown as a part of the wider structure.

Equally important is what is left out of the site – Decoded avoids unnecessary clutter. It keeps a clean interface for uninterrupted learning (Krug, 2017). It avoids the usual noise found on similar sites – meaning no overwhelming adverts or cluttering of user comments – the focus remains on the words and the whole learning experience. The result, a digital environment that has a sense of authority without feeling too academic.

Subtle design choices that strengthen the brand image and visual identity can be spotted across the site. Navigational and toggle content are displayed with variable widths depending on the content – a nod to the visual shape of bars written. Buttons have a drop shadow, like the logo, and push like cassette player buttons.



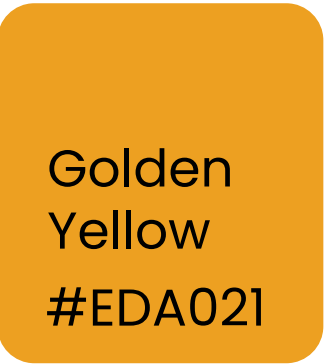
Design Philosophy

4.3

Primary



Secondary



Icons

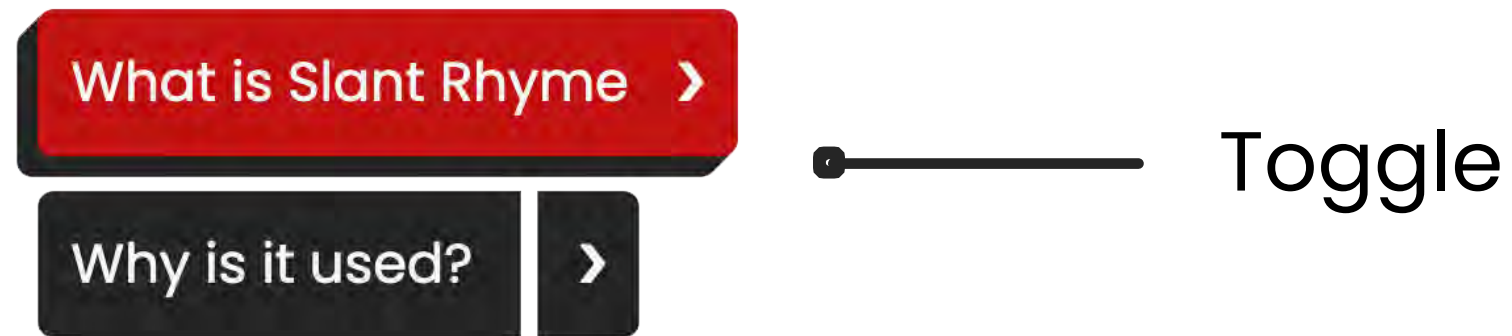




Design Philosophy

4.3

Features across the website also take inspiration from the logo. Corners are consistently rounded on buttons and any square or rectangular elements. The Breakdown Room toggles adopt the split and use small transitions to animate the opening of the toggle - adding a bit of rhythm to the whole interaction.



Accessibility & Inclusivity

4.4

A vital part of bridging the gap is accessibility – both on a technical and a contextual level.

From a technical perspective, Decoded has been designed to be usable across different devices with a responsive layout, designed mobile first (Marcotte, 2012). The typography prioritises clarity and combines selected font sizes and hierarchies that guide the reader's eye with ease. Colour has been carefully selected to meet WCAG accessibility guidelines (W3C, 2025), ensuring content legibility for a wide audience, including those with visual or situational impairments. These fundamental decisions ensure the platform feels open and usable to all.

Decoded's dark mode option, which does not take away from the overall design of the site and its strong branding. More than just a design option, it increases the site's inclusivity, improving readability in low-light

Accessibility & Inclusivity

4.4

environments or for those who prefer reduced brightness. With the colour palette of Decoded, there were some challenges in producing a successful dark mode option that both met WCAG guidelines and looked like Decoded. The bold Chilli Red clashes with the Charcoal, but with careful design adjustments, including subtle shifts in tone and selectively using accent colours, the dark mode option maintains legibility. While elements meet accessibility standards, I feel there is an opportunity for some design refinement.

