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HIP HOP MATTERS

Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement

S. Craig Watkins

Beacon Press, Boston

INTRODUCTION

Back in the Day

Let's keep it underground. Nobody outside the Bronx would like this stuff anyway.
—GRANDMASTER FLASH

The story of the origins of the hip-hop movement is, by now, a relatively well-traveled one. Most historians and cultural critics trace it back to the early and middle 1970s, back to a time and place affectionately known as the "Boogie Down Bronx." As terms like *innercity* and *underclass* were reinventing America's racial vocabulary, a thriving cultural underworld began to bustle with energy and innovation. It was at once the worst and the best of times for those who pioneered and peopled the hip-hop movement. When the historic aftershocks of urban renewal, resegregation, and capital flight settled, a new social and economic order had emerged in America. In the wake of the massive shifts the gulf between America's cities, populated increasingly by black and brown bodies, and the suburbs, whiter and more affluent, grew wider and more severe. But in the midst of the volatile surge of social and economic change an exuberant youth culture started to take shape. What began in basements, on street corners, in public parks, and throughout the still of the night would furnish young people fertile spaces for crafting new identities, explosive art forms, and later, whole industries.

Not surprisingly as the hip-hop movement evolves into a vibrant cultural industry, nostalgia for the presumably more innocent days grows. This particular narrative imagines a time when hip hop was unsullied, unburdened, and unchained by the commercial forces and

political divisions that generate so much anxiety within the movement today. From this perspective hip hop was real, organic, and deeply connected to its grass roots. It was, in short, a simpler time in the movement's history. As understandable as it is, this view belies the realities that have always made hip hop so irrepressible and impossible to define or contain. Hence, even as the longing for hip hop's allegedly more innocent days gains momentum, among many in the hip-hop nation, some of the big issues that generate great division within the movement—namely the pull between hip hop's commercial vitality and its strivings to be a meaningful source of youth empowerment and social change—were more than apparent back in the day. No year reflects that more than 1979, the year that hip hop emerged from the underground world that nourished its soul and sparked its creative fire.

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In a strange way, 1979 represents both the beginning and the end of the hip-hop movement. The events that unfolded that year ushered in a new era in hip hop while essentially closing the door on a previous one. Hip hop, once invisible, became visible to the wider public. Hip hop, once largely recreational, became increasingly commercial. Throughout the year hip hop, unbeknownst to most, was embarking on a journey that would make it a cultural and economic juggernaut.

According to hip-hop legend it was the summer of 1979 when Sylvia Robinson's son, Joey Jr., persuaded her to accompany him on a talent hunt in, of all places, a New Jersey pizzeria. Under the direction of his mother, Joey had been actively mining his street networks, determined to find someone who could rap on a recording Sylvia was eager to produce. Before securing a rapper to record in the beige stucco and brick building that housed their recording studio, Sylvia had already laid the musical track for the song. The making of rap music's first commercial hit is as improbable as the genre's rise to global prominence twenty years later. It is even more improbable

that in an industry dominated by young men the genre's commercial breakthrough can be attributed, in large measure, to a forty-three-year-old woman.

Their first attempt to secure a rapper failed after he was scared off by a pending litigation battle between the Robinsons' All-Platinum Records and industry heavyweight Polygram Records. On this summer day they made their way to the pizzeria located on 96 West Street in suburban New Jersey to lure Henry "Big Bank Hank" Jackson, a local rapper Joey had heard about, into the studio. Remembering that day as if it were yesterday, Hank says, "I'm making pizza, and Joey and his mother walk in . . . I don't know these people at all, right? It's like somebody walking up to you and saying, 'I want you to make a record for me.' " He thought it was a joke, but Sylvia and Joey soon convinced him that they were serious. Sylvia recalled that Hank "was the manager of the store, but he left the parlor with his apron on. There was flour all over the floor."

