Opinion

‘Hot for Hockey’ shoots wide with new fans

By NOAH KIM
Staff Writer

As the NHL season kicked into high gear, I found myself scrolling social media when I stumbled across an article from ESPN’s NHL reporter Emily Kaplan. In it, she details the NHL’s plan to capture a new audience. Particularly the 1.8 million people who watched the league for the first time thanks to shows like “Heated Rivalry” and “Off Campus.”

Kaplan describes the league’s plan to “humanize” the players, a concept that has worked in the past. Formula 1 used a similar plan in the Netflix docu-series “Drive to Survive” to show fans the behind-the-scenes drama and storylines, as well as the personal lives of the drivers and team principals. This let fans better understand athletes’ personalities and resonate with them. The show undoubtedly is one of the key drivers behind the series’ recent boom in popularity.

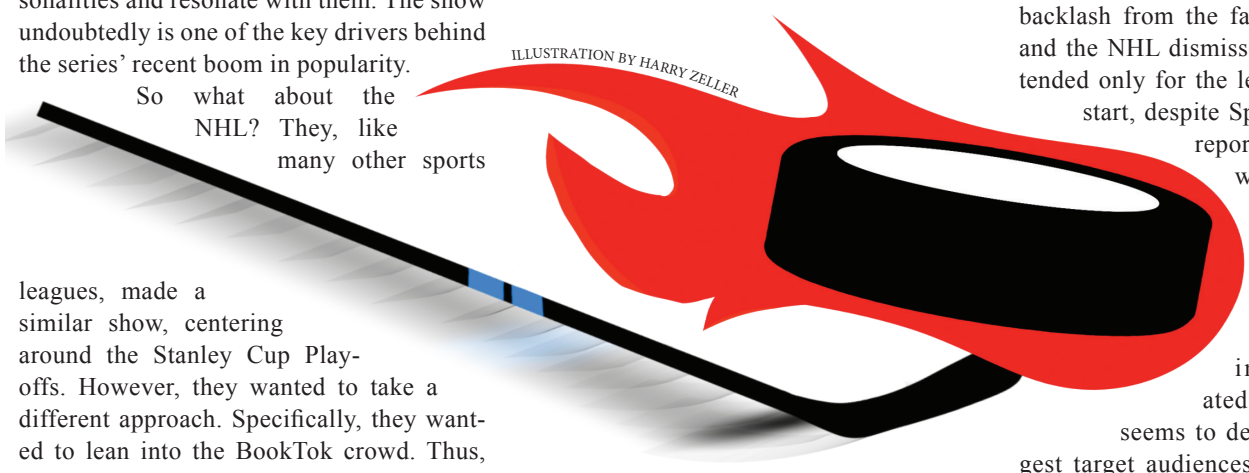
ILLUSTRATION BY HARRY ZELLER

So what about the NHL? They, like many other sports leagues, made a similar show, centering around the Stanley Cup Playoffs. However, they wanted to take a different approach. Specifically, they wanted to lean into the BookTok crowd. Thus, they partnered with romance novel author C.R. Jane to create an audiobook series called “Hot for Hockey.”

The plan was for each episode to be 60-90 second teasers of real-life NHL storylines “in the style of romance novels.” In practice, the show would encourage fans to tune into games to see those storylines play out.

Oh boy. Where to even start on that?

First off, they used real players for this, which really bothers me. The players featured were NHL stars, including Edmonton Oilers forward Connor McDavid, Carolina Hurricanes forward Sebastian Aho, Vegas Golden Knights forward Jack Eichel, New York Rangers forward Mika Zibanejad, Winnipeg Jets forward Kyle Connor and Philadelphia Flyers forward Trevor Zegras. While all the articles I can find do mention that the players seemingly gave approval for the league to use their likeness, and there are no actual romance scenes in the episodes, the language used in the show at times is rather questionable and potentially suggestive.

