



Fordham University
DigitalResearch@Fordham

Occasional Essays


Bronx African American History Project

10-28-2019

Why Hip Hop Began in the Bronx- Lecture for C-Span

Mark Naison

Follow this and additional works at: https://fordham.bepress.com/baahp_essays

 Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [American Popular Culture Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), and the [Ethnomusicology Commons](#)

Why Hip Hop Began in the Bronx- My Lecture for C-Span

What I am about to describe to you is one of the most improbable and inspiring stories you will ever hear. It is about how young people in a section of New York widely regarded as a site of unspeakable violence and tragedy created an art form that would sweep the world. It is a story filled with ironies, unexplored connections and lessons for today. And I am proud to share it not only with my wonderful Rock and Roll to Hip Hop class but with C-Span's global audience through its lectures in American history series.

Before going into the substance of my lecture, which explores some features of Bronx history which many people might not be familiar with, I want to explain what definition of Hip Hop that I will be using in this talk.

Some people think of Hip Hop exclusively as "rap music," an art form taken to its highest form by people like Tupac Shakur, Missy Elliot, JZ, Nas, Kendrick Lamar, Wu Tang Clan and other masters of that verbal and musical art, but I am thinking of it as a multilayered arts movement of which rapping is only one component. What evolved in the Bronx in the early and mid 70's, and which spread to disfranchised communities around the world in the 80's, consisted of four connected components: DJ'ing and beat making, the original art form which set the Hip Hop Revolution in motion; B-Boying or Break Dancing, a form of acrobatic group dancing that bore more than a few commonalities with martial arts; Graffiti art, a form of illegal public art and self-expression which found its way into flyers announcing hip hop events as well as on buildings and transportation systems, and finally, Mc'ing or rapping, rhyming over beats in a style that could vary from the boastful, to the reflective to the assertively political.

ALL of these art forms, which emerged in the Bronx in the middle and late 70's, spread around the world TOGETHER, disseminated by film and music video, and can be found today in almost every city in the world in one form or another.

Let me give an example of this. When I was first brought to Berlin to lecture about Bronx Hip Hop Culture in 2005, my hosts took me to an abandoned school in the Kreuzberg section of that city which had been turned into a community center. I was stunned by the visual image it projected. Almost every surface inside and outside the building was covered by elaborate, multicolored, murals in the style of the graffiti art that covered subway trains in New York in the 70's and 80's. Clearly, in this section of Berlin what was still seen as "vandalism" among many New Yorkers was prized as an expressive art form to be encouraged among young people in poor and immigrant neighborhoods. Secondly, I was taken to a "break dance" class where young women, some of them wearing hijabs, were learning dance moves perfected among B-Boys and b-girls in the Bronx 40 years before. Finally, I was shown a state of the art music studio where beat makers and rappers were producing original music in which the language of choice varied between German, Turkish and English.

And this was not the only place where I saw the four arts forms of hip hop honored this way. I saw the same glorification of the “four elements of hip hop” in three other community centers in Belrin, most of them serving immigrants from Turkey, the Middle East and Eastern Europe; as well as comparable community centers in Barcelona, Spain. In all of these places, as well as their counterparts in Paris, Havana, Rio De Janeiro, Rome, Tokyo and even Hanoi, the art forms of hip hop are being cultivated with love and respect and transmitted to new generations of youth, all with the understanding that THEY STARTED IN THE BRONX.

So today for everyone here, and for everyone around the world who loves Hip Hop, I address the questions WHY? Why did Hip Hop as a multidimensional art form start in the Bronx, and why did it spread.

In answering this question, I am going to look at three different variables. 1. The Unique Cultural Capital of the Bronx and Its People which derived from immigration and the mixing of cultures. 2. The tragedies which befell the Bronx in the 1960's and 1970's, once regarded as unique, which were to hit many other cities and communities in subsequent years. And 3. The easy accessibility of the Bronx to Harlem, Mid-town Manhattan and the Village and the Lower East Side which culture makers and entrepreneurs were in a position to publicize and market Bronx Hip Hop when they became aware of its revolutionary potential.