They settled in the back of Joey's Oldsmobile, parked outside the pizzeria, where Hank auditioned on the spot. As the Jersey pizzeria employee did his best to impress, a small crowd began to gather around the car. Soon, a friend of Joey's walked by and noted that while Hank's style was entertaining, the Robinsons should listen to his friend Guy O'Brien, who went by the stage name Master Gee. Incredibly, Guy climbed in the car and he and Hank started battling, feeding off of each other's energy and skills. "I did my thing, not thinking of the immensity of what could happen. I mean who could have even dreamed of something like that?" Hank wondered out loud years later. As if the story is not bizarre enough, Michael Wright (also known as Wonder Mike) was playing a guitar across the street when he noticed the commotion around the Oldsmobile. Michael walked over and then made his pitch to the Robinsons: "I can rap, too."

Excited about the chemistry between the three men, they all moved on to Sylvia's house that same evening. After listening to them rhyme and perform more, Sylvia proposed a name for a new

record company, Sugar Hill Records. She then told Hank, Guy, and Michael that they would be the label's first act and that the name of the group would be the Sugarhill Gang. That was a Friday. The following Monday they came together in the studio and cut rap's first commercial hit in one day. The record cost Sylvia $750.

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Born Sylvia Vanderpool, on March 6, 1936, in New York, Sylvia Robinson was a veteran in the world of R&B music when she stumbled across the still nascent rap music scene. Prior to discovering the Sugarhill Gang she had enjoyed a modestly successful career as an R&B singer, songwriter, producer, and co-owner of several independent record labels. Singing professionally by the age of fourteen she scored her first hit in 1957 as part of the duet Mickey & Sylvia. The corny pop tune "Love Is Strange" reached number one on the R&B charts and peaked at number eleven on the pop charts. Sixteen years later Sylvia recorded another hit, the sensuous R&B single "Pillow Talk," which peaked at number one on the R&B Hot Singles chart and reached as high as number three on the pop charts. After that Robinson spent most of her time writing and producing hits for others and enjoyed some success with songs like "Love on a Two Way Street" and "Sending Out an S.O.S." In a career that spanned four decades, history will likely remember her most for the role she played in the production of "Rapper's Delight," the novelty song that introduced rap to the world.

Though her day in the spotlight as a performer had long passed by the summer of 1979 she and her husband, Joe Robinson, stayed active in the music business. Sugar Hill Records, which was named after the famed Harlem neighborhood, was not the Robinsons first attempt at running an independent recording company. Over the course of the previous eight years they launched a series of labels including Stang, All-Platinum, and Turbo. The Robinsons' label, like many small and independently owned black music labels, found itself struggling in a

period of sweeping changes that saw many of the major record labels muscling in on the world of R&B music. The Sugar Hill start-up was a chance for a new beginning and an opportunity to establish an early stake in a musical subculture the majors knew nothing about. According to Love Bug Starski, a popular New York DJ in the 1970s, Sylvia discovered the burgeoning rap music scene while he was spinning records for a birthday bash in her honor. Love Bug's agility in rhyming over records fascinated Sylvia and convinced her that what he was doing was exciting and different enough to record.

Rap music, or what was then recognized as MCing (MC is short for master of ceremonies), had been around a few years prior to the 1979 recording. But in those early days it was essentially a live performance-art form that complemented hip hop's main attraction, the DJ. Ironically, some DJs began to rhyme or add MCs as a way to keep rivals from stealing their two most prized possessions: their records and their technique. In just a few short years, though, the roles reversed, with MCs becoming the main attraction and DJs serving in many instances as background accompaniment. Back then it was all about battling to earn your rep as one of the fiercest DJs or MCs on the block. In the ramshackle black and brown boroughs of a recession-weary New York City, one's rep was no small matter. In many cases it may have been all a poor youth had. Many of hip hop's pioneers—DJ Kool Herc, Kurtis Blow, and Melle Mel among others—earned their battle scars and now legendary status in this environment.

At some point DJs, MCs and even the spectators that attended the shows began recording the performances. The act of recording the live shows served several purposes, both intended and unintended. The DJs realized early on that mix tapes could be an effective source of self-promotion. For many DJs mix tapes became a way to build a loyal legion of underground fans that could enhance the credibility of a DJ or MC in the culture and attract even bigger audiences for future performances. Mix tapes continue to be an important vehicle for aspiring rappers to earn a rep, circulate their music, and build recognition in hip hop's underground milieus. It was through the mix tapes cir-

cuit that a young, unknown MC named Curtis Jackson was able to build his reputation and a loyal following as he shopped around for a record deal. When he burst in on the scene in 2003 as 50 Cent, he owed at least part of his meteoric success to the fan base and street cred made possible by mix tapes. In other instances, however, mix tapes were a source of income. While many of the early tapes often lacked the refined qualities of more formal recordings they, nevertheless, marked the beginnings of an alternative economy that has endured in hip hop.