Parts of the BookTok crowd have also been historically problematic with this sort of media, with the Seattle Kraken publishing a series of thirst trap-like edits of their players, explicitly leaning into the BookTok crowd. It eventually led to Kraken forward Alexander Wennberg and his wife Felicia having to release a statement asking for fans to end the “harassment of our character and our relationship.”

To me, “Hot for Hockey” is much like what the Kraken did; allowing and, in some ways, indirectly promoting such behavior allows individuals to blur the lines between reality and their romantic visions.

The thing is, even with the troubling decision to market to an audience that has had issues with this sort of media in the past, I’m not sure if it even reached them. At least to me, it was launched with very little fanfare. I stumbled across the Kaplan article by chance and didn’t know of the actual “Hot for Hockey” project until it had already been out for maybe a week.

The project was quickly pulled amid backlash from the fans who did notice it, and the NHL dismissed it as something intended only for the lead-up to the season’s start, despite Sports Business Journal reporting that the program was going to last the whole season.

One of the biggest criticisms from the fans, outside of the clearly artificial inntelligence-generated graphics, is that it seems to demean one of the biggest target audiences the program intended to interest: women. It seems to say “we think you’re just here for the romance, so we’re going to distill the sport into a format we think you can understand,” and I think nothing can be further from the truth.

Just because people are learning the sport from romance shows doesn’t mean that’s all women want from the sport. I guarantee the vast majority of people tuning in for the first time genuinely want to learn about the game of hockey, and the attention should be focused on that; genuinely presenting the teams and players to a broader audience, instead of trying to use a “romance” tint.

As I mentioned earlier, the NHL should instead have gone the “Drive to Survive” route. I am all for showing behind-the-scenes, since learning players’ stories is a great way to introduce them to a wider audience, and it can even give an inside experience to already existing fans. In addition, such a show should be full episodes, not 60-90 second shorts. “Drive to Survive” launched Formula 1 into the public limelight. All “Hot for Hockey” did was give short, non-informative snippets that, to me, did very little to incentivize a new fan to tune in to anything.

It is fascinating to me how “Hot for Hockey” did nearly everything wrong. Market to a group with questionable segments, fail to generate any level of hype, use AI for its graphics, be lambasted by the very audience it was intended to draw in and then attempt a cover-up to save face. It was truly a comedy of errors only rivaled by the Toronto Maple Leafs, though that’s a story for another time.

For any new fans of hockey reading this, I’m so glad that you’re here. I too only relatively recently got back into the swing of watching, and it has quickly become one of my favorite sports to watch. Pick a team you like, pick a few players, sit back and relax and be ready to yell “shoot the puck” at your TV when they’re on the power play.

How Trippie Redd made me realize hip-hop is on a massive decline

By MAXWELL ADAMS
Contributing Writer

Usually, when rappers go on an Instagram Story rant, it is barely articulate, and viewers are not getting anything valuable or pertinent out of it. This is not to say that all rappers are dumb, because a lot of them certainly aren’t. They’re often just emotional.

But would you believe me if I told you I was taken aback by something Trippie Redd said a few weeks ago? You’d probably question where my head is at, but I promise this goes somewhere.

Redd said in this particular rant, “Rap doesn’t have any young superstars anymore.” He went on to mention that labels are signing rappers who don’t hold nearly the same star power as previous artists like Lil Uzi Vert, XXXTentacion or Juice WRLD.

What took me aback was the fact that, when you look at the state of rap in 2026, he’s kind of right. The genre is declining before our very eyes, basically yielding to other genres and forcing us to listen to throwbacks to remember the good times.

The good is still good. “Let God Sort Em Out” by Clipse from last year was a legendary drop, as was “GNX” by rapper Kendrick Lamar. But Lamar is 39, and Pusha T and Malice have been in the game for 32 years.

Where is the future going?

Relying on rappers who have been in the game for decades is not exactly an effective way to keep the genre afloat, especially when you have artists like singer-songwriters Olivia Dean, Billie Eilish and Bruno Mars dominating the charts.

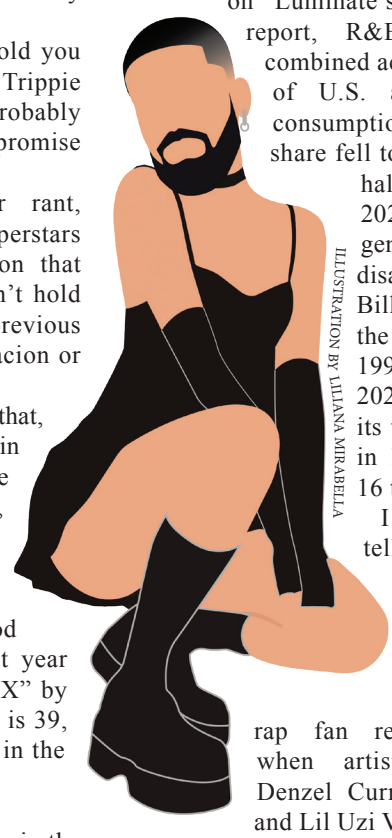
ILLUSTRATION BY LILIANA MIRABELLA

According to the Associated Press report on Luminate’s 2026 midyear report, R&B and hip-hop combined accounted for 41% of U.S. album-equivalent consumption in 2023. That share fell to 30% in the first half of 2026. In 2025, the hip-hop genre completely disappeared from the Billboard top 40 for the first time since 1990. From 2023 to 2024, the genre saw its top 40 entries cut in half, going from 16 to eight.

I think the biggest tell that Redd is onto something is the decline of the XXL Freshman classes. Every rap fan remembers 2016, when artists 21 Savage, Denzel Curry, Kodak Black and Lil Uzi Vert went viral for their XXL Freshman Cypher. For a while, we rap fans really looked forward to when those cyphers dropped each summer.

Fast-forward to this year, and none of the artists who appear on the cover can be considered mainstream. The 2026 class included artists Chris Patrick, Belly Gang Kushington, Slayr, La Reezy, Trim, Trap Dickey, Babyfxce E, Hurricane Wisdom, YKNiece, Skrilla, Sosocamo and Miles Minnick.

Know any of them? Me neither, and neither do the charts or the Grammys. The 2026 class did not enter the Billboard Hot 100’s top 40, nor were any of its members nominated for the Grammy Award for Best New Artist.

The magazine has done a good job of finding star power and giving artists recognition, but as the years go on, it seems increasingly difficult to find rappers with potential to reach that level. The earlier XXL Freshman classes appear to have produced a deeper pool of artists who reached the Hot 100’s top 10. The newer classes have breakout stars here and there, but the key question is how many from those classes have achieved mainstream chart success? The classes from 2016-20 accounted for 28.8% of the top 100, but that number dropped to 5.7% for the 2021-23 classes, and it has continued to decline since then.

And then there’s the Drake anomaly. Yes, Drake continues to sell, he was the highest selling rapper of the last 11 years as of 2025. He’s hip-hop’s Taylor Swift, but the public is catching on to his lack of creativity after the Lamar beef, and his originality was in question even before that.

His repetitive themes and reliance on collaborations over music quality have diminished critics’ opinions and public perception. “Honestly, Nevermind” did not land with a lot of his main audience, and the “Iceman” trilogy has been more about quantity than quality. Now, he’s dressing up on the internet as a “goth baddie.”

In the words of actor Michael B. Jordan, “Is this your king?”

His early work was masterful, but he’s about to turn 40, and his critical reception and public perception continue to decline despite his sales and chart numbers remaining formidable. He can still make hits, but I’m not sure he can make albums anymore. The album used to be more meaningful to hip-hop than the hit, and we seem to have lost sight of that, with Drake perhaps being the biggest example.

When Drake goes, when Kendrick Lamar goes, when rapper J. Cole goes, who are we turning to? Or will we continue to listen to these guys in the hopes they keep rap alive and well through their 50s? That’s how you end up with projects like “Tha Carter VI.” If the direction hip-hop is heading in means a bunch of “Tha Carter VI” projects, then I will continue to listening to Olivia Dean.