Cultural accessibility extends this concept beyond the design of the interface. Decoded offers free, unrestricted access, without advertisements, subscription fees or diluted content for non-paying users, so every visitor engages with the same full experience. It also avoids privileging mainstream artists – while artists such as Drake are still included, equal attention is given to artists like MF DOOM , whose lyricism may be

Accessibility & Inclusivity

4.4

overlooked in mainstream platforms. This consistently structured framework allows users to explore hip hop across different eras without bias towards trends or popularity.

Inclusivity is reinforced by the self-explorative nature of the site – there’s no “correct” pathway through Decoded (Schneider, 2006). Users can explore at their own pace, moving between definitions on the Rap Index, techniques in the Breakdown Room and a quick lyric snippet on the Lyric Anatomy, in whatever order makes most sense for them. This explorative freedom reflects the diversity found right across hip hop, where different entry points and perspectives coexist.



DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

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05



Design & Methodology

Turning Decoded into a working platform meant finding a balance of creativity and structure. I needed to set clear goals, choose the right tools and design something that pays homage to hip hop's energy while staying accessible at every step of the way. From the early brainstorming of ideas, sketches and research, to the first prototype, every decision was based on both the user needs and cultural context.



Project Planning & Goals

5.1

Setting clear goals took Decoded from just an idea and turned it into reality. The main aim of the project was simple in theory but ambitious in practice – to make hip hop lyrics, which are often layered with complexity, more accessible and understandable to listeners who want to go beyond that surface-level enjoyment. The project had to be interactive and structured, but not lack depth or cultural authenticity.

Planning remained vital to the success of the entire project – keeping things realistic and focused on the essentials. What are the core features of the website that demonstrate the value of the site – what is the mvp? This meant prioritising sections such as The Breakdown Room, which allows users to explore specific techniques used in lyrics, in context, and a glossary of terms in the Rap Index to support users' understanding of technical and cultural references. The Lyric Anatomy, on the other hand, remains a smaller, secondary feature – supportive to the main content.

Project Planning & Goals

5.1

Beginning by exploring existing tools and platforms that tackle the same core problem around hip hop lyricism, I could see where they fell short. The research translated directly into my design decisions, refining the visual identity, creating wireframes and mockups to begin to visualise the concept. With a solid foundation, development then brought the whole design and idea to life. Using WordPress as a CMS combined with custom PHP and CSS, the visuals become functional. Testing usability and making adjustments, made sure that Decoded meets the needs of being clear, accessible and engaging.

The audience's perspective provided guidance so each decision was thought of through the eyes of "listeners who listen" – someone who is curious about lyrics, who is invested in the craft of lyrics, but not necessarily trained in lyric analysis. This perspective guided not just features of the website, but the content itself – the flow and the presentation. For example,



Project Planning & Goals

5.1

rather than getting users to read large chunks of text explaining techniques, the project gives you small digestible chunks of content.

Overall, the planning stage was more than just a schedule of works depicting when and how long everything would take to complete. It was about defining and prioritising what mattered most and ultimately keeping the project true to its original purpose. This foundation meant the website works functionally and technically, as well as connecting with the intended audience.



User Research & Insights

5.2

Decoded is built for “listeners who listen” – or at least who want to become that person. These are the people who enjoy hip hop beyond hearing just the beat or hook. It’s the audience that value the craft of lyrics and want to explore more. It’s the people invested in the literature who feel connected to the music.

The core audience is 20–35 year olds, but with hip hops long and strong history can even be extended to those past their 50’s who can remember the beginnings of hip hop. The younger generation of teenagers who easily have access to hip hop content will also no doubtly be an included audience. Though hip hop is worldwide (Spotify, 2023), language is a key factor for the audience. With the site focused on American hip hop, the core language of the site and users of the site need to understand is English.

Since Decoded is built for fans, it was important to understand how people



User Research & Insights

5.2

actually engage with lyrics and what might get in their way. To get some first-hand insights, I ran a few small surveys with hip hop listeners whose responses would help to provide a snapshot of common frustrations, listening habits and the way they prefer to consume analysis content. Most people said they break down lyrics themselves, but find their understanding could be improved with interactive lyric breakdowns and visual tools for rhyme schemes and patterns. A recurring theme was that more interactivity combined with a balance of structured learning and casual exploration, would make learning about the techniques more interesting. 11 out of 15 people said they use Genius when they want to look up lyrics, but many find that it's inconsistent and mixed with speculative user input. 53% of responders engage in YouTube breakdowns and 21% explore forums (Jervier, 2025).

