

DJ Kool Herc,
1982



DJ KOOL HERC

THIS AURAL VISIONARY KICK-STARTED
A MUSICAL MOVEMENT THAT CHANGED
OUR CULTURE FOREVER.

BY MICHAEL A. GONZALES



On August 11, 1973, fifty years ago this year, 16-year-old Jamaican immigrant Clive Campbell changed the sound of music forever. In a Bronx recreation room inside an unassuming apartment building located at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue, young Campbell, better known today as DJ Kool Herc, ignited the musical elements of hip-hop culture at his little sister Cindy's "back to school jam." The young DJ, the eldest of six kids, had previously spun discs with his dad at various adult parties, but after school he was testing and refining new techniques that he'd soon unveil. "When I started playing music, I practiced in my second-floor bedroom and put the speakers in the window," Herc recalled. "I liked watching the people dance while I was spinning."

Utilizing two turntables, a mixer, and two McIntosh amplifiers, Herc used twin copies of the same record to isolