Hep Cats Encyclopedia Article

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An important term in the history of African American slang, a "hep cat" was a jazz aficionado in the marijuana-using urban subculture of the 1940s and 1950s. A hep cat's essential qualities included a free-spirited rejection of societal convention, intense creativity, and an unflagging rejection of all things "square." First entering the language in the late 1930s, the term was an amalgam of "hep," an older term meaning "smart" or "aware," and "cat," slang for "man." Its roots stretch back to the Wolof language of Africa where "hepi" meant "to see," and "hipi" meant "to open one's eyes," while "hipicat" translated as "wise" or "informed." As hep cat was appropriated by white beatniks in the 1950s, African Americans turned to using fresher terminology like "hip" and "hipster." Continuing to evolve with stylistic changes in American musical and drug-related subcultures, its roots survive in terms like hippie and hip-hop.

Further Reading:

Jonnes, Jill. *Hep-Cats, Narcs, and Pipe Dreams: A History of America's Romance with Illegal Drugs*. New York, Scribner, 1996.

Major, Clarence, editor. *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang*. New York, Penguin, 1994.

Thorne, Tony. *The Dictionary of Contemporary Slang*. New York, Pantheon, 1990.