Alongside this, I also looked at existing platforms to see how they tackle lyric



User Research & Insights

5.2

explanations (Reddit, 2008; YouTube, n.d ; Genius, n.d). The biggest name in the game is Genius, but that's just overall. Their content is extensive but inconsistent; some songs have long and detailed annotations, while others appear to be purely a display of lyrics.

Then there are YouTube channels that often provide in-depth analysis, but you're limited to the pace of the video. Forum discussions show that people have a genuine interest in lyrics and their interpretation, but the conversations are often scattered and hard to follow or keep up with.

By looking at all my findings, it was clear that there's not a lack of resources, but they are not structured or accessible in the way the audience wants and needs them to be. They want to learn, but in a way that is easy for them to dip into the content, something that is reliable, an interface that is uncluttered and distraction-free. That's where the design of Decoded



User Research & Insights

5.2

comes into play. The Breakdown Room organises techniques into categories. The Rap Index supports this with clear definitions. The Lyric Anatomy gives a hands-on example, showing the techniques in use. Together, they allow users to learn at their own pace while still having enough depth so that users get both clarity and useful content.



Content Strategy

5.3

With valuable information collected from the target audience, I could confidently say that Decoded's content strategy should be focused on consistency, clarity and depth. Each section of the website has a clear role and purpose.

The Breakdown Room

The Breakdown Room is the heart of the site, containing all the educational content about the complex lyrical techniques. It systematically breaks them down into clear categories such as "Rhyme & Sound", making navigation straightforward. Each page doesn't just define the term, it provides real-life examples with actual lyrics – a combination that allows users to understand the concept and immediately see how it works. It also prompts you to explore yourself with "artists to know".



User Research & Insights

5.3

The Rap Index

The Rap Index is the site's quick-access reference tool. It's essentially a glossary giving short, reliable definitions that users can dip into at any point. Useful for when you come across an unfamiliar word or terms while exploring the breakdown room, or those who simply want a straightforward explanation with no extra noise, no distractions. The focus is clarity – short entries, no clutter.

Lyric Anatomy

The Lyric Anatomy automatically draws from the website's database of lyrics and presents them individually, giving them their own spotlight. Each lyric displayed is interactive – techniques used in that bar are displayed as button-styled links that take you to the relevant Breakdown Room page.



User Research & Insights

5.3

While words and terms that feature in the Rap Index are highlighted in red, with pop-up definitions. This setup as a whole makes the feature both educational and explorative – each lyric stands as its own piece of art, while also acting as a gateway into the wider structure of Decoded.

The site content and its structure are carefully designed to avoid flooding the user with information. Decoded presents the content in digestible chunks, with a consistent framework across lessons. The aim is simple: to create an experience that works for both the ‘casual visitor’ who wants to skim through and the ‘dedicated fan’ who wants to dive that little bit deeper.



Development & Implementation

5.4

The next step was translating the design decisions and body of content into a functional and interactive website that supports its educational nature. WordPress was chosen as the core of the platform for its flexibility and ease of content management. Alongside this, custom CSS, PHP & JS were used to implement features that make Decoded successful.

A core part of the technical setup was the creation of Custom Post Types (CPTs) for lyrics, techniques and glossary terms. Each CPT was designed to structure and organise content efficiently, providing a clear framework for both the input and output of the content. The Advanced Custom Fields (ACFs) help to take it a step further, extending the functionality, turning each post into more than just a block of text. With ACFs, posts can be broken down into repeatable, structured sections, perfect for building consistent content across the site.



Development & Implementation

5.4

For example, the Lessons CPT isn't simply just a post containing the text of all the educational content for that lesson. It breaks them down into a series of sections that collectively build the content of the page. Similarly, the Rap Index CPT separates each entry's content into parts, including the definition, the abbreviation and related terms. Relationship fields link entries to other terms in the Rap Index and to example lyrics stored in the Lyric CPT. The overall setup allows for dynamic linking across the site, which in turn supports the interactive features like the Lyric Anatomy while maintaining consistency. Decoded can easily scale – lyrics, artists, or techniques can be added without breaking the interactive experience or requiring additional coding.

