

Adventures On The Wheels Of Steel

'Betwixt decks there can hardlie a man catch his breath by
reason there ariseth such a funke in the night . . .'

— W Capps, 1623

'Think rap is a fad, you must be mad.'

Nice.

— Stetsasonic, 'Talkin' All That Jazz'

2-12-29
Hip-hop's
already 4
or 5 yrs.
old at
this pt.
No?

It was violent, but the whole neighbourhood was violent, you know,' recalls Sal Abbatiello, the owner of the Bronx club Disco Fever, open between 1977 and 1985. 'I mean, I had three murders in the club in ten years, but if you compare that to the neighbourhood . . . I had three in ten years, they had one every week! I thought my percentage was better than theirs. I had one of my bouncers died in my arms, over telling a guy "don't sniff blow at the bar".'

'But we were open seven nights a week. Monday was like a Saturday. We've got Grandmaster Flash on Monday, Lovebug Starski on Tuesday, I go get this other kid for Sundays called Eddie Cheeba, and now I give Kool Herc a night, Kool Herc has a night with Clark Kent. And I always wanted to get DJ Hollywood, but Hollywood wouldn't come to the Fever, he just wouldn't come. Finally I convince Hollywood, and he does a Wednesday. And there's Jun-Bug. So now I got everybody. The club is mobbed every night.'

'It was two dollars to get in. Never advertised, never went on radio, just word of mouth and the music and the party. Everybody knew all the customers, and it was pretty wild that a white guy owned the club, and the main DJ was Latin, you know, Jun-Bug.'

'I'd have a doctor sitting here, I'd have a pimp sitting here, I'd have a hooker here, I'd have a lawyer here, I'd have a frigging correction officer here, a girl worked on Wall Street here, but in there it was just . . .'

[Acts sniffing coke]

"Throw your hands in the air!!"

"Somebody got a gun."

[Ducks]

"He's gone."

"OK."

"Ho-ooo!!"

'I'd have a shooting and the whole place would leave. They'd stand outside and then, "Can we come back in now?" Like, "Did you drag out the fucking body?"'

'The rappers would come in and have contests. Jun-Bug would DJ in the booth, and Furious Five, Melle Mel would be lined up, and Kool Moe D, Kurtis Blow, and Sugar Hill Gang, and Sequence, and all these groups would be lining up, they'd all be waiting their turn to get on the mic. And try to outdo each other.'

'If Flash was in London, he would call up and we had a phone in the DJ booth, we'd put the phone near the microphone and he would rap. They would be rapping on the mic to the people from London.'

'This music just had you involved with it from beginning to end. Fever was the biggest neighbourhood club in the world. Copacabana was in Manhattan, Studio 54 was in Manhattan, they had all the glamour and the press; we just had that music. That sound. And it was ours.'

Fever in the Bronx

The Bronx has not been a fashionable address for sixty years. Carved into unliveable shadows by the great highways of city planner Robert Moses, burnt by riots and insurance arson, and finally rinsed in floods of heroin, by the mid seventies it had been left by all those who could leave. In places it looked blitzed, in statistics it was the third world. But for half a decade, unknown to the fearful outside, it hid some of the planet's most exciting and revolutionary music.

Hip hop, or (loosely speaking) rap music, is defined in a hundred proudly self-referential songs as music made with just two turntables and a microphone. As such, like reggae, hip hop is DJs' music first and foremost. It grew from the innovations in turntable techniques of a few young Bronx disc jockeys, who taught themselves phenomenal record manipulation skills in order to adapt the music available to them — the disco hits of the day and funk tracks from a few years before — to better meet the distinct needs of their dancefloors.

These DJs saw that certain dancers exploded with their wildest moves not only to certain records but also to certain parts of records. Following DJ rule one — that such energy should be encouraged — they looked for ways to play only these particular sections, and to repeat them over and

DJ Rule #1

over. In the process, they were creating a completely new kind of live music; and not a guitar in sight.

Eventually there were hip hop recordings, but these were records made to sound just like a DJ playing other records. Even now, with a twenty-five-year body of work behind it and an ever more sophisticated approach to production, hip hop is still about recreating in the studio the kind of music that a DJ would make in a basketball park in the shadow of a Bronx housing project.

As music made from other music, with chunks snatched and sampled from existing records, hip hop dramatically affected concepts of musicianship and originality as well as radically changing recording techniques and copyright practice. Of course, sampling, copying, making a version or a cover, has always happened in music, and has been especially important in black music. But hip hop's blatant approach – to steal whatever you like from whatever source and throw it all together (with some rapping over the top) – caused plenty of fuss, especially when digital sampling made such theft as easy as pressing a button.

Hip hop is now a whole culture (indeed, 'hip hop' is not now strictly synonymous with 'rap music'; instead, the term refers specifically to the cultural trinity of rap music, graffiti and breakdancing) and seems to have ten sociologists for each recording artist. Despite this, its history is often submerged by its mythology. In place of facts there are a few endlessly repeated fables, some respectful nods to its legendary creators and a deal of misty-eyed clichés about 'back in the day'.

The Bronx DJs who released the creative possibilities hidden in a pair of record turntables were real people in a very real world. All they wanted to do was throw a better party than their rival up the block. In fact, they were creating an entirely new genre of music and sowing the seeds for several more.

Breakdancing

Face your partner, holding hands. Tap one foot behind the other and bring your feet together again. Repeat with your other foot. (Your partner does the same in mirror image.) Then take two half steps back and one step forward. Smile.

You are now doing a basic version of the hustle, a dance crystallised in the mid to late seventies by millions of disco-dancing partygoers worldwide. The hustle's undemanding nature lay at the heart of disco's democratic aspirations, and the dance's regular, uncomplicated moves perfectly matched the music's constant pulse-rate tempo and four-on-the-floor beat. It's simple to pick up, requires very little in the way of coordination or concentration, and can be safely practised by even the most non-committal dancer, without risk of embarrassment or serious injury, while wearing a suit, tie and sensible shoes.

But you're a teenage boy. Everything in your chemistry says you should be burning energy parading your sexual promise. And you sure as hell aren't wearing a suit. The floor is filled with hustle-busy couples, and while you might love some of the music that's being played, you want to look cool and be noticed. When you venture out to dance you feel uncomfortably unpartnered and inconspicuous. In your mind, the only place you want to be is right in the middle of the dancefloor with a circle of astonished onlookers. You want the hustlers to pause their toe-tapping steps and watch you do something incredible.

Before there was anything called hip hop, there was breakdancing. It evolved, as an expression of peacocking male prowess, from the 'Good Foot' steps of James Brown, from the robotic 'locking' and 'popping' moves of West Coast funk dancers, and from the extrovert dancing of the podium stars on TV's *Soul Train*. It took influences from such acrobatic styles as tap dancing and Lindy-hopping, even from kung fu. Part of an unbroken black dance heritage, breakdancing was far from unprecedented (the flying, confrontational moves of capoeira, a kind of choreographed martial art with roots in Brazil, are strikingly similar). It is named after the 'break', a jazz term for the part of a dance record where the melody takes a rest and the drummer cuts loose, this being the explosive, rhythmic section of a song which most appealed to the teenage show-offs. Cf. the break to 'Tighten Up'! 12.9

Back in the early seventies, breaking consisted mostly of moves which today's dancers would call 'up-rocking' – the rapid circling steps and floor-work which precede their more gymnastic exertions. The 'power moves' – such as the headspins and backspins which would capture the world's attention and sweep breakdancing into TV commercials and Hollywood movies like *Flashdance* – were yet to develop, but at clubs and parties in the Bronx, a generation of kids, many of whom would become rap's first stars, were starting the custom of dancing with wild abandon to the breaks; their chance to compete for attention.