Mix tapes also produced some unintended consequences. Fab Five Freddy, who was both a B-Boy, a break dancer and an aspiring visual artist in hip hop's early days, remembers that some of hip hop's most legendary DJs recorded some of their performances. "Those tapes would then become circulated," Fab Five explains. "They were spreading all through the city." Queens native Darryl McDaniels of Run-D.M.C. asserts, "It was all about tapes back then. In my neighborhood, tapes used to filter in from all the shows that were happening in the Bronx and all the Harlem World tapes." According to McDaniels, "People would go tape these shows, come back to Queens and sell them." He remembers paying fifteen dollars for his first mix tape.

While the circulation of recorded hip-hop music generated wider exposure, it also made it much more difficult to police the culture's boundaries. The music's ability to travel would not only expose it to more people; it also made it easier to learn, imitate, and even modify the genuinely creative flourishes that flowed throughout the movement. Later, the wider circulation of hip hop in the form of albums, radio, music video, and even fashion transformed the culture by subjecting it to a variety of regional, economic, and political interests that have simultaneously broadened and baffled the culture's identity, its sense of community and purpose.

It was inevitable that a more formal effort to record and package the new style of music emerging from hip hop's cultural trenches would occur. Though "Rapper's Delight" was not the first studio-

recorded rap song, there is no doubt that it was the first to gain attention beyond what was still a relatively small hip-hop community. The first studio recording was "King Tim III" by the Fatback Band. Distributed by Spring Records, it came and went with little notice.

"Rapper's Delight" was a hit for two immediate reasons. First, there was the timely use of Chic's classic disco recording, "Good Times," which was one of the year's most popular recordings. But rather than use an electronic sample of the song Sugar Hill Records' house band played their own version with Sylvia providing the bass line herself. Second, the art of talking rhythmically or rapping exclusively over a danceable track offered something quite rare in the world of pop culture, an original idea. But what separated Sugar Hill Records most from the other would-be rap labels like West End Records and Enjoy Records was the experience of the Robinsons in the music business. They knew that in order to survive they would need to get a favorable distribution arrangement and labor endlessly to use their contacts from years in "the life" to promote their records.

Once a dub of "Rapper's Delight" was complete and cut it was Sylvia's job to make sure that radio stations around the country received a copy. Armed with more than twenty years of experience in the music business Sylvia was not intimidated by the hard work it would take to make the record a success. In fact, she relished the challenge.

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On the verge of making music history the Robinsons had what at the time was a radical, some thought even crazy, idea—cut a 12-inch single of the recording rather than the standard 7-inch single. The longer format allowed the label to take full advantage of the song by letting each MC fully develop his character's narrative and personality. Though mostly lighthearted and fun, the lyrics display much of the male swagger and self-boasting that continue to be steadfast qualities in hip hop. Today, the ability to cite the fifteen-minute ex-

tended version of "Rapper's Delight" has become a kind of rite of passage in hip-hop culture. But the fear, of course, from the perspective of the music industry was that 12-inch singles were too long for radio airplay thus there was no incentive to produce them. Recalling the choice to release a 12-inch cut of the recording, Robinson says, "At first it was challenging for us to market 12-inch singles because they were whole-selling [*sic*] for $2.25 vs. the traditional 7-inch singles that were whole-selling for only sixty cents."

The length of the single, however, was just the beginning of the Robinsons' problems. An equally formidable challenge was getting the song on radio. It was still a few years before music video would become a prominent promotional tool thus radio, despite its localness, was still the primary way to gain widespread exposure. The Robinsons had been in the music business long enough to know that their effort to turn hip hop's party anthems and street rhymes into successful records would either be rewarded or thwarted based on their access to the nation's radio airwaves. So Robinson went to work. She did a lot of handholding and maneuvered deftly to persuade DJs around the country to play the record. WESL-AM St. Louis and WBLS-FM New York were the first two radio stations to receive "Rapper's Delight."