Custom PHP queries were central to displaying the page's content and making the interactivity possible. With the CPTs and ACFs, custom queries target specific data held in the database to output content dynamically.



Development & Implementation

5.4

For example, in the Lessons CPT, each section of the lesson – such as “Why is it used?” and “Common Mistakes” – are stored as individual ACFs and are queried and displayed using a loop:

```
<?php
    if ($posts) :
        foreach($posts as $post) :
            setup_postdata($post);
        // get the fields associated with the lessons
        $intro = get_field('intro') ?: '';
        $what = get_field('what_is') ?: '';
        $why = get_field('why') ?: '';
        $use_tip = get_field('use_tip') ?: '';

    ?>
    <h2><?php the_title(); ?></h2>
    <p class="lesson-intro"><?php echo esc_html($intro); ?></p>
    <input id="definition" type="checkbox" class="content-dropdown">
    <label for="definition" class="toggle">
        <h3>What is <?php the_title(); <span>&#x276F</span></h3>
    </label>
    <div>
        <p><?php echo esc_html($what); ?></p>
    </div>
    <?php
        endforeach;
    endif;
?>
```




Development & Implementation

5.4

With it being structured this way, each lesson is broken down into collapsible, modular sections, improving readability and interactivity. This makes the lesson format reusable and consistent, as new lessons can be created simply by filling in the relevant ACF fields, with PHP handling the displaying logic.

A similar approach was used across the Lyric Anatomy and Rap Index CPTs. While the details differ, the overall method enables consistency and site scalability.

Alongside achieving the main functionality with the code written, several WordPress plugins add to the development and operation of the site. WP Vivid manages the backups and ensure the site's structure and content remain secure. Though this also came with its own set of challenges during development. My hosting platform, Clook, had a storage limit on the plan I



Development & Implementation

5.4

was on, which caused my backups to fail. Combined with an unknown error in my code & the WordPress ‘white page of death’, it highlighted the importance of monitoring my server resources.

Yoast SEO does what it says on the tin – handles the SEO – and was more useful than just helping search rankings. It lets me control how pages show up in search engines by allowing me to manually edit page titles and meta descriptions. The breadcrumbs feature also tied in quite nicely to the lessons in The Breakdown Room – helping the site navigation, not just for the search engines, though it was only used as a reference tool for creating my own menu.

Google Site Kit provides analytics insights and helps to better understand user engagement, habits and movement across the site. Though the site has only briefly been up and running, I can begin to see where users are



Development & Implementation

5.4

exploring and how they are moving through the site. As traffic builds, this can become more useful for refining the structure and focus of the website.



Testing & Refinement

5.5

The testing and refinement was a back-and-forth process that involved making changes and retesting. Once the site was up and running, making sure that it actually worked in the way it is supposed to, both functionally and from a user experience perspective, was important. With the functionality being a fundamental aspect of the site, it needed to be responsive. Testing thoroughly across multiple devices to ensure the site remains accessible, and features are not compromised, so users get a consistent, full 'Decoded' experience regardless of the device. Fonts, colours, and spacing were checked for readability and interactive elements such as the Lyric Anatomy buttons and dropdowns were tested to confirm they worked consistently.

With a small select group from the core audience, listeners were invited to navigate the site, exploring pages, interactions, and site navigation. Their feedback highlighted what areas users struggled with, what works well, and



User Research & Insights

5.5

what they liked about the website. And was used to make improvements that would help the site better achieve the aim.

A key improvement was the navigation menu, which was changed to a full page on mobile and a side menu on larger screens. Users picked up on the explorative nature of the Lyric Anatomy and liked this about the page, but feel the pop-up definitions are something you'd find only if you know about it. An improvement was to add pop-up instructions when users hover over the words, which acts as a hint to the page's functionality. One final major improvement picked up by users was navigating to the content. While users found The Breakdown Room useful, navigation to 'Multisyllabic Rhyme' for example, could take 4-5 clicks. Most users found that this added to the explorative nature of the site, but 22% found that there could be a more direct route, especially when jumping between different lessons.



