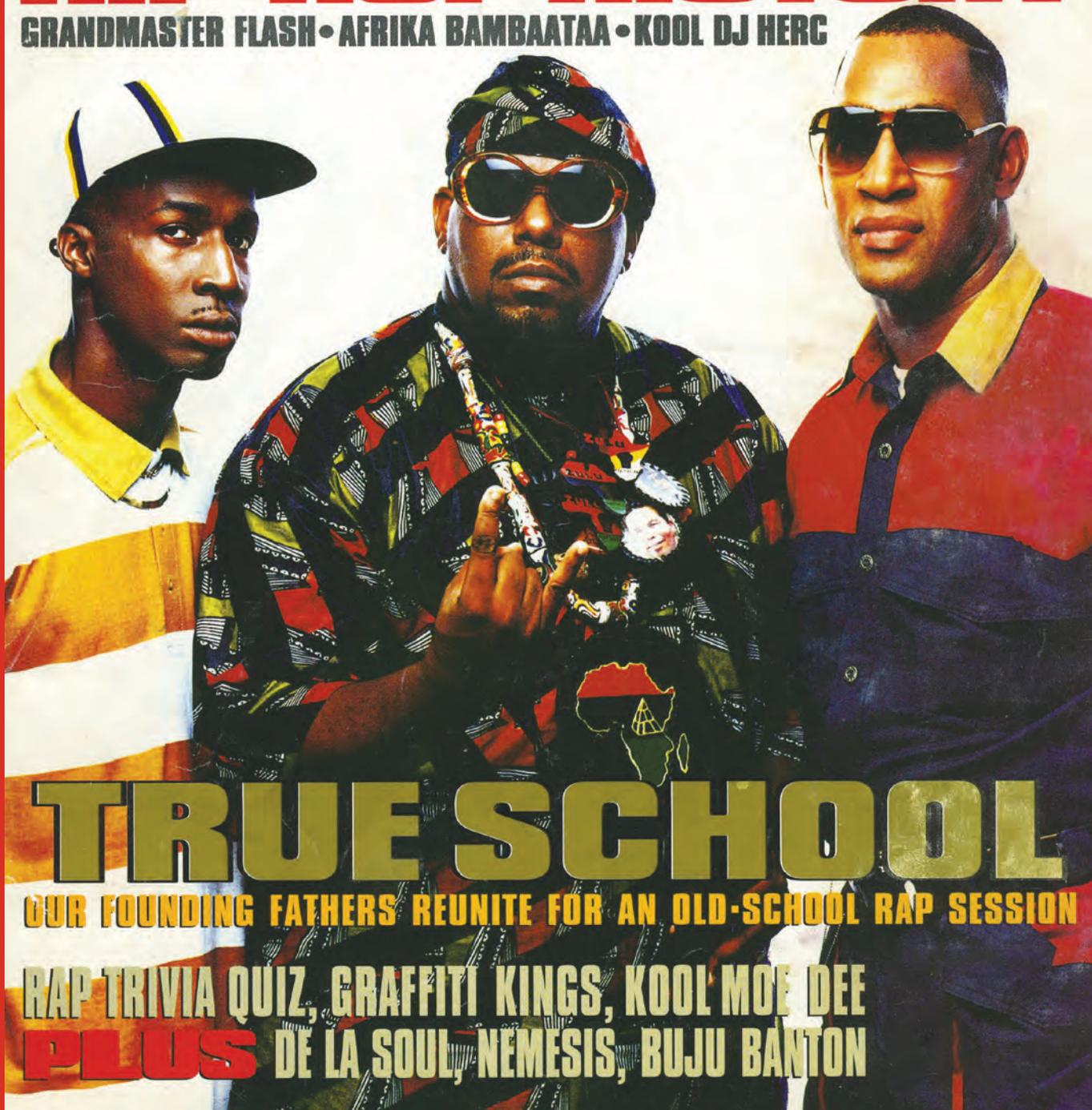


# HIP-HOP HISTORY

GRANDMASTER FLASH • AFRIKA BAMBAATAA • KOOL DJ HERC



## TRUE SCHOOL

OUR FOUNDING FATHERS REUNITE FOR AN OLD-SCHOOL RAP SESSION

RAP TRIVIA QUIZ, GRAFFITI KINGS, KOOL MOE DEE  
**PLUS** DE LA SOUL, NEMESIS, BUJU BANTON



# THE GET-DOWN PART

By Miles Marshall Lewis

## “YOU LOVE

to hear the story again and again,” said the legendary MC Shan, “of how it all got started way back when.” Back when the hip-hop holy trinity of DJs Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash appeared together on the cover of *The Source* magazine in late 1993, only the hardcore adherents of rap music knew its history in intimately familiar terms. Things like the 1520 Sedgwick Avenue address of Kool Herc or crews like the Universal Zulu Nation—of which DJ Jazzy Jay was an early member—were largely unfamiliar outside of the Bronx. As hip-hop developed throughout the years into the pop music of the world, spawning documentaries and historical biographies, rap’s origin story has become as well-known to music lovers as the Beatles’ roots in Liverpool.

