

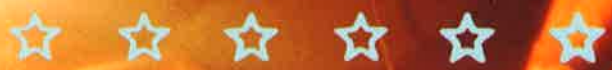
JIM FRICKE • CHARLIE AHEARN • introduction by Nelson George



The Experience Music Project

Oral History of Hip-Hop's First Decade

yes yes y'all





superrappin' flash & the furious 5

RAHIEM: There were a handful of record company people that hung out at the parties around that time, and on a few occasions they had approached us about making a record. We had flatly turned them down. We was like, "No! Nobody wants to hear this stuff on a record." Then the first record that we all heard was "King Tim III." It was rap, but it wasn't anyone who was known to us. As far as we knew, we were the best doing it at that time, and we felt like this "King Tim III" guy, he's kinda wack. He's not a real MC. Then when we heard "Rapper's Delight" for the first time, I remember discussing it as a group, and we were saying how we were gonna approach the record label that they were signed to and see if we could make a record.

FLASH: There was this wrinkled old guy who used to just come in and watch us perform. Now my audience ages range between sixteen to maybe thirty, so he could only be one of two people: he could either be the police or he was somebody's father looking for his daughter. Either one I definitely did not want to get entangled with.

He eventually stepped to me at a party, after I was breaking down my sound system, and asked if I would like to make a record. His name was Bobby Robinson, of Enjoy Records. We agreed, then, that this was a new goal. Doing the street thing, it's okay...let's make records now. And the record was called "Superrappin'"—that was our first record on Enjoy Records.

RAY CHANDLER: Bobby [Robinson] started recording them without me knowing. One night I went up; they was playing in the studio and I seen Bobby up there. I said, "What are you doing? This is my group." "Oh I'm just making this little thing with the fellas." All along he was making deals with them. He was perpetrating that he was my friend, but he was a snake.

KID CREOLE: When Sugar Hill Gang came out with "Rapper's Delight," every jerk with a producer or promoter was trying to get a record out. We had released two records before we got down with Sugarhill Records. One was on the Brazillia label, and the kid who put it together wanted us to change our name. I guess the Furious 5 wasn't good enough for him; he wanted us to change our name to the Younger Generation, and we recorded a joint called "We Rap More Mellow." Then we did a joint on Enjoy called "Superrappin'." That was the joint that we played like a fifteen-minute version of "Bra" (by Cymande).

RAHIEM: I don't remember exactly how we met Bobby Robinson, the president of Enjoy Records. All I remember about that meeting was that one day we were talking to him, and less than a week later, we were in the studio recording "Superrappin'." Melle Mel and I made up most of the words to "Superrappin'" just walking through Crotona Park one day.

We recorded a few songs with Enjoy. I guess the reason why we left Enjoy Records was because we felt like we didn't get an accurate accounting of our record sales. I remember us getting paid \$1,200 apiece for "Superrappin'", and that was it. We each bought motorcycles—except Flash. The five of us bought these little Yamaha GT-80s.

We met with Bobby Robinson on this one day, and we were discussing our royalties with him. There was something that we thought was kinda shady about him, so we were more confrontational, not just laid back and willing to listen to him give us an explanation as to when we were gonna get the money. Well, one thing led to another, and it turned into a really big blown-out argument, on 125th Street and 8th Avenue. I remember it was like 95 degrees in the shade, and at that time, if I had to guess, I would say Bobby Robinson was in his late fifties. He fell out. He fell out backwards, like he fainted, and hit his head on the sidewalk. I remember his daughter running from his record shop across the street, and we helped him up and carried him inside of a clinic or something like that. And we sat there and waited for him to come to. When he came to, we said "Bobby, where's our money?!" [laughs] But nevertheless, we never got any more money from Bobby.

KID CREOLE: When we started hearing rumblings that Sugarhill Records wanted to sign us, we was real excited. Even though we considered the Sugar Hill Gang a bunch of frauds and our archenemy—at that point, Sugarhill was the only game in town. We went out to the house; they showed us the big house and the whole thing. It was real exciting.

RAHIEM: We met Joey Robinson from Sugarhill Records. His cousin knew Flash, so he introduced Flash to Joey Robinson, and then Flash and Joey brought the group to Sylvia. Sylvia Robinson bought us out of the contract with Bobby Robinson. She paid him \$10,000. I remember us getting a contract from them, and I think it was about \$1,000 apiece. When we were issued Sugarhill recording contracts, we signed them on a car, like on the trunk of a car. Now I was a minor, so my signature didn't mean diddly. I took it to an attorney, and he advised us not to sign it, and my mother was totally down with the attorney, the advice the attorney gave us. So I really didn't sign with Sugarhill until I turned eighteen.

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JAZZY JEFF: Before records, we had a salary of like \$75 a party. That was for the MCs. It was about your sound system then. You couldn't do it without the system, so Baron and Breakout and Jazzy Dee made most of the money.

DJ BARON: We did parties and we was trying to invest the money back into the system. We used to play at the Galaxy, Executive Playhouse, and all these other places, and the MCs went along with us in investing money back in the system.

