

Planet Rock

'The Bronx is so named because it once belonged to the family of Dutchman Jonas Bronck, who built his farm here in 1636. It is, therefore, The Broncks.'

– Time Out Guide To New York

A neighborhood is where, when you go out of it, you get beat up!

– Murray Kempton

Hip hop today thrives on a sense of its own past. It is obsessed with 'keepin' it real' – grabbing its nuts and proclaiming its thug life, its loyalty to 'da ghetto' from whence it came, and to the 'old school' pioneers who created it. Ironically, this concern for staying true to its roots (seen by most of today's young guns as a need to appear blacker and angrier and more acquisitive than thou) has obscured a few facts about its history.

In practice, hip hop rarely has any time for its first generation of performers. Its definition of 'old school' rarely goes further back than 1982, and while figures like Herc and Flash may be venerated ancestors, they are irrelevant beside next week's young street-corner discovery. For similar reasons there have been radical revisions in the story of the genre's musical origins. Hip hop is usually portrayed as some mythical disco-hating force which came out of nowhere; in fact, it was inextricably connected to disco, it has an important debt to Jamaican reggae, and, perhaps most surprisingly, it owes part of its practical success to punk rock.

Most regrettably, perhaps, hip hop has largely forgotten that it was originally all about having *fun*. After years of 'ghetto reality' subject matter, with rappers dwelling relentlessly on crime and politics, the culture has lost sight of its original party purpose, its sense of celebration. You might think it's strange when a grumpy, gun-toting gangster asks a concert audience to put their hands in the air ('and wave them like you just don't care'), but all he's doing is displaying a relic from the days when hip hop wore a smile.

Rockin' it in the park

Born in 1974, it took more than half a decade before hip hop was heard beyond the Bronx. That it remained a secret to white New York for so long was not entirely down to fear and racism; it was also a result of the DJs' narrow horizons. Recording contracts, professionally managed careers, even the simple notion of playing outside your own neighbourhood: these things weren't considered. Eventually, the record companies and the cool downtown clubs would catch on and the music would begin its mutation into the worldwide business it is today, but hip hop's first five years were centred on nothing more complicated than throwing the best party.

To poor New Yorkers, block parties were nothing new. Local festivities in closed off streets and in the city's many parks have a long tradition (a New York park can be as small as a single asphalt basketball court). The entertainment might come from a local band playing funk and soul or, in Hispanic areas, salsa and merengue. As well as live music, there were mobile DJs who would bring their own sound systems and play a blend of Latin, funk, soul or disco, depending on the crowd.

As hip hop grew in popularity, the new generation of uptown DJs followed these traditions and threw their own events, giving free parties in the parks through the summertime as promotion for paying events in schools, clubs and community centres. In the parks the music would last from the afternoon well into the early hours, with the police usually turning a blind eye, reasoning that it was keeping teenage troublemakers out of harm's way. If they were out of reach of any other power supply, DJs and their crews would break open the base of a street lamp and risk electrocution to hotwire the sound system. 'Playing music was more important than our lives,' jokes Charlie Chase, confirming that this dangerous practice happened fairly often. 'We didn't give a fuck, we wanted to play music.'

Basements and abandoned buildings were other favoured settings, especially for an older crowd, and here the atmosphere could get much heavier. The scene was far more druggy than today's rap stars prefer to remember, and along with pot, plenty of less innocent pleasures were enjoyed. In between sixties heroin and eighties crack, the Bronx whizzed along on cocaine, which was then held to be non-addictive. Hence names like Kurtis Blow and Coke La Rock, and the fact that Melle Mel's record 'White Lines' actually started life as an ironic *celebration* of cocaine, with the 'Don't do it' message tacked on for commercial reasons. As well as coke there was angel dust, aka PCP, a manic-making animal tranquilliser which stank like stale sweat when it was smoked.

'It used to be so ill: the energy and the vibe,' recalls Fab 5 Freddy, who

would travel to Bronx parties from his native Brooklyn. 'Back then in the hip hop scene it was very weird. It'd be really dark, the DJ would have a couple of light bulbs rigged up on a board. A lot of DJs had one strobe light and they'd have it on a table, and that was the lighting.

'Motherfuckers used to smoke angel dust on the scene. At least up in the Bronx, that was a popular drug at the time. And it makes a really sickly ill smell, when guys are smoking that in a hot funky room. There used to be a lot of heavy dust-heads. That might have inspired a lot of the sound, I don't know. I'm not saying any DJs were smoking that shit – I never got into it – but the scene was weird.

'That's why you wanted to go. You wanted to be a part of that world, hear that sound, just be in a cloud of angel dust smoke, all that energy, just funky perspiration odour, some stick-up kids that could rob you. I mean, all that shit was a part of the party. It was a whole world. That's what hip hop was at the time.'

Battles

In this closed world, competition grew intense and DJs duelled for local glory in what became known as 'battles', setting up their sound systems on opposite sides of a basketball court or a school gymnasium, just like their counterparts in Jamaica's dance halls. They then fought it out with records, technique and volume, to see who could win the largest crowd. Their MCs sparred verbally in support, and rapping evolved into complex rhymed boasts about the indefatigable MC and his spellbinding DJ. Likewise, the b-boys who breakdanced to their music fought each other with an escalating vocabulary of impossible moves.

Battles are one of hip hop's great romantic notions. They did happen – frequently – but they had no elaborate tribal customs, just agreements about who played when and for how long. Battles were never for settling disputes more serious than performers' rivalry; on the whole they were just a way of making an event more exciting for all concerned. The loser did not automatically forfeit his equipment (although foolish was the DJ who set up in a Bronx park without a tough crew to protect his system); the winner simply gathered more respect – and more of the audience for his next show.

'It was territorial,' urges Charlie Chase. 'It was like a cat where it sprays its territory, just to let people know, this area's been taken. Basically, all this shit stems from us wanting to impress the girls.'

At first, DJs would simply try to drown each other out. 'You play your system, I play my system, a bunch of noise going at the same time,' recalls Bambaataa. 'You out-louded the next person.' But this led to frayed tempers and the possibility of sabotage. 'Someone might get mad and go and

knock the turntable or something, and it leads into a rumble. So then we started having it where we play an hour, you play an hour, and this way the audience decides, and it got more peaceful.'

If the contest was for volume, it was a brave man who battled Herc. As he would rap, 'Kool Herc is not a stepping stone. He's a horse that can't be rode, a bull that can't be stopped. Ain't a disco I can't rock.'

'Kool Herc used to just destroy people,' remembers Jazzy Jay, the Zulu Nation's champion DJ. 'Herc was the ultimate 'cos he had the records, and his system was unmatched.'

Flash recalls being shamed by Herc's system without even battling. He had popped in to check out the Hevalo one night.

'He'd say, "Grandmaster Flash in the house," over the mic, and then he'd cut off the highs and lows on his system and just play the mid-range. "Flash," he'd say, "in order to be a qualified disc jockey, there is one thing you must have . . . highs!" Then Herc would crank up his highs and the hi-hat would be sizzling. "And most of all, Flash," he'd say, "you must have . . . bass!" Well, when Herc's bass came in, the whole place would be shaking. I'd get so embarrassed that I'd have to leave. My system couldn't compare.'

Many people talk of the time, at the Webster Avenue PAL (Police Athletic League), when Herc's Herculoids washed Bambaataa out completely. Herc strolled around casually, taking ages to set things up, so Bam and his DJs carried on playing past their allotted time and were really getting into it. 'We was throwing the records on and we was *kill*-ing it,' recalls Jazzy Jay. When Herc was finally ready, he warmed up his speakers with a series of polite but booming requests, delivered with the ominous vibration of his echo chamber. With a smile, Jay relates what came next:

'He said, "Ah, Bambaataa, could you please turn your system down?"

'So Bam's getting all gassed by the Zulus – "Yo, fuck that nigga, Bam! We got his ass! Throw on them funky beats!" So Bam passed me some shit, I slice that shit up.

'Herc said [*louder*], "Yo, Bambaataa-baataa-baataa, turn your system down-down-down."

"Fuck you!" Niggas getting on the mic, cursing.

'Now Kool Herc, he said [*louder still*], "BAMBAATAA-Baataa-baataa, TURN YOUR SYSTEM DOWN!"

'Couldn't even hear our shit. Whoa! We started reaching for knobs, turning shit up, speakers started coughing. And he comes on with "The Mexican". You ever hear "The Mexican" by Babe Ruth? It starts out real low – ba-doom-doom. By about sixteen bars into the song, we just gave up, turned off all the fucking amps. Turned everything off. And the drums

didn't even come in yet. When the drums came in, all the walls... just like VROOM! That was it.'

Bambaataa, however, insists that the Zulus remained unbowed.

'He had a louder system, but when it came to the music they couldn't fuck around. At the battle, we funk'd them up with our music so much that when we left, the whole crowd left with us too.'

Battles weren't always a simple head-to-head. Fab 5 Freddy remembers a battle between seven separate systems in an armoury building in Brooklyn. Bambaataa recalls a time at James Monroe high school when a Bronxdale DJ called Disco King Mario put out a call for help in order to battle Flash. Mario ended up fighting the Grandmaster with his own system, plus amps and speakers from Bambaataa's, plus another system belonging to a DJ Tex. 'We put our stuff all together. It looked like the wall of Jericho,' says Bam biblically.