During the late 2010s, social media clowned millennial MCs like Lil Yachty and Lil Xan for not revering the likes of 1990s legends Biggie Smalls

and 2Pac. But their points of view underlined that hip-hop culture now stretches long enough (nearly five decades) for different generations to have their own “OK boomer” views about who’s hot and who’s not in rap history. The almost 50-year passage of time since its beginnings at public-park jams in the South Bronx also means that the genre spans from the mature dad rap of 4:44-era Jay-Z to the so-called SoundCloud rhymes of the late Juice WRLD.

Still, even an outsider like Australian director Baz Luhrmann felt comfortable enough creating the fictive world of *The Get Down*, a scripted Netflix series set in the mise-en-scène of hip-hop’s formative years in the ’70s. From the American Book Award-winning *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop* to the Peabody-winning docuseries *Hip-Hop Evolution*, many have laid bare the origins of rap music for mainstream audiences—way beyond rap’s intracultural borders—and succeeded.

We totally know the story of how it all got started way back when. Or do we?

*Pictured above: DJs Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash and Kool Herc.*



**Let's commence with a recap of the most famous facts.**

**Hip-hop** culture traditionally consists of five elements: rapping, deejaying, B-boying (aka breakdancing), graffiti art and knowledge.

On Aug. 11, 1973, in a Sedgwick Avenue recreation room in the urban-blighted South Bronx, Kool Herc deejayed a back-to-school jam—cementing his reputation and launching a music revolution.

Afrika Bambaataa, leader of the Black Spades gang, reinvented that crew as the Universal Zulu Nation (dedicated to peace, unity, love and having fun), and recast himself as the “Master of Records.” Grandmaster Flash rose as the final third of the triumvirate by inventing the backspin technique: making it easier to loop the same record on two adjacent turntables, extending the groove with a mixer’s crossfader.

Further, **Coke La Rock** often performed along-

side Kool Herc as the first de facto rapper, hyping up crowds in Bronx parks and schoolyards.

And years after hip-hop became an entrenched South Bronx cultural phenomenon, in 1979 “Rapper’s Delight” by **The Sugarhill Gang** featured three rappers flipping rhymes over the music bed of **Chic**’s “Good Times” to bring rap music to the wide world beyond New York City. The single’s success paved the way for **Kurtis Blow**, Grandmaster Flash and the **Furious Five** and more, to the point where tastemakers realized songs like “The Breaks” and “The Message” weren’t faddish novelty records. Ten years passed between Kool Herc’s first community-center party and the release of **Run-DMC**’s “Sucker MC’s,” the single that effectively sounded the death knell for rap music’s baby-steps stage.

Those are the big beats. Let’s hydrophonic-scratch into them with some details.

Born in 1970, I spent my childhood with grandparents who lived in different areas of the



OLDER TEENAGERS SPUN WINDMILL AND HEADSPIN MOVES ON FLATTENED CARDBOARD BOXES TO THE BREAKBEATS: ISOLATED SECTIONS OF THE MOST FRENETIC MOMENTS ON RECORDS LIKE "APACHE" BY THE INCREDIBLE BONGO BAND AND THE JIMMY CASTOR BUNCH'S "IT'S JUST BEGUN." SOME CALLED THOSE B-BOYS BREAKDANCERS BECAUSE THEY DANCED TO BREAKBEATS.

financially devastated South Bronx: Mott Haven, Highbridge. My parents moved us uptown to the northeast Bronx in 1974, two years after the Cross Bronx Expressway project of city planner **Robert Moses** was completed. Controversy surrounded the construction, as the highway cut straight through existing neighborhoods and displaced the (largely Jewish and Italian) residents who could afford to leave. That left me pedaling my tricycle up and down East 170th Street, riding seesaws in Claremont Park with the black and Puerto Rican kids who remained. I don't recall the embroidered denim jackets of street gangs like the Savage Skulls who roamed the hood; they were dying out. What I remember is the music.

Booming speakers plugged into streetlamps echoed funk throughout the playgrounds and public parks where my cousins and I played ringolevio. Grandmaster Flash was one of those DJs. So was the late **Kool DJ AJ**—immortalized on Kurtis Blow's "AJ Scratch"—deejaying in the courtyard

of the Moore Houses housing projects, across the street from my grandmother's building. Older teenagers spun windmill and headspin moves on flattened cardboard boxes to the breakbeats: isolated sections of the most frenetic moments on records like "Apache" by **The Incredible Bongo Band** and **The Jimmy Castor Bunch's** "It's Just Begun." Some called those B-boys breakdancers because they danced to breakbeats, the prime contribution of DJ **Kool Herc**.