User Research & Insights

5.5

Accessibility was a constant thought from initial design to refinement. Colours were tested to ensure their contrasts meet WCAG standards (WCAG, 2025), tweaking them where necessary. Interactive elements and page navigation were checked for keyboard accessibility, and code was written keeping screen reader users in mind. The overall goal here is that anyone, no matter their device or ability, could explore and learn without trouble or frustration.

Testing wasn't just about fixing problems; it also confirmed that the design decisions made were working and well-informed. The feedback suggested small refinements that impact how well people engage with the content. Each adjustment contributed to keeping the focus on the lyrics and the journey of learning.

FINDINGS & ANALYSIS



Findings & Analysis

Once the site was live, the focus changed to testing how it actually performs. This was less about the idea, and more about the outcome of the site – has it met up to the aim of being accessible and engaging for listeners who want to dig deeper into hip hop lyrics?

This looks at a few different areas – technical performance, accessibility, SEO and early-stage audience engagement. As a combination, it shows what worked well, where things didn't quite go to plan and where there's room for improvement as the project develops further along the line.



Performance Testing

6.1

I used Google PageSpeed Insights (Google, 2025) to run tests on both desktop and mobile. On desktop, the results remain strong across the board with no major issues flagged. On mobile, however, the results are marginally lower, as expected, because of things such as the unused JavaScript and CSS. These weren't problems that highlight anything critical to the site performance, but remind me that performance could always do with some improvement.

Similarly, on Digital Beacon (Digital Beacon, 2025), testing different pages, there was consistently fast loading times with elements like interactive content and scripts loading smoothly.

Looking at how Decoded runs, an important part is the environment it is hosted in. Decoded uses Clook as its hosting platform (Internet, 2025), which works well for small or medium-sized WordPress projects. With my



Performance Testing

6.1

upgraded plan, Clook handles the site just fine, loading pages quickly and features working as intended with no lag. As the site gains more traffic, tools like Google Site Kit will again help track how users move through the content and if any hosting limitations impact user experience. So, even as decoded grows, it can still continue to improve and provide a smooth experience.



Analytics & User Engagement

6.2

Although the site has only recently gone live, analytics are beginning to provide a valuable snapshot of how listeners interact with Decoded. From using Google Site Kit (Google, 2025), I can see data such as which pages people are visiting first, how long they stay there and where they move to next.

At the moment, The Breakdown Room is drawing in the most attention, with the Lyric Anatomy close behind. The pages under “Rhyme & Sound” such as “Metaphors & Similes”, “Assonance” & “Internal Rhyme”, are taking over 20% of current traffic. The Lyric anatomy is also being used as intended, maybe even a bit more than anticipated. People are clicking on the highlighted techniques to jump straight into the relevant lessons linked.

The average engagement time per active user for the Lyric Anatomy is 5m 58s, which suggests users are exploring the page thoroughly and spending



Analytics & User Engagement

6.2

adequate time there. Similarly, the Rap Index is averaging 3m 8s, which also suggests users are exploring the page. However, some of the longer lessons found in The Breakdown Room are experiencing a faster drop-off rates. This may suggest the content is too heavy and could benefit from some further refinement.

Even with the limited data, the patterns are reassuring – people are not just landing on the pages and leaving, they're moving around the site and actually using the tools – navigating through sections, using interactive features and giving time to the site content. This is exactly the type of engagement Decoded is trying to encourage from visitors, and provides a solid foundation for informed content improvement as the site grows.

Reflections

6.3

Reflecting back on the goals that I set out at the start of the project, I can see Decoded is already ticking many boxes, and where more work is needed. A main objective was to build a website that helps listeners to not just passively hear or read lyrics, but truly understand them – through providing structured and referenceable content that is interactive and engaging.

Analytic data shows people are clicking through the Lyric Anatomy and moving into the lessons – proving the interactive elements of the site are ‘doing their job’. The average engagement times indicate that visitors are not just landing and leaving, but they’re taking the time to explore, reflecting the site’s aim of encouraging active listening.

From a technical perspective, the site was designed to be functional, structured and easy to navigate. Custom queries, breadcrumbs, and the



Reflections

6.3

plugins used collectively make this possible. While there were some setbacks in the development phase, like the storage hosting limits and occasional WordPress errors, they were all resolved and do not prevent the site from functioning.