Charlie Chase, a former musician, had more stage experience than most and with the weighty lyrical skills of Grandmaster Caz, the Cold Crush Brothers used showmanship and theatricality as their trump cards.

'When you saw us perform, it was unforgettable,' boasts Charlie. 'Nobody else had the stage presence we had. We couldn't just get on the stage and just rap, we've got to give them a show.' For the group's entrance, Charlie would use a classical record for a single note: the strike of an entire orchestra.

'When you hear a symphony strike, that shit is intense, so we have to match that visually onstage. So I would take a record and take a strike, and the guys would pose, BAMM! Then you'd see the guys spin round one at a time. I would play "Catch the Beat" by T-Ski Valley, they would do more dance steps. Once the whole group was on the stage, I would play instrumental breaks that they could do their dance steps to. Then the whole group would do a song together, and then two members of the group would do a chant, and the other three members of the group would do the rap. And then the chant comes in, and then the rap, and the chant ...

'That shit was not done in hip hop. We dressed the part. We played the part. We had a show called the Gangster Chronicles. We came onstage with pinstripe suits, the hats, and Uzis, plastic toy Uzis.'

Cold Crush's mobster outfits made their debut at one of the most famous battles ever: Cold Crush Brothers vs Theodore & the Fantastic Romantic Five, winter 1981, in Harlem World. It was a grudge match, stemming from the fact that two of the Fantastics' MCs had been protégés of Cold Crush's MC Grandmaster Caz.

'I remember, we made scenes in the street,' laughs Charlie. 'We were this close to fighting in the street, fist fights, with them. It was like

Muhammad Ali facing Joe Frazier at the time, where he would meet him in public just to humiliate him. Some shit. And the promoters at Harlem World got wind of it and they said, we'll put up a thousand dollar prize if you guys come here and battle. And the buzz was growing in the hip hop community, like, "Fantastic is better," "Hell no, Cold Crush will bust they ass," "No, Fantastic is better," and little tiffs and arguments in clubs and in public.'

In the end, despite the polished Cold Crush show, the Fantastic Five won the affections of some wild girls at the front of the crowd and were screamed to a dubious victory.

Hip hop on record

The idea of capturing these low-rent street thrills on records just seemed contradictory. While the music industry was entranced by disco's glitzy aspirational sound, what would they find of interest in these ghetto parties? The DJs and MCs might be stars in the neighbourhood, but they could hardly conceive of any greater level of fame; none of them thought of making records. The closest these kids – few were even out of their teens – had come to the music business was a brief negotiation with a local nightclub owner. Partying in the projects was worlds away from the record labels and their midtown mirror glass.

In late 1978, mere months before the Sugar Hill Gang would hit the charts with 'Rappers' Delight', Fab 5 Freddy first saw Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five perform. He remembers, after the show, in the community centre of the Lower East Side's Smith Projects, talking to Melle Mel.

F5F: 'Yo man, wassup. Are you aware of how big this is? You guys should make a record.'

MM: 'Yo, who would buy it?'

F5F: 'Well, at least all the people coming to these parties.'

MM [*unconvinced*]: 'Yeah?'

Flash himself claims to have turned down some very early offers of record deals, thinking that music made from other people's records was simply not commercial enough. 'I was asked before anybody. And I was like, "Who would want to hear a record which I was spinning re-recorded with MCing over it?"'

In any case, the scene already had an established communication network as DJ-mix tapes were copied and circulated throughout black New York, and played, of course, on 'ghetto blasters', the era's suitcase-sized portable radio cassettes (a similar trade had developed downtown in tapes of the disco DJs' performances). The hip hop sound was heard even further away as people sent tapes to relatives outside the city and servicemen

took them overseas. In the Bronx, echoing the Pullman railroad conductors who had distributed blues records decades ago, car services helped to market tapes.

'Those were our biggest promotional vehicles,' puns Charlie Chase. 'You had the OJ cab service and then you had Community Cab service, they were the first cabs that used to drive luxury cars.' (The OJ cars were immortalised in several songs, including 'Rappers' Delight'.) 'If they knew you were a DJ, they would come by and buy tapes off you. And then they'd play them in the cars. People would go, "Yo, whose tape is that?" and the cabdriver would say, "This is Charlie Chase," or they'd give them your number.' Charlie would sell his tapes from his ground floor apartment. 'My window was always being knocked on. They would knock on my window and I would sell 'em tapes. My neighbours thought I was a fuckin' drug dealer for a while.'

Cassette technology was also a way for would-be DJs to practice their skills at cutting up songs without the need for expensive equipment. Many of the DJs inspired by Herc, Flash and Bambaataa would begin their careers on a home hi-fi with their fingers hovering over a hot pause button. Grandmixer D.ST was one of them.

'I had pause button tapes all over the place. Everyone had one of my pause button tapes. I was one of the biggest pause button guys.' All this despite the fact that his tape recorder didn't actually have a pause button. 'I would just cut with the tape on play and the record button halfway down. And then when the part on the tape would get to the cut part, I would just push the record button all the way down.' He laughs at the thought of such primitive techniques. 'Then when I got a pause button, I was off the hook!'

It would take a handful of independent (and often predatory) entrepreneurs to see the commercial possibilities of committing hip hop to record. All had experience of bringing money and music together since the fifties; most had a dislike for disco, which kept them away from what was then the most lucrative genre for independent labels; and several saw in the hip hop scene a parallel to earlier forms, especially the street corner harmonising of doo wop.

'Rappers' Delight'

In 1979, an ailing Brooklyn funk band, Fatback, slipped an unknown rapping DJ, King Tim III, onto the B-side of their single 'You're My Candy Sweet', and laid claim to the first modern rap record. When New York's powerful disco station WKTU played this track, 'King Tim III (Personality Jock)', over the A-side, it became a surprise hit.

Hip hop's breakthrough song, however, was the fatally infectious 'Rappers' Delight' on Sugar Hill Records, the latest label from experienced soul and funk mini-moguls Sylvia and Joe Robinson (the husband and wife team behind such imprints as All Platinum, Turbo, Stang and Vibration; Sylvia had also enjoyed a long singing career). 'Rappers' Delight' stole the bassline of that summer's disco hit 'Good Times' to full effect – recreated in the studio by session musicians mimicking the music of a quick-mixing Bronx DJ – and this fourteen-minute groove stormed the clubs and the radio like a police raid.

But the Sugar Hill Gang? Who were they? Their record was selling thousands a day, but the Bronx had never seen them pick up a microphone.

'Never heard of them. They didn't pay no dues at all,' is how Flash remembers it. 'We all thought, "If they're not from any of the five boroughs, where are they from?"'

Far from veterans of the scene, they were a manufactured group, put together by the wily Sylvia Robinson. She originally claimed she signed them after seeing them perform at her niece's birthday party at Harlem World. Others remember band members Wonder Mike as a friend of her son, and Big Bank Hank as a bouncer at the Sparkle, one of Kool Herc's clubs – the rest of the time he worked in a pizza shop in Englewood, New Jersey, where Robinson was based.

Although the group was unknown in the Bronx, the rhymes in 'Rappers' Delight' were all too familiar – an amalgam lifted, it's said, from the MCs which club doorman Hank had heard onstage. Grandmaster Caz (short for Casanova) of the Cold Crush Brothers has always claimed authorship of most of the lyrics, even to the extent of saying he lent Hank (who had offered to manage him) his rhymes notebook. Since one of the song's lines is, 'Check it out, I'm the C-A-S-AN-the-O-V-A . . .', this seems pretty likely.

Whatever its provenance, the record went to no.4 on *Billboard's* R&B charts and no.36 in the Hot 100, proving beyond any doubt that this music had a market.

After the Bronx had heard 'Rappers' Delight', everyone realised the rules had changed. Bambaataa says he was immediately fearful that hip hop on record would kill the party. 'I was one who stood away longer. Flash and all them jumped on the scene. I stood more watching.'

Flash, always chasing firsts, was incensed.

'I was like, "Damn, I could'a been there first." I didn't know the gun was loaded like that. Blew up. It was a huge record for them.' He vowed to turn his anger into action. 'It was OK, though. 'Cos we were gonna come later . . . We had the talent, and they didn't.'

'Adventures Of Grandmaster Flash On The Wheels Of Steel'

Soon after 'Rappers' Delight', Flash & the Furious Five leapt into the fray with 'Superrappin' on Enjoy, a Harlem label started by another veteran record retailer and producer, Bobby Robinson. Years ago, Enjoy had been home to saxophone legend King Curtis, just one of the artists Robinson had nurtured for success with larger companies. (Robinson can also claim the discovery of Gladys Knight & the Pips, who he signed to his Fury label.) After 'Superrappin'', a funky rip-off of 'Seven Minutes Of Funk' by Tyrone Thomas & the Whole Darn Family, Flash would follow this tradition when he moved his deal to Sugar Hill, complaining that Robinson had failed to get any radio play for his debut single.

DJ Breakout's group, the Funky Four (Plus One More), had been the first to record hip hop for Enjoy, with 1979's 'Rappin' And Rockin' The House', a take on Cheryl Lynn's 'Got To Be Real', but they, too, would move their business from Enjoy to Sugar Hill, as did Spoonie Gee (even though he was Bobby Robinson's nephew) and the Treacherous Three. Once signed to Sugar Hill, Flash and the Furious Five quickly made up for lost time and emerged as recorded rap's first superstars.