**Clive Campbell** was born in Kingston, Jamaica, in April 1955. The oldest of six children, he relocated with his family to 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in the southwest Bronx in 1967. As a graffiti writer with the Ex-Vandals crew, Clive's tag for spray-painting walls and subway trains—**Kool Herc**—came from Hercules, the nickname thrust upon him in high school because of his superhero-sized frame. Deejaying a party in the rec room of his apartment building in August 1973, a modest jam of around 50 community kids to raise money

*Pictured above:  
Andre Harrell with  
rapper Kurtis Blow,  
Coke La Rock with DJ  
Red Alert.*



Left-top: DJ Grand Wizzard Theodore. Bottom: Grandmixer DST. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Afrika Bambaataa in front of 1980s Zulu Nation graffiti. Club flyers. Hip-hop pioneer, rapper and visual artist Fab Five Freddy in front of graffiti wall in Harlem, 1979.



for his sister's back-to-school clothes, a 16-year-old Herc did something no other DJ had ever thought to do before. His so-called "merry-go-round" style involved using the peak percussive segments of often obscure songs and lengthening them by switching over to a second copy of the same vinyl record on another turntable.

Those segments soon became known as breaks. Herc's party people going off with **James Brown**-inspired moves became known as break-boys and break-girls, or B-boys/B-girls or breakdancers. The huge wardrobe-sized speaker cabinets of Jamaican sound systems were a part of Herc's heritage growing up, and they soon served him well on the streets of the Bronx. His Herculords sound system was even louder than the deafening speakers I remembered hearing firsthand as a boy, cherry Italian ice dripping over my fingers.

What DJ Kool Herc and his hype-the-crowd partner Coke La Rock soon did at clubs like **Harlem World** and **Disco Fever** had its mirror in more upscale downtown discotheques with DJ **Hollywood** and his master of ceremonies, **Eddie Cheba**. Their suit-and-tie audience wanted nothing to do with the backspinning teenagers up in the hardcore South Bronx. But **Anthony "Hollywood" Hollo-way's** call and response exhortations—his "throw your hands in the air, and wave 'em like you just don't care"—extended from the rhyming tradition of radio DJs like **Frankie Crocker** and **Jocko Henderson**. His placement in hip-hop history has been controversial because of his disco clientele, but many pioneers begrudgingly bestow him his proto-rap bona fides.

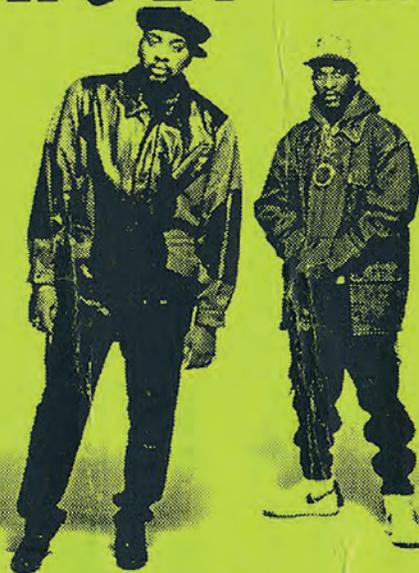
But back to the Boogie-Down Bronx.

**Afrika Bambaataa** (né Lance Taylor) grew up in the Bronx River Houses projects of the southeast Bronx. Inspired by unsung local DJs like DJ **Tex** and **Kool DJ D**, Bambaataa carved out his own deejaying style in the early '70s by reaching for the obscure and diverse. He draped speeches from **Malcolm X** over the afrobeat drums of **Fela Kuti**; he blended James Brown beats underneath TV-show themes from *The Andy Griffith Show* and *Batman*, or **Henry Mancini's** *Pink Panther* score; he mixed **Kraftwerk** krautrock with **Daffy Duck** cartoons. Heavily influenced by the psychedelic style of **Sly Stone**, he wore a mohawk before the Afropunk aesthetic was a glint in anyone's eye.

Beyond his estimable turntablist contributions, Afrika Bambaataa had vision. Several rappers (**Cowboy** and **Lovebug Starski** included) lay claim to first coining the term "hip-hop," but Bambaataa grouped emceeing, deejaying,



# ERIC B. & RAKIM



## AT THE MUSE



CHARLES ATTAL AND CHARLIE JONES INVITE YOU AND ONE GUEST TO ATTEND

FEATURING

# THE SUGAR HILL GANG

PLUS

## HAR MAR SUPERSTAR

VHS OR BETA

THE 4TH ANNUAL PARTY

THURSDAY  
MARCH 13TH  
12:00 MIDNIGHT  
(FRIDAY MORNING)

4822  
EAST  
CEASAR CHAVEZ  
(LOCATION)

FEATURING THE  
ART OF SHEPARD FAIREY

COMPLIMENTARY DRINKS AND BBS



*Pictured above:  
The Treacherous Three.*

breakdancing and tagging graffiti under the single umbrella of the one new true faith. When party rockers were still floating the idea of calling rap “the boing-oing-oing,” Bam spread the idea of hip-hop as a culture with distinct elements. As a former leader of the Black Spades gang, Bambaataa helped shift the paradigm from street warfare to battling with rhymes and footwork by founding the Universal Zulu Nation in 1973.

