

The hip hop years

a history of rap

Alex Ogg with David Upshal



rapper's delight

► From MCing To Rapping

Contemporary rapping, as various authors have noted, can trace its origins in African *griots* (priest-poets) through to the political tracts issued by the Last Poets ('Niggers Are Scared Of Revolution') and Gil Scott-Heron ('The Revolution Will Not Be Televised') in the late 60s and early 70s. The trajectory takes in bebop singers such as Cab Calloway, early rock 'n' roller Bo Diddley, 'soul' rapper/preacher Johnnie Taylor, American jive-talking radio jocks and the Jamaican toasters such as U-Roy they influenced. Muhammad Ali's ringside boasting has a place in hip hop's lineage, and so too the insult battles or 'dozens' that took place in Harlem in the 60s. The linguistics of signifying, testifying, schoolyard and jailhouse rhyming all play a role in the aesthetics of urban verbal exchanges, upon which rap draws so heavily. One of the common threads is the idea of competitive bragging or *braggadocio*, which characterised the spirit of early hip hop and the first rap records.

These antecedents and influences are undeniably important. However, while hip hop openly borrowed from previous traditions, its development was ultimately organic and self-sustained. As its pioneers confirm, rap music is a collision of accident with design, of forethought with spontaneity. It is not a tributary of rock 'n' roll, reggae, disco or anything else, but a rich and individual standalone musical style.

Like so much else in hip hop, the development of MCing can be traced back to Kool Herc. To improve his sound, Herc had invested in an echo box for his microphone – ensuring his voice would boom out over his record selections. DJs speaking between records had long been accepted practice. What Herc said, and how he said it, was not.

block party days

'I used to call people's names and say: "Yo, Wallace D, D-D-D." Or: "This is the Joint-Joint-Joint, you never heard it like this before."'

Eventually, these introductions expanded.

Ya rock and ya don't stop

And this is the sounds of DJ Kool Herc and the Sound System

And you're listening to the sounds of what we call the Herculoids

He was born in an orphanage

He fought like a slave

Fuckin' up faggots all the Herculoids played

When it come to push, come to shove

The Herculoids won't budge

The bass is so low you can't get under it

The high is so high you can't get over it

So in other words be with it.

Coke Le Rock, Herc's partner and friend, began to extemporise the vocal introductions to records.

'Coke Le Rock, my partner, he used to have the poetry and he used to come on, say a couple of lines. Used to tell me things to say. The time we played the Dodge High School for my sister's high school dance, he came up with the phrase: "You rock, and you don't stop, keep on, and don't stop." And he did that over "Bongo Rock".'

MCs like Busy Bee Starski began to recite improvised rhymes over records. There had been disco DJs on the radio, like Hal Jackson on WLIB and Gary Bird on WWRL, who would improvise words in time with the music they were playing. But now the format was becoming conceptualised. Bambaataa:

'It was really with the hip hop culture, from Herc, myself and Flash, that the MC was really developing into the rhyming, or saying a lot of clichés or certain words that was catching on.'

Pretty soon rapping, as it was now being termed, became an art form in itself. Some attributed its development to the pioneering rhyming style of DJ Hollywood – it is said that the Fatback Band decided to use their party MC, King Tim III, after hearing Hollywood at the 371 Club. Bambaataa, however, believes that Hollywood and others, notably Eddie Cheeba, were part of the radio jive-talk tradition and nothing to do with hip hop.

'I got to give most credit to Grandmaster Melle Mel and the Furious Five, 'cos they was getting into the rhyming cliché, and then also with the fast style of rapping from Soul Sonic Force.'

DJ Bobbito Garcia notes that allusions to historical precedents can be misleading.

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'People talk about Gil Scott-Heron and the Last Poets as being hip hop pioneers – I don't think so. I think they were instructive and definitely seminal artists of the 70s in terms of black music and political expression through music, but by no means were MCs influenced by these people. No one had ever been on a mic and rhymed to a beat in the manner that MCs had done.'

Others, like Grandmaster Caz, saw the accent switching to rapping as retrograde, an erosion of the importance of hip hop as a cultural package.