Their most famous song is undoubtedly 1982's 'The Message', which made no.4 in the R&B chart (no.8 in the UK), as hip hop's first socio-politically charged rap. A hugely inspiring record, its conscious lyrics were an innovation of Sylvia Robinson's which the band, armed with a powerful lack of political consciousness, strongly resisted. But Sylvia's uncanny commercial acumen triumphed and rap's enduring sociological agenda was born. With the song's success, a whole series of 'message raps' followed.

"The Message" was the announcement that hip hop was gonna be culturally significant,' considers Richard Grabel, one of the first journalists to cover the scene. 'White rock fans, and certainly white rock critics, have always been content oriented. Up to that point rap hadn't given them much to write about lyric-wise. But now it was doing it. And that's when all the writers started covering it.'

From a DJ's perspective, however, 1981's 'Adventures Of Grandmaster Flash On The Wheels Of Steel' remains a far more important record. Seven minutes of quick-mix excitement starring a host of the period's hit tunes, this was the first track made successfully with records and turntables, not session musicians.

'It took three turntables, two mixers and between ten and fifteen takes to get it right,' recalls Flash. 'It took me three hours. I had to do it live. And whenever I'd mess up I would just refuse to punch. I would just go back to the beginning.'

And how did he react when he heard the playback?

'I was scared. I didn't think anyone was gonna get it. I thought, "they might understand this. DJs'll probably love it."'

'Adventures ...' didn't enjoy huge success in America, only managing no.55 in the R&B chart, but in clubs, both at home and in Europe, the record was huge.

To those who heard it at that time it was a revolutionary moment in the history of music: a record made from nothing more than other records, a record made by a DJ, a postmodern collage of existing texts, the scratch-filled proof that turntables could be real instruments. Theorists heard the creaking of concepts like authorship, copyright, originality, musicianship – 'Adventures Of Grandmaster Flash On The Wheels Of Steel' was the first time hip hop had been captured on record rather than translated; music's possibilities had been expanded dramatically.

'Vicious Rap'

Another key figure early on was experienced entrepreneur Paul Winley. Having recorded doo wop groups in the fifties, some of whom he describes as 'real hoodlums', Winley saw hip hop as familiar territory. 'The doo wop era and the hip hop era, in the beginning it was the same thing. It was kids. Young kids.'

The affable Winley, who can greet anyone over forty by name as he ambles down Harlem's 125th Street, had been a Tin Pan Alley songwriter with a number of hits to his credit, had worked for the young Atlantic Records, and had run a successful independent label, Winley Records, since 1956. (He recalls being cursed out by Billie Holiday when he suggested she record for him: 'She was a rough woman.')

Winley already knew the hip hop scene from producing compilation albums of breakbeat songs. When his daughter Tanya started coming home from school reciting the raps going through her playground, he decided to put her on record and squeezed her into the studio at the end of one of her mother's vocal sessions. Against a live funk backing and some police sirens, she became Sweet Tee and recorded 1980's 'Vicious Rap', a great, if rather lo-fidelity record.

Winley didn't necessarily see hip hop as an enduring art form, but he thought it was more than a mere novelty. His view was typical. 'It was grass roots people, grass roots kids. Just like the blues, just like gospel. It came from the soul, and it was natural writing, and it wasn't no great productions.

'I saw it as rhyming. Rhyming, with a beat, with music. I just saw it as entertaining. I didn't say that it was music or that it was gonna be a big thing. I saw it as something the kids enjoyed doing, and anything that the masses can participate in could be big.'

Paul
Winley

'The
Message'

He would later record Afrika Bambaataa's first records, 'Zulu Nation Throwdown' (1980), a rap backed with some minimal guitar and Hammond organ vamps, and 'Death Mix' (1981), an exciting but inaudible live show. Bambaataa claims this was mastered from a second or third generation cassette tape – such haphazard quality control meant Winley's early entry into recording hip hop was followed by an equally early exit.

'Planet Rock'

Of hip hop's founding trio, only Kool Herc never got the chance to transfer his skills to vinyl. Afrika Bambaataa, after a couple of false starts on Winley Records and a minor club hit with 'Jazzy Sensation' (based on Gwen McCrae's 'Funky Sensation'), was to emerge with one of history's most influential records. His renowned eclecticism would pay off as 1982's 'Planet Rock' lit the fuse on not one but several genres of dance music. It's the source of electro, the root of Miami bass music, it was an acknowledged inspiration for the genesis of house and techno and was a massive influence on the way future hip hop records would be made.

Arthur Baker, the record's producer, recognised the significance of 'Planet Rock' immediately. 'Oh, I knew,' he insists. 'I knew before we even mixed it. I knew before there was even a rap on it. I went home the night we cut the track and brought the tape home, and I said to my wife at the time, "We've just made musical history."'

Baker, now one of dance music's most successful producers, had started making records a couple of years earlier, entering production after admitting to himself that he lacked the obsessive nature that makes a good disc jockey. Despite this, he has a DJ's acute instincts for the dancefloor and says he always made records with a particular club in mind, tailoring them to reflect the DJ's style and the feel and energy of the scene.

'Planet Rock', a sci-fi vision of crashing electronic drums and eerie keyboard melodies, was a reflection of Bambaataa's eclectic live performances – it was constructed by recreating elements from a stack of records high on his playlist, notably 'Trans Europe Express' and 'Numbers' by German synth futurists Kraftwerk. Bambaataa used to overlay Malcolm X speeches over 'Trans Europe Express's thirteen minutes (Grandmaster Flash put it on when he needed a toilet break). Other elements added included the beat from 'Super Sperm' by Captain Sky and a part of 'The Mexican' by Babe Ruth.

'I'd been into Kraftwerk and Bam was into Kraftwerk, and we just had the idea of merging the two songs together,' says Baker. 'I used to hear "Trans Europe Express" all over the place. In playgrounds, clubs, everywhere. At that time, I'd just moved to New York. When I had lunch, I'd

sit in the park and there'd be guys with a big beatbox breakdancing to it. I used to hear it all over.'

Though Bam had hardly any studio experience, he had very clear intentions for the project.

'I wanted it to be the first black electronic group,' he says. 'Some funky mechanical crazy shit with no band, just electronic instruments. When I made it, I was trying to grab the black market and the punk rock market. I wanted to grab them two together. I always was into "Trans Europe Express" and after Kraftwerk put "Numbers" out, I said, "I wonder if I can combine them two to make something real funky with a hard bass and beat?"'

It was probably the first hip hop record to use a drum machine (a Roland TR808), a fact which marks it as the starting point of the spin-off genre known as electro, and makes it a clear inspiration for Run DMC's beatbox work-outs – a style which made them the undisputed leaders of hip hop's second wave. Baker, who had no experience with drum machines, recalls hiring a programmer out of the paper. 'There was an ad in the *Village Voice*: "Man with drum machine, \$20 a session." I don't even remember the guy's name or anything. So I got him for twenty dollars and said, "Programme this." With its unshakeable beat, making mixing easier, 'Planet Rock' couldn't fail to appeal to DJs.

The record's orchestra strikes and explosions were conjured out of a Fairlight synthesiser, 'a hundred thousand dollar waste of space,' as Baker puts it. The Fairlight, an Australian monster machine beloved of prog rockers like Peter Gabriel, was the sampler's hulking prototype, but since its sampling ability was minimal, Kraftwerk's melody lines were masterfully replayed by programmer/keyboardist John Robie.

Though it doesn't use sampling in the digital push-button sense that today's hip hop producers would understand, in conception 'Planet Rock', like 'Rappers' Delight' and Flash's 'Adventures . . .', is a sampled record. In fact, all three songs show a considerable leap from the kind of organic sampling which has always existed in music – the slow transmission of melodies and rhythms – to a more unmediated form of musical thievery. Here are songs made from very little more than snippets and snatches of others, not *versions* of other songs, not *improvisations* of other songs, but *copies*, either re-recorded from existing records or replayed note for note as exactly as possible.

And what set 'Planet Rock' apart from its hip hop predecessors was that it was more than just a medley of pop hits. Baker and Bambaataa showed that sampled elements didn't necessarily have to be preserved intact: instead they could be collided into each other and woven into an intricate new sound tapestry. Today, this idea is regularly pushed to its

limits, as producers make records from a multitude of tiny samples, often distorting and disguising them as much as possible. This process can be seen to have started with 'Planet Rock', a record in which the DJ's pioneering ability to create new music from old was on clear display.

Another key aspect of sampling was also highlighted: its ability to generate litigation. When 'Rappers' Delight' had used 'Good Times' so overtly, Chic's Nile Rogers and Bernard Edwards had been able to successfully claim full writing credit. On hearing 'Planet Rock', Kraftwerk launched a lawsuit claiming royalties, which continued unresolved for many years. (Baker had in fact anticipated legal problems and had recorded an alternative melody line for the song. When Tommy Boy's Tom Silverman decided to release the record intact, Baker used this as the basis for Bambaataa's next record, 'Play At Your Own Risk'.)

As for the song itself, Bambaataa recalls the incredible reaction it generated.

'It was faster than any other rap record before, but the crowd was just dancing crazy and couldn't get enough of it, especially when I turned it over to the B-side with the instrumental – it just was a whole different thing to people. They'd heard the techno-pop records, but this was the first thing that had bottom, rhythm, the hard bass and all that.' He first played it in the Boys' Club, in the Soundview Section of the Bronx, 'a straight-up hardcore party. We had to play it four or five times. Because the crowd just went crazy.'