Before going into the underlying factors shaping Bronx Hip Hop in more depth, let me give you a brief hip hop timeline. Most scholars think that the big bang which launched hip hop took place at the parties held by Cindy Campbell and her brother, Clive Campbell, aka Kool DJ Herc, at the community center of a Mitchell Lama housing complex 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in 1973. There, Herc discovered that dancers at his parties would go crazy if he used two turn tables and a mixer to fuse the 15-20 second percussive sessions of popular records- which he called “break beats”- into 10 minutes of pure percussion. After several hugely successful parties at the community center, Herc decided to take his sound system into a public park 10 blocks north of his house, Cedar Park, using electricity from the bottom of a lamp post. Thousands of young people came to these outdoor jams, which were not broken up by police even though they were done without a permit, and other talented DJ's in the Bronx decided to follow his example. Among these were a former gang leader from the Bronx River Houses who called himself Afrika Bambaata, and young man from Morrissania trained in electronics at a vocational high school who called himself “Grand Master Flash.” By 1976, parties where DJ's competed with one another to create the most danceable interludes using break beats from records where taking place all over the Bronx, in parks, in community centers, in abandoned buildings. At these parties, dance competitions between crews using innovative steps taken from martial arts movies, Latin dancing and James Brown moves became common occurrences, almost to the point where they were as much part of the event as the DJ's. Soon, the DJ's began starting to distinguish from one another by commandeering street poets to rhyme over their beats and by the late 70s the artistry of the rappers was starting to gain as much attention as the DJ's and the dancers. By now, the parties were starting to spread into private clubs and dance halls as well as parks and community centers, places like Disco Fever and the Stardust Ballroom and people from other parts of the city were starting to take notice. Then, in 1979, a record entrepreneur from Englewood New Jersey named

Sylvia Robinson, who had once been a singer and club owner in the Bronx, decided to record some of the music. She put out a record called "Rappers Delight" which almost went platinum, and set music industry minds to thinking there were new business opportunities to be found in this Bronx based art form. Within five years, scores of rap records were being produced, some with their own music videos, and mass market films were produced which highlighted the Bronx setting for hip hop as well as the DJing, the rapping, the break dancing and the graffiti which were all integral parts of the scene. As a result hip hop in all four of its forms spread around the city, the nation and the world, almost always in places where there were large numbers of young people who felt disfranchised and marginalized.

So that's the broad story. Why the Bronx?

Let's look first at the population of the Bronx and the sonic universe they lived in prior to hip hop.

Well before the emergence of hip hop, several neighborhoods in the South Bronx had a mixture of cultures and traditions that made them unique in New York City and the nation and fostered a remarkable legacy of musical creativity. During the 1930's 1940's and 1950's, two largely Jewish working class neighborhoods in the South Bronx, Morrisania and Hunts point, were peacefully integrated by three population streams coming from Harlem and East Harlem- African Americans originally from the US South; West Indians from Anglophone Caribbean countries like Jamaica, Antigua and Barbadoes; and Spanish speaking peoples coming from Puerto Rico, Cuba, Honduras and Panama. Each of these peoples brought their own musical traditions to the neighborhoods, schools and housing projects they lived in and over times these traditions fused and morphed in the most remarkable ways. By the 1950's, the clubs and theaters and churches and schools in these were places where you could hear Afro Cuban music and mambo, doo wop and rhythm and blues, bee bop and Dixieland jazz and calypso. By the 1960's, these forms had begun to evolve and change as American born youth began to transform them, giving rise to salsa, funk and Latin soul!

Nowhere in New York or the US were there as many people of the African Diaspora living together in the same apartment buildings and housing projects and the result was a unique sonic universe where melodies and songs in different languages took place to a back drop of powerful percussion.