'I used to love the roar of the crowd when I would do my moves,' remembers Kurtis Blow, an early breakdancer and later the first major label rapper. 'And then I used to go downtown to the disco where there was no competition, no b-boy competition, so I used to reign supreme.'

Many dancers would completely forgo the rest of the music, standing against the wall until a song's break came in. They were eventually known as b-boys, the 'b' almost certainly for 'break' (some say it was also for 'Bronx'). The stern 'b-boy stance', beloved of rappers even today – with shoulders curved inwards and arms folded tightly under the chin – was not so much a signal of aggression as a b-boy's way of looking cool while he waited for a break.

2.12.21
ARG.?

12.9.19
Somebody
should
write a
book on
this...

up-
rocking

The
'b-boy
stance'

The dancefloor was soon split between the meandering moves of the hustlers and the youthful explosion of the breakers. When a record was happening when certain oldies, notably James Brown tracks, got an airing. It couldn't be long before the DJ would take notice.

Kool Herc

The DJ was a six-and-a-half-foot Jamaican giant, Clive Campbell, known since school as Hercules: DJ Kool Herc. A suitably mythological name.

One west Bronx night in late 1973, Herc tried an experiment.

'I would give people what I know they wanted to hear. And I'm watching the crowd and I was seeing everybody on the sidelines waiting for particular breaks in the records,' he recalls.

That night he tried playing a series of breaks one straight after the other, ^{mixing} missing out the other parts of the songs.

'I said, let me put a couple of these records together, that got breaks in them. I did it. Boom! bom bom bom. I try to make it sound like a record. Place went berserk. Loved it.'

Herc recalls the records he used that night. 'There was the "clap your hands, stomp your feet" part of James Brown's "Give It Up Or Turnit A Loose", "Funky Music Is The Thing" by the Dynamic Corvettes, "If You Want To Get Into Something" by the Isley Brothers and "Bra" by Cymande.' All this was topped off with the percussion frenzy of the Incredible Bongo Band's 'Apache', a record destined to become Herc's signature tune, a Bronx anthem, and one of the most sampled records in hip hop. *Maybe play these breaks 4 Karen Shelby's class? 12.7.99*

'Took off!' he smiles.

Kool Herc's mixing technique
Herc's mixing technique was extremely basic. There was no attempt to cut each record into the next or to preserve the beat. Instead he just faded from one to another, often talking over the transition, saying perhaps, 'Right about now, I'm rocking with the rockers, I'm jammin' with the jammers', or 'Party with the partyers, boogie with the boogiers'. Sometimes it was just a single word, sustained with the echo chamber he liked to use, or 'Rock on my mellow' or 'This is the joint'. Most of the time, he was actually seated, a boom mic in front of him like a radio jock. The response was incredible. Herc played the older, funkier tracks they loved, and he repeated and repeated the parts they loved most. The b-boys had found their DJ.

Right away, Herc began to always include a sequence of breaks in the music he played over the course of a night, and he started to buy two copies of each record so that he could repeat the same break back to back. He would still play records in full, including a lot of James Brown, and

the latest disco numbers. But there would always be a set of records he aimed squarely at the ears of the b-boys. He even had a name for this part of the night: "The Merry Go Round". See, once you hear it, you got to hop on. You're not comin' back, you're goin' forward.' His style was very different from today's hip hop DJs, in that he mostly played the full thirty seconds or so of a break rather than chopping it up any smaller, but he had invented what we now know as the 'breakbeat': the use of a record's percussive break in place of playing the whole song.

DJ Grandmixer D.ST, best known for his scratching on Herbie Hancock's 'Rockit', remembers being taken by a friend to a club called the Executive Playhouse in 1974 and discovering Herc.

'I stood there, and at the time I was a b-boy, so I was ready to break-dance at the drop of a dime. I'm listening, checking out people doing the hustle, and I'm waiting for "Apache" to come on, so I could b-boy.

'There was a bunch of guys waiting around for Kool Herc to play the beats. And he was playing the disco for the disco crowd. Then all of a sudden he would play the beats and it's b-boy time. And some of the best hustlers were some of the best breakdancers too. And back then it was still into, you know, asking a woman to dance. With some class. But now you could impress her by doing a spin on the floor.

'Herc didn't cut on time or nothing like that, he just... his variety of music, the songs that he had, it was very clever. It was a combination of the old and new. And it moved the crowd.'

Like many other b-boys, D.ST had found a DJ who would give him just the kind of music he wanted to hear.

'Now there's a place, there's a guy, I can go to his party and practise my skills. Herc gave me the opportunity to just go there and work on my moves. So that became it. I became a fan, instantly, of Kool Herc.'

To the ears that heard it, Herc's style was revolutionary. He was playing music which you couldn't hear on the radio, reviving the hard funk sound that elsewhere was being displaced by soul and disco. And with his new technique he could extend the excitement found in a piece of music, focus attention on a record's most danceable part, and work the b-boys to boiling point.

'I had the attitude of the dancefloor behind the turntables,' he says. 'I'm a dance person. I like to party.

'I'd come home from dancing and my whole clothes was soaking wet. My mother would be, "Where you going with my towel?" And I be, "Ma, it gets like that up in there!" A sweat box.'

Indeed, Herc's ambition to try DJing came from frustration as a dancer hearing too many DJs cut records in the wrong places.

'I'm dancing with this girl, trying to get my shit off, and the DJ used to

the invention of the breakbeat

fuck up. And the whole party'd be like, "Yahhh, what the fuck is that . . . ? Why you took it off there? The shit was about to explode. I was about to bust a nut." You know. And the girl be like, "Damn, what the fuck is wrong?" And I'm hearing this and I'm griping, too. Cos the DJ's fucking my groove up.'

His other great inspiration was Caribbean sound system culture. Herc is a Jamaican, brought to New York as he entered his teens, who even has a wisp of the islands left in his accent. He has clear memories of living near a Trenchtown dance hall and watching the huge speakers of a sound system run by King George being wheeled in.

'We used to be playing at marbles and riding our skateboards, used to see the guys bringing the big boxes inside of the handcarts. They used to make watercolour signs and put them on lightposts, let people know there's going to be a dance coming.'

Too young to get inside, Herc and his friends would listen to the music, watch the partygoers enter and discuss in whispers the guests' reputations for violence.

'We on our skateboards, skating round, you know, and you saw the little gangster kids, and they knew who was from the gangs, or the bad boys. [He whispers] "Yeah, that's such and such, man." "Awww!" And you see all the big reputation people come through. We're little kids, and we sit on the side and watch.'

The parties Herc was around as a child in Jamaica were at the front of his mind when he was building his equipment and his DJing style. Especially important were his memories of the sound systems themselves.

'Little did I know at the time, that would be a big influence on me,' he admits.

The two other leading players in hip hop's creation also have Caribbean roots, but both deny that Jamaican dub culture influenced them directly. Only Herc represents a direct link. New York, specifically Brooklyn, enjoyed large Jamaican-style mobile sound systems before Herc started his parties, but he definitely brought several Jamaican elements to bear.

- > For one, the highly influential rhyming style he and his MCs (Masters of Ceremony) used was clearly based on Jamaican toasting rather than on the
- > elaborate couplets of the rapping disco DJs. He used an echo chamber,
- > another Jamaican staple. Also, he was ready, in a way reminiscent of dub selectors, to treat records not as separate songs but as tools for composition. And of course, he prized bass and volume.