'We're MCs, we rhyme. We're masters of ceremony, we're mic controllers. We're MCs, not rappers. I just have a problem with the term, OK? MCing evolved from the DJ having a microphone to make announcements, to announce when the next party was going to be, where the next party was going to be, who was going to be at the party, to acknowledge members of the group. Then people started to embellish on how they said things. Instead of saying: "There's a party next week and we want you all to come," you say: "Yeah, next week at the PAL, we want to see your face in the place, we're going to party hearty with everybody." People would try and put a little flare to it to make you want to come to the thing. Then every DJ did that himself or he had somebody that would make the announcements for him. They started to embellish, and they would say things till they grew into sentences and to paragraphs.'

► Mix Tapes: A Bronx Cottage Industry

Although the embryonic hip hop movement shunned the mainstream record industry, another way to make money was to record their shows and DJ battles. The mix tapes that resulted became a vital source of revenue, as well as one of the main ways in which the music gravitated downtown and through suburbia, as Fab Five Freddy recalls.

'The parties in the Bronx that Flash and Theodore and Bambaataa and those guys were playing in the mid-70s, they luckily had the foresight to record almost all the gigs. Those tapes would then become circulated. They were spreading all through the city. The word was getting out that there's a guy named Flash, a guy named Theodore, a group called the Funky Four, there's a group called the Treacherous Three, there's a guy called Busy Bee Starski.'

Mix tapes were the reason many, like Darryl McDaniels of Run-D.M.C., got into the hip hop game.

Mix tapes
circulated
and help
to spread
the
culture

'It was all about tapes back then. In my neighbourhood, tapes used to filter in from all the shows that were happening in the Bronx and all the Harlem World tapes. They used to filter into Queens. A lot of people don't think that Queens had a scene, [but] we had a lot of DJs, DJing in the parks and at the local clubs in our neighbourhood. So rap was in our neighbourhood, but on the stardom level, the celebrity level, you used to have to go see Grandmaster Flash and artists like Grandwizard Theodore. Their tapes were coming to our neighbourhood, people would go tape these shows, come back to Queens and sell them.'

He was particularly impressed by one mix tape featuring a performance from the Cold Crush Brothers.

'There was a promoter, who at the time all the rivalries in the Bronx and Manhattan was going on, heard about these rappers out of Staten Island. He brought the Force MDs into Manhattan to battle the Cold Crush Brothers and to battle the Funky Four (Plus One). That was the level that I was on. I wasn't really rhyming off the records, I was rhyming off the tapes. To me, the tapes were more of the real thing that I was accustomed to hearing in my neighbourhood, even though the party MC was a big part of everything. But the rivalries were the thing that really generated your interest. So that's what really made hip hop interesting to me. I used to see groups like the Cold Crush Brothers giving out flyers about their shows and stuff like that. I bought my first Cold Crush tape, paid fifteen dollars for it.'

According to McDaniels, you can see that heritage of mix tapes, of block parties and jams, throughout their work.

'If you listen to Run-D.M.C. records, it's exactly what the Cold Crush do. Because that was the rawest thing, the reason why nobody wants to go on after us, the reason why everybody says: "Run-D.M.C. got the best show". The reason why we lasted sixteen years in hip hop. We haven't had a record out in six years, but the reason why we can still tour, do shows and all of that. We're not about the industry, we're about that thing that began before these big corporations and industries tried to direct what's hip and what's not. That Cold Crush tape in 1982 was the defining moment in hip hop, because if that would have never happened, I don't think Run-D.M.C. would have ever came out and did what they did.'

➤ **Hip Hop Reaches Vinyl – Rapper's Delight**

As vital as these mix tapes were, especially for a movement as street-orientated and organic as hip hop, every musical phenomenon salutes its

first recorded release, even if the finished product isn't entirely representative of the genre. Hip hop on vinyl arrived officially on 13 October 1979 with the release of 'Rapper's Delight'. Over a studio recreation of Chic's disco smash of earlier in the year, 'Good Times', three MCs rapped personally about themselves and their music and set in motion the wheels of the multi-billion dollar modern rap industry.

Having grown up between 166th street and Boston Road, Big Bank Hank (Henry Jackson), one of the trio of rappers who comprised the Sugarhill Gang, had first encountered Kool Herc at a Mitchell Gym party, four or five years previously.

'The crowd just lost their mind and I lost mine right along with it.'

Herc's first MC, Coke Le Rock, attended the same high school as Hank. Coke could have been hip hop's first star MC, had he not opted for an alternative career. He certainly helped inspire Hank, who realised the potential of the music.