But people didn't just listen- they DANCED- in their homes, in their clubs, in schools and in the streets! And people shared their dance traditions. If you grew up in the South Bronx, whether you were Black, Latino or White, you danced Latin! And if you were Latino, you probably slow danced to the Drifters and fast danced to James Brown.

In the South Bronx, music and dancing were everywhere and nothing was more prized than music that forced you to dance because of the powerful beats. For thirty years before the first hip hop jam, the Bronx was swaying to the multiple rhythms of the African Disapora, indoors and outdoors, in parks and schoolyards in clubs and community centers, and in the streets where people took their record players out in summer months for block parties and outdoor jams.

So when Kool Herc had his “big bang” and created ten to fifteen minutes of pure percussion at the 1520 Sedgwick Community Center, the young people of the Bronx were not only predisposed to respond to it joyously, they were prepared to dance to it just like their parents and grandparents had done, albeit in somewhat different conditions.

However, in doing so, they were the beneficiaries of a Gang Truce which took place in 1971 at the Hoe Avenue Boys Club, allowing young people to move safely from neighborhood to neighborhood for the first time in many years. Engineered by Benjy Melendez of the "Ghetto Brothers" and incorporating the leaders of the Bronx's most feared gangs, the Black Spades, the Savage Skulls and the Savage Nomads, the truce put an end to the violent policing of Bronx streets by gangs which led to multiple deaths and injuries and left many young people afraid to leave their neighborhoods and even their blocks. Without this truce, very few people would have dared leave neighborhoods such as Morrisania, Soundview or Mott Haven to head to the far reaches of the West Bronx where Herc held his parties. Even before Hip Hop was created and spread, young people in the Bronx were shaping their own destinies by trying to reduce violence in the face of drug epidemics, fires, disinvestment, and cuts to city services

Which brings us to another element of the “Cultural Capital” of the Bronx that helped it spawn hip hop- a new wave of Caribbean immigration that followed the drastic relaxation of immigration quotas in 1965. Clive and Cindy Campbell were among the more than 10,000 Jamaican immigrants who came to the Bronx between 1965 and 1975, bringing with them among other things, the “Sound System” culture of that country which had helped spawn Ska, Rock Steady and Reggae. Young people like Clive and Cindy Campbell came from a society where people made extra cash by sponsoring parties with huge loud amplifiers and speakers, often in outdoor spaces, playing the most popular records, all the while “toasting” over the sounds. It is that tradition that Campbell and his sister brought to 1520 Sedgwick with the loudest sound system anyone had ever heard. But the sound system alone couldn’t excite the crowds. Campbell combined the power of his amplifiers with something they had never heard before, something that made them dance with a power and a frenzy they had never done before, a sound which both reflected the percussive traditions they had grown up with and the harsh sonic universities of communities where buildings were burning, fire engines and police sirens were moaning, and the windows of cars and buildings were being shattered.

Campbell, when he created crashing percussive riffs at full volume, was capturing the sounds of communities experiencing a set of tragic circumstances that at the time were seen as unique to the Bronx, but would soon spread throughout the nation and the world. So let us turn from Cultural Capital to Tragedy. Because Hip Hop, as much as blues or gospel, was a case of people who created musical innovations amidst extraordinary hardship.

Tragedy As Opportunity

During the very years that Hip Hop emerged in the Bronx, large portions of the borough were hit by and arson and abandonment cycle that left scores of once thriving communities in ruins and produced a loss of housing stock and population rivaling that of cities hit by aerial bombardment. Morrisania and Hunts Point, the two Bronx communities responsible for much of the borough's musical creativity, lost 50 percent and 60 percent of their populations respectively and fully 40 percent of the housing stock of the South Bronx was destroyed. But the fires and abandoned buildings were only one component of the tragedy. Because of the NY City fiscal crisis, not only were fire and police services drastically cut in the borough, but the great music programs and after school programs in Bronx schools were shut down as a result of budget, depriving young people of the borough of the opportunity to learn how the play musical instruments and showcase their musical skills the way their parents and grand parents generation had done.