In his early parties Herc even played reggae and dub, although, he says, 'I never had the audience for it. People wasn't feelin' reggae at the time. I played a few but it wasn't catching.' New York's West Indians have remained surprisingly separate from the city's main currents of black

infl. of
JA dub
cult

culture (possibly because they can distinguish themselves as voluntary immigrants). Certainly, as hip hop was being formed in the Bronx, reggae there was either disliked or seldom heard. So instead, Herc moved to the funk and Latin music his Bronx audiences were used to: 'I'm in Rome, I got to do what the Romans do. I'm here. I got to get with the groove that's here.' However, in choosing records and in tailoring the sound, he emphasised the same factors prized in Jamaican music, the 'boonce', as he says his musically minded father would pronounce it, and the bass. 'A lot of my music is about bass,' he says.

Herc's DJ career began with a few local house parties on borrowed gear. His father, Keith Campbell, supplied the sound for a local band but kept his equipment strictly off limits to his son. However, when Herc showed him how to get the most out of his powerful speakers, his father relented and, as well as getting him to play records between the band's sets, let him borrow the big Shure columns for his own events. Herc started throwing parties for his high-school friends in the Sedgwick Avenue Community Center, the public hall attached to the housing project where they lived. The first one was his sister Cindy's idea — she wanted to raise some back-to-school clothes money. It was so successful they were soon doing them almost monthly. With Campbell senior on hand to prevent any trouble, the parents knew their kids were safe from any gang influence; equally the kids knew they wouldn't have their fun ended abruptly by their parents, as happened too often at house parties. And they had music far beefier than any home hi-fi. With all its growing energy, Herc's teenage party scene was soon set to make a wider impact.

Around this time, as well as dancing regularly at local clubs the Puzzle and the Tunnel, Herc was an early graffiti writer (he'd write 'CLYDE AS KOOL', with a smiley in one of the O's). He was also making a name for himself running track and playing basketball. But gradually everything paled against his success as a DJ. By the end of 1974 he had progressed from 25-cent recreation room jams to all-night block parties to playing in a series of Bronx clubs now considered the sacred sites of hip hop: Twilight Zone, the Executive Playhouse, the Hevalo and Disco Fever.

It's 1998, and Herc stands on Jerome Avenue, where these clubs were all within a few blocks of each other. They are now car parks and shoe stores; Twilight Zone is a mattress factory. 'This is Herc Avenue, really,' he says wistfully, as a subway train rumbles overhead. Then a pronouncement:

'After I who have entered through this door and certain places such as the Executive Playhouse should be known as a car park . . . So it is, baby! After I who have entered through this door, DJ Kool Herc, no one else shall enter, certain places like the Hevalo, should remain a car lot . . . So it is, baby!'

Hip Hop's
hallowed
grounds

Herc became a legend. His parties were soon famous throughout 'Uptown' – the Bronx and Harlem – and here he enjoyed superstar status. Because he played a radically different kind of music, tailor-made for the teenage b-boying masses, his local crowd-pulling power was nothing short of heroic. On seeing him play, D.ST realised that Herc had the same kind of marquee value as the local bands. 'People go see him just to see him. I just stood there and watched him DJ and I was amazed.'

As well as trusting his dancer's instincts, Herc added MCs to the mix to whoop up the crowd even more and to allow him to concentrate on the turntables. Many people credit Herc and his main MCs, Coke La Rock and Clark Kent, as being the first hip hop rappers, because they didn't emulate the style of jive-rhyming practised by mobile disco DJs like Hollywood or Eddie Cheeba – a style in turn copied from the personality radio DJs. Theirs was far more like the 'toasting' of Jamaican reggae deejays – hyping up the crowd with short phrases like 'To the beat, y'all' or 'Ya rock and ya *don't* stop', all with the added drama of Herc's echo chamber.

Herc's other secret weapon was his system. In a time and place when the DJ provided his own sound equipment – just like the club bands he was steadily replacing – Herc had the biggest and the best. Even though the DJs he inspired would eclipse him on technique, no one ever beat Herc on volume. At the heart of his Herculoids system (which many mistook for the name of his crew), amassed piece by piece from a lesser DJ who played at the Twilight Zone, were two McIntosh 2300 amps – 'The big Macs, top of the line' – and those huge Shure column speakers.

Grand Wizard Theodore, one of the many DJs inspired by Herc, remembers the first time he heard the Herculoids's power.

'It made you listen to a record and made you appreciate the record even more. He would play a record that you listened to every day and you would be like, "Wow, that record has *bells* in it?" It's like you heard instruments in the record that you never thought the record even had. And the bass was like WHUMM! Incredible!'

Herc's later system was so powerful he named it 'Not Responsible'.

'Every time you play that set somewhere, some shit always jump off, some dispute, some shit, so I call it Not Responsible.'

Herc would be a massive, looming influence. Suddenly every b-boy dreamt of enjoying the same kind of local adoration; everyone wanted to get their hands on some turntables and throw parties just as wild. It all seemed so possible. After all, he was just digging out old records and playing their best bits. As Jazzy Jay, another DJ inspired by Herc's legend, would put it, 'All of them was sitting in your house – they were all your mom's old and pop's old records. Soon as Kool Herc started

playing, every motherfucker started robbing his mother and father for records.'

'I went to the Hevalo when I was thirteen,' recalled the Cisco Kid – an early hip hop MC – in Bill Adler's book *Rap*. 'It was very dark inside, but there was an excitement in the air, like anything could jump off. Then Herc came on the mic and he was so tough. You'd get transfixed by this shit. You thought, "This is cool, I want to be like this."'

Like so many originators, Herc has reaped much respect and little remuneration. By the time those he had inspired were signing record contracts and touring Europe, he had retreated from the game and turned to drugs, demoralised by the tragic drowning of his father and discouraged completely in 1977 after being stabbed through the hand at one of his own parties, when he 'walked into a discrepancy'. Twenty years later, the Chemical Brothers invited him to London to open one of their shows, paying homage to the man who created the breakbeat, the core of their music. However, his absence from what became a billion-dollar industry only served to heighten the mythic status of this classically named giant. It is only recently that Herc has been accorded his place in American cultural history. In 2010, the apartment building at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue, was narrowly saved from destruction by predatory real estate operators and officially recognised as the birthplace of hip hop.

Grandmaster Flash

Flash is fast, Flash is cool. If Herc was the DJ who discovered the electricity of the breakbeat, it was Grandmaster Flash who wired it up and put a plug on it. As Kidd Creole of the Furious Five put it, 'It's a known fact – the Herculoids might cause a disaster, but there only could be *one* Grandmaster.'

Flash, aka Joseph Saddler, born in Barbados, was an intense, scientifically minded kid majoring in electronics at Samuel Gompers vocational high school. He would take Herc's raw ideas and subject them to laboratory-style development, emerging with a style of playing that had all of Herc's frenzied b-boy appeal, but that was also polished and continuous. In the process, Flash transformed hip hop from a quirk of Bronx partying to a genuinely new form of music.

While Herc had given the world the breakbeat, his technique, by all accounts, was pretty slapdash. The excitement of his Merry Go Round sequences came from the records he chose and the parts of those records he played – he had no concern for making clean mixes. But Flash, methodical and obsessed, set himself the goal of playing breakbeats *with precision*. He wanted to take the phenomenal power of Herc's style and deliver it to the dancefloor with a constant, unbroken beat. At first, he had no idea

breakthrough. 12.9.19
breakbeats was certainly a technical innovation, but beatmatching was even more of an

The Herculoids system

'Not Responsible'

whether it was possible, just that it would be amazing – and that if he could get it right, he would make history.