K.K. ROCKWELL: I took Breakout and them to a project on 129th and St. Nicholas. We played there outside, and people were all up in their windows enjoying the music. Not many people came, but a record producer showed up—Bobby Robinson of Enjoy Records.

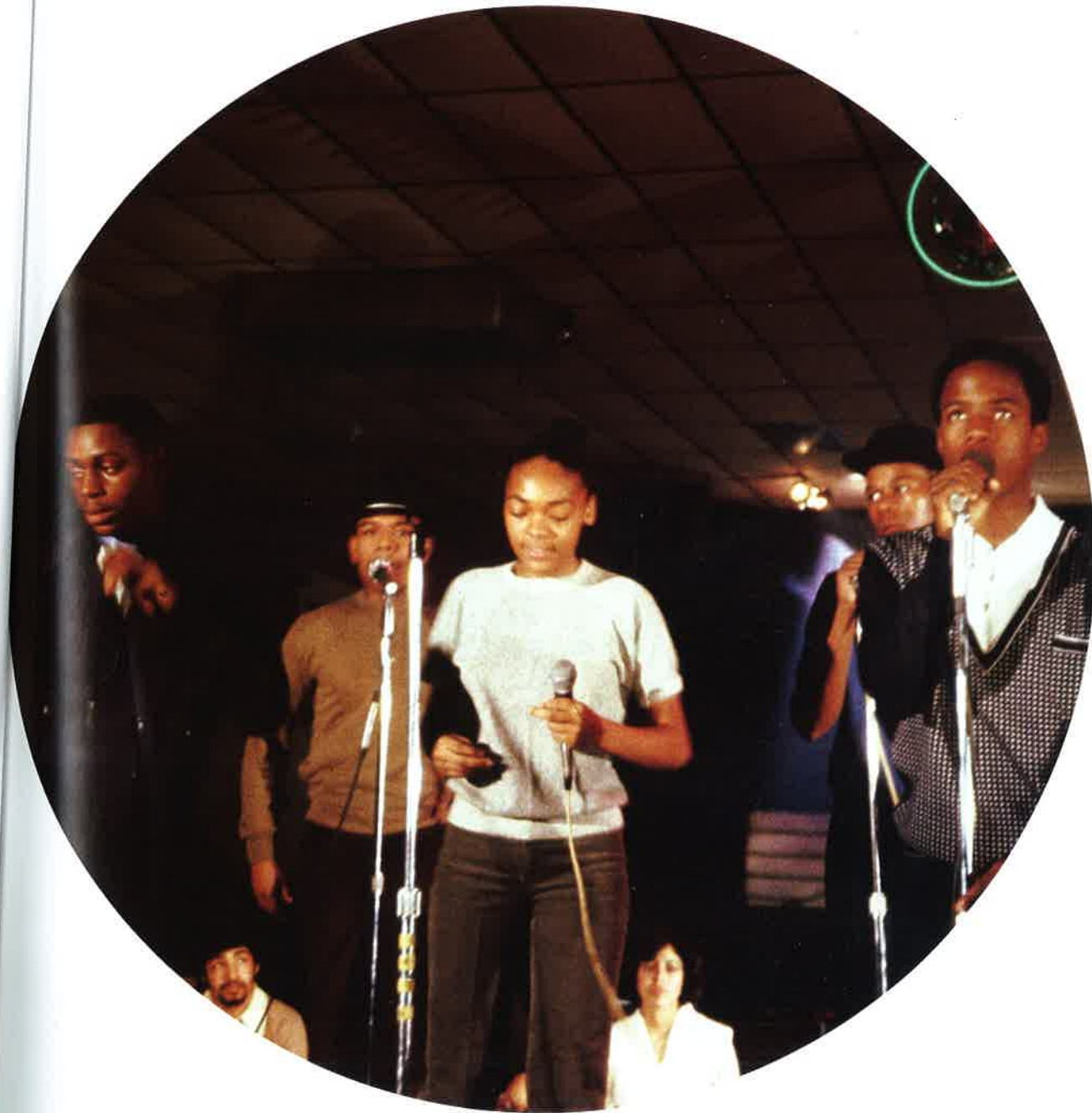
JAZZY JEFF: Bobby Robinson talked to our manager Jazzy Dee. He wanted to know if we was to do a record, what would we do? So we invited him to one of our practices, and we did a routine, and that was it. He just took us right inside the studio.

K.K. ROCKWELL: We practiced with Pumpkin [drummer/producer who recorded many of the tracks for the early hip-hop records, now deceased] who played drums in his garage to the Cheryl Lynn record. Bobby laid the track down for us, and we came in and did it in one take. No rehearsal. Nobody said how long it was supposed to be, and we just kept rapping. Fourteen minutes of nonstop rapping.

SHA-ROCK: At that time, to think about records wasn't even an issue. We never even really believed that it would go that far.

DJ BARON: That was our downfall, when we met Bobby Robinson and made "Rappin' and Rockin' the House." When we went into the studio, and they got their first payment of \$600 it was, "Ha ha...we don't need Breakout and Baron no more. We got our own money. We let our records play for us. That's how that went. That's how we faded away.