'It was an escape for the younger generation to get out of the bad scene for a moment and take them into something that was a little bit positive. Instead of people fighting and using guns, if they wanted to battle, instead of having the gang wars, they would grab the microphone, challenge somebody in the court. They'd only lose on the MC mic. They wouldn't lose their life.'

When spotted by Sylvia Robinson, owner of Sugarhill Records, he was working in a pizza parlour in Inglewood, New Jersey, practising his rapping to pass the time. He was also manager of Grandmaster Caz, booking his shows and distributing his tapes. He'd taken the pizza job to pay off a loan from his parents, funds he'd diverted to purchase a bigger sound system for Caz.

'Sylvia Robinson came into the pizza shop along with her son, Joey Robinson Jr. They had heard about me, and they asked me: "Did I want to make a record?" Picture this – I'm in a pizza shop, full of dough, flour all over me, and I'm going to audition to make a record! So I go into the back of her son's ninety-eight and they have a cassette in the car and I'm rapping along with the track and she really enjoyed it. She said, "OK, I'm going to use you on the record." At that exact time, as I get out the car, Guy O'Brien happened to be walking down the block. He was a member of a group called Phase Two and he had heard about what Miss Robinson was doing and he said: "Miss Robinson, I can rap also." So we started kicking verses back and forth together. Miss Robinson said: "Mmm, this is pretty good. Maybe I'll use both of you." Now also during this time, across the street – this is for real – Wonder Mike, which is Michael Wright, was across the street. He had

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heard all the commotion and came over across the street and said: "Miss Robinson, I can rap too."

Husband and wife team Joe and Sylvia Robinson had previously overseen a number of record labels, including All Platinum, Turbo and Stang, before Sugarhill, which had bland, utilitarian offices in Englewood, New Jersey. They had tasted success with acts including the Moments, Whatnauts and Shirley & Co in the R&B field, before problems with distribution scuppered their efforts. Sylvia was also well-known for her 1973 hit, 'Pillow Talk'. Alerted to the power of hip hop through Bronx mix tapes her son had been devouring, she was the first major figure in the music industry to see the music's potential.

Despite being a whopping seventeen minutes long, Hank confirms that 'Rapper's Delight' was totally improvised after the first few words and recorded in a single take.

'One take, no mistakes, didn't stop or stutter. A seventeen-minute record done in seventeen minutes and fifty seconds. When you're hungry, you want to do something right.'

When the Sugarhill Gang reformed and performed 'Rapper's Delight' for a show on 18 August 1994 for *Vibe* magazine's first anniversary party, an online report castigated them for being opportunists, particularly Big Bank Hank's verse -

'Check it out, I'm the C-A-S-A-N-The-O-V-A
And the rest is F-L-Y'

The enunciation of C-A-S-A-N-O-V-A had been lifted from a routine by Grandmaster Caz, who was less than thrilled at its appropriation.

'He didn't even change it to Big Bank Hank, he just said the rhyme the way it was in the book [which Caz had loaned him], except for maybe there might have been a curse in there and he changed it to something else. The rhyme about Superman and Lois Lane, that's my rhyme too.'

The handclaps were insipid while some of the words, close to 3,000 of them in total, lacked the ingenuity and guile demonstrated by the Sugarhill Gang's peers. 'Rapper's Delight' was a poor man's imitation of Bronx hip hop. The song was merely repetitive and topical where much of the competition was inventive and incisive. Yet, as *Vibe*'s article was forced to concede:

'Flawed as it is and controversial as the circumstances of its birth may have been "Rapper's Delight", of all the hip hop records that have ever been released (and there have been many, many great and greater ones) is unique for one simple reason. It's the only record after which, no matter who you were or what you did in hip hop, everything was different. It

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changed the rules of the game. Its wide release made hip hop instantly international. Its commercial success renegotiated the scope of what was imaginable, possible, probable, do-able.'

Within a week the record had become a mainstay of New York's airwaves. It went on to sell an estimated fourteen million copies. Hank found himself with a serious outbreak of celebrity to deal with.

'Everyone knows what happened after that. We couldn't walk the streets any more. That big.'

Bambaataa and other pioneering DJs worried that the success of 'Rapper's Delight' might 'mess up the parties'. Bambaataa also advances 'King Tim III (Personality Jock)', the 1979 b-side to 'Candy Sweet' by the Fatback Band, as the first true hip hop record. In terms of both form and content he has a point, but the Sugarhill Gang's effort was the one everybody accredited with the status of first rap record.