Flash was blown away when he first saw Herc. 'I saw people gathered from miles around just for one individual, playing music. When I saw Kool Herc sitting up on his podium, heavily guarded, and all these people in the park enjoying themselves, that was it: I was gonna be a DJ.' Crucially, though, he was just as mesmerised by a disco DJ, Pete DJ Jones. Like Herc, Pete Jones was a giant among men, a six-foot-eight stud famed for his harem of female assistants who set up his equipment for him (including his capable stand-in spinner Ms Becky Jones). 'Here is one dude that doesn't have to wear any flashy clothes to stand out in a crowd,' wrote New York DJ fanzine *Melting Pot* in 1975. 'When he lights a match, he looks like the *Towering Inferno*.'

Originally from Raleigh, North Carolina, Pete Jones was the leading DJ in early disco's straight black overground, a close-knit scene of mobile DJs who would set up their rigs in parks, hotel ballrooms and, following the 1971 beef shortage, in otherwise under-populated restaurants in New York and New Jersey. Besides Jones, the other main players were: the Smith Brothers; Cameron 'Grandmaster' Flowers, the scene's founding big-shot who started playing in 1967 and sadly ended his days panhandling outside Tower Records (he was also an early graffiti writer); Maboya, a Panamanian who pioneered outdoor parties at Riis Beach before returning to Central America, and Ron Plummer, a chemistry graduate who shot to fame as the scene's Deejay Of The Year 1975 before heading off to medical school in Boston. 'Flowers was the best,' remembers DJ Tony Smith. 'But he was the most egotistical too. Flowers had the best music and a really great sound system but Maboya and the Smith Brothers were definitely more friendly.'

While the music they played was hardly ground-breaking – the length and breadth of the *Billboard* R&B chart sprinkled through with funky oldies and a smattering of more obscure southern soul – Jones and his peers were key in spreading mixing techniques beyond downtown's underground clubs. On the gay scene Francis Grasso had made beatmatching and blends (or 'running' records, as Pete calls it) required skills. Flowers and Pete Jones deserve credit for developing the same techniques at the same time and, crucially, for showing them off to wider New York, including the Bronx.

Jones explains how in those early days DJs were considered either 'mixers' or 'choppers' depending on their style. He regularly used two copies of a record to extend it. 'Best part of the record is usually that groove part,' he says with a Deputy Dawg chuckle, dusting off a stack of what he calls 'gutbucket' 45s – the JB's 'Monorail', Leon Haywood's 'Believe Half Of What You See' and 'Mister Magic' by Grover Washington – to play through his GLI mixer the size of a television. 'I'd play a record over and

Pete DJ Jones

early disco's straight black overground

'mixers' vs. 'choppers'

WANTED



KEN WEBB

PETE D.J. JONES

DESCRIPTION

HEIGHT: 6'0" WEIGHT: 165 lbs.
 BE ON GUARD FOR: Unusual loud mouth and has tendencies of talking a lot and incessantly — You'll hate him in the mornings.
 LAST HEARD: On radio station WBLB this morning.

LAST SEEN: M.C. at Bohannon Concert
 IDENTIFYING MARKS: Small 1/2 inch scar on left cheek — Also likes to see people having a good boogie down time! Likes to mingle with the crowd — he's a very chatty dude — we extreme caution upon approach him.

DESCRIPTION

HEIGHT: 6'8" WEIGHT: 230 lbs.
 BE ON GUARD: For very heavy stereo equipment he lugs around. Armed with over 2,000 watts of disco power, and should be considered dangerous — dance on site of him.

LAST HEARD: At Adrians disco. The club, Jimmys, Piggins, Riis Beach.
 LAST SEEN: With female accomplice known only as "Becky".
 IDENTIFYING MARKS: Mole on left thigh and extreme height. Also likes to play non-stop boogie music.

ALIVE & PLAYING

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Alias Webb and Jones — rounding up a posse for their disco showdown.

over again, because you didn't have many hits in those days, and you had to keep playing until four or five in the morning. So you'd play it over again and you'd shine a light on that groove and play it awhile.'

Pete was Flash's greatest inspiration. Why? Because, unlike Herc, he kept a seamless beat. Having seen Jones play at local block parties, Flash imagined a music which combined the two DJs' styles.

'Herc was playing the break parts of records, but his timing was not a factor. He would play a record that was maybe ninety beats a minute, and

then he would play another one that was a hundred and ten. He would play records and it would never be on time.

'But timing was a factor, because a lot of these dancers were really good. They did their moves *on time*. So I said to myself, I got to be able to go to just the particular section of the record, just the break, and extend that, but *on time*.

'I had to figure out how to take these records and take these sections and manually edit them so that the person in front of me wouldn't even know that I had taken a section that was maybe fifteen seconds and made it five minutes. So that these people that really danced, they could just dance as long as they wanted. I got to find a way to do this.'

As Flash tells it, this involved a long period of experimentation and research. He apprenticed himself to Jones as a warm-up DJ, and studied the technical mysteries of turntable torque, cartridge construction, needle configuration and the like, examining every aspect of the machinery which he aimed to master. For months, during high school and then while a messenger for a fabric company, this 'scientist of the mix' spent as much time as possible shut in a room relentlessly pursuing his goal.

'Friends of mine used to come to my house and say, "C'mon, let's go to the park, let's go hang with girls." I'm like, "Naw, man, I can't do that. I'm working on something."

'I didn't know what I was working on, didn't have a clue. All I know is that with each obstacle there came an excitement on how to figure it out. How to get past it... How to get past it, how to get past it.'

One particularly thorny problem was cueing - listening to the next record to find the desired passage without the audience hearing it too. At this time, mixers with the necessary extra pre-amplifiers and headphone sockets were the preserve of custom-built club systems, and Flash was only vaguely aware that such technology even existed. Using Pete Jones' system showed him the immense value of cueing and, using his electronics' knowledge, he was able to create the device for himself.

'I called it the peek-a-boo system. How do you hear it before the people hear it? The mixer I was using at the time was a Sony MX8. It was a microphone mixer. So I had to go out and buy two external pre-amps from Radio Shack, and these would take the voltage of the cartridge and boost it to one millivolt, so now it has line output voltage and I could put it inside the mixer and hear it. I had to put two bridges in between the left and right turntable so that I could hear the music before it goes out, so I had a single-pole, double-throw switch, and I had to Krazy Glue it to the top of the mixer.' (Flash notes that Herc, though he had an impressive GLI 3800 mixer, didn't use its cueing system until much later.)

His doggedly clinical approach paid off and by the summer of 1975

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Flash could put into practice a series of 'theories' enabling him to cut and mix records exactly as he had envisaged. *But why call them 'theories' instead of 'moves' or something else?*

'I called my style "Quick Mix Theory", which is taking a section of music and cutting it on time, back to back, in thirty seconds or less. It was basically to take a particular passage of music and rearrange the arrangement by way of rubbing the record back and forth or cutting the record, or back-spinning the record.' His supporting 'Clock Theory' involved marking the record with a line on the label like a hand on a clock face to show where a chosen passage began. This let him speedily rewind the part of the song he wanted to repeat. *the 'Quick Mix Theory'*

'I had to figure out how to recapture the beginning of the break without picking up the needle, because I tried doing it that way and I wasn't very good at it. And that's how I came up with the Clock Theory: you mark a section of the record, and then you gotta just count how many revolutions go by.' (To this day, a hip hop DJ's records will be plastered in little stick-on paper lines.) *the 'Clock Theory'*

'I would use what I call the Dog Paddle, which is spinning it back [*fingers on the edge of the disc*], or what I call the Phone Dial Theory, where you would get it from the inner [*fingers on the middle of the disc*].' *the Phone Dial Theory*

By teaching himself to flit between his two turntables at breakneck speed, find the first beat of the chosen part of a record in a matter of seconds, and to play, repeat and recombine a few selected bars, Flash became able to completely restructure a song at will. This manual sampling and looping of a record, done without losing the beat, is the fundamental basis of hip hop (as well as all other breakbeat musics, ie drum and bass, breaks, big beat, trip hop). It prefigures the cut and paste techniques of constructing music which would become ubiquitous as soon as digital sampling technology was developed. *so basically now we're talking about beat juggling, right? (12.9.19)*

He had long been called Flash (named by his friend Gordon after a comic book character). Now, to mark his achievements he was awarded the martial arts title of Grandmaster.