Yet while the creation and performance of instrumental music in the Bronx by young people suffered from these multiple tragedies- as the Bronx would no longer lead the nation in performance of jazz, Latin music, rhythm and blues or funk- at least not until some of the music programs were restored at the beginning of the 21st century, it did not suppress the impulse to musical creativity! Rather, budget cuts and disinvestment directed that impulse through channels no one had predicted or anticipated, using turntables, mixers, records, sound systems, and vocal poetry to create something that the older generation neither welcomed nor predicted, but would end up sweeping the world.

How did hip hop thrive in tragedy? First of all, let's look at how it was disseminated. After Herc's first parties, hip hop largely spread through the Bronx as a result of outdoor parties held in schoolyards and parks with electricity drawn from lamp posts, all done illegally! Why were these parties allowed? Because given how the NYC Police Department had been reduced in size by budget cuts, and given all the forms of violence taking place in the Bronx, police made a decision to allow outdoor hip hop parties to take place even when making huge amounts of noise and lasting well into the night, as long as no one was being shot or stabbed at the events. Did people complain? Hell yes. The noise drove nearby apartment dwellers crazy. But police ignored those complaints so long as the gatherings remained peaceful. Basically, scores of illegal outdoor parties, attracting thousands of people, were allowed to take place because in the 1970's, the Bronx was viewed as such a war zone that such gatherings had to be tolerated. Ten years earlier, or twenty years later, such gatherings would have been shut down had they lasted that far into the night

The same thing was true of the graffiti arts that accompanied the rise of hip hop and were regarded as one of the 4 elements of hip hop. Police and transit budget cuts in the 1970's up into the 1980's made it impossible to keep graffiti writers from tagging trains or whitewashing their masterpieces after they went up. Just as hip hop parties thrived outside the law, so did graffiti art, and the two paralleled one another. Amidst what many New Yorkers regarded as lawlessness and chaos, new musical and visual art forms arose, spread and ultimately took such a compelling form as to inspire imitators around the nation and around the world.

Even rioting helped the spread of Hip Hop. When New York City was hit by a blackout in 1977, every major business district in the Bronx was looted, especially the Hub, Tremont Avenue and Fordham Road. Perhaps the most popular target of looting were electronics stores, leading to the dissemination of hundreds of sound systems to Bronx youth and the creation of even more aspiring Hip Hop DJ's. In the past, such young people would have learned to play trumpet, saxophone and trombone in the public schools, leading them to seek outlets for their talent in salsa, funk or rhythm and blues, but with those programs gone, kids with musical talent looked to DJing and rapping as an outlet and they produced music when, when popularized, many young people found irresistible

Because one thing has to be said to explain why something created in the Bronx amidst extraordinary hardship ended up spreading around the world. The arson, disinvestment, and building abandonment that took place in the Bronx turned out to be anything but unique. Indeed, it would prefigure what would happen to almost every industrial city in the US and Western Europe when factories began to close and industries began to move to developing countries. By the late 1980's and early 90's you could see abandoned neighborhoods which looked like the Bronx in the 70's in places ranging from Youngstown Ohio, to Buffalo New York to Manchester England and Berlin Germany, with similar cuts to public services and programs in schools. And in those circumstances, the sounds that Bronx Hip Hop DJ's were producing and the raps that accompanied, had become the soundtrack of a generation of young people caught in the throes of de-industrialization and globalization.

But to understand that, we have to understand how hip hop spread and to do that, we have to understand something of the Bronx's accessibility, via public transportation, to other communities where global cultural production was already taking place, albeit with different musical forms. The young people of the Bronx had the ability to create culture, but not to market it. That responsibility would fall upon those located in other neighborhoods who were aware of Hip Hop's potential to be sold as music, as visual art, as dance and as fashion

New York Location and Marketing.