SHA-ROCK: When we'd perform live, our DJs was a part of our show, doing the mixes, the introductions, the records. But when we went into the studio with "Rappin' and Rocking the House," we used a live band; we didn't use a DJ. Then when we went on from Enjoy Records to Sugarhill, we still didn't use a DJ. We never really used the DJs in the studio; we always used live bands.



The Funky 4 + 1 (L-R) Rodney Cee, Keith Keith, Sha-Rock, Jazzy Jeff, and K.K. Rockwell) at Bruckner Roller Rink, 1980 (© Charlie Ahearn)



The Funky 4 + 1 in the photo studio, 1981. (Courtesy Sharon Jackson)

JAZZY JEFF: Before records, it was about having a sound system, so Jazzy Dee always held that over our heads. Then overnight we was making records, and we didn't need the sound system to make our records. By him not being able to deal with that transaction, that just was a headache we didn't want. We took a couple of aspirins and got rid of him. We just dropped him. We wasn't signed to him or anything like that.

SHA-ROCK: Jazzy Dee wasn't a part of the Sugarhill thing. What happened was Sylvia Robinson sent someone to scout us out and see whether or not we were willing to leave Enjoy Records. We felt, as a group, that we weren't getting the money that we was supposed to be getting, and we said, "OK, she's doing good by the Sugar Hill Gang, so we're gonna switch over." We didn't know anything about the money or the music business. We were thinking about the fame, just being able to get people to know how great we were. That's what it was all about. So we said, "If the Sugar Hill Gang is being recognized worldwide, maybe they can do the same thing for us, because we know that we're as good as the Sugar Hill Gang. We started this, so we need to get out there to let people know that we started it."

JAZZY JEFF: It was a business move: Sylvia offered us more money, paid us, and then bought out our contract. I think we got \$50,000. \$10,000 went to buying out our contract from Bobby, and then the other \$40,000 we split amongst the group. For doing what we was doing at that time, it was good money. I mean, I was in the tenth grade, and I had \$5,000. Yeah! For all of us, that was money! We were satisfied, because first of all it was a hobby; now the hobby was turning into a good job. We took the money and we went. But we was jumping into something that we really knew nothing about.

DJ BARON: Me and Darnell took it hard and didn't do too many more parties. Eventually they rehired Breakout to do tours when they got down with Sugarhill, but that was when the parties really just stopped.

SHA-ROCK: Even though these were my high school years, I was spending more time out on the road because we had the Sugarhill tour where we toured with the Sugar Hill Gang and Sequence and other different groups on the Sugarhill label. We toured like fifty-two cities. The promoters promoted it very well. We never went into a place where they didn't know we were coming, where they said, "No, we're not liking this type of music" or whatever. Because they knew "Rapper's Delight." That opened up the doors for everybody else. Even if they hadn't heard your song, they gave you the opportunity to just go off, to show them what you were about.

crossing over

SHA-ROCK: Once "Rappin' and Rocking the House" came out, we pushed that record, but we was pushing ourselves to a different audience. We used to perform in places like the Mudd Club, with the punk rockers. We brought a different type of feeling to a different type of people; we geared ourselves toward making them accept hip-hop music. We figured if we can do that, then we can go different places. We used to get write-ups in different newspapers and be on different cable TV shows, and that's how we wind up being approached by Blondie.

JAZZY JEFF: We were booked in this place called the Kitchen in 1980, which was in the Village. It was the first time we ever played in front of a Caucasian crowd, and Deborah Harry was in the audience, hangin' out. Then when she went to Saturday Night Live, she remembered us and put us on with her. She had her choice between the Sugar Hill Gang and Flash and the Furious 5, and a few other Sugarhill groups. But she pulled us because she actually saw us live, and she liked what she saw.

CHRIS STEIN: We were on Saturday Night Live and for some reason or other we got to pick a musical guest act to come on with us. So we got the Funky 4, who were on Sugarhill at the time. It was really a struggle trying to get the people on Saturday Night to understand what these guys were doing, 'cause they just didn't have a clue about what scratching was, for example. "You have these two turntables and then by switching back and forth...blah, blah, blah"...I really, really wanted them to be able to do a live scratch to their thing, but they just couldn't do it. They wound up going on with a tape.

But I'm pretty sure that that appearance of the Funky 4—who they saved for the last goddamned moment of the show, and who went on over the credits—was probably the first time there was a rap group on national TV in the country.

SHA-ROCK: The spot that really sticks out in my mind is the Ritz, because the Ritz Club had their certain type of people, high society, whatever. Rap music was from the streets. Our thing was "OK, we're playing down here in the Ritz. This is like a rich club, and we can pull it off, make the people just go crazy over us." And we did it. We had them going crazy, shouting, repeating "ho!" screaming, hollering, and that's when we knew that we crossed over. When we was able to get a different type of listener to listen to our street music, to me that was the ultimate.

We had just gone to a different level. We basically had left the street scene and started recording. We did go back to performing the streets, but we wasn't out there like we were in the beginning. So you had the other groups to come up and represent for New York, a lot of different groups emerging that may not have made a record yet were out in the streets. That gave a lot of other groups the opportunity to spruce up and get to the point where they needed to be, for people to hear them.