**Joseph Saddler** was born in Barbados and emigrated to the southwest Bronx at a young age. His childhood interest in electronics and an obsession with his father’s sizeable record collection dovetailed after his parents split. Piecing together discarded bits of transformers, gaskets and copper wires, he built his own speakers and deejayed tracks like **Trouble Funk’s** “Pump Me Up,” **Mandrill’s** “Fence Walk” and “Scorpio” by **Dennis Coffey** in his mother’s living room. His eventual protégé, **DJ Grand Wizzard Theodore**, is credited with inventing the *zigga zigga* scratch that’s forever associated with hip-hop sonics.

But as Grandmaster Flash, Saddler was the first DJ bold enough to lay his fingers on the vinyl albums (strictly prohibited back then), mark breakbeats off with crayon and loop those sections ad infinitum in what he called his quick-mix theory.

Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash had already won the revolution before the world had any idea. *Then* came the records.

#### **On Wax**

**In 2019**, I visited the **Library of Congress** in Culpeper, Virginia, home to an enormous audio-visual archive. A director was shooting a **PBS** pilot structured around screening a rare *Tonight Show* episode from 1968, with comedian **Pigmeat Markham** performing his Top 20 hit, “Here Come the Judge.” Explaining the song as a precursor to hip-hop, I labeled the single “proto-rap”—noting that Markham’s flow, delivery, and even the dusty drums of the track itself, had everything in common

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with hip-hop. Kool Herc and other rap historians cite “Here Come the Judge” as proof that hip-hop has always been here.

Back in 1937, gospel’s **Golden Gate Quartet** released the minstrel standard “Preacher and the Bear” with a syncopated style in their verses that has unmistakable hip-hop swagger. Afrika Bambaataa always gives credit to jazz great **Cab Calloway**’s “Minnie the Moocher,” the early-’70s spoken-word releases of **The Last Poets** and **Gil-Scott Heron**, and the boastful rhymes of **Muhammad Ali** for being hip-hop before hip-hop. Not to mention soulfully spoken lines in music by James Brown and **Isaac Hayes**. But a day would come in the summer of 1979 when rap music made its official debut on the radio as rap music.

The record, of course, is the Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight.”

In the six years between Kool Herc’s Sedgwick Avenue party and **Sugar Hill Records**’ first release, several crews of prominence made solid reputations in the South Bronx. The **Cold Crush Brothers**’

**Grandmaster Caz** ghost-wrote the rhymes everyone knows as the opening bars of “Rapper’s Delight.”

Contemporaries like **The Treacherous Three**, **The Fantastic Romantic 5** and the **Funky Four Plus One** crossed paths constantly. Solo MCs like **Busy Bee** and **Lovebug Starski** circulated at the same parties. But the ethos of hip-hop was only about making reputations and a percentage of the door take—until **Sylvia Robinson**.

Known for “Love Is Strange” (1957) and “Pillow Talk” (1973), singer Sylvia Robinson originally hailed from Harlem but relocated to New Jersey with her husband, **Joseph**. She’d abandoned her solo career to launch a fledgling independent music label, **All Platinum Records**. On the hunt for the next new thing, her interest was piqued by **Lovebug Starski** performing at a packed Harlem World birthday party for her niece. Starski rejected her proposal to record, and her offer extended to **Henry Lee Jackson**, aka **Big Bank Hank**: the maladroit manager of Grandmaster Caz who

*Pictured above:  
Sylvia Robinson. The  
Cold Crush Brothers’  
Reggie Reg and Tony Tone*



Melle Mel,  
1982.

worked part-time in an Englewood, New Jersey, pizza parlor. Auditioning him alongside his homeboys **Guy O'Brien (Master Gee)** and **Michael Wright (Wonder Mike)**, Robinson decided to choose all three for the studio session.

Recorded in a single take 15 minutes long, over an interpolation of “Good Times” (R&B outfit Chic’s #1 hit that same summer), “Rapper’s Delight” swiftly became the biggest-selling 12-inch single of all time.

At the Library of Congress, curators showed me an early rushed pressing of “Rapper’s Delight” with a red label in place of the iconic Sugar Hill Records candy cane logo. Already beaten to the airwaves that March by **The Fatback Band**’s less popular rap record “King Tim III (Personality Jock),” Sylvia Robinson wanted to release her product before hip-hop music’s shock of the new lost its novelty.

### The New Rap Language

**Run-DMC** frequently, justifiably get described as the **Beatles** of hip-hop. **Joseph “Run” Simmons**, **Darryl “DMC” McDaniels** and their late DJ, **Jason “Jam Master Jay” Mizell**, scored multiple firsts as a rap group, becoming the genre’s original international superstars. Run-DMC established rap as a platinum album medium with *King of Rock* (1985), *Raising Hell* (1986) and more.