'That came from a fellow by the name of Joe Kidd. Said to me, "You need to call yourself a Grandmaster, by the way you do things on the turntables that nobody else could do."' (It's almost certain that Kidd's inspiration was Grandmaster Flowers, then well-known across New York.) 'It sounded good. It connected with Bruce Lee, which was the leading box office draw for movies at the time, and it connected to this guy that played chess. And these guys were very good at their craft. I felt I was very good at my craft. I found it fitting.'

Surprisingly, though, when Flash showcased his new cut-up music, his first audiences were far from thrilled.

'When I first created the style, I played in a few parks in the area but

nobody really quite understood what it was that I was doing. A lot of people ridiculed it. They didn't like the idea of it.

'I was so excited, but just nobody would get it. Nobody would get it for quite some time.'

Despite his unique skills, Flash found it impossible to make a crowd appreciate the quick mix. While his techniques were revolutionary, he had yet to figure out how they could be best used to drive a dancefloor.

'What I said to myself is, if I take the most climactic part of these records and just string 'em together and play 'em on time, back to back to back, I'm going to have them totally excited. But when I went outside, it was totally quiet. Almost like a speaking engagement. I was quite disenchanted. I was quite sad. I cried for a couple of days.'

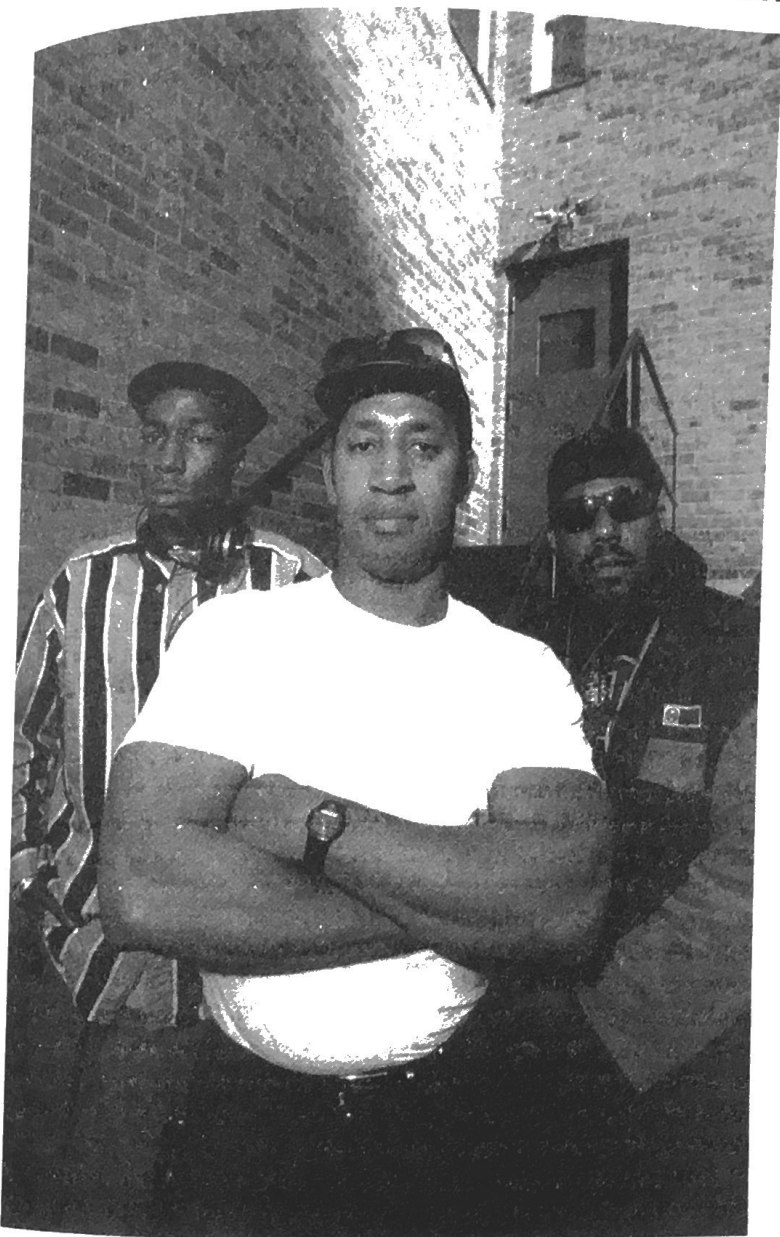
But Flash would soon be vindicated. The initial confused reaction to his music was in fact an indication of its power. Less than two years later, on 2 September 1976, after residencies in two small clubs – the Black Door and the Dixie Room – and innumerable parties in parks, basketball courts and school gyms, Grandmaster Flash was so famous throughout uptown New York that he could fill the massive Audubon Ballroom in Harlem, the theatre where Malcolm X had lectured (and been shot). With his MCs the Furious Five to back him, he was introduced by his lead rapper Melle Mel. With screams and cheers, two or three thousand people welcomed 'the greatest DJ in the world'.

'When we took the crowd to a climax, the floor was shaking,' he remembers. 'The floor was fucking shaking, it was really something. And next day, man, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five was heroes. It was like, after that there was nothing else we couldn't do. After that there was no hurdles we couldn't climb. Anything after that, it was a piece of cake.'

Afrika Bambaataa

'Zulu Nation is no gang. It is an organisation of individuals in search of success, peace, knowledge, wisdom, understanding and the righteous way of life. Zulu members must search for ways to survive positively in this society. Negative activities are actions belonging to the unrighteous. The animal nature is the negative nature. Zulus must be civilised.' So reads the Principles of the Universal Zulu Nation, parts one and two.

In 1975, a high school student from the Bronx River housing project won a trip to Africa in a UNICEF essay competition. He had entered the contest the previous year, for a visit to India, but had missed the judging in favour of giving out invitations to one of the parties he used to throw. The second time around, after making a special effort to convince the judges that he needed to visit the land of his ancestors, he found himself spending two weeks in the Ivory Coast, Nigeria and Guinea-Bissau. His reasons for



Breakers' yard – hip hop's holy trinity, Grandmaster Flash, Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa (left to right) together in 1993.

wanting to see Africa were no doubt passionate indeed. As the founder of a music and breakdancing collective he called the Zulu Nation, and as the proud owner of a colourful self-given African name Afrika Bambaataa Aasim, he possessed a powerful identification with the people of the dark continent. (His real name is unknown – Afrika Bambaataa, 'Affectionate Chieftain', was the name of a twentieth-century Zulu king.)

It is on his leadership of Zulu Nation, an organisation aimed at giving hip hop culture a unified (and international) foundation, that Bam is most eloquent. He has told the story many times of receiving divine inspiration to form Zulu Nation when he saw Michael Caine and his scarlet-uniformed British soldiers defending themselves against an onslaught of the proud tribesmen in the 1963 movie *Zulu*. Today there are Zulu Nation outposts in such unlikely places as Switzerland and the Canary Islands. It is now the *Universal* Zulu Nation and Bam has said he is ready to offer the hand of hip hop friendship even to extra-terrestrial Zulus, should they present themselves.

