



Issue Brief: Hip-Hop

Overview

Hip-hop is a cultural movement that exploded in the early 1970s in the Bronx, New York. It draws upon the dance, poetry, visual art, social and political legacy of African, African American, Caribbean and Latino immigrant communities in the United States. Hip-hop began as an independent, non-commercial musical and cultural form of expression. Nobody thought it would ever make money. Rather, it was about enjoyment—or “rocking the party.”

Alternative Hip-Hop vs. Commercial Rap

“Rap” is a term often used interchangeably with “hip-hop.” However, the term “rap” has a more commercial overtone and is more often used to describe hip-hop music released and promoted by major record labels and aired on commercial radio stations and Internet sites. Many artists, especially those who are critical of mainstream rap, have preferred that the term “hip-hop” be used to describe the musical genre, with “rap” used as a verb for the act of singing, “spitting” or speaking hip-hop lyrics or with an adjective such as mainstream, underground, conscious or alternative placed in front of it.

- **Mainstream and Commercial Rap**

In the last 10 years, the record industry has consolidated from over 20 major labels to five. Mainstream rap or hip-hop is that which is recorded on—or crafted to sound like it is recorded on—one of the five major labels (Universal Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment, EMI Group, Warner Brothers Music and BMG Entertainment). Gangster rap came into prominence at the beginning of the industry consolidation as its use of violent, sexual and consumerist themes proved highly marketable. Generally speaking, commercial rap has a highly produced pop sound and more frequently contains violent, sexist, consumerist and homophobic metaphors.

- **Alternative, Independent, Conscious and Underground Hip-Hop**

Alternative, independent, conscious and underground hip-hop describe recordings done on a smaller scale with an independent label or in one’s own studio. This music prioritizes artistry and content over commercial viability and crossover appeal. Conscious hip-hop is a subset of the musical genre that explores social themes relevant to young people as a distinct community, not just as individuals, such as: policing, poverty, militarism, reparations, the representation of women, homophobia, among others subjects. The first record labels to record and mass-produce hip-hop albums were small and black-owned.

The Four Elements of Hip-Hop

In hip-hop, four overlapping cultural activities converged, inspiring what many argue is the most influential culture in a generation.

These four fundamental elements are:

- **MCing or Rapping:** Stemming from the initials for “Master of Ceremonies,” rapping is the art of saying rhymes to the beat of music. It draws its roots from the Jamaican art form known as toasting. The influences of present day rap can be traced to artists like **James Brown**, **The Last Poets** and **Gil Scott Heron**, along with old “dozens” rhymes and jail house jargon passed down through the years and made popular by Black activist **H. Rap Brown**.
- **Graffiti:** The first forms of subway graffiti were quick spray-painted or marker signatures (“tags”) of one’s crew, gang or nickname. Graffiti evolved into large elaborate calligraphy, complete with color effects, shading and more. Graffiti is now recognized as a force in contemporary visual art and is collected by major art institutions worldwide as well as remaining an expression of rebellion and youth culture in public spaces.
- **DJing:** The art of “cuttin’ and scratchin’” and the manipulation of a vinyl record over a particular groove so it produces a high-pitched recombinant scratching sound is known as DJing. The term also refers to the practice of selecting dance party records or other songs in a compelling thematic sequence. This was invented by **Grand Master Flash** and **Grand Wizard Theodore**, two popular disc jockeys from the Bronx.
- **Breakdancing:** The acrobatic style of dance that includes headspins, backspins and gymnastic style flairs (long before Olympic athlete Kirk Thompson) is called breakdancing. No one knows who New York’s first break dancer was, but a group of youngsters known as “**B-Boys**” or Break Boys and original members of an organization called **Zulu Nation** popularized it. At the same time breakdancing became known in the streets and dancehalls of New York, Black and Latino communities in California popularized a style of dance known as “Pop-Locking.” This particular West Coast form includes strutting, moon-walking, waving and angular, staccato or robot-like contortions of the body. With the broadcast of Don Cornelius’s dance-party television show *Soul Train*, breakdancing soon became a nation-wide phenomenon.