The trio mastered branding by taking a page out of **Johnny Cash**’s book and dressing in all-black everything, complete with fedoras and shell-toe Adidas. They were the first rappers on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. They were the first rappers with a crossover hit, the **Aerosmith** cover/collab “Walk This Way,” which busted through walls, literally and figuratively, via **MTV**. They were the first rap act to carry their own *A Hard Day’s Night*-type film with *Krush Groove*. The story of ’80s pop, let alone ’80s hip-hop, is incomplete without Run-DMC.

But the timeline of rap music doesn’t jump directly from Sugarhill Gang to Run-DMC. Sugar Hill Records also signed Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, who followed Sugarhill Gang onto European club dates on the strength of their own hits, notably “Freedom,” “Birthday Party” and the DJ showcase “The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel.” Sugar Hill Records also pumped out the Treacherous Three, the Funky Four Plus One and **The Sequence**. (The Sequence was hip-hop’s first female rap trio; the Funky Four’s “plus one” was female rapper **Sha-Rock**.) Many were put off by Robinson’s bookkeeping practices in the end, but to a large degree the label normalized rap music on black radio.

Kurtis Blow also arrived in 1979 with “Christmas Rappin’”—which was initially rejected by dozens of record labels despite the efforts of his manager, 22-year-old Hollis, Queens, native **Russell Simmons**. Harlem’s **Kurtis Walker** met Simmons at Manhattan’s **City College**, determined to use hip-hop to reach superstardom. Chasing the local nightclub success of **Eddie Cheba**, Simmons and Blow hustled

their way into a contract with **Mercury Records**, the first for a solo rapper. The following year, “The Breaks” turned Blow into a star on the level of Sugarhill Gang. His club performances featured a teenage **DJ Run**, billed as “the Son of Kurtis Blow” before the rise of Run-DMC. (Run is, famously, Russell Simmons’s little brother.) Blow became a sex-symbol rapper with sung vocals on “Daydreamin’ ” four years before **Drake** was born.

**Debbie Harry** of NYC’s genre-hopping new-wave rockers **Blondie** rapped about the virtues of Grandmaster Flash and graf artist **Fab 5 Freddy** on mainstream pop radio with 1980’s “Rapture.” That same year, **Rick James**’ vanilla-soul protégée **Teena Marie** emceed her way through “Square Biz.” African-American block parties and adventurous black radio in the final days of **Jimmy Carter**’s presidency filled the air with tracks like “The New Rap Language,” “Funk You Up,” “The Body Rock,” “Apache” and “Feel the Heartbeat.”

“Planet Rock” by Afrika Bambaataa and the **Soulsonic Force** dropped in the summer of 1982. With its synthesizers, **Roland TR-808** beat machine and German electro influence, it was the sound of *Star Wars*’ Millennium Falcon landing smack dab in the South Bronx. Bam once explained to me: “The reason I made electro-funk hip-hop is because I looked around [and] there was no group nowhere whatsoever that was doing strictly electronic music like **Kraftwerk**, **ELO** and **Gary Numan**. And I said, ‘Well, we gonna be the first with this.’ So I took the idea of what they had with the techno-pop and adding that funk to it, the basis of James Brown, **Sly** and **P-Funk**. Put it to our stuff and took the style and dressing from Sly and P-Funk.”

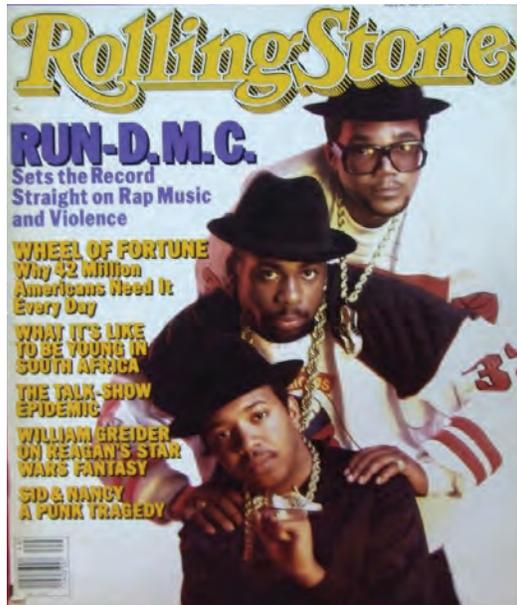
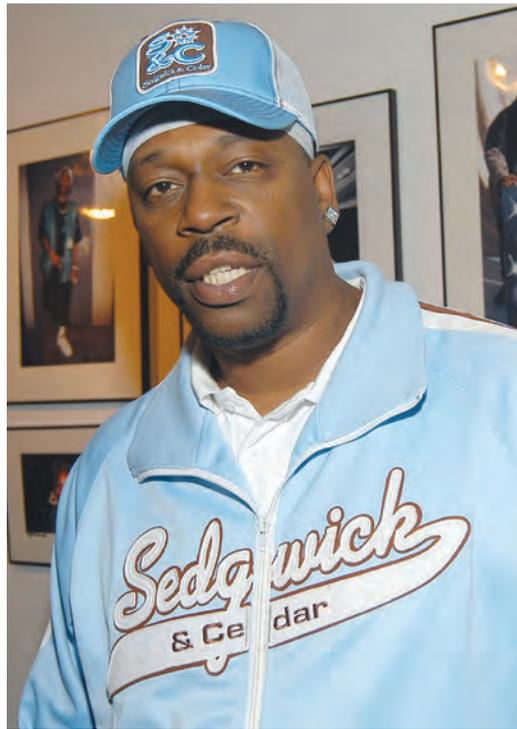
On the other side of the spectrum, “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five took street reportage to a stratospheric level, turning rap from party music into a sonic *cinéma vérité*. Flash, as a DJ, had nothing to do with the song and doesn’t even appear on it (in the most illustrative example of how, by 1982, MCs surmounted DJs as the face of rap music). **Melle Mel**, the most eloquent rapper of his generation next to **Kool Moe Dee**, warned: “Don’t push me, ’cause I’m close to the edge/I’m trying not to lose my head. It’s like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder how I keep from going under.” As a vivid, brutal bulletin from the ghettos of America—full of roaches, broken glass, urine-soaked staircases, sex workers and the homeless—the song is still unparalleled.

