

MAKING NOISE

A four-part series exploring black culture in entertainment

hiP hOP



Pioneers of the rap scene, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five took the new genre to the people, giving hip hop critical and commercial credibility.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ELEKTRA RECORDS

the message

Hip-hop's influence rises from the streets to the charts

BY JIM WALSH
STAFF WRITER

It's tagging, spinning and breaking. It's B-boys and fly girls. It encompasses funk, techno, rap and everything in between. Quite simply, it is hip hop, a genre that has come to mean more things to more people than its originators ever imagined.

But where did it all begin, and how has this once-obscurer, bombastic art form come to be so celebrated?

The roots of the music are tangled and elusive. Many have been proclaimed the originator, the first or even the godfather of the style. But, as a rule, the genre belongs not to one man, but to every man.

"It's not correct to say that any one person was the originator," said Negar Mottahedeh, a professor of literature at Duke University who teaches a course titled, "Fight the Power: Hip-Hop."

Of the many artists who made their mark at house parties and impromptu street jams in the early years of hip hop, two stand out.

DJ Kool Herc, raised in the Caribbean, was one of the first artists to manipulate records on turntables. He used techniques such as back-spinning to create sounds — wikka, wikka, wah — that spiced up U.S. records imported from New Orleans and Miami during the '50s.

When he came to the Bronx in the early '70s, DJ Kool Herc became acquainted with "the godfather of hip hop" and founder of Zulu Nation, Afrika Bambaataa.

Bambaataa, who first gained notoriety as the ruff-and-tumble leader of a Bronx gang, revolutionized the genre by infusing it with techno and electronic beats. According to one legend, he also coined the term hip hop, using it on a flyer to announce a house party.

Another hip-hop front-runner, Grandmaster Flash, got started in the genre after watching DJ Kool Herc spin records.

The music spread, from house party to house party, in grassroots fashion. It grew and, with the support of the people, eventually hit the main-

stream when Sugarhill Gang released the hit single "Rapper's Delight" in 1979, selling more than two million copies.

Even today, in the face of opposition from both conservative groups and the mass media, hip hop is one of the highest selling musical genres, second only to rock, according to a 2002 consumer report by the Recording Industry Association of America.

"Hip hop is the most important vehicle of African-American youth," said Grant Farred, a professor of literature at Duke University who also teaches a hip-hop class. "It is never static; it's always reinventing itself."

The music inevitably has changed since the first records hit turntables almost 30 years ago.

There was a time when the DJ who spun the discs was considered more important than the MC, who rapped over the tracks.

Beginning in the early '80s, though, MCs literally took center stage. The now-famous rappers Run-D.M.C. were among the first to take charge of the mic, dropping visceral rhymes on their eponymous LP "Raising Hell" in 1986. In that same year, the Def Jam record label was born, providing the foundation of early '90s east coast hip hop.

Then came the anomalies. Beginning hip-hop's legacy as an inclusive art form, the sultry females of Salt-N-Pepa scored a hit with "Push It," and three Jewish kids from Brooklyn cashed

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