What happened that fall in St. Louis typified the march of "Rapper's Delight" into pop music history. After sending the record to Jim Gates, the programmer of WESL St. Louis, Sylvia followed up with a series of phone calls. After she persuaded him to give the record a try, listener response took care of the rest. Recalling that magical moment, Robinson says, "That night, a local distributor phoned in with an order for thirty thousand records. It was so bizarre that the next day I called retailers in the market, who confirmed that the record was that much in demand." Station managers at WESL reported, "Everybody wanted to know immediately after it was aired where the record could be bought." Like many other stations around the country, WESL could not play the song enough to satisfy demand and

soon had to play the fifteen-minute record twice every hour just to keep the phone lines from jamming.

But not everyone responded enthusiastically to the record. When WBLS's Frankie Crocker first received a copy he was not impressed. A source from the station was quoted as saying, "He [Crocker] wouldn't play the record because it's too black for his station." Two days after allegedly making that comment Crocker relented and WBLS jumped on the "Rapper's Delight" bandwagon. To the surprise of nearly everyone involved the song was an instant hit.

Though the term was not a common part of the pop culture vocabulary in those days, the song created what industry observers would now call a "buzz." That is, a groundswell of energy and excitement that generated the most effective kind of advertising available, word of mouth. WKTU-FM New York's musical director, Michael Ellis, claimed the record was "the biggest selling 12-inch single in New York. We receive between 100 to 150 calls each day, which is ten times as many calls as we have received on any other record." Calling the record a "word-of-mouth hit" one Los Angeles record store owner told *Billboard*, "This record is something. I received five-hundred at 4 pm on Friday and sold out by Sunday evening. I can't remember when anything like this ever happened."

In retrospect, the arrival of rap music could not have been timelier. Though no one knew it then, the beginning of rap was also the beginning of the end for the radio and music industries, as they existed in 1979. It was a period when an unknown, untested, and unproven style of music could still get access to commercial radio airwaves, the lifeline of the pop music industry. Some twenty years after rap's breakthrough commercial radio was a different kind of business—an entertainment medium reshaped by a variety of factors—consolidation, corporate-controlled play lists, new monitoring technologies, and MTV to name a few. Given the realities of the commercial music industry by the close of the twentieth century a genre as novel as rap was in 1979 would never gain the spins necessary

in today's radio industry to establish a viable presence in the world of pop music.

Within three months of those first spins the song became a huge hit and eventually moved more than two million units. The feat would have been remarkable in any case, but it was especially so for a genre widely viewed in 1979 as an urban fad. Even in their wildest dreams the Robinsons never imagined the type of success the record and, subsequently, the label would enjoy. During its extraordinary run "Rapper's Delight" charted number four on the R&B Singles Charts and even peaked at number thirty-six on the pop charts. The song actually reached the top of the charts in Canada and fared extremely well in countries as far as Europe, Israel, and South Africa. Though "Rapper's Delight" was wildly successful there was no real reason to believe that what was still derisively labeled "street music" had any staying power. Still, Sugar Hill Records established rap music as a bankable genre. It was a contribution that would create enormous possibilities and perils for the hip-hop movement.

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Despite their success the Sugarhill Gang was never embraced by those who considered themselves the true guardians of hip hop. The Jersey-based trio was dismissed by many in the up-and-coming world of hip hop as a watered-down knock-off that had neither the style nor the tenacity of the real thing that was emerging across the Hudson River. Many among the hip-hop faithful regarded the Sugarhill Gang as outsiders who were exploiting the culture. There were even charges that Big Hank lifted portions of his rhymes from the Mighty Force Emcees, a Bronx-based crew.

The tension that swirled around The Sugarhill Gang's newfound status presaged some of the enduring tensions in the movement regarding who and what is hip hop. Years later, when Raymond "Benzino" Scott accused Eminem and by extension white and corporate

America of stealing hip hop, it was neither a new nor an unprecedented charge. Protecting the integrity and borders of hip hop has been a constant source of conflict, producing palpable anxiety within a movement that has consistently defied all efforts to restrict or control its influence. The Sugarhill Gang's success, like the success of the movement years later, produced a gripping paradox: At the same time that commercial success established hip hop as a legitimate cultural force it also made it much more difficult to control who participated in the movement.