Meanwhile, Russell Simmons had managed Kurtis Blow right into teenage living rooms on Saturday morning *Soul Train*, and soon came into contact with **New York University** undergrad **Rick Rubin**.

**Frederick Jay Rubin** grew up near suburban Long Island listening to punk and hardcore bands. The long-haired guitarist fell in love with rap music in college, stalking DJ Jazzy Jay’s weekly sets at **Danceteria**. In addition to fronting a garage-punk band called **Hose**, Rubin deejayed for a trio of fellow white boys who mixed rap and hardcore and were known as **The Beastie Boys**. From his NYU dorm, Rubin had already pressed and distributed a Hose single before Jazzy Jay introduced



# PROFILE



# Def Jam recordings

THE STORY OF '80S POP, LET ALONE '80S HIP-HOP, IS INCOMPLETE WITHOUT RUN-DMC.

Counter-clockwise from top: Run-DMC's iconic shell-toe Adidas, massive gold chain necklaces and groundbreaking cover of Rolling Stone. Track-suit trendsetter Grandmaster Caz.



him to Russell Simmons. Envisioning success for hip-hop culture above and beyond what Sugar Hill had already achieved, Rubin and Simmons started brainstorming **Def Jam Recordings** as the ultimate rap label.

Run-DMC signed to **Profile Records**, not Def Jam. But in August 1983, the stripped-down sound of Run-DMC's "Sucker MCs (Krush-Groove 1)" influenced an entire decade of rap music, Def Jam's included.

Whereas Sugar Hill recordings featured live instrumentation from session musicians like bassist **Doug Wimbish** (later of rock band **Living Colour**), Run-DMC went bare-bones in order to more closely replicate the park jams that birthed hip-hop in the first place. Hip-hop wasn't meant to be R&B. The upscale trappings of the latter genre's radio playlists rejected the rap aesthetic. As far as Russell Simmons and Run-DMC were concerned, "Sucker MCs" and the Def Jam music to follow would flip the middle finger right back. The gauche, **Funkadelic**-like outfits of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five were played out; so were the off-the-rack suits of Kurtis Blow. Run-DMC dressed like everyday rap fans from the boroughs of New York City and sounded like street jams from '70s schoolyards. If the Cold Crush Brothers could have gone pop, it would have looked like the success of Run-DMC.

Def Jam launched with Hose and stepped into rap with **T La Rock & Jazzy Jay's** classic "It's Yours." But its real beginning was "I Need a Beat" by 16-year-old Queens high schooler **LL Cool J**. With a beat programmed by **Ad-Rock** of The Beastie Boys and produced by Rick Rubin (the sleeve of LL's *Radio* album said "reduced" instead), the single rocked the rap radio shows in October 1985. Still shunned by daytime radio programmers, and completely ignored by white radio stations, hip-hop found support from late-night and weekend DJs in New York City. **WBLS**, **WHBI** and **Kiss-FM** aired hours of rap from DJs like **Red Alert**, **Chuck Chillout**, **Mr. Magic** and **The Awesome Two**. Ironically, LL next released "I Can't Live Without My Radio" in an era without hip-hop radio stations, when gatekeepers isolated rap music to the midnight hour.

But LL Cool J—with his lanky muscles, **Le Tigre** polo shirts and omnipresent **Kangols**—established a prototype: Def Jam rappers would be characters, like wrestlers or superheroes. Soon, The Beastie Boys appeared as the wild frat boys of "(You Gotta) Fight for Your Right (to Party)," spraying beer onstage and practically parodying rap for a certain audience. America had never seen white rappers; Ad-Rock, **MCA** and **Mike D's** debut album, *Licensed to Ill*, held the title of all-time best-selling hip-hop album for years.