Hip-Hop’s Fifth Element

Some members of the community have added a fifth element to the fundamentals of hip-hop: **activism**. Many see hip-hop as a larger movement—more than just a musical or cultural genre. While this means different things to different people, it suggests that hip-hop is a way of life with its own ethical code, politics and aesthetics. Author and journalist Jeff Chang writes:

The hip-hop generation, the first to emerge after the civil rights and black power movement, has benefited from the cultural desegregation that followed those movements. That success created the conditions for hip-hop culture to become a multibillion-dollar commodity culture that guides what youth listen to, wear and watch. But hip-hop has also reflected and reshaped youths’ perceptions of race,

power and reality. It serves as a critical space for young people to develop progressive thought and action.

Chang goes on to describe how hip-hop activists have:

- Successfully stopped juvenile super-jails in the San Francisco Bay Area and in New York City;
- Involved a new generation in environmental justice movements in the South;
- Fought anti-sweep ordinances in Chicago.

Notably in the 2004 and 2006 elections, hip-hop activists also successfully brought young first-time voters to the polls in New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Florida, Ohio and California.

The Roots of Hip-Hop: Dominant Early Figures

DJ Kool Herc

One of hip-hop's most important founding moments occurred when a Jamaican DJ, later known as Kool Herc, attempted to bring a new sound to a backyard party in the Bronx. It was 1973, and at this party Herc combined a lyrical practice of "toasting"—the delivery of prose over reggae and dub records—with the contemporary American music of the day.

His audience in the South Bronx had initially not been interested in his reggae selections but enthusiastically responded when he isolated and played the beat-heavy percussion portions of familiar soul, R&B, funk and even disco songs, and smoothly spoke over them. This effect elongated the songs and kept the party energy high.

Grandmaster Flash

A DJ colleague of Herc's named Grandmaster Flash picked up on his record selection technique and expanded it, making the mixing of records audible and even more playful with a highly entertaining and performative approach.

Afrika Bambaataa and the Universal Zulu Nation

A few years later, another musical and social innovator, Afrika Bambaataa, expanded on the record selections of Herc and Grandmaster Flash and pulled accessible sounds from West African, Caribbean and even obscure German electronic recordings and mixed those in with his own party chants on the microphone.

Bambaataa had been a leader of the Black Spades, one of the most notorious and violent gangs at the time. When he put his energy behind this new cultural form, he brought many other people with him. He led the conversion of the Black Spades into a new organization focused on self-improvement and world peace. He called it the Universal Zulu Nation, and it is still a thriving positive force in hip-hop today.

Bambaataa is widely credited with helping to significantly decrease youth and gang violence of the 1980s in the greater New York region. Instead of fighting with violence, his followers started using informal lyrical, dance and even graffiti competitions to settle disputes. He also created sound and technical innovation with his release of Planet Rock, which took advantage of the rapidly improving drum machine and synthesizer technology.

Early Hip-hop Timeline – adapted from Henry Adaso’s list on about.com

1925: Earl Tucker (aka Snake Hips), a performer at the Cotton Club invents a dance style similar to today’s hip-hop moves. He incorporated floats and slides into his dance as well. Similar moves would later inspire an element of hip-hop culture known as breakdancing.

1940: Tom the Great (Thomas Wong) uses a booming sound system to please the crowd. Wong also used American records to steal music-lovers from local bands.

1950: The Soundclash contest between Coxsone Dodd’s “Downbeat” and Duke Reid’s “Trojan” gives birth to DJ Battling.

1956: Clive Campbell is born in Kingston, Jamaica. Campbell would later become the father of hip-hop.

1959: Parks Commissioner Robert Moses starts building an expressway in the Bronx. Consequently, middle class Germans, Irish, Italians, and Jewish neighborhoods move out of the area. Businesses relocate away from the borough only to be replaced by impoverished African American and Latino families. Along with these poor people came addiction, crime, and unemployment.

1962: James Brown records *Live At The Apollo*. Brown’s drummer Clayton Fillyau influences a sound that is now known as the break beat. The break beat would later inspire the b-boy movement, as breakers danced to these beats at block parties.