SEO is one of the areas that could still benefit from more work. There are currently solid foundations with the site appearing in related searches such as 'rap terminology' and 'hiphop slang words' whilst averaging a position of 47 in search results. But with the addition of using Yoast SEO and adding page and post-specific metadata, there could be a real improvement in search rankings.

Overall, the findings show that users are not only moving through and navigating the site as intended but are also engaging with features. Alongside that, they also highlight where the site may benefit from some



Reflections

6.3

further refinements, such as dark mode accessibility and engagement in The Breakdown Room lessons. These results, however, do not undermine the original objectives but point towards the next stage of development, building on what works, addressing the gaps and continuing to evolve Decoded into a tool that fully meets the needs of its audience.

DISCUSSION & REFLECTION



Discussion & Reflection

This section looks back at the project as a whole, what it achieved, what the defining decisions were, and what was learned along the way. It discussed the final outcome and how it relates to the original aims and research, while reflecting on what went well and could be improved. Finally, it considers how Decoded sits in the wider landscape of digital learning, music education and hip hop culture.



Decoded in Literature

7.1

In relation to existing literature, the findings I uncovered through Decoded's development and analytics, a few things stand out. One of the first things that stood out was the way people are using the Lyric Anatomy and The Breakdown Room. Though still early in its launch, users are beginning to engage in a way that reflects patterns of analysing traditional literature. Traditional literature emphasises careful reading, annotating and connecting to context, while contemporary lyric analysis typically blends close reading with cultural knowledge and community style discussions. Decoded supports both – users explore individual lines in the Lyric Anatomy, click on highlighted terms and move between pages, suggesting they are thinking more critically about the text rather than just reading it passively.

Analytics show users average almost 6 minutes in the Lyric Anatomy, indicating sustained engagement, perhaps mirroring the way scholars or students may pause over a complex poem and unpack it line by line. At the



Decoded in Literature

7.1

same time, the structure of Decoded encourages the user to explore, so they are not only consuming the content but, of their own accord, are connecting ideas and following their curiosities.

Comparing this to modern platforms such as Genius, you can see there is a clear distinction. Genius lets anyone add notes to lyrics, and anyone can comment their idea of what a lyric means, which in turn can be a hit or miss. Decoded takes a similar idea but uses a more guided approach. Users can submit a lyric and therefore their 'input' to the site. However, unlike Genius, these aren't immediately and publicly available until they are reviewed & added to the database. People want to click around and explore, connect ideas. The fact that users are on the Lyric Anatomy clicking technique links and connecting to different pages, or spending time on and exploring the Rap Index, discovering new terms, reconnects to the way modern analysis on digital platforms.



Decoded in Literature

7.1

Accessibility is where the literature gave me a reality check, but not so much because of the content of the literature itself. Accessibility should be built in from the very start, not an afterthought. It should avoid a trade-off of accessibility vs aesthetics, but be a beautiful blend that successfully achieves both. While I made progress with things like dark mode, making the platform more user-friendly, my colour choices sometimes clashed, demonstrating a tension between brand identity and accessibility.

Overall, it's clear that Decoded is supporting a form of digital lyrical literacy that sits comfortably between traditional literary interpretation and modern fan-driven interpretation. Users are not solely skimming over content; they are reading critically, making connections and exploring context. As a result, Decoded sits in a space where cultural engagement and learning coexist.



Successes

7.2

Looking at what has been achieved, there are a number of aspects of Decoded that have worked really well. To start with, the build of the website overall was a big win. The desired functionality was achieved, and the Decoded vision was brought to life. More specifically, building the database in a structured way that made it clean, clear and easy to manage. The good foundations allowed for flexibility with custom PHP queries and JavaScript features, both of which worked as intended and gave the site the interactivity it needed.

Content-wise, the balance between accessibility and clarity was another strong point. The site has a wide audience from a range of backgrounds, so it was imperative that it let people engage with the complex ideas we're unpacking without needing specialist knowledge or being put off by unnecessary jargon. The tone of the content is both relatable to the audience and authoritative, whilst reflecting the subject. Additionally, the



Successes

7.2

display of the content – clear headings, visual hierarchies all aid the accessibility and ease of use for a better user experience.