*Left-top: 18-year-old rapper LL Cool J holding a boombox outside a concert and (bottom), at 20, riding around in limousines styling the Kangol designer bucket hats and trending gold chains.*

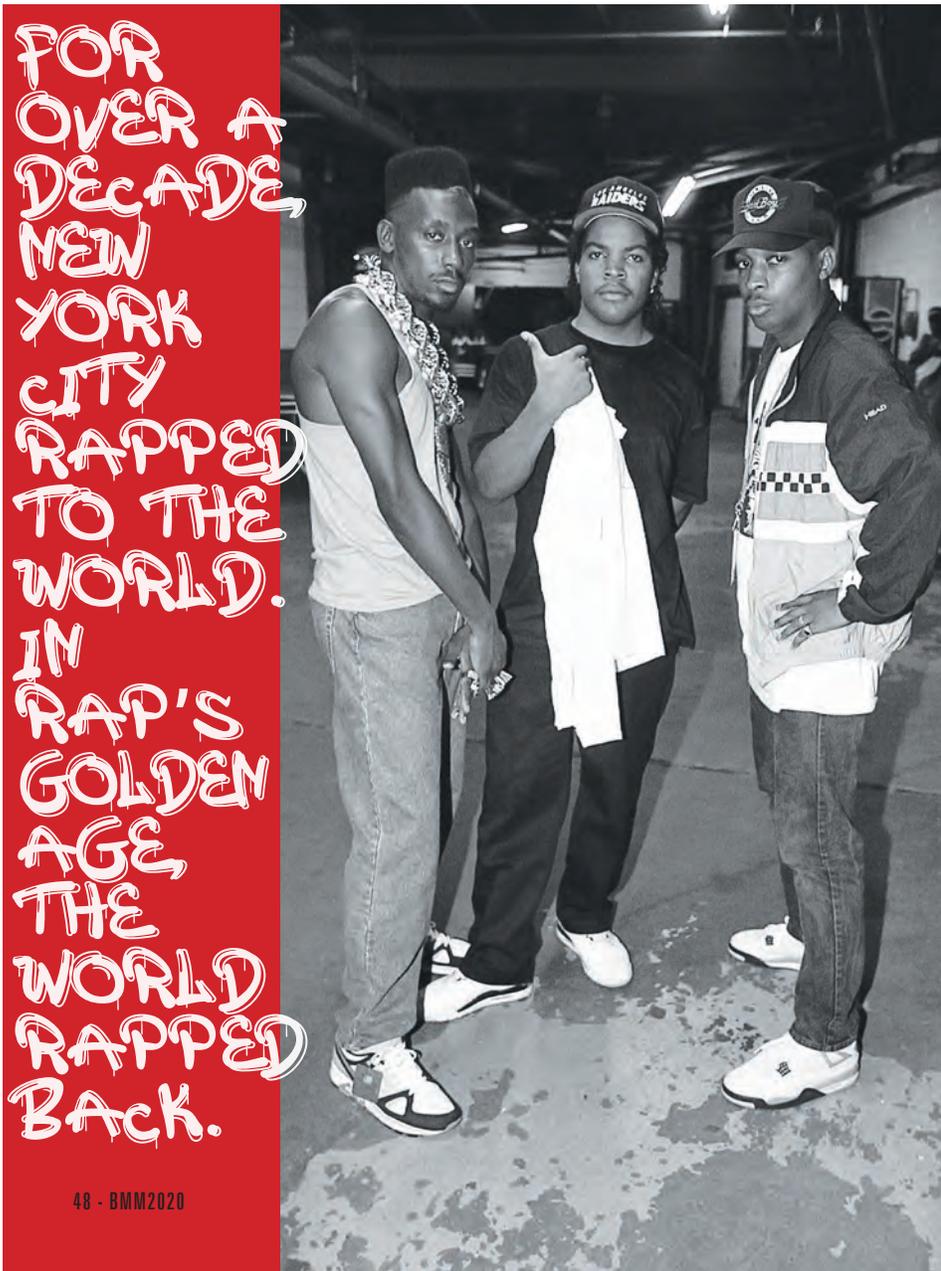
Right-top: Public Enemy in 1988 wearing their trademark large clocks. Bottom: Rappers Big Daddy Kane, Ice Cube and Chuck D.

**Public Enemy** elevated “The Message” to another level as the Black Panthers of rap. **Chuck D**, **Flavor Flav** and **DJ Terminator X** espoused the maxims of **Malcolm X** and **Louis Farrakhan** onstage, flanked by shock troopers toting plastic machine guns. *Yo! Bum Rush the Show* and *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (critically praised as the best rap album of all time for decades) gave listeners ammunition against **Reagan**-era white supremacy, with the cacophonous production of the **Bomb Squad** amped up for the crack age. **Slick Rick** blended **Dolemite**-level storytelling with hip-hop high style: **Bally** shoes, **Gucci** socks and more gold chains than **Mr. T**. Def Jam MCs forevermore married sound and image in hip-hop, selling millions of albums in the process.