Alongside his sociological importance – in offering an alternative, post-gang model of comradeship based on music and dance rather than violence in settling disputes or 'beefs' between hip hop crews, and in creating a global network of hip hop fans – this courteous, impassive bear of a man is equally important because he is a DJ: Afrika Bambaataa's other self-given name is 'Master of Records'.

* In common with Herc and Flash, Bambaataa can claim Caribbean forebears (his grandparents were from Jamaica and Barbados). However, any link to Jamaica in terms of its DJ culture was not a factor. The sound systems he knew were those of Kool Herc and the mobile disco DJs; he knew nothing of reggae, except its records, until much later.

From as young as eleven or twelve, he was throwing parties with his friends in the Bronx River Community Center. Without access to anything more complex than a pair of their home hi-fis, the kids used flashlights to signal across the darkened room to keep the music continuous.

'I would bring my house system down and we would bring out flashlights and we would give parties in the centre. You have the lights off and you signal to the other side for them to play the next record. When the flashlight goes on, the guy knows to start his record off. So you put on one record – say, "Dance To The Music" by Sly and the Family Stone – then when you know that it's ending, somebody might put on James Brown's "It's A New Day" on the other side.'

Bambaataa's early years were a whirl of creative mischief. His friends remember him as the catalyst for no end of inspired activities. Whether it was convincing them to buy bows and arrows to hunt rabbits along the banks of the Bronx River, or pouring and lighting gasoline on the

sidewalk during a war game siege, Bam could be relied on to fill a day with something memorable. Since his mother, a nurse, regularly worked long and late and owned an expansive record collection, the basis for his own growing music library, Bam's house was often the place for impromptu partying.

In the context of the Bronx at that time, it was almost inevitable that such a charismatic youngster would be swept into a gang. From 1968, tribalistic groupings had emerged to replace the original fifties gangs wiped out by the late sixties flood wave of heroin. The largest was the Black Spades, who dressed in jeans, Levi jackets, military belts and black engineer boots. They existed to fight white north Bronx gangs such as the Ministers, but were also fairly civic-minded in cleansing their neighbourhoods of drug dealing. You joined them because you liked their style, because wearing their colours offered you protection, and, simply, because you were a teenager.

During a ninety-two-day confrontation between the Black Spades and another black gang, the Seven Crowns, Bronx River project was filled with enough gunfire to be christened 'Little Vietnam'. Bambaataa has admitted that he 'was into street gang violence', and remains otherwise silent on his 'negative' past. However, he is remembered by his compadres as a mediator rather than a warmonger, as a Black Spade who could happily walk on Nomad or Javelin turf, and as someone who was, in any case, usually off scouring New York for records.

After a peak around 1973, gangs faded fast. The rise of graffiti and breakdancing offered less dangerous ways to express your male competitiveness, and besides, the girls had decided to stand for no more belligerent nonsense from their men. 'Get peaceful or get none' seemed to be their message. Bam declared his party-minded friends to be Zulu kings and queens, and following on from an earlier collective he'd founded with similar aims – the Organization – formed the Zulu Nation, a group of b-boys and b-girls.

'I'd probably be dead if it wasn't for getting straight into hip hop, and making a culture out of it, and bringing a lot of my people from that type of way of life,' he admits.

He washed his hands of the gangs completely in January 1975 when his best friend Soulski was killed by the police. On his graduation from high school later that same year, his mother bought him a sound system. On 12 November 1976, he played his first official party as a DJ, at the Bronx River Community Center. 'I never had a problem in pooling a large army or crowd. So when we shifted right into the DJ thing, I already had a packed house,' he grins.

Herc had the head start and the volume, Flash had the techniques, but

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Cf. That
ancient
Gk. play-
is it 'The
Women'?

Afrika Bambaataa had the records. And with no regard for any criteria other than 'Will it add to the party?' he was a fearsome hunter of vinyl. While others in the Bronx were wedded to funk, disco and soul, Bam was ready to play anything that would make people dance, ready to buy any record that had just a few seconds of funky rhythm: an intro, a break, a stab of brass.

'His record collection was just *incredible*,' recalls Theodore. 'He would play the B52s and everybody in the party would be going crazy. He would play Rolling Stones' records, Aerosmith, Dizzy Gillespie. Jazz records, rock records.'

'I remember I went to an Afrika Bambaataa party and he played "Honky Tonk Woman" and I thought, "Wow, what's that?" And after I went home and thought about it, I was like, "That's Mick Jagger and them." It didn't matter if you were listening to a white artist or a black artist, it was any record he could find that had a beat on it.'

'We just was comin' out with crazy breaks,' enthuses Bam. 'Like other DJs would play they great records for fifteen, twenty minutes or more, we was changing ours every few seconds, or every minute or two. I couldn't have no breakbeat go longer than a minute or two. Unless it's real crazy funky that we just want the crowd to get off on - then we would extend it for two minutes, three minutes, four minutes . . . I just was finding music from all over the place.'

The audiences which gathered around Bambaataa were as open-minded as he was, and if anyone dared to get snobbish about music, he delighted in tricking them; whipping in some obscure track and then gleefully informing them they'd just danced to The Beatles or the Monkees. (For the spotters: Bam would play the drum part from 'Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band' and the 'Mary, Mary, where are you going' part from the Monkees' 'Mary Mary'.) Taped TV themes and commercials, Hare Krishna chants, Siouxsie & the Banshees, the Flying Lizards, even Gary Numan, all made their way onto his system.

Grandmaster Flash remembers Bam's music and shakes his head - he was rarely able to identify the obscure records he heard.

'I couldn't get too much from Bam because Bam's shit was so deep and so powerful I just didn't know where he got it.'

'He broke so many records,' adds Theodore. 'I can't begin to name the records he broke into hip hop.' Billy Squier's 'Big Beat', Foghat's 'Slow Ride' and Grand Funk Railroad's 'Inside Looking Out' were just three of the obscure, forgotten or just plain unlikely records which Bambaataa broke to the hip hop consciousness of the Bronx.

Information about records with hot breaks went around like nuclear blueprints and the records themselves were soon plutonium in value. By

summer 1978, *Billboard* had noticed this peculiarly localised commerce and ran a story on how Downstairs Records, New York's 'leading disco retailer', was doing a roaring trade in 'obscure r&b cut outs', mentioning Dennis Coffey's 'Son of Scorpio', Jeannie Reynolds' 'Fruit Song' and the Incredible Bongo Band's 'Bongo Rock'. Profiling Kool Herc as the instigator of this phenomenon, the paper noted '... young black disco DJs from the Bronx . . . are buying the records just to play the thirty seconds or so of rhythm breaks that each disc contains.'

The bigger jocks had learned from the disco DJs to press up one-off acetate discs, putting album tracks (and occasionally even primitive mixes and edits) on more manageable 10-inch dub-plates. It was an obvious commercial move for someone to start making bootleg copies of the most hard-to-find tunes.

Harlem entrepreneur Paul Winley launched his *Super Disco Brakes* series of breakbeat compilations (ie albums of songs which contained an exciting break). These were notoriously poor quality recordings mastered straight from records in his collection; others, such as ex-chauffeur 'Bootleg' Lenny Roberts, offered a better quality product. At the Music Factory record store in Times Square, Stanley Platzer (known as Fat Stanley, King of the Beats) kept a notebook in the store, recording for Lenny all the songs that customers requested. On Lenny's Street Beat Records, the *Ultimate Breaks And Beats* series of albums eventually ran to over twenty volumes. Many others followed suit, meeting the demand for tracks which by now ranged from expensive to unobtainable.