Sampling

There were many other key records, of course. Kurtis Blow's 'Christmas Rappin' (late 1979) would become the first major label release (on Mercury); Blondie would show their insight into the scene by releasing 'Rapture' (1981), a US no.1 and important for the fact that it was by an established (and white) group. There was the post-'Planet Rock' boom of electro records, including the influential sound collages of Mantronix and Double Dee & Steinski, not to mention truckloads of records about breakdancing and Pacman. In the UK charts, the rap phenomenon started as little more than a joke and a series of novelty hits, including Kenny Everett's 'Snot Rap' and Roland Rat's 'Rat Rapping' (both 1983), were the first rap records to hit the mainstream. Luckily it was a different story in the clubs.

The explosion of recorded hip hop brought the DJ's cut and paste aesthetic to bear on studio production and furthered his inexorable move into the producer's chair. As early rap producer Marley Marl said in 1988, 'There's not much of a difference between making a record and being a DJ, cutting up beats and stuff.' Sampling would become

especially important – used these days by everyone from bedroom dance producers to major rock bands. Making records this way is nothing more than using clever studio electronics to exaggerate what a good DJ can do on his turntables.

Indeed, the story of sampling is a tale of technology catching up with the DJ, of equipment being created that could do faster, more accurately and more easily what a DJ had long been able to. After the Fairlight Computer Musical Instrument, which allowed a tiny burst of sampled sound to be played, there was the EMU Emulator, first used in hip hop in 1982 by Marley Marl, who sampled the beat of a snare drum by accident during a remix he was doing. As he told writer Harry Allen, he realised the potential of this immediately: 'I could take any drum sound from any old record, put it in here and get that old drummer sound.' Old drummer Max Roach realised sampling's promise too, when he declared that, 'Hip hop lives in the world of sound, not the world of music, and that's why it's so revolutionary.' In contrast, the inventor of the Emulator, Dave Rossum, had little idea how important his machine would be. When asked in the early eighties whether sampling was the 'future of the sound industry?', he just laughed.

Sampling is now an accepted part of music, and record labels have entire departments selling sampling permissions. For many years, however, it generated considerable confusion, as everyone tried to avoid setting a standard practice. This was partly settled by a landmark decision in 1992 against comedy rapper Biz Markie for sampling part of Gilbert O'Sullivan's 'Alone Again Naturally' on his *I Need A Haircut* album. A federal judge, declaring 'Thou shalt not steal,' set the precedent by ruling against Biz and, instead of having his record label (Cold Chillin', owned by Warner Bros) pay O'Sullivan a royalty, demanded the offending sample be removed and the records containing it recalled.

The validity of sampling has long been debated, with irate musicians decrying it as non-creative. Hip hop fights back by claiming activist status, referring to the interest it generates in older and forgotten artists. As Brooklyn rappers Stetsasonic rhymed in 'Talking All That Jazz' (1988): 'Tell the truth/James Brown was old/'Til Eric and Rak came out with "I Got Soul"/Rap brings back old R&B/And if we would not/People could have forgot.'

In hip hop, reliance on sampling reached its peak in the late eighties in the wall-of-sound productions of Public Enemy and in the kooky grab-anything styles of De La Soul, before it became too expensive and/or risky to base records on large numbers of lengthy and recognisable samples. Commentator Nelson George makes the interesting point that it was only when hip hop started sampling white music

*the
E-MU
Emulator

'Hip hop
lives in
the world
of sound'
- Max
Roach

1992:
the
landmark
decis.
against
Biz
Markie

– specifically in the Biz Markie case, and also in lawsuits relating to De La Soul's *Three Feet High And Rising* LP and Public Enemy's *It Take A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back* – that the industry perceived a problem.

Hip hop goes downtown

Obviously, hip hop's graduation to vinyl was what allowed it to develop into an accepted musical genre, but in some people's view, the records were all that saved it from extinction. In the Bronx around 1979, after a peak of interest three years before, there was what Jazzy Jay refers to as 'the drought', a time when grass roots interest in the music seemed to be dying. Party attendances were waning so fast that even the DJs themselves were convinced hip hop had already had its day. This before most of the world had even heard of it. 'If you wasn't in hip hop, you wouldn't know about the drought,' says Jay. 'But around 1979 it was dying down. Everybody thought it was a dying art form.' With the domination of crossover disco, audiences were turning their backs on hip hop in favour of more glamorous sounds. 'Everybody was starting to swing back towards R&B and the club disco-type scene. Everybody was getting *sophisticated*. They were through with hip hop: "Oh, that's childish shit, we don't want to deal with it no more."'

As well as saving the uptown scene, hip hop's first records had a phenomenal impact around the world; people remember hearing them and feeling they were listening to a completely new musical language. Naturally, there was an intense curiosity about where this music had started. Few were prepared to venture to a derelict Bronx basement to see it in its natural habitat, so hip hop gradually headed downtown. In doing this it became a vibrant part of post-disco clubland, meeting other established scenes and infecting other forms of music with its impressive DJ techniques and its innovative cut-and-paste creativity.

One style of music which is rarely connected with hip hop outside of cultural analysis is punk. And yet punk and hip hop shared a great deal more than a do-it-yourself ethos and a rebellious attitude. In fact, in cahoots with Manhattan's posey artworld, punk was what brought hip hop to the world's attention. Former art student Johnny Dynell, then starting his DJ career at the arty punk disco that was Manhattan's Mudd Club, remembers seeing Flash for the first time. It changed his view of DJing completely.

'I was a DJ but I always thought of myself more as a visual artist,' he says. 'I never saw DJing as artistic or creative. But then in 1979, I went with this friend to this church basement and I saw this battle, with Grandmaster Flash, Hollywood, all those early guys. And Flash was DJing with

his toes. He was scratching, which I'd never heard before. He just rocked my world.'

With his art school background, Dynell was thrilled by the conceptual implications of what he'd seen. 'They were playing the same records I was playing, like James Brown, but what they were doing was taking two copies and going back and forth and making this new thing out of them. To me, coming from the art world, I thought it was brilliant. I thought, I'm going to have to tell Andy [Warhol] about this. This is incredible. It's like Marcel Duchamp.'

Dynell was so excited that he tried to bring Flash together with Alan Vega of punk band Suicide, reasoning that Vega's music, like Flash's, was all about repetition. This ambitious attempt at cross-pollination raised little enthusiasm from either side. The collision of punk and hip hop would have to wait a couple of years.

Punks from the Bronx

In 1982 Malcolm McLaren declared, 'I think punk rock is more alive in Harlem, in some respects, than it is in Bracknell.'

Speaking in *Time Out* to Jon Savage, punk's master hypester spun an unlikely but intriguing yarn: 'I was in the Bronx and I saw a boy and a girl, hand in hand, two black kids from the south Bronx, and they were walking down the street and they were both wearing "Never Mind The Bollocks" T-shirts. Now they may not even have known of the Sex Pistols. They liked the look of it. They homed in on it. They saw something. They liked the words.'

In August 1981 McLaren had been introduced to Afrika Bambaataa by Michael Holman, a black video artist who had taken him up to the Bronx to witness this amazing new music scene. The Sex Pistols' ex-manager was then steering the fortunes of pop band Bow Wow Wow, and formulating an ambitious album project based on smelting together the world's folk-dance music (this would become his *Duck Rock LP*). Despite a harrowing night during which he was, by most accounts, completely petrified, McLaren was mesmerised.

'It was like *Heart Of Darkness*,' laughs Holman. 'I go to the hotel and I'm about to take them up to the Bronx on a summer evening – McLaren and Rory Johnston from RCA – and they're dressed like fucking pirates, in all that Vivienne Westwood gear. I thought we were gonna get stuck up or shot at any second. We finally get there and we go from a place that's completely deserted to masses and masses of kids, nothing but teenagers running from one corner to another, watching fights break out in the crowd. It's insane. Bottles flying everywhere. Malcolm's dressed like a pirate – and nobody noticed us. And now he starts to see the special effects DJs

Michael
Holman

?

and the b-boys throwing down, and he's starting to see it all. So he says, "Let's get out of here. But I've got an idea."

McLaren gave Holman \$1,500 to put together a hip hop revue to open for Bow Wow Wow. Holman booked Bam and his cohorts, including the Rocksteady Crew (destined to become the world's most famous break-dancers), to open the band's New York show.

Ruza Blue, an English girl just into her twenties, was fresh off a plane from London for a two-week stay in New York. With her hair dyed in a black and white skunk cut, and with good contacts from her time on the London club scene, she would end up staying stateside. Employed for her dress sense more than anything, she started working for McLaren and his ex-wife Vivienne Westwood. At the Ritz to see the Bow Wow Wow show, Blue, like most of the audience, found herself transfixed by the support act. A DJ, a stocky black guy with long lashes, was playing some kind of crazy chopped up disco-funk music, and a gaggle of hyperactive Puerto Rican teens were cutting up the dancefloor like demented spinning tops.

'I was like, "What the fuck is this?" I was completely blown away,' says Blue. 'I just knew that whatever it was, I wanted to get involved in it.' She introduced herself to the Bronx kids after the show and in the coming weeks this punky British girl started venturing uptown to a club called Disco Fever. 'That was *the* hip hop club. No one downtown knew what the hell was going on up there, and that was wild. Flash was the DJ, Melle Mel was the MC and there were all these other MCs there. All the Sugar Hill Gang were hanging out. I'd go up there and I'd be the only white face in the club, and that was wild, and I thought, "Oh my god, I've got to bring all of this downtown."'