Even the emergence of the Robinsons as hip hop's first recording moguls reflects some of the contentious claims about ownership and influence that have a long presence in the movement. The Robinsons had no organic connection or entitlement to hip hop. They, like virtually every one else who came after them, saw hip hop as an opportunity to make money. Their reign as hip hop's premier recording label came to a sudden end, in part, because they never understood the need to develop a connection to the culture's grass roots.

As hip hop and the stakes involved in the recording of rap music intensified so did the battle to control the music and the movement. Between 1979 and 1983 Sugar Hill Records outmaneuvered their short list of rival labels in the budding rap music industry. But by 1983 a combination of factors—the rise of hungrier labels with closer ties to hip hop's pulse, squabbles with artists over royalties, lawsuits, and slowly building competition from the majors—turned rap music into a full-fledged, intensely competitive industry that eventually upended Sugar Hill's status as the top label in rap music.

Within a few short years Sugar Hill Records went from being the only label that mattered to a label that no longer mattered as a new generation of record labels and would-be moguls used their street-savvy ways and connections to chart a new era in the production of rap music. That new era would dramatically alter the character and trajectory of the movement raising, eventually, not only the financial stakes but the political stakes, too.

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One of the earliest and most fervent charges made against Sugar Hill Records was that "Rapper's Delight" diluted the raw rhymes and street cadences that captured so much of hip hop's vitality. Over the years Sylvia has been both reviled and revered for her role in establishing rap music's commercial identity. But even as Sylvia established "pop" rap as a commercially viable genre, she was also instrumental in making the recording that established rap music's legacy as a politically viable form of music. Most hip-hop aficionados identify Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message" as rap's initial foray into social and political commentary. The song crafted a revealing window into the conditions of urban blight that were ravaging many of America's biggest cities in the early 1980s. Though the song is attributed to Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, the group had little or nothing to do with its creation. Thus, while many recognize Melle Mel's heartfelt performance and biting critique of American apartheid-like conditions, few recognize that Sylvia, the forty-something music producer, was the pivotal mastermind behind the groundbreaking recording.

Members from Sugar Hill Records' house band were taking a break in between recording sessions one day when Duke Bootee, a well-known jazz and pop-funk percussionist, began tapping out an intriguing rhythm on an empty water bottle. "That sounds funny," Sylvia said. Always on the lookout for something new, she asked Duke to come up with a hook and then suggested recording the tune on a catchier, more commercial track. Later that evening they recorded the track, but it sat on the shelf for over a year. Eventually, Duke penned some lyrics that vividly portrayed the grim realities of everyday life in Ghetto USA. Describing his lyrical explorations on the song, Duke says, "I had come up with 'It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder how I keep from going under' cause it gave it that feverish, jungle feel. So I took that verse and that

hook that she liked and put it over a new track, which was more commercial."

Sylvia then approached Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, her label's hottest act, with the idea of recording the song. But they showed no interest in recording what they perceived as a "preachy" rap song. According to Duke, the group was unwilling to think beyond their own style of rap. Bootee remembers them declaring, "This record ain't gonna sell, don't nobody want to bring their problems to the disco. We're a party group, we about being nasty and having parties." Through sheer persistence Sylvia was finally able to persuade Melle Mel to give the song a try. A few days later Melle excitedly approached Bootee, "[M]an, I got a verse that seems like it just go right with that record." All ears, Bootee replied, "Well, what is it?" Melle unleashed parts of his now classic flow about a child's state of mind and the American apartheid-like conditions that characterized vast parts of black ghetto life.

They ran the rhyme by Sylvia, who approved immediately, and off to the studio they went. "The Message" was released in 1982 and went on to reach as high as number four on the R&B charts and sixty-two on the pop chart. Whereas Sylvia had proven that a pop song like "Rapper's Delight" could sell, "The Message" indicated that a place for socially conscious rap music also existed in the marketplace. Between 1987 and 1994 what some labeled "message" or "political" rap emerged and broadened the definition of popular music. Though the popularity of message rap ebbs and flows, it established an expectation for some in the movement that rap should be used as a forum for socially conscious discourse.