Each DJ worked to keep their exclusives exclusive, and so took up, probably from Herc, the practice of soaking off or obscuring labels to evade tune detection. Charlie Chase, DJ for the Cold Crush Brothers - perhaps the biggest rap group of hip hop's pre-commercial days - has many a tale of such happy competition. *

'One time I did a party and Flash turned up, and I played this beat that he never heard. So what I did, on one record I wrote, "For the name of this record, go to turntable two", and you see this on the label and it's spinning. So Flash went over to the other turntable to look and the other record said, "Get off my dick!" He was laughing, man. Those were the days.'

Charlie also remembers acts of surprising generosity.

'Yeah, we always looked out for each other in the past. Sometimes the DJs wouldn't want to give the names of records up, but at the same time we would always cover them, so it was OK to lend somebody a record because they didn't know what the fuck it was. We just pointed to where the break was, and that was it, that was your cue.'

He recalls a time playing on the same bill as Bambaataa. Both had

received a promo pressing of Trouble Funk's 'Pump Me Up', but each had but one copy.

'So I'm cutting it in with something else because I only had one copy, and all of a sudden Bam says, "Yo, I got a copy of that. I have one copy of that." He gave it to me and I went berserk. I had two for the night. I was just cutting it and like, "Oh god!", that was the first. Then Bam took his copy back, 'cos Bam was the king of records.'

Bambaataa's key move, as well as his out-of-state vinyl searches in New Jersey and Connecticut, was to join all the record pools, the disco-born DJ cooperatives through which the labels promoted their dance product. Few in the Bronx knew about these at first, but Bam was in there early. Especially rich pickings came from Rock Pool, where he picked up on such crucial oddities as Kraftwerk and the Yellow Magic Orchestra.

European synth pop, via acid rock, all the way to cartoon theme tunes: even from its very beginnings, hip hop was hungry and eclectic. The DJ had no concern for the genre of the records he played, his only thought was for their effectiveness as sonic components and their effect on a dancefloor.

'This was the only time, this was the only kind of music where you could hear James Brown playing with . . . Aerosmith! You can just fuckin' mix two bands *together*,' beams Charlie. 'We were there to listen to all eras' music, you could just mix it together. It was really something. It was weird, but it sounded good.'

Skills to pay the bills

The Bronx is the only part of New York City on the American mainland. Its western half is rippled with steep hills, while the land east of the Bronx River slopes gently down towards the sea. In its forty-two square miles it has a man-made beach, about 1.3 million inhabitants and the busiest highways anywhere in the US. In 1976 it was ruled by three people.

'Flash was in the south Bronx, we was the south-east Bronx, and you have Herc in the west Bronx,' explains Bambaataa. 'Flash was always in the Black Door, or in 23 Park in the summertime. Herc was in the Hevalo, and Sedgwick Avenue Park. I was always in the Bronx River Center, or in high schools or junior high school gyms in the south east Bronx. But we respect each other.'

By this time there were other crews making their way. The mobile disco DJs started adding hip hop spinners to their line-ups. DJ Breakout (and the Funky Four) came to hold the north Bronx. Charlie Chase was starting to bring Cold Crush together. And Harlem and Queens were developing their own DJ and MC talent. Crowds at shows were getting bigger as word spread about this new music. Things were quickly more competitive.

'It was basically for who had the most showmanship between Bam, Herc and myself,' says Flash. 'Bam had the records, Herc had the sound system. My sound system was pretty cheesy, so I knew I had to constantly keep adding things and innovating just to please my audience. Because once they'd go to hear a Herc sound, then heard my sound . . . eurggh.'

Flash tried rapping. He was horrible at it. Then, like any good side-show circus, he discovered a child star: his DJing partner 'Mean' Gene Livingstone had a little thirteen-year-old brother, Theodore. Theodore could do something amazing: he could find the beginning of a break by eye and drop the needle right on it, with no need to spin the record back.

Sure enough, this cute short-stuff standing on a milk crate at a block party in 63 Park quick mixing by needle dropping was a big draw, but he was to develop as a DJ in his own right a whole lot faster than Flash had planned. Calling himself Grand Wizard Theodore, the kid acquired more than just a name. He acquired 'scratching' – twisting the record back and forth while manipulating the mixer's cross-fader to produce a dramatic new percussion noise.

A decade later, as we'll see, this surprising sound would form the basis of an entire style of DJ music, now known as 'turntablism'. Its origins were far less dramatic.

'I used to come home from school and try to practise and try to get new ideas,' Theodore recalls. 'This particular day I was playing music a little bit too loud. And my mom's came and like [banging on the door] boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. "If you don't cut that music down . . ." So she had the door open and she was talking to me and I was still holding the record, and my earphones were still on. And while she was cursing me out in the doorway, I was still holding the record – "Jam On The Groove" by Ralph McDonald – and my hand was still going like this [back and forth] with the record. And when she left I was like, "What is this?" So I studied it and studied it for a couple of months until I actually figured out what I wanted to do with it. Then that's when it became a scratch.'

So your mum invented scratching?

'Yeah, God bless my mama.'

Scratching is often attributed to Flash, but most people will tell you it was Theodore's invention. The truth, Theodore admits, is that Flash *conceived* of it first but that the Grand Wizard beat the Grandmaster to the decks: 'He had a vision of scratching records, but he couldn't really present it to the people.'

Scratching, as well as being a huge conceptual leap towards making turntables true instruments, was a massive crowd draw. When people heard familiar songs restructured by the quick mix they might be surprised, but

Grand
Wizard
Theodore
& the birth
of scratch-
ing

when this was accompanied by a DJ's futuristic *zigga-zigga* scratch percussion, they were really stunned.

'If you knew a record, and you hear that record but you hear a part going *bam, bam, bam*, you walk over to the turntables and go, "What the hell is that?" So everybody was very astonished about what I was doing.

'People were dancing, and then when I started scratching, everybody would eventually stop dancing and walk up to the front of the stage and try to see what the hell is this guy doing: the arm movement and the cross-fader going back and forth, and everybody was like, "Wow".

'They'd be screaming out. Imagine: listening to your favourite record and I'm going *ba-bam, ba-bam, ba-bam, ba-bam, ba-ba bam bam*, and they'd be like . . . "WOW!" Our crowd really increased, because everybody was talking about this little short guy Grand Wizard Theodore. Every time we gave a party it was a humungous crowd.'

But these crowds were now for himself, not for Flash. Shortly before the scratch emerged, Flash had fallen out with Gene, who formed the L Brothers with Theodore.

The relentlessly innovative Flash was undeterred. He is credited with the important idea of punch phasing, where a stab of horns or a lick of vocals is 'punched in' from one record over the top of the other, and he was the first to do 'body tricks' like turning his back to the decks or spinning records with his feet. And . . . Flash was on the beatbox – the first to introduce a drum machine to the mix.

'There was this drummer who lived on 149th Street and Jackson, I think his name was Dennis. He had this manually operated drum machine and whenever he didn't feel like hooking up his drums in his room, he would practise on this machine. You couldn't just press a button and it played, you had to know how to play it. It had a bass key, a snare key, a hi-hat key, a castanets key, a timbale key. And I would always ask him if he ever wanted to get rid of it I would buy it off him. A day came that he wanted to sell it and I gave it a title: beatbox. My flyer person at the time put this on the flyer: "Grandmaster Flash introduces the beatbox. Music with no turntables."'

He didn't play the machine, a Vox percussion box, over the top of records.