Blue asked Holman to put on a similar night for her at Negril, an East Village reggae joint run by Kosmo Vinyl, manager of the Clash (it had once been Bob Marley's Manhattan hangout). Holman brought down Bambaataa, Jazzy Jay and other Zulu Nation DJs, as well as Theodore and the Rocksteady Crew (who are Zulu-affiliates), and he and Blue began promoting the club to the punky downtowners.

'To get people to come down and check it out, I'd put people like the Clash on DJing,' she recalls. 'Combining the hip hop scene with the dregs of the punk scene brought the general public down. They were all like, "The Clash are gonna be there, we'd better be there." Once they arrived, they'd find what was really going on: the hip hop.'

Holman insists that what drew the crowds was in fact the breakdancing. Punk was old news to his trendy Mudd Club friends, but breakdancing had them completely enraptured. 'The first gig at Negril was a white guy, Nick Taylor, the High Priest on the turntables, Bambaataa, Fab 5 Freddy. Ramelzee is there putting up giant graf pieces, like armoured

letters. I had TV monitors showing this breakdancing footage I'd filmed. And Rocksteady Crew came down.'

Holman eventually fell out with Blue (now Kool Lady Blue), who then took the concept to the next level. When Negril was closed by the fire department for overcrowding, she moved it to Danceteria, the trendy post-disco new wave club, and then – despite advice that she was mad to book such a huge space – to a 3,000-capacity roller-skating rink: the Roxy.

Everyone remembers the Roxy years as very special.

'The Roxy embodied a certain vision of what New York could be – a multi-racial centre of world culture, running on a current of flaming, uncompromised youth. The night had a thousand styles, a hundred dialects,' recalled club queen Chi Chi Valenti.

Every Friday from 18 June 1982 to the end of 1983, Kool Lady Blue's Wheels Of Steel nights brought teenage Bronx b-boys together with spiky-haired punks, new wave musicians like Blondie and Talking Heads, and the gentry of the downtown art world, Andy Warhol included. It was

The
Roxy
years

The Roxy Rocks 515 W. 18th St. 10th Ave.

Hosts Fab Five Freddy

SURESHOT BODY PARTY NITES **KLB: GRANDOP'NING FRIDAY JUNE 18**

formerly NegRil. ThuRsdays-RockeRs BReakeR HipHop!!!

IT'S FUTURA FUTURA FUTURA
2000s Super Spray Graffix Experience

Almighty Afrika Bambaataa Original Jazzy Jay
- THE SOULSONIC FORCE & CO.
"DOING THE HIT PLANET ROCK"

AA 1990's Futuristic DJ Combination
GRAND WIZARD THEODORE GRAND MIXER D.S.T.

The RockSteady Breakers Crazy Legs Take Me

Damage \$5 All **ROXY** **Open 11-6am**

From Mc Donalds It's Dynamic! Double Dutch Girls

No Skating Just Dance Your Pants Off - Every Friday Nite - B-There

Zulus take Manhattan – the opening night flyer for the legendary Wheels of Steel at the Roxy, taken from Kool Lady Blue's forthcoming book.

one of those rare clubs where a true cross-pollination was happening; the opposite of the selective decadence of Studio 54.

Richard Grabel declared in the *NME*, 'The feeling hits you when you walk into the Roxy on a Friday night the way it doesn't hit you in any other New York club. Everywhere else it's hesitation and uncertainty; at the Roxy, you know you're in the right place.'

'It was fabulous. It was such a great feeling,' says Johnny Dynell, one of the downtown DJs who played there at the time, recalling how the Roxy mixed up cultures and 'races.' 'That was the great thing about it. For me it was great; it was like both of my worlds. I would actually see both groups of my friends in the same place. That was really unusual.' Dynell is sure that Blue was able to pull this off precisely because she didn't share the usual American assumptions about race. 'An American couldn't do that. It took an English person.'

Graffiti hung on great canvas sheets. Kurtis Blow, Sequence, Indee performed. Fab 5 Freddy MCed. Run DMC had their first gig there, as did New Edition. Madonna sang there, starting her climb to stardom. The young Russell Simmons was running around networking. Every week a photographer would take pictures of the partygoers and a huge projector would show the portraits from the week before. With solid residences from the Zulu DJs Bambaataa, Afrika Islam, Jazzy Jay, D.ST and Theodore, and a constant breakdancing presence from the Rocksteady Crew, it drew an astonishing mixture of people, all riding the energy wave of this thrilling new music.

'I didn't have too many MCs. It was very focused on the DJ. I just kept it strictly DJs and dancing,' says Blue. 'I used to mix it all up. One night I had a whole troupe of American Indians doing sundances on the floor with the breakers. And that was like a really weird thing, but it worked. Or the Double Dutch girls, that was a complete fluke. I just saw them on TV one night in a McDonald's commercial and thought, they'd be good. Double Dutch girls have nothing to do with hip hop whatsoever. But all of a sudden, because it was showcased at the club one night, it was suddenly, "Oh, that's hip hop."'

Fab 5 Freddy, who was steering Blue around the uptown pantheon of DJs and MCs, remembers the pivotal party as the night they screened *The Great Rock And Roll Swindle*, never released in the US, for the downtown glitterati.

'Right after the screening was around the time when the uptown heads from the Bronx, the hip hoppers, would start coming in, and these two scenes had never been mixed on this level. When you went to clubs, the downtown scene was pretty much predominantly white, and the uptown scene was black and Hispanic. And I couldn't imagine it was gonna

work. I just anticipated kids from the Bronx beating the shit out of weird-looking punk rockers.'

Instead, uptown and downtown were brought wholeheartedly together, a near-impossible achievement, even today. 'The fashionable, on-the-edge punk rock people: when the movie ended, they stayed. And sure enough, here come all the little b-boys and b-girls, the fly guys and fly girls coming in. Kids was coming in just dancing, the energy was right. And it seemed to me, from that point on, you had this great mix. You had punk rock kids with mohawks, standing next to b-boys. It was the first time each other was seeing each other.'

And the two scenes weren't just cautiously observing each other. A lot of real mixing was taking place. 'A lot of fucking going on,' laughs Freddy. 'In short, a lot of fucking going on, because the hot dance at the time was the Webo, or the Freak. It came out of the Latin scene, where you would dance and you would get all up on a girl and really rub your two pelvic areas together, furiously. Like really wind and grind on each other.' Since the white girls didn't know that it wasn't really cool to let just anybody do this, the uptown guys took advantage.

'You would see three or four Puerto Rican dudes all around one chick, and the chick would be like [*dizzy abandon*] "Aahhh, this is great!" And them guys would be like, "Yeעהhhh!" There'd be a lot of energy like that, just people rubbin' on each other and shit. I used to be like, "Yo! This is kinda hot!"'

Bambaataa has similar recollections.

'At first, people was buggin' when they first seen the punk rockers. Blacks and Latinos looked at them like they crazy. They had the spikes and the hair, and the colours and all the different clothing, but then when that music hit, you just see *everybody* tearing they ass up dancing.'

Cold Crush were so taken by punk that they recorded 'Punk Rock Rap', one of several records which failed to convert their legendary live shows into a recording career of any note. Cold Crush DJ Charlie Chase remembers the fun of the Roxy, including a night when Bianca Jagger was crowding the DJ booth.

'She was starry eyed, looking at me doing my thing on the turntable. She was fine. She was gorgeous. So I said to Bam, "Who's that chick down there looking at me?" He says, "Yo, that's Bianca Jagger." I says, "Bianca Jagger, you mean Mick Jagger's wife?" He says, "Yeah." I was like, "Shit, we movin' on up now on the pussy scale! We movin' on up now, kid, this is big time!"'

Fab 5 Freddy was another important link between uptown and down. His motivation for bringing the two together was to gain art world respect for graffiti - which had evolved alongside rap music and breakdancing

— and thereby further his own career as a graffiti artist. By the early eighties, Bronx spray-can Picassos were painting startling subway-train-sized masterpieces, and with the patronage of Andy Warhol, serious critical respect was being accorded to Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, who had both started as graffiti artists. The galleries were jumping on this 'street art' fairly quickly, and as he ventured deeper into the art world, meeting people like Glenn O'Brien, editor of Warhol's *Interview*, and Blondie's Chris Stein and Debbie Harry, Freddy soon found himself the Bronx's unofficial cultural ambassador.

This role led him to put together *Wildstyle* with novice director Charlie Ahearn, a film aimed at documenting the nascent world of hip hop. 'I was serious about trying to be a painter, and I wanted this graffiti movement to be seen as a serious movement like Futurism or Dada. I didn't want us to be looked on as folk artists.'

Wildstyle

The birth of hip hop as culture

'I wanted to let people know that this was a complete culture, which I had read somewhere included dance, painting and music. So I wanted this film to be made to demonstrate that this graffiti thing, which was the focus, was a complete culture: that it was related to a form of music and related to a form of dance. Prior to that, nobody had seen these things as being connected.'