Grandwizard Theodore relates the feeling that 'Rapper's Delight' engendered among some of hip hop's pioneers.

'Big Bank Hank used to be the bouncer at the door for the venue that we used to play all the time called the Sparkle. And for this guy to all of a sudden, overnight, make a rap record, it was really incredible. It just goes, one day you can be a bouncer at a party, and the next day you can be travelling round the world.'

Kool Herc, too, was less than overjoyed.

'I wasn't too pleased. Hank is a homeboy that wanted to be with the fellas and had a lot of mouth. He was a football player. This was his way of getting into the business. That's fine, I didn't know you had that in you. I didn't know you wanted to be in with the music . . . It hurt, man.'

He was not surprised, however, that hip hop had taken off as a global phenomenon.

'Hip hop 'bin around since 1970. It got exposed in 1979. So once it's exposed, this is it. Just like crack. Crack 'bin around, till Richard Pryor got burnt up, then it went: whoosh! So I wasn't surprised. People in the Bronx weren't surprised.'

Grandmaster Flash sums up best the feelings of the originators:

'They weren't the most talented that I would have seen on a record if I had a choice, but it served its purpose.'

One of the biggest detractors was Hank's former friend and client, Grandmaster Caz.

'It lowered the standard drastically of what an MC was, and what you had to be to make a rap record. If you never saw nobody play basketball in your life and some knucklehead just played it in front of you - he

played terrible but that's what you saw – that's the way you'd think you have to play basketball.'

Grandmaster Caz was also embittered about the use of his 'C-A-S-An-The-O-V-A' routine appearing in the song.

'People knew me for my rhymes. People said: "I heard you on the radio." That ain't me. "No, but I heard your rhymes." I know, it's not me though. "Well, I know you're getting paid." Yeah, well . . . It's fucked me up ever since.'

Hank, for his part, was reconciled with the fact that:

'There's always going to be envy in groups. Because you did it first, they didn't. Or, they may have been in business a little longer than you. But, overall, we got nothing but love.'

Melle Mel, conversely, had nothing but contempt for rap's first superstars.

'When "Rapper's Delight" first came out, every traditional rapper was fuckin' mortified. It was like: "What the fuck are they doing with our art form?" It's like they axe-murdered the shit.'

Yet as Melle's colleague Flash conceded, the Sugarhill Gang had upped the ante.

'Once you heard that record – it was definitely a consideration to wanting to become an artist, as opposed to just performing. Definitely, it enlightened all hip-hoppers.'

► **Grandmaster Flash Responds On Enjoy**

Grandmaster Flash looked to exploit hip hop's new-found popularity on record. His original retinue of MCs (Melle Mel, Cowboy, Kid Creole – nothing to do with August Darnell of Kid Creole & The Coconuts) had long since expanded to become the Furious Five, who debuted on 6 September 1976, with the addition of Rahiem (formerly of the Funky Four) and Scorpio.

Melle Mel, aka Melvin Glover, grew up in the Bronx ghetto before becoming a breakdancer with the D-Squad, then a DJ, with his brother Kid Creole. Grover was christened Melle Mel by Flash in 1976.

'He was just a regular DJ, a neighbourhood DJ. I used to breakdance on my own. One time we danced against Flash and his old partner [Mean] Gene. They used to play music in a centre. That's where I first met him. They was older, thinking that they could really do their thing or whatever. And they got spanked a little bit. Genie did his thing, but Flash wasn't much of a dancer. He was a DJ, but everybody used to dance back then. So that's

how I first actually met him. He was just a neighbourhood DJ.'

From there, it was a short step up to becoming Flash's MC.

'When Flash played the music, he didn't have a good speaking voice, so he needed somebody to rap for him. He wasn't a good talker. He wasn't very witty. So he needed somebody to rap for him and then that's when we started. He just left a mic there and anybody would just get on the mic. That's how it started.'

Melle's main influence, however, was Kool Herc. In fact, he had offered his services at one point.

'Me and my brother Kid Creole, we wanted to rap for Kool Herc. But he was so huge back then, he didn't think that he needed to bring in other people or needed to take on other areas. He just thought that him being Kool Herc would last and nobody would be able to overtake him.'

Flash secured a contract with Enjoy Records after proprietor Bobby Robinson, an industry veteran since the 50s, saw Flash & the Furious Five play with the Funky Four (Plus One) in the Bronx. Robinson recalls:

'They were both very good. The crowds were having a field day. So I got to the groups and decided to record both of them.'