'No, what I would do is play it, play it, play it, *doomm ah da-da uh-hah*. Stop. Zoom. Play in a record. And then, while the MC was MCing, where you would fade the beat out for a minute, I might switch back to the turntables. It was a real high part of our performance. A real high point.

'I stayed in my room for a month. And once I learned how to play it, myself and my MCs made up routines, "Flash is on the beatbox." So the first time we did it, we didn't get screams and yells and whatever. It was

punch
phasing

Not: 'punching' 12-9-19

"Oh shit! Flash got this new toy." It probably got back to Bam, it probably got back to Herc, "Flash is making music – drum beats – with no turntable."

Rapping

The other great area of competition was rapping, or MCing as it was then known. As the DJs plundered each other's hot tunes, their playlists (except perhaps Bambaataa's) got ever more similar. Having the most impressive rappers became a new way for a DJ to distinguish himself.

To audiences raised on performers like James Brown, Isaac Hayes, Millie Jackson, Barry White, the Last Poets and Gil Scott Heron, on comedians like Pigmeat Markham, Nipsey Russel and Moms Mabley, on radio DJs like Jocko Henderson and Eddie O'Jay, on local disco DJs like DJ Hollywood and Eddie Cheeba – and let's not forget Muhammad Ali – rapping was absolutely nothing new. In 1991, in William Perkins' book *Droppin' Science*, legendary bandleader Cab Calloway reminded us, 'I was rapping fifty years ago. My rap lyrics were a lot more dirty than those in my songs.' He added, for good measure, 'I did the moonwalk fifty years ago, too.' The Afrocentrists among us will trace rap from griot poetry, through the dozens and storefront preaching right to the door of the latest gangster group. Black American culture has never been short of oral dexterity.

Hip hop, however, made it def, dope and fresh. When Herc, drawing on memories of dub toasting, used his MCs (who sat with him behind the decks) not strictly as performers but as party energisers, he set off the new era of the MC. In this way, hip hop took an established form – rapping – and let it evolve from a new year zero. The greatest impetus for this was the fact that the DJ, using the breakbeat, could now provide an MC with an unshakeable beat over which to rhyme. To someone who could rap, the minimal, repetitive, funky-ass drum patterns that emerged from the quick mix were an irresistible invitation. From the initial couplets and 'Throw your hands in the air', 'Rock it, don't stop it' crowd-raisers and clichés, the form quickly gathered steam.

The rappers drew constant inspiration from rhyming radio DJs like Gary Byrd and Frankie Crocker. Byrd insists that the radio DJ was their main model. 'Now I've got a mic, what do I say on it that's gonna make me fly? I'm gonna say what I heard the DJ say. That's my starting point. So the DJ is the seminal influence on the whole piece. You're coming into the seventies, where we've just seen some of the greatest spoken word of the twentieth century: Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Stokely Carmichael. This is a rhythm that's in the air. So when you get someone who makes a record, Sugar Hill Gang or Fatback, what are they doing? They're

actually doing what they heard DJs do! Because if an MC is on a mic, what is he going to imitate? He is going to imitate the DJ.'

The Bronx party MCs were soon introducing new elements and styles apace. Cowboy, the late Keith Wiggins, was Flash's first permanent MC. He is remembered as the first to rhyme about his DJ, and the first to step out in front and act as an actual showman-like Master of Ceremonies. Flash credits him with adding the humanising element which finally made his quick mix style palatable to an audience. 'If it wasn't for Cowboy, I don't know . . . Cowboy found a way to complement what I was doing.' Another of Flash's cohorts, Melle Mel (Melvin Glover), is the MCs' MC: his name comes up more than any other when rappers are discussing their heroes.

Astonishingly, the first person in hip hop to actually sit down and write a rhyme was possibly Flash himself. Theodore recalls how, early on, sick of hearing the same old clichés, Flash took it on himself to progress things.

'He said, "Yo, the only thing you guys say on the mic is 'Clap your hands and throw your hands in the air, this person over here, that person over there, this person's in the house, that person's in the house.'" So he wrote a rhyme and tried to get everybody to say the rhyme, but nobody wanted to say it. He actually sat down in a corner, wrote a rhyme and tried to get his MCs to say it. "Dip dive, socialise, try to make you realise, that we are qualified to rectify and hypnotise that burning desire to boogie,



3D b-boys – breakdancers at the Wheels of Steel night at the Roxy, NYC, in 1983

'all.' that's exactly what he wrote. Couldn't get anybody to say it, so he got on the microphone and he said it himself.'

Eventually, as happened in Jamaica, the person playing the records would be eclipsed by the person out front saying the rhymes. But for now, largely because he owned the sound equipment and because rapping was still fairly primitive, the DJ was in control. Herc had Coke La Rock and Clark Kent; Flash collected his Furious Five. Bambaataa garnered several rap crews including the Soulsonic Force, the Jazzy Five and Planet Patrol. DJ Breakout had the Funky Four (Plus One More), Cold Crush came together around Charlie Chase, Theodore would become DJ for the Fantastic Five. But already there were performers for whom the DJ was secondary: Treacherous Three (including Kool Moe Dee), the Nigger Twins from Queens, Kurtis Blow . . .

From the rappers, this music and these parties – which had previously been referred to as 'break' or 'wildstyle' music – gained a name: 'hip hop'.

'The reason that became the name of the culture,' explains scenester and impresario Fab 5 Freddy (Freddy Braithwaite), 'was because that was the one thing that almost everybody said at a party: "To the hip, the hip, the hibby-hibby, dibby-dibby, hip-hip-hop, and you don't stop." And when you would be describing to somebody what kind of party you were at, you would say, "Yo, it was one of them hibbedy hop . . . you know, that hibbedy hop shit." So that became the one defining term within the culture that everybody related to.'

Although its use was so universal as to defy exact accreditation, popular consensus holds that it was Lovebug Starski, one of the early rhyming DJs, who coined the phrase. Other main contenders include DJ Hollywood, whose regular shows at Harlem's Apollo Theater and Club 371 were the first places many were exposed to hip hop, and Phase II, an early graffiti writer and one of the very first b-boys. Grandmixer D.ST, however, holds that Cowboy was the first to use the term, and that it was a reference to military parade drill.

'The story goes that a friend of his was getting ready to go into the service. And he was saying, "When you get in there, you're gonna be going, "Hip hop the hip hop, hi hip hi, and you don't stop," and that's how the story stuck. Cowboy started it. Lovebug Starski just took it and made it the thing of the day.'

Whatever the term's derivation, there was now a name for what was going on in the Bronx and by the last few years of the seventies, hip hop had a well-defined identity. The scene was all about intense partying, and whether this was in the parks, the high schools or in the few clubs – like T-Connection, Disco Fever, Club 371 and Harlem World that risked the boisterous crowds it attracted – the driving force was fun. DJs, MCs and

the partygoers themselves competed to add as many exciting elements as they could, and hip hop grew to be about improvisation, showmanship, enjoyment and that greatest of party feelings, living for the moment.

Then in the summer of 1979, out of nowhere, riding on the pump of Chic's 'Good Times' bassline, came the sinuous rhyme that would change it all.

I said a hip hop

The hippie the hippie

To the hip hip hop and you don't stop the rock it

To the bang bang boogie, say up jumped the boogie

To the rhythm of the boogie, the beat

Sal Abbatiello of Disco Fever remembers the first time he heard 'Rappers' Delight'.

'I was in my office, I heard the record and I'm like, "Who's out there rapping?" They said, "No that's a record." I said, "About time somebody was smart enough to put this shit on record. Now they won't be breaking all my microphones."'

TEN HIP HOP