The design implementation reinforces this by building a strong visual identity that feels deep-rooted in hip hop without being gimmicky or cliché. The colour palette and typography choices present a balance between boldness and clarity, creating a visual that connects to the culture and still feels fresh and distinct. Collectively, these elements meet the project's aims to build a website that is functional, accessible and culturally relevant.



Improvements

7.3

Though the functionality was largely successful, there are small improvements or additions that I would have liked to include. A key feature that would add some more depth to the content would be the handling of glossary entries for the same word or term with multiple meanings. At the moment, one can be published while others sit in the drafts, but it would be nice if they could coexist and for the relationship functionality to work for them. This is definitely something that could be addressed in a phase 2 version of the site.

The search results functionality was another area for improvement. With search results displayed, the Lyric Anatomy posts in particular need refinement. While the results link to the Lyric Anatomy page, due to the random generation of lyrics from the database, users may click on a specific lyric but be shown another when the link is followed. Additionally, search only queries post titles or pages, but it could also include artists and



Improvements

7.3

actual text from page content. While the core functionality works, these are the finer details where it could benefit from some improvement. This would give the glossary more depth and help to make the site feel more complete.

The project could also benefit from user testing at a larger scale, to provide some more insight into users' pain points, what they enjoyed and to receive feedback to help the design evolve. Given more time, I would like to conduct more research and have the site up and running for longer to build a more accurate picture of insights and analytics.



Position in Wider Debates

7.4

Decoded sits in an interesting position somewhere between sparking conversations on how people learn about music outside the classroom, how culture is interpreted online and how hip hop is treated as a subject of study.

When looking at how digital platforms shape the culture and knowledge around hip hop music, Genius is the obvious comparison. It opens up lyric interpretation to everyone, which, although inclusive, can provide a lack of consistency and quality. Decoded's approach takes a different tune, keeping things structured and guided, making it more reliable while still encouraging curiosity. That is what puts the project in a slightly different position within the wider conversation of how online platforms can influence cultural interpretation.

There's also the question of how hip hop fits in with education. While there

Position in Wider Debates

7.4

are recognised courses such as MIT Rap Theory and Practice, hip hop centred education often focuses on the 'how to', not the study of already available material (DeSmith, 2024). Or at the other end of the spectrum, when it is studied, it risks being stripped of its cultural voice and turning into something purely academic. University of Southampton's module Global Hip Hop (n.d) is an example of a course that does well to highlight the cultural relevance of hip hop, but misses the opportunity to study the music and lyrical content.

Decoded tries to avoid producing something too academic by reflecting hip hop's identity in its design and tone, while still offering serious analysis. This way, it shows that lyric study can be both thorough and culturally authentic.

Video and podcast-style analysis content are great at reaching wide



Position in Wider Debates

7.4

audiences, and quickly, but they often rely on the opinion and personality of the host. Decoded's tone lives in the roots of hip hop and sounds just like your own familiar voice. It offers a slower, more text-based way of engagement, putting the focus back on the words themselves. It emphasises the lyrical techniques, not the hype, showing how much of the complexity of hip hop lyrics comes from structure, sound and phrasing. Seeing the words and bars laid out visually allows users to connect the sound of lyrics and ideas of techniques with clarity – seeing words, bars, or sentences makes all the difference – and creates a different kind of listening experience.



Development Opportunities

7.5

Considering the future of Decoded, there are a number of directions it could take.

On a larger scale, thinking of phase 2, expanding the content seems to be a clear opportunity. Perhaps, introducing artist profiles and/or deeper explorations of lyrical techniques would give the site much more depth and appeal to users looking for more advanced insights. As for the artists, the data is already there and set up; it would just be a case of formatting and designing to present the content in a useful way for listeners.

Adding multimedia elements is an idea that needs careful thought to avoid being a distraction from the strong connection with words and lyrics. Audio snippets on the Lyric Anatomy would really bring the whole concept together, but would need to be a secondary, accompanying element.



Development Opportunities

7.5

Other future opportunities sit in the area of user experience. Expanding on providing a curated experience for each user, personalised recommendations, such as linking users to related lyrics or techniques based on their previous explorations, which would create a more tailored experience.