Although the making of "The Message" may have been unplanned, there was always something seemingly inevitable about hip hop's political promise. The most enduring images of Old School hip hop suggest a vibrant and pleasure-seeking atmosphere that included, among other things, the now legendary block parties and graffiti-scrawled trains that circled the boroughs of New York. And

while the hip-hop nation's first wave of pioneering artists, producers, and consumers were most interested in turning a blighted urban landscape into their very own play-station there was something incredibly insurgent about their elaborate pursuit of pleasure.

Afrika Bambaataa, recognized by many as one of the central figures in the rise of hip hop, has consistently maintained over the years that the culture's political potency can be traced back to the early days of the movement. As a pioneering DJ, Bambaataa experimented with a wide palette of musical styles and genres including German techno, calypso, as well as disco, rock, and soul. Likewise, he experimented with the notion that in addition to being a source of amusement hip hop could also be a force for social change. As much as anyone, he understood why hip hop mattered in the lives of ordinary youths. Hip hop's real power and true significance, Bambaataa professes, resides in its capacity to empower young people to want to change their lives. Before many others did he believed there was something notably serious about the pleasure-seeking ambitions that characterized hip hop back in the day. Perhaps it was his own experience that colored his unique vision of what hip hop could be.

Born Kevin Donovan, Bambaataa came of age at a time when New York's roughest and poorest boroughs spawned a number of street gangs in the early seventies that battled over everything from territory to reputation. The most notorious gangs included the Savage Skulls, a predominantly Puerto Rican clique, and the Black Spades, a rival group made up of mostly African Americans. When they were not at war with each other, many of the gangs spent their time intimidating their neighborhoods. It was not uncommon for gang members to steal from local stores, harass young women, or start trouble at local events. It was as if all of the pain and pessimism that came with being young, poor and black or Latino was channeled inside and often against the very people who shared a similar deprivation.

Bambaataa was no stranger to the gang wars that wreaked havoc throughout the streets of New York. He was an active member of the Black Spades. But like a number of his peers he was drawn to the

magnetic powers of hip hop. At some point he started to believe that the energy, loyalty, and passion that defined gang life could be guided toward more socially productive activities. As Bambaataa began to develop a reputation and a following as a DJ, he saw an opportunity to combine his love of music and B-boying with his desire to enhance community life. Though his parties were designed, first and foremost, to rock the crowd he acknowledged that "you [also] had people who were coming together to kick the drug dealers out of the area—we used violence against a lot of the drug pushers and all that." Former members of the Black Spades usually served as a homemade security force. Bambaataa maintains that with the parties and the effort to drive away violent offenders "we went from a negative thing to a positive thing."

As a youngster Bambaataa came up with the idea of starting a group called the Zulu Nation. The name was inspired by a movie he saw as a kid in the early sixties called *Zulu*. "Just to see these black people fighting for what was theirs against the British, that always stuck in my mind," Bambaataa explained. The young Bronx native was also inspired by the ferment of social and political struggle that partially characterized the sixties and seventies. So, when he was old enough, Bambaataa took his vision of unity, anti-violence, and self-help to the streets in an effort to recruit what he called "warriors for the community."

Among its other activities the Zulu Nation held weekly meetings. For some the meetings offered a home, for others a source of discipline. Most important, the meetings provided an open forum to develop ways of eradicating the rising presence of drugs and violence that unleashed terror in some of New York's most disadvantaged housing projects. Behind the outer galaxy outfits, flamboyant hair styles, and the sometimes quirky philosophical views Bambaataa was a man ahead of his time. He was one of hip hop's first street philosophers.

His work with the Zulu Nation was one of the earliest attempts to mobilize hip hop's energy toward effecting change in the lives of

those who lived and breathed the culture. Still, his vision for the Zulu Nation exceeded what the group was actually capable of accomplishing back then. The difficulties he faced in realizing hip hop's political potential, in retrospect, are not surprising. While most observers doubted hip hop had an enduring commercial life, virtually no one was prepared to even consider what, if any, political life it had. Because of his previous affiliation with the Black Spades, many dismissed the Zulu Nation as a rogue outfit rather than the community-based initiative Bambaataa wanted to build.