1965: In a historic boxing bout, Muhammad Ali (born Cassius Clay) defeats Sonny Liston in the 6th round. Before the bout, however, Ali recited one of the earliest known battle rhymes:

*Clay comes out to meet Liston
And Liston starts to retreat
If Liston goes back any further
He'll end up in a ringside seat.
Clay swings with a left,
Clay swings with a right,
Look at young Cassius
Carry the fight.
Liston keeps backing
But there's not enough room
It's a matter of time...*

1967: Clive Campbell migrates to the United States at the age of 11. Because of his size, kids at Alfred E. Smith High School nicknamed him Hercules. He would later become a writer and change his name to Kool Herc.

1968: A gang named Savage Seven would hit the streets of the East Bronx. Savage Seven later transforms into Black Spades, before eventually becoming an organization known as Zulu Nation.

1973: DJ Kool Herc deejays his first block party (his sister's birthday) at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue, Bronx, NY. Herc would often buy two copies of a record and stretch the break parts by using two

turntables and mixing in both records before the break ends. The Zulu Nation is officially formed by a student of Stevenson High school named Kahyan Asim (aka Afrika Bambaataa).

1974: After seeing Kool Herc perform at block parties, Grandmaster Caz, Grandmaster Flash, and Afrika Bambaataa start playing at parties all over the Bronx neighborhoods. Around this time, DJ/MC/Crowd Pleaser Lovebug Starski starts referring to this culture as "hip-hop."

1975: Herc is hired as a DJ at the Hevalo Club. He later gets Coke La Rock to utter crowd pleaser rhymes at parties (e.g. "DJ Henry is in the house and he'll turn it out without a doubt"). Coke La Rock and Clark Kent form the first MC team known as Kool Herc & The Herculoids. DJ Grand Wizard Theodore invents 'the scratch' by accident. While trying to hold a spinning record in place in order to listen to his mom, who was yelling at him, Grand Wizard accidentally caused the record to produce the "shigi-shigi" sound that is now known as the scratch. Scratch is the crux of modern DJing.

1976: DJ Afrika Bambaataa performs at the Bronx River Center. Bambaataa's first battle against Disco King Mario sparks off the DJ battling that is now embedded in the culture.

1977: The Rock Steady Crew (the most respected b-boy crew in history) is created by the original four members: JoJo, Jimmy Dee, Easy Mike, and P-Body. DJ Kool Herc is nearly stabbed to death at one of his parties. Although the assault placed a permanent dent on Herc's career, Grandmaster Flash, Afrika Bambaataa, Disco Wiz (the first Latino DJ), and Disco King Mario all kept performing around town.

1978:

- Kurtis Blow, who was being managed by Russell Simmons, decides to hire Simmons' brother, Run, as his DJ.
- Run was so-called because he could cut so fast between two turntables.
- Kurtis would later become the first rapper to be signed to a major record deal.
- Music industry coins the term "rap music", and shifts its focus toward emcees.
- Grandmaster Caz (aka Cassanova Fly) and Bambaataa engage in a battle at the Police Athletic League.

1979:

- Grandmaster Flash forms one of the most outstanding rap groups ever, The Furious 5 – Grandmaster Flash (Joseph Saddler), Melle Mel (Melvin Glover), Kidd Creole (Nathaniel Glover), Cowboy (Keith Wiggins), Raheim (Guy Williams), and Mr. Ness (Eddie Morris).
- Around the same time, another great rap crew – The Cold Crush Four – was formed comprising of Charlie Chase, Tony Tone, Grand Master Caz, Easy Ad, JDL, and Almighty KG.
- The first rap record by a non-rap group "King Tim III" is recorded by the Fatback Band.
- *Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" would go on to become the first known rap hit, reaching #36 on Billboard.*

In the early 70's and 80's major labels shifted strategies and developed large urban music departments often run by black executives. When the music industry consolidated in the late

eighties, the divisions that once recorded and distributed Hip Hop shrank, laid off thousands of workers and embraced a business model that promoted only what was believed to be the most commercially viable hip-hop acts. Many experts note that the artistic themes that emerged at that time were dominated by violent, rebellious and highly sexual content. Some suggest that these are still the types of artists promoted on mainstream radio, video, Internet and recording labels today.

However, with the continued development of high-quality consumer level recording and music distribution technologies, there is an ever-expanding network of independent artists finding their audiences and writing hip-hop's future. Hip Hop continues to be a vital force in youth culture globally, and with an entire new generation picking up the microphone, the spray-can, and the critical discourse, hip hop's future is guaranteed.

Sources

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