



Spring 2-17-2023

The United States of Percussion- Changes in Music and Society in the Late 1960's Which Set The Stage for the Rise of Hip Hop

Mark Naison

The United States of Percussion- Changes in Music and Society in the Late 1960's Which Set The Stage for the Rise of Hip Hop

In the late 1960's, portions of American popular music underwent a sonic transformation that helped set the stage for the rise of hip hop. A combination of underlying factors ranging from changing US immigration laws, to the Black power movement, to the disrupting influence of the Vietnam War expanded the audience for music which had multiple levels of percussion, and where rhythm supplemented, and occasionally overpowered harmony and melody.

One source of percussive energy was Latin Music, whose audience expanded as a result of a rapid growth in the LatinX population in response to dramatic changes in US immigration laws in 1965, which allowed for far more immigrants to come to the US from the Caribbean and South and Central America. Many of these immigrants came with traditions of hand drumming, of African derivation, which had largely been wiped out in the US, which they incorporated into every dimension of their music. This was particularly true of two genres of music which arose in New York City, where LatinX immigrants lived side by side with African Americans in large portions of the Bronx, as well as in portions of Harlem and Brooklyn- Bougaloo and Salsa. These musical forms, though their lyrics were often in Spanish ,were influenced by Rhythm and Blues and Soul Music, but with one difference- they had much deeper percussion sections, using three different varieties of hand drums, along with the traditional stick driven drum sets of rock, jazz and soul, often supplemented by clave and maracas. These new musical forms not only attracted a large audience among Spanish speaking people in US urban areas, they captured the imagination of many Black musicians, inspiring them to add hand drums to the rhythm sections they used in the recording studio as well as live performance as more percussion meant more dancing! Their influence also led to the rise of powerful "Latin Fusion" groups who combined Latin percussion traditions with funk and rock, among them Santana,

War, Mandrill and the Jimmy Castor Bunch, the first which became popular in the late 60's, the latter three which rose to fame in the early 70's.

But perhaps the most influential exponent of the percussive revolution in US Popular Music was James Brown, who in the late Sixties, created songs which eliminated melody entirely in favor of a music which turned voice, horns and guitar into percussion instruments in a tightly woven dance tracks performed by band which never missed a chance to get audiences screaming, shouting and dancing ecstatically. Brown, who called himself "Soul Brother Number One" became the symbol of the Black Power Revolution's impact on popular music, bringing African American music back to its African roots by making rhythm the primary form of musical communication. Many of his songs had only the most perfunctory lyrics- it was the horns and drums and guitar, along with Brown's shouts and inspired dancing, that were the source of their appeal

Brown's popularity also set the stage for other great bands who took percussion to new heights, among them Sly and the Family Stone, the Isley Brothers, and in the early 70's,

the Ohio Players, Parliament Funkadelic and Earth Wind and Fire. The music they produced was given the name of Funk, and one of the most popular groups of the 70's actually incorporated that in its name- Parliament Funkadelic

This percussive revolution, it should be noted, did not become universal- many of the musical groups of the late 60's particularly those appealing to largely white audiences, either doubled down on harmony and melody, like Crosby Stills Nash and Young, or featured long guitar solos meant to be listened to rather than danced to, such as Led Zeppelin,

But the Latin and Funk Revolution would carve out a permanent place in the American musical landscape, one only enhanced by the rise of Hip Hop in the 70's and 80's.