Most of Enjoy's productions were overseen by gifted multi-instrumentalist Pumpkin. In common with Sugarhill's early catalogue, they were predominantly speculative, opportunistic efforts. Melle Mel, while bearing Robinson no malice, notes that:

'He was the local guy that just scooped up all the local talent. Then he cut records on everybody. None of the records were major hits, but it did give everybody a shot to be heard. None actually got played on the radio but they played them in clubs and then they gave Sugarhill a chance to hear all the other talents.'

Aware of hip hop's burgeoning commercial prospects (his nephew, Spoonie Gee, was an aspiring rapper) and keen to make sure no one else hit on his artists before him, Robinson rush-recorded and released records by both groups on the same day. The Furious Five issued 'Super Rappin', while the Funky Four debuted with the lengthy 'Rappin' And Rocking The House'. Rodney C, the 'Plus One More' adjunct to the Funky Four, recalls:

'It was the longest rap record ever created at that point. One side was sixteen minutes, the other side was fourteen minutes. Thirty minutes of non-stop rap.'

Flash was also responsible for two further releases, under the pseudonyms Younger Generation and Flash And the Five. Then Joe Robinson Jr (no relation) bought out their contract with Enjoy and took them to Sugarhill Records. Bobby Robinson never gained the commercial

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rewards his nose for talent entitled him to. By 1984, he had given up on hip hop.

'I figured rap was about had it. I never dreamed it would last twenty years. So I sold off three or four of my groups and whatnot and got out of it.'

The success of the Sugarhill Gang spurred numerous others into action, as a deluge of rap twelve-inches hit the streets. As well as providing extended length, the format was popular partly because it made handling records easier for DJs than conventional seven-inch singles. Among some substandard non-descript fare came worthy efforts by Spoonie Gee, the nephew of Enjoy's Bobby Robinson, who cut 'Spoonin' Rap' for Peter Brown's Sounds of New York USA label, and the Nice And Nasty Three's 'The Ultimate Rap'. Kurtis Blow also took a bow with the gimmicky 'Christmas Rapping', which reached number thirty in the UK while failing to chart domestically.

► **Kurtis Blow Slams On The Breaks**

Born Kurt Walker in Harlem in 1959, Blow studied vocal performance at the High School of Music and Art at the City College of New York, then worked the Harlem club circuit as Kool DJ Kurt. His friend, Russell Simmons, remembers persuading him to adopt the name Kurtis Blow:

'I started promoting parties. I had a company called Rush. That company promoted Eddie Cheeba and Kurtis Blow and DJ Hollywood and Grandmaster Flash. So those guys were pioneers, we promoted parties with them at the Hotel Dukeman on 43rd Street or in Queens, Brooklyn, the Bronx or Harlem. Just those five boroughs. But that was a big deal moving them from one borough to another. Bringing Grandmaster Flash downtown to Manhattan was, at that time, an unheard of event. And it was a big event for us, so that's what I did. That's how I got involved with them, by promoting their parties. The next obvious step was to manage them when they made records and that's what I did.'

Blow became the first rapper signed to a major label and scored his breakthrough hit in September 1980 with 'The Breaks', a co-production with DJ Davy D, which reached number eighty-seven in the US charts. However, its impact was more correctly gauged by a number four showing in the R&B charts, selling half a million twelve-inch singles in the process. For Simmons, this was a vindication of Harlem's role in hip hop.

'In Harlem and in some places in other boroughs there were kids

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experimenting with their own music. They were all using old James Brown beats or old rock 'n' roll beats and they were rapping over those beats and those kids became popular in the street. Their tapes were popular because the records that were out weren't popular. Donna Summer wasn't a star in the community, community stars were DJ Hollywood, Eddie Cheeba, Kurtis Blow. Those were the guys who were developing that new sound and it was obvious that it was for us and by us and about our real lives and we could relate to it. That's where it grew. It grew from an organic, honest springboard, as opposed to the industry sold it to us, which is what disco seemed to have, that kind of quality.'

Hip hop was becoming steadily more visible. In 1980 members of the High Times Crew were arrested for breakdancing at a subway in Washington Heights. Photos of the incident appeared in the New York Post. Mr Magic's Rap Attack, the most influential New York radio show, also began its run on WHBI on Saturday nights.