He also arranged for DJs to spin at gallery events. Thanks to Freddy, Bambaataa had actually been playing for the downtown art trendies since 1980, considerably before Holman and Blue's Negril and Roxy nights. Of the Bronx DJs, Bam had the closest connections to the downtown club world (as well as being in many of the record pools, his playlist was published in several dance music newsletters) and Freddy brought him down to play in Club 57 on St Mark's Place, the Fun Gallery and the Mudd Club, the after-dark home of post-punk weirdness. Since he was as flamboyant as anyone on this new wave scene in both his outlandish dress sense (P-Funk goes witch doctor) and his musical tastes, Bam couldn't wait to play for them. In fact, he soon started dying his hair green and orange and wearing a mohawk (later, he would team up with Sex Pistol John Lydon for a single, 'World Destruction'). Make no mistake, Afrika Bambaataa was as punk rock as anyone in New York.

Bam downtown

Hip hop and disco

Then there is disco. Musically, hip hop likes to set itself up in opposition to disco. The accepted wisdom is that hip hop was the ghetto's reaction to disco's gayness, its polish and its monotonous beat (all faults which today's hip hop folk are equally happy to ascribe to house). Actually, hip hop's debt to disco as a whole is high (just ask Def Jam mogul Russell Simmons, who was a regular at the Loft and Paradise Garage).



Boxing match — Tina Weymouth of Talking Heads and Tom Tom Club matches her boombox against Flash's, 1981.

In addition to funk, disco was the music the hip hop DJs played in the many years before the scene produced its own tunes. Compare playlists between the Roxy and the Paradise Garage and you'd find a huge number of the same records. You can't get much more disco than Chic's 'Good Times', a record deeply embedded in early hip hop, especially in Flash's career. Bambaataa's first hero was Kool DJ D, who played disco. Flash's earliest inspiration was Pete DJ Jones. Another influential mobile disco jock was Grandmaster Flowers, for whom Fab 5 Freddy has a particular affection. And that's not to mention the DJs like DJ Hollywood and Lovebug Starski, who were important to the development of rap but who were playing largely disco.

A striking parallel underlines the connection. The disco scene had actually developed a prototype version of the quick-mixing style before Flash even owned a pair of decks. Walter Gibbons was renowned for using quick cuts and two copies of the same record to extend favourite passages, and for favouring funky percussion-based tracks. Gibbons' style has often been compared to that of a hip hop DJ. He was doing all this around the same time as Flash, and in all likelihood he was even using some of the

Walter Gibbons

same records. Before Gibbons, Michael Cappello, too, had a reputation for working fast cuts and extending the lightning short intros of that era's songs. Even Francis Grasso, the granddaddy of them all, can claim that as early as 1969 he was picking out drum breaks to excite his dancefloor. *

Finally, without disco it is unlikely that the hip hop scene would have discovered so many of its important vinyl oddities. 'The Mexican', a big Loft record long before it was a hip hop anthem, is a case in point, and there are many more. Bambaataa admits that many of his finds (including the all-important Kraftwerk) came about as a result of tips from the disco-based record pools he eagerly joined.

So, far from rejecting disco as some have suggested, the Bronx DJs simply reformulated it. Think of hip hop as an offshoot of early disco which then grew in parallel – a version of disco's dance revolution tailored to the tastes of the Bronx. The formula 'hip hop = disco + ghetto' isn't too far from the truth.

The end of the old school

Hip hop's first commercial flowerings came at the beginning of the eighties; by the middle of that decade, the music – and its culture – was developing into a very different thing. Though its horizon expanded and records streamed out, much of the original party spirit was fading. Blue and Freddy had taken hip hop on tour to Europe in 1982 and the music was beginning to make its presence felt, exerting influence on other genres. Breakdancing and graffiti were (over)exposed to the world in magazines and TV commercials. Round the corner, the next generation of rappers were honing their lyrics, ready to bring in the complexities of social commentary, hard-knocks reportage and character-filled fictions. Rap's first magnate Russell Simmons would soon spring Run DMC, Def Jam and his ruthless commercial instincts on the scene. KRS 1, Eric B and Rakim, Public Enemy, the Beastie Boys and LL Cool J weren't far behind, not to mention the west coast's gang-obsessed entry into hip hop.

But while the music was establishing itself, its backdrop changed. Many of the new stars had middle class suburban backgrounds, so the focus moved away from the inner city. Clubs like the Roxy closed or changed promoters and were soon violent ghetto outposts rather than happy melting pots. Reaganomics started biting hard, and crack made Bronx neighbourhoods into war zones. Things weren't as much fun as before. It was the end of the old school.

Through these changes, the DJs carried on doing what they knew. And of all the people involved in creating hip hop, it was the DJs who came off worst when the music became commercial. Once there were records

to be produced and stars to be created, the spotlight was firmly on the visible and charismatic MC onstage, not on the guy behind the decks. MCs didn't need a DJ to make records, just a studio and a producer. Most of the first wave of rap records were made using session musicians rather than turntables, and fairly soon there was easy-to-use sampling technology which meant anyone could loop up a sample and recreate the effects of a quick-mixing DJ.

After the old school, the DJs who made names for themselves were mostly famous as producers rather than for playing records, even though this was the source of their skill. From Eric B and Marley Marl, through Pete Rock, Large Professor and Premier, to Dr Dre, the RZA and Prince Paul, to name just a few: these are all artists known for their studio work first and foremost. Hip hop moved decisively into the concert arena and became a performance spectacle more than a dancefloor genre. It maintained a thriving underground club scene, but there are very few hip hop DJs who have risen to fame through playing in clubs (with Funkmaster Flex and perhaps Stretch Armstrong as notable exceptions). Playing in concerts raised the DJ to the status of live musician, but reduced his input to a forty-minute showcase. And eventually there was the dreaded DAT to contend with – mistake-proof digital tapes which all but replaced DJs in live hip hop gigs.

But somehow, the DJ survived.

Turntablism

Hands whipping from one record to the other, stopping lightning fast on the crossfader in between, shoulders dipping slightly in time to the beat, but running no risk of unplanned movement, fingers moving in millimetre-precise formation, each flick or slide or rub controlled to a hair's breadth, and from the speakers a pounding beat with a barrage of 'skribbles and scratches' running in and out of it, the bare bones of a song repeated and repeated and repeated, then let go, dropping into the climax of another.

The hip hop DJ's skills were showy enough to be pursued as an end in themselves, and as the rapper and the DAT stole the attention from the DJ, this is exactly what happened. The essential elements of hip hop DJing were distilled until it became an art form almost completely detached from its original dancefloor function.

It all starts with the scratch. With this technique, instead of playing records, or even recognisable parts of records, the DJ was able to chop previously recorded music up so finely that he was manipulating sounds – discrete notes or beats or noises – to make compositions, just like any other musician. In the hands of a skilled 'turntablist', as these DJs eventually became

known, the record deck became a genuine musical instrument. Indeed, with a recent surge of interest in this form of DJing, there are now several ensembles who play multiple turntables as bands – each DJ/musician laying down component basslines, rhythms and lines of melody until a whole song is constructed. Some have even created systems of turntablist musical notation.

'Manipulating sound with just your hand is like a miracle,' urges DJ Q-Bert of San Francisco's Invisibl Skratch Piklz crew, one of today's best-known scratch DJs. 'The basic root of scratching is that the turntable is a musical instrument: you're figuring out all these time signatures and rhythms and patterns and notes.'

Rob Swift of the X-Men (now, for superhero legal reasons, the X-ecutioners), another leading turntablist, agrees: 'With the turntable you can create your own rhythms and sounds. In other words, the turntable can adapt or mimic the violin, the drum, the guitar, the bass. The turntable can morph into almost any instrument. Out of the turntable you can coax high pitches, you can coax low pitches, there are notes involved. If you move the speed a certain way you can create slow noises and fast noises. There are so many things you can do with the turntable, it's definitely an instrument.'

At times, though, these scratch DJs seemed in danger of becoming obsessed hobbyists, vying with each other in increasingly esoteric competitions. What saved them from becoming completely isolated was that they were in a very real sense keeping alive the traditions of the 'old school' of hip hop pioneers. While hip hop culture was moving fast into the mainstream, the turntablist DJ was preserving the music's roots.

By showing off his tricks, the hip hop DJ retained his status as a star performer and preserved an important aspect of the old school: the battle. Back in the Bronx, the most skilled DJs had been like feudal champions, and even when hip hop left the park for the concert hall, a rap group would find time in their show for the DJ to flex his muscles. In later years, the competition between DJs was formalised in showcase events. DMC (Disco Mix Club), a British-based DJ organisation and the founders of dance magazine *Mixmag*, has been staging global competitions since 1987. The New Music Seminar (NMS), a New York music industry forum, ran a well-respected contest for many years. The International Turntablist Federation (ITF) is a more recent grass-roots collective with aims to gain 'industry awareness in the future and development of the turntable as a musical instrument'; its contest has been rapidly gaining ground since starting in 1996. These competitions, filled with fast-scratching demons showing off the latest techniques, have kept much of the music's original DJ-based spirit alive. And following

DMC
Compe-
titions

a recent resurgence of instrumental hip hop, interest in scratch DJing is greater and more global than ever.

Turntablism (the name was actually coined as late as 1995) had been envisaged many years before hip hop's DJs made it a reality. The idea of playing recorded sound like an instrument has existed almost as long as sound recording itself.

French composer Pierre Schaeffer was the founding member of the avant-garde *musique concrète* school, which aimed to create music from natural sounds rather than with musical instruments. Through the forties and fifties, Schaeffer and his friends searched for new ways to record, play back and combine everyday sounds. Schaeffer experimented mainly with the new technology of magnetic tape, but he also messed around with turntables (he, of course, knew them as 'gramophones'). Using a group of record players and a series of specially cut discs containing various captured sounds (some of which had been looped), he would produce a musical performance by changing the discs and adjusting the speed and volume controls.