Then came hip-hop’s **Hendrix**. Just as a black man from Seattle arrived to revolutionize the electric guitar in the mid-’60s, an 18-year-old MC from Wyandanch, Long Island, transformed rap music lyricism in 1986 with “**Eric B Is President**.” An adherent of the teachings of the **Five Percent Nation** (an offshoot of the **Nation of Islam** popular with African-American teenagers of the 1980s), **Rakim** threw in dog-whistle verses in his rhymes just to let it be known—if you heard, you heard. But his often-cosmic connections and **John Coltrane**-influenced delivery (Rakim was a jazz fan and former sax player) immediately ranked him above wordsmiths like Melle Mel or Kool Moe Dee. Though he was born **William Michael Griffin Jr.**, all of hip-hop knew him by **Rakim Allah** through “**I Ain’t No Joke**,” “**I Know You Got Soul**,” and his 1987 debut, *Paid in Full*.

Rakim’s equal and opposite reaction came swiftly. Straight out of Brooklyn, 18-year-old **Antonio Hardy** made fast friends with the comical rapper **Biz Markie**, who’d already had connections with the hottest producer since Rick Rubin. Hardy picked the sobriquet **Big Daddy Kane**, ghostwriting lyrics for his clown-prince homie until earning his own spotlight. Queens DJ **Marlon Williams**, aka **Marley Marl**, quickly cultivated a reputation as one of rap’s greatest producers via tracks like **Roxanne Shanté**’s “**Roxanne’s Revenge**” and **MC Shan**’s “**Marley Marl Scratch**.” Marley’s production technique was built on sampling kick drums and snares from the funkier records in his collection with a TR-808 beat machine. His innovation changed rap music forever. And the posse he assembled around that sound—the loosely knit **Juice Crew** of **Kool G Rap**, **Craig G**, **Biz Markie**, **Roxanne Shanté** and **Big Daddy Kane**—became instant rap royalty. Big Daddy Kane in particular could go toe-to-toe with Rakim, using multisyllabic rhyme schemes, punch lines and lover-man raps interchangeably on newly minted classics like “**Raw**” and “**Ain’t No Half-Steppin’**.”

The culture’s strongest advocates didn’t wait long to brand this era the golden age of hip-hop. Though a handful of acts managed to release multi-platinum albums, rap was still arguably a singles medium, and many MCs of the era were one-hit wonders of the dancefloor and late-night radio mastermixes who rarely make the history books.





Clockwise from top: Slick Rick. Big Daddy Kane trending the flat-top, 1980. MC Shan showing off his Puma bling. Eric B. (right) and Rakim in NYC. Schoolly D. Roxanne Shante (jacket detail) of The Juice Crew.

Doug E. Fresh triumphed in the summer of 1985, going back and forth with Slick Rick on “The Show.” **The Audio Two** ruled ’87 with the insane beat pattern of “Top Billin’.” **Bad Boys** and **K Love** would never build on the promise of “Veronica,” an X-rated tale with a hook from *Sesame Street*’s “Mah Nà Mah Nà.” Like **Chubby Checker** in the late ’50s, **Joeski Love** (“Pee-Wee’s Dance”) and **B. Fats** (“Woppit”) popularized dance crazes. **Ultramagnetic MCs** took inscrutable rhyming to an apex on “Ego Trippin’.”

The agitprop of Public Enemy kicked off a wave of politically conscious hip-hop, including powerhouse rapper **KRS-One**, who posed like Malcolm X on the cover of *By All Means Necessary*.

But even for the best of the best, mainstream success was short-lived. Eric B. & Rakim released four albums, all of which went Top 10 R&B, between 1987 and ’92. But Rakim wouldn’t emerge as a solo act until 1997. Kane’s first two LPs for **Cold Chillin’** went gold, but the third, 1990’s *Taste of Chocolate*, was his last to

crack the Top 40. He stopped recording in 1998.

For over a decade, New York City rapped to the world. In rap’s golden age, the world rapped back.

### Worldwide Underground

**Gangsta rap** started with Philadelphia’s **Schoolly D** bragging about drugs, guns and whores on “P.S.K. (What Does It Mean?)” Or else gangsta rap started with **KRS-One** rhyming “9mm Goes Bang,” holding guns with his DJ on the cover of *Criminal Minded*. Then again, maybe gangsta rap started with **Ice-T** detailing a day in the life of a California hustler on “6 in the Mornin’.” Alternatively, gangsta rap started when **N.W.A** sold millions of copies of *Straight Outta Compton* to white kids in American suburbs.

Whichever factoid you favor, reality rap begat gangsta rap, and hip-hop never looked back. ■