In 1995 New York City officials held a ceremony in the Bronx River projects to celebrate Operation Commitment, the city's official crackdown on crime and graffiti in area housing projects. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani was on hand to help plant a ceremonial tree. During the celebration Bambaataa and his group were conspicuously absent. Those same officials had removed the Zulu Nation from their Bronx River project's headquarters. It was a place, ironically, where many believed the group had made its biggest impact.

Some of the older residents in the housing project expressed concern that the members of the organization were aggressive and even occasionally violent. Though no one, city officials or Bronx River residents, could recall the involvement of any Zulu Nation members in any recent criminal activity, the city still maintained that the group constituted a threat. Ruben Franco, chairman of the city's housing authority, declared, "It was my decision they had to go. There was a general climate of disorder and hopelessness, and they were part of it." A memo produced by the housing authority claimed that, "In the five months since the graffiti and the Zulu Nation are gone, crime is down fifty-two percent and there seems to be a more upbeat feel to the development."

But residents below the age of forty held a very different view of the Zulu Nation. They regarded the Zulus as an important cultural institution and Bambaataa a signature figure in hip-hop history. Part of their outrage was based on the fact that they knew the Zulu Nation was one of the few grassroots organizations that tried to seriously

mobilize disaffected young people. Despite the dispute about the legacy of the Zulu Nation, Bambaataa's ultimate message that hip hop could and should play a more activist role in society would not be lost.

According to DJ Spooky, a body-grooving experimental DJ and mind-grooving intellectual, Bambaataa was future-oriented in terms of his approach to hip-hop music and politics. Calling Bambaataa "actionary rather than reactionary," Spooky claims, "he gave the notion of channeling the anger and bitterness of being outside the American mainstream into a constructive thing." Bambaataa understood that the misery associated with poverty bred contempt that was often channeled inward. Though he did not have the formal training of a social worker or youth psychologist, Bambaataa knew that the troubles facing ghetto youths required dramatic intervention. He argued that the solution was to empower people to confront head-on the problems facing their community. When nearly no one else did, Bambaataa believed hip hop could lead the way to a brighter day.

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While Bambaataa and others contemplated hip hop's political future, the movement was about to succumb to a more immediate reality, commercialism. The concerns about credibility and authenticity—notwithstanding the growing sensation known as "Rapper's Delight"—confirmed that hip hop's commercial potential was real. Still, the idea that hip hop could have an enduring commercial life seemed farfetched. Back in the day, hip hop's performing elite consisted of DJs, MCs, break dancers, and aerosol artists. This emergent cadre of artists—and that is what they were—had never rejected the idea of making money, they just seldom stopped to think that the art they were creating could command money-paying patrons of any significance beyond their immediate environment.

One such artist was Joseph Saddler. Born in Barbados, Joseph

came of age in the Bronx just as hip hop was coming to the world's attention. From an early age Joseph had developed a love for vinyl records. His father maintained a prized collection of LPs that he barred his young son from meddling with. But Joseph could not resist the pull of the records. Whenever his father left the house, he grabbed a handful of LPs and played them on the family's record player even though doing so could lead to a severe beating. His fascination with spinning records, it turns out, would be a lifelong passion.

By the middle 1970s Joseph was emerging as a local celebrity and one of hip hop's most important creative forces. A lot of the fame and prominence accorded to DJs around the world today can be traced directly to the crew of DJs that came together in the early days of hip hop. Saddler's peers and admirers nicknamed him Flash because his hands moved so quickly while handling the records and turntables he used to help revolutionize the skills and image of the DJ in global pop culture. It was the competition between Flash, Bambaataa, Kool Herc, Grand Wizard Theodore, and others that sparked the development of several of the techniques that define the art and science of modern DJing. Their unique approach and magician-like skills turned a seemingly passive exercise—spinning records—into a dynamic display of personal expression and musical performance.

Like many Bronx-based youth in the seventies Flash found himself immersed in a culture that was bubbling over with a creative energy that no sociological theory could ever explain or predict. He tried break dancing but found himself mesmerized by Kool Herc, a Jamaican-born DJ credited with introducing some of the earliest and most raucous block parties that define part of hip hop's lore. Herc's contributions to hip hop are legendary. Born Clive Campbell, Herc and his family came to New York from Jamaica in 1967 when he was a young kid. But he carried with him the memories of his youth in Trenchtown, including the sound system culture that defined part of Jamaica's social world.