The story how hip hop was marketed is a fascinating one and requires us to look at people based outside the Bronx. Quite frankly, the early Bronx hip hop dj's, rappers, break dancers and graffiti artists, all needed help from people with more resources to market and sell their arts. And that help would soon be forthcoming, in part because of the Bronx's accessibility to public transportation. Though the tragedies that hit the Bronx took a unique cast there, people in other parts of the city knew all about it. The Bronx was only 15 minutes by subway from Harlem, 30 minutes from Midtown, and 40 minutes from Lower Manhattan and a 20 minute car ride from New Jersey.

Adventurous individuals in the commercial New York music scene, by the late 1970's all had Hip Hop on their radar screen, albeit for different reasons. As previously mentioned, Sylvia Robinson, a former Bronx based singer and club owner, who with her husband Bill Robinson owned a small record label based in Englewood New Jersey, decided to try recording rap songs to studio produced beats and the result so successful that the concept took off. Following "Rappers

Delight” Robinson signed Grandmaster Flash and his rap team “The Furious Five” and produced several legendary tracks including the best known hip hop song of all time “The Message,” Soon, other small labels started to produce catchy rap tunes, among them two 1980 hits by Bronx Rapper Kuris Blow “Christmas Rappin” and “the Breaks.”.

But hip hop also caught the attention of musicians and artists in the Lower East Side punk scene. Not only did they see the potential to market rapping as a musical form, they also saw potential in graffiti as saleable art and break dancing as marketable performance whether live or on film. One sign of this was a 1980 song by Punk group “Blondie” which included actual rapping by lead singer Debbie Harry, but also began with a tribute to graffiti artist Fab Five Freddie and DJ Grandmaster Flash. The song began with these lines

“Fab Five Freddie told me everybody’s high
DJ’s spinin are saving my mind,
Flash is fast, flash is cool”

The song was a huge hit and was followed up by a movie about the Bronx Hip Hop scene and its connection to the downtown punk scene called “Wild Style” which featured graffiti art and break dancing as much as mc’ing and rapping

This was followed, a year later, by a movie produced by Harry Belafonte called “Beat Street” which featured an epic break dance battle at the Roxy Ballroom on the Lower West Side and had a tribute to a graffiti artist who had been killed tagging the trains.

The success of “Wild Style” and “Beat Street” had as much to do with the spread of hip hop as did songs like “Rappers Delight” “the Message” and “The Breaks.” Both movies treated mc’ing, rapping, break dancing and graffiti as connected art forms created by disfranchised youths in New York’s most decayed borough which suddenly became legendary for its artistic creativity as well as its unprecedented devastation.

So when Hip Hop spread to Paris and Berlin in the early 80’s it was not just as music, it was as dance and visual art as well. And this continued through the 80’s and 90’s as it spread to Asia, South America, Africa and Eastern Europe, all with the understanding that it started in the Bronx and that the Bronx has a honored place in Global Cultural History:

The Meaning:

Hip Hop’s origins in the Bronx is replete with irony. A new form of music was created when houses were abandoned and burned, police and fire resources were cut, violence spread, and young people lost the ability to learn how to play musical instruments.

Yet it was precisely Hip Hop’s emergence amidst tragedy, as well as its multicultural origins and connection to immigration, that were integral to its appeal. Because what happened in the Bronx was going to spread throughout the world- factories closing, schools being shut, people

from all over the world learning to live together as they migrated not only from countryside to city, but from one country and continent to another.

That the young people of the Bronx, abandoned, despised, and marginalized, created art forms that fused into a powerful message of defiance to those who would silence them, has inspired young people around the world who find themselves in similar circumstances. Using their own languages and musical traditions, drawing upon their own ways of dancing and creating visual images, they have kept Hip Hop alive and fresh for more than 50 years, never forgetting where it started--- right here in the Bronx.