American avant-garde composer John Cage had envisioned turntablism even before Schaeffer. Cage, who wrote that 'Percussion music is revolution', had once performed a piece called 'Cartridge Music' that involved rubbing a gramophone cartridge against various unlikely things. And in 1937, in a speech to a Seattle arts society, he praised the wonders of record-playing technology in highly prescient terms.

'With a phonograph, it is now possible to control any one of these sounds and give to it rhythms within or beyond the reach of imagination. Given four phonographs, we can compose and perform a quartet for explosive motor, wind, heartbeat and landslide.'

Grand Wizard Theodore

Though they acknowledge these conceptual antecedents, turntablists trace their practical roots to hip hop's pioneer DJs, notably Grand Wizard Theodore, who, as we've seen, discovered the basic scratch noise – or at least figured that it could be used creatively – and Grandmaster Flash, who as well as exploring the possibilities of scratching started the craze for doing body tricks such as scratching with his elbow or using his belly to move the crossfader. There were in fact other, lesser-known DJs who came upon the idea of scratching, including a young spinner called DJ Tyrone who played the breaks for a mobile disco set-up of Cool DJ D. Tyrone, now all but forgotten, would do the simplest of scratching, just rocking the first beat of 'Apache' back and forth before starting the song, or catching a break on the beat and doing a few *zik-zak* scratches before letting it go again.

MUSIQUE
CONCRÈTE

John
Cage's
'Cartridge
Music'

*
DJ
Tyrone

'That's all he would do,' recalls Zulu DJ Grandmixer D.ST. 'But it was so dope, because nobody ever did it before. That's all he did, but it was enough to go, "Ohhh, shit!"'

It is Grand Wizard Theodore, however, who most turntablists regard as their forefather. Theodore, surprisingly modest about his contributions, feels it was his adventurousness which set him apart.

'All the other DJs played music the same old way – "Bongo Rock" or "Dance To The Drummer's Beat", they played it the same way. I was like, "You gotta be different." That's why I started scratching and trying to do tricks with the records. It was so that people can look and say, "Wow! This guy's really into it; he's not just putting one record after another – he's actually giving us a show."'

D.ST is less reserved about Theodore's talents.

'He was phenomenal, and he was a prodigy. He was so skilled so young, it was ridiculous. It was effortless, his cutting ability. And remember he was a student of Flash, and Flash was a definite technician, but there was something about Theodore that made him different.'

He puts this down to Theodore's highly expressive style.

'Without opening his mouth, he was articulate. He was physically articulate, in his gestures, and in his ability to be so precise, and synchronise. The way he would physically move – it was an expression. It may be esoteric to most, but I understood what he was saying. I'm a DJ and it was a language that I understood.'

D.ST and 'Rockit'

D.ST would himself have an important role to play, showing that scratching could have a melodic as well as a purely rhythmic impact. Beginning his musical career as a drummer in local Bronx party bands, Derek Showard (named D.ST, or D.St. for the fact that he hung out on Manhattan's Delancey Street) had been a regular DJ at the Roxy.

'By that time I was off the hook,' he recalls. 'I was doing all kinds of crazy tricks and stunts. I did everything but blow up the turntable. I was running around the place, coming back and cutting on beat with no headphones on. Breakdancing, kicking the mixer, everything.'

Jean Karakos of electro label Celluloid hired him for a series of DJ gigs in Paris, and here D.ST's turntable dexterity brought him to the attention of jazz keyboardist Herbie Hancock and earned him pride of place in the grooves of Hancock's 1983 single, 'Rockit'.

This, more than any other track, was what propelled scratching into the world's consciousness. Aided by a great Godley & Creme video of sexy, robotic legs, it helped break MTV's de facto 'No black music' policy

and was a very visible video hit, even if it only reached no.71 (it was no.8 in the UK).

And D.ST's contribution was central to the song. He was providing more than just a few flourishes: his scratches were proper rhythmic, melodic elements – notes. Based on ideas he had recorded previously on his own single 'Grand Mixer Cuts It Up', his scratching on 'Rockit' was a series of climactic manipulations of part of Fab 5 Freddy's record 'Une Sale Histoire (Change The Beat)'. As it wove expertly between the bassline and melody, D.ST's urgent, insistent vinyl percussion was the essence of the record. Judged as 1983's Best R&B Instrumental Performance, 'Rockit' also gave D.ST the honour of being the first DJ to win a Grammy.

Following 'Rockit', he was given a place in Hancock's band, both on tour and in the studio, but it took a long time for the other musicians to treat him as an equal. The penny didn't drop until during a rehearsal when they were badgering Hancock about a particular passage that actually D.ST had created.

'There was some trouble with the song, and they were asking Herbie – I think Herbie was just a little annoyed that day anyway – but they were saying, "Hey, Herbie, this part?" And he said, "Yo, man, don't ask me, ask him, he did the damn song."'

However, D.ST didn't feel fully accepted as an artist until veteran producer Quincy Jones paid him a visit. 'He took a chair, spun it around backwards and sat in front of me and said, "Go ahead, play." Just like that. And when I finished, he picked me up and gave me a bear hug, then it was official for me. He said, "That's some dope shit you doin', that shit is so bad, it's incredible." He said, "You playin' triplets. You playin' a lot of triplets." He was talking music. I was like, "Yeah, I play triplets."'

'Buffalo Gals'

Though 'Rockit', by virtue of its MTV visibility, was most people's introduction to scratching, two important scratch-based records had preceded it. Flash's 'Adventures On The Wheels Of Steel' was crucial, as we've noted earlier, but another record was more widely heard, at least in Britain, than even the Grandmaster's finest hour. Malcolm McLaren's 'Buffalo Gals', produced by Trevor Horn, reached no.9 in the UK chart in late 1982.

The infectious single was the first release from McLaren's album *Duck Rock*. A plundered collage based on a western square dance song by one Peyote Pete, McLaren's version showcased the hip hop sound he had heard in the Bronx, notably the scratching talents of the World's Famous Supreme Team.

By day the Supreme Team – Just Allah The Superstar and C Divine The Mastermind – were a pair of Times Square rogues; by night they became rapping black nationalist DJs on obscure uptown radio station WHBL. Without really knowing what their contribution would be, McLaren brought the duo over to London where, despite some expensive studio shenanigans, they proved to be the essential cement that brought together his sprawling project. When the album was released, McLaren included on the sleeve notes some brief instructions on how to breakdance, as well as this helpful introduction to scratching:

'The performance by the Supreme Team may require some explaining but suffice to say, they are DJs from New York City who have developed a technique using record players like instruments, replacing the power chord of the guitar by the needle of a gramophone, moving it manually backwards and forwards across the surface of a record. We call it "scratching".'

By the mid eighties, hip hop DJ techniques, and scratching in particular, had had a dramatic effect on record production and a rash of scratch-like techniques were being used, made extremely easy by the emergence of the sampler. In the US, Steinski, aka advertising copywriter Steve Stein, used the concept of scratching to produce a series of records built around arresting collages of sound. In the UK the scene was greatly energised by these new ideas and many followed suit. And although the over-use of stuttering, cut-up vocals served to date many a pop dance remix of the time, important new possibilities were becoming clear.

Scratching as a concept was so influential that its impact spread even beyond music. It is possible to see it in the graphic design of the period, and given the new affordability of video equipment at the time, we were even treated to the new 'art form' of video scratching, a precursor to TV's now ubiquitous fast-edits.

Transforming and beat-juggling

Turntablism's next big step came when a pair of Philadelphia DJs found that by cleverly manipulating the mixer's crossfader switch, a basic scratch could be chopped up in all sorts of new ways. 'Transforming', as this was called, made the scratch far more flexible and percussive, and gave the DJ more precise control over the sound. From here a whole vocabulary of techniques evolved.

Said to have been first practised by DJ Spinbad, also from Philly, transforming was perfected through heated competition between DJs Cash Money and Jazzy Jeff. Cash Money showcased the transform to great effect in 1988, winning the DMC world DJ championships in the process.

* Jazzy Jeff (DJ for the Fresh Prince, aka Hollywood golden boy Will Smith) was the first to put it on record, in 'The Magnificent Jazzy Jeff'.

'They brought out all these weird styles and ways of scratching that had never been done before,' explains Q-Bert. 'When transforming came out it just flipped the whole scratching world around.'

Today there is rarely anything like a simple scratch. A dedicated turntablist would be able to tell you the difference between the chirp, the tweak, the scribble, the tear, and the stab (or chop), not to mention the more advanced techniques of the transform – the hydroplane, the flare (a reverse transform), the orbit or the twiddle. The crab, a tricky technique which Q-Bert introduced in 1996, is worth describing to give an idea of the complexity involved in all this. To do a crab, your thumb pushes the crossfader to one side while your four fingers (of the same hand) each push it back momentarily to the other. And this is done in just a fraction of a second, while your other hand is doing something equally difficult with the actual record.

Now, if all this talk of scratching is making you itch, you might want to sit down . . . because in 1990 a whole new – and even more complicated – arena was opened up when 'beat juggling' was invented.

Beat juggling goes a step further than scratching. Instead of using a relatively long noise (a scratch) for your rhythm and cutting it up with the crossfader to make a percussion sound, you use a record's individual drum beats more or less intact, juggling them, as the name suggests, to construct new and untold percussion patterns.