Sound systems gave the people mobile discotheques made up of turntables, massive speakers, and charismatic DJs. With little means

to afford the country's live bands, poor and working-class communities gravitated toward DJs who built the powerful sound systems. These homemade sound systems amplified the already bottom-heavy bass rhythms that provided the essential architecture in Jamaican music. The most popular DJs earned an even greater following by featuring black American soul music, which U.S. military personnel based in the Caribbean exposed them to. When he was old enough, Herc wove elements of that world into his performance as a DJ in hip hop's burgeoning scene. The cultural flows that connected North America to the Caribbean suggest that hip hop was global long before being global was cool.

But as much as Flash admired Herc he noticed a few flaws, too. According to Flash, "[Herc] might play something that was downtempo and then right behind that would play something that was uptempo, and it wasn't on time. In between record A and record B, you could see how off time it was in the way the audience would go into disarray." Flash later termed what he observed as the *disarray unison factor*.

At a time when most young boys his age would have dreamed of sports stardom or girls, Flash developed a passion for mastering the fine art and science of DJing. With passion and persistence he pursued the ideas that were revolving in his head as fast as the discs he became famous for spinning. By his estimation he spent about three years of his life locked away in his bedroom mastering what, in essence, would become his craft and a new form of musicianship. "I sacrificed most of my kid years to—to try to just take this thing that was just running around in my head and make it a reality."

Flash and his DJ friends believed that in every great record there is an even greater part, what they called "the get down part." That part of the song is more formally referred to as the break. Flash wanted to capture and extend the break beat because it was usually only a few seconds long. What he really wanted was to take sections of songs from vinyl and reinvent them by producing newer, longer, and funkier versions: essentially, making new musical soundscapes from previously

recorded materials. Some characterized his efforts as innovative while others dismissed them as thievery and lacking creativity.

As he began to figure out how to manipulate the technology—turntables, amplifiers, mixers, and speakers—he developed a new vocabulary to capture his creative genius. According to Flash, "That's when I had to come up with terms like 'the torque factor'—how I judge the turntable from the state of inertia to when it is up to speed." His close study of turntables revealed the subtle yet important distinctions between different types of needles and how they might affect his efforts to create songs out of previously recorded materials. He even coined the term *clock theory* to describe his decision to re-repeat particular sections of a record by spinning the disc back a few rotations to constantly play the break beat.

What makes the accomplishments of Flash and his contemporaries so impressive is how they imposed their creative will on what was, in reality, a hardscrabble landscape that provided few resources or opportunities for young people who lived on society's margins. "Today," Flash says, "you can buy turntables, needles and mixers that are equipped to do whatever. But at that particular time, I had to build it. I had to take microphone mixers and turn them into turntable mixers. I was taking speakers out of abandoned cars and using people's thrown-away stereos." How Flash and his contemporaries invented the modern DJ through sheer hustle, imagination, and innovation is not simply *their* story; it is, in a very real sense, the story of hip hop. Like many in hip hop's first wave of innovators, Flash created a way out of no way and, in the process, transformed DJing into a serious art form and a lucrative profession.

Years later in an interview the man the music world now knows as Grandmaster Flash recalled turning down some of the earliest offers to do in a recording studio what he genuinely loved doing in area parks and dance clubs around New York. Like many of the young hip-hop artists in the 1970s, Flash was making a name for himself but not much else. He found it hard to believe that anyone would pay four or five dollars for music they were getting basically for free in the

local community centers, on city blocks, and in gymnasiums that played host to those early hip-hop parties. His response to an initial offer to record the music he was helping to create was incredibly naïve: "Let's keep it underground. Nobody outside the Bronx would like this stuff anyway." And then he heard the Sugarhill Gang on the radio.

It was the autumn of 1979 and Flash could not believe his ears. "I heard this record on the radio almost every ten minutes on almost every station that I switched to," Flash remembered. "They said it was these boys out of Jersey." The success of the record haunted him; he realized that he had missed out on an opportunity to be the first to record the music he would eventually help introduce to the world. As he listened with equal parts of disbelief and amazement to rap's first commercial hit, he sensed that what he and others were doing might be on the verge of something big. Just how big no one could have ever imagined in 1979.