Overall, these development opportunities point to a Phase 2 version of Decoded. It could grow to a richer, multi-layered platform, without losing sight of the site's core aim: lyrics, their meaning, their formation and making them easier to understand.



CONCLUSION

~~DECODED~~

08



Summary

8.1

Decoded set out to create a space where listeners could engage with hip hop lyrics in depth, breaking them down in a way that feels both accessible and authentic. The project aimed to find a balance of hip hop lyrics in education and maintain respect for the culture.

Achieving this required some core elements that reinforce the overall concept. The Breakdown Room, Rap Index and Lyric Anatomy all work as intended. Together, they give users a way to explore techniques and meanings in a structured but engaging format.

Content remains a vital part of Decoded & ensuring it meets its goals. The writing style makes techniques clear without diluting their complexity or undermining users with inaccessible language and tone. Visually, the typography and colour take the content a step further, establishing hierarchies and connecting to the culture.



Summary

8.1

Overall, the project demonstrates that hip hop lyrics can begin to be analysed and treated with the same respect as traditional poetry with depth and seriousness. Decoded shows that there is a space for a resource that combines structure learning and a focus on the artistry of language.



Project Contributions

8.2

Decoded's contributions are in a few different areas. For music education, it shows that people can learn about lyrics and techniques outside of a formal classroom setting. The website lets users explore ideas at their own pace – no need for any specialist knowledge or the presence of a regulated formal space – highlighting the value of informal learning spaces.

For hip hop, Decoded offers a new perspective on the music and encourages listeners to explore from another viewpoint. Instead of solely focusing on performance or culture, it puts the words and their techniques front and centre – essentially giving them their flowers. It shows that lyrics can be studied like poetry or literature and maintain their cultural identity and relevance.

Design is another area where Decoded takes a different approach. Unlike other lyric analysis platforms, the site avoids clutter and distraction. It



Project Contributions

8.2

optimises visual hierarchy with strong typography and structured layouts to guide users through content.

On the whole, Decoded sits at a 3-way intersection of culture, education and design. It's a website that keeps the focus on the lyrics and the learning, but at the same time, leaving room to grow and explore new directions in the future.



Limitations

8.3

Time was a big factor in the scale and achievement of the project. Some features did not get as much attention or had to be compromised to ensure there was a successful version of Decoded. For example, the Lyric Anatomy generates random lyrics but not a random sequence of lyrics. As a result, the next & previous buttons are not necessarily the next and previous lyrics, but just another random lyric. With more time, this is something I would have liked to refine.

User testing and analysis were another thing limited by time. I would have liked to get more practical evidence demonstrating the use patterns and, consequently, what works well and what could be improved.

A major limitation was the learning curve. The build of the website used tools that required a lot of learning on the go, which naturally slowed down the process. Some ideas couldn't be pushed as far as I would have liked, as



Limitations

8.3

a result.

Time and knowledge constraints played a big part in the limitations of the project, and the project had to balance ambition with practicality. Though with careful planning to incorporate learning as part of the build, a happy medium was achieved to produce a version of Decoded that meets its aim and to be proud of.



Final Reflections

8.4

Decoded is made for listeners who listen. It started as an idea to take hip hop lyrics seriously as the complex art form they are. Decoded gives people a way of exploring lyrics and learning to understand them better, to ultimately transform the way we experience the music when we listen to it. The project has shown me how, with research and design, content and structure, it can all come together to make it possible.

There were plenty of bumps in the road along the way – time, learning new tools and how to debug them contributing to a few. Not everything I initially imagined made it into this version of the site, but the core of the project did. The site works, it has a clear identity, and it meets the aims – it feels authentic and is accessible.

What stands out most for me is seeing the whole idea become something real – more than a mockup or static prototype. Building Decoded has been



Final Reflections

8.4

as much about my growth and learning as it has the site itself. From learning WordPress, further exploring PHP & JavaScript, to learning more about hip hop lyrics myself to produce content. I've also learned to plan, adapt and plan for problems.

Although the project is finished for now, there is a lot of room for Decoded to develop further; it genuinely feels like the first step in a bigger process. For now, it addresses the issues found in the very beginning of the project. It treats hip hop like literature but remains rooted in the culture; it is free and easily accessible, and importantly, it bridges the gap.

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