Roc Raida, another of the X-Men/X-ecutioners, explains with deceptive simplicity: 'Beat juggling is taking two records, and just rearranging the beat.' He clicks on his gold-plated Technics (his prize as 1995 DMC world champion) and demonstrates. With a flurry of little jet-fast moves, he flicks around with two breakbeat records. The result is an impossibly complex pattern of improvised drumming; he seems to be able to put each beat exactly where he wants it. As if that isn't enough, he then speeds up the pattern in a ballistic sequence of funky syncopation and double beats. It sounds, of course, nothing like the original records. Without a doubt, this is an act of musical creativity.

Beat juggling was pioneered by 'The Cut Technician' Steve D, who introduced it at the NMS Superman battle for world supremacy in 1990, and his mentor 'The Cut Producer' Barry B from Doug E Fresh's Get Fresh crew. Roc remembers the astonishment it caused at the NMS competition. 'People were just fucked up, like all the judges that were on the panel. Like Ritchie Rich, DJ Scratch, all the popular DJs at that time were just fucked up. "Oaawww, what the hell is he doing?"' Steve D won a hands-down victory and used his sudden notoriety to found the X-Men, for many years the pre-eminent scratch crew.

Beat juggling is really no more than a superfast version of the basic

beat
juggling

lol
video
'scratch-
ing'

TRANS-
FORMING *

spinback techniques developed by Grandmaster Flash. The key move is the loop, in which a short drum pattern is repeated and repeated. The other important moves are the breakdown, a manual slowing down of a drum pattern whereby the DJ halts the record in between each beat; and the fill, where beats from a second record are added to the first to give double or triple beats or an echo effect. It's all reminiscent of the early days when one measure of a DJ's skill was how fast he could cut between two copies of Chic's 'Good Times'. D.ST remembers one of Herc's DJs, a guy named Imperial JC, who could catch it faster than anyone.

JC was also the fastest out of everybody. Out of *everybody*. JC was the first person to go "Good . . . good . . . good . . . good . . ." with "Good Times". I got this fast: "Good times . . . good times . . . good times . . . good times . . ." I remember the first night I seen him do that and I went [*sharp intake of breath*] "I gotta go home and practise."

Today's beat jugglers – who practise and practise and practise – can do even better. D.ST recalls judging a DJing competition alongside Flash, and the two being blown away by the phenomenal skills on show.

'I love to go to these new DJ battles and see these guys, 'cos now it's off the hook!' he enthuses. 'To actually know that you have inspired a genre, a whole movement . . . I look at these guys and I think, "We started that shit." It's incredible what these guys took from us, and there's no end to it.'

Turntablism seems to be finally shedding its image as a cryptic cult. All-turntable crews such as the Invisibl Skratch Piklz, the X-ecutioners and the UK's Scratch Perverts are performing as bands and the emphasis seems finally to be on what the finished product sounds like, rather than how many zillion flicks of the wrist a DJ can manage.

As Q-Bert puts it: 'Before, when it was just a baby, it couldn't express itself in too many ways. You couldn't have a whole album of just the same baby talk. But now it's maturing. It's twenty years old, I guess it's becoming of legal age, so there's a lot more intelligence put into it, it's got much more of an intellectual life to it now, it can express itself in many more ways.'

Digging

Another arena of DJ competition taken to new heights is crate digging, the DJ's endless search for funky breaks that no one else knows about. DJ Shadow (Josh Davis) led the way for a new breed of DJ by building a whole recording career entirely from existing records. Shadow will happily spend days in cellars below the Mason-Dixon line searching for rare and unusual vinyl.

As a kid, he collected comic books. 'I have a collector gene in my

blood. I suppose in some ways, it's obsessive compulsive,' he admits. 'But I have this fear that one day I won't be able to bring records in through the door any more. You know used record stores *are* closing down. So I want to make sure I'm not caught playing the last record and I don't have *any* more new records to play.'

It was natural that once every Meters album had been wrung dry and James Brown had been sampled to within an inch of his pompadour, DJs and producers would turn their attention to the rest of the world. These days anything is fair game, from Turkish pop records, Indian disco and, of course, funk 45s, the basic tool of the hip hop producer. For the DJ the motivation is clear – to look for records no one else has. For the DJ/producer there's also money to be made. Hip hop is now a billion-dollar industry and the best breaks and rarest records come at a premium. In the summer of 2005 (in what may or may not have been a publicity stunt), it was widely reported that rapper Nas had paid production duo the Neptunes \$2 million for a beat.

Even without these motivations, there's something aggressively addictive about the search for rare vinyl. 'You're constantly looking for the best record ever, that you've never heard before,' says northern soul collector Guy Hennigan. 'But you don't want to find it, because once you've got it you haven't got the best record in the world,' he laughs. 'I have a backing track I'm looking for which is my main aim, ever, and I hope I never find it. But I hope nobody else does. If anybody else gets it I'll just fuckin' spit.'

The most obsessed diggers will go to any length to find elusive tunes. Convinced there was rare US vinyl to find, Hennigan rushed to Vietnam straight after the war, the first week that travel restrictions were lifted. 'I was rooting about in snakes in this fuckin' cellar. You'd chuck a chicken down for the snake occasionally.' He didn't find anything.

Collector Keb Darge deliberately brought the maniacal acquisitiveness of his first passion, northern soul, to the funk scene. 'If you didn't bring it in you'd be playing the same old shite and it would become a revival scene,' he argues. 'It's exactly the same as northern. They need new records, new discoveries.' The market in funk 45s has rocketed thanks to the digging exploits of DJ/collectors like Shadow and Darge. In 2004 a collector in Essex paid a staggering \$4,293 for Arthur Monday's 'What Goes Around Comes Around', an excruciatingly rare (but rather average) funk 45.

Digging goes back to the noble role of the DJ as a record promoter and musical evangelist, rescuing forgotten songs by never-heard artists or long-forgotten producers, maybe putting them in a mix or on a compilation so this lost music can live again. Digging can even help

resurrect an artist's career, as happened for David Axelrod, or shine a light on forgotten albums, as the Finders Keepers label did with Jean-Claude Vannier's *L'Enfant Assassin Des Mouches* or Motel did with their reissue of Gary Wilson's privately pressed (and fantastic) *You Think You Really Know Me*.

DJ Shadow considers it urban archaeology. 'Sometimes, looking through records in a unique place in the country or in the world, there is an electrical charge that I get. You feel like you're doing something noble.' Who knows what amazing music lies utterly forgotten to the world? Who else but an obsessed DJ would try to rescue it? 'There've been basements where there are rats running around, water seeping in from the Michigan River and you're knee deep in it and you're just sitting there thinking, "shit, this is my one shot to get in here and rescue stuff."' "

Thirty years of hip hop

When it first came to mainstream attention, most people wrote hip hop off as nothing more than a novelty. Hardly anyone, even those on the scene, thought it would grow into an enduring influence on the world's music. Richard Grabel was one of the few believers. When he started writing about hip hop in 1979, he saw in it a formidable depth of commitment and musical understanding.

'Part of it was being able to see the dedication that these kids had,' he recalls. 'You'd see them coming to the Negril to breakdance and they had really practised. You'd see Bambaataa or Flash come and do a DJ set and it was obvious that it wasn't something they'd just thrown together. The crates of records that they were lugging down to these clubs spoke of a real collector's and connoisseur's knowledge of music that was deep, and wide. Hearing those DJs made me think, "Wow, it's not just throw your hands in the air and let's throw a party". These guys really had a deep knowledge of musical history.'

Today, hip hop has long been the dominant force in music. It overtook America's next biggest-selling genre – country – in 1999, with sales of eighty-one million CDs, tapes and albums. It's a thoroughly international form today, and rapping can be heard in just about any language. Nigeria is producing some great tunes; in New Zealand, Maori rap is a potent force. Once it left the US hip hop found its greatest echo in France, where the curling lyrical panache of French made this offshoot altogether distinct. Bred in the ghettos of *les banlieues* around Paris, French kids of African descent like MC Solaar and the charmingly named Nique Ta Mère (Fuck Your Mother) showed what could be done with a bag full of beats and a head full of rage.

Beyond music, hip hop's vast cultural influence can be seen throughout the world in the fashions it has spawned, and the way it made black American English a global vernacular. In the mid eighties, Cornell West, one of many sociologists intrigued by hip hop's rise, asked himself, 'Where will rap end up?' His answer was telling: 'Where most postmodern American products end up: highly packaged, regulated, distributed, circulated and consumed.'

Such is hip hop's mastery of marketing that today image has almost replaced music, which, with few exceptions, is a super-commercialized parody of itself. After thirty-five years of rap's escalating bragging it's no surprise that its early wit has been knuckled out by crass materialism. These days we're as fascinated by Kanye West's yacht as we are by his lyrics. But there's no doubting hip hop's cultural power. Kanye's predecessor as hip hop kingpin, Sean 'Diddy' Combs, bragged a decade ago that hip hop was becoming so powerful that in five years his endorsement might swing a presidential election. And indeed, on election eve in 2012, with Barack Obama facing an uncertain result, at his final rally in the swing state of Ohio Jay-Z was up on the mic nudging him to victory over Mitt Romney, rapping, 'I got ninety-nine problems but Mitt ain't one.'

All this from just two turntables and a crate of your mom and pop's old records.

12.12.19
Sweeping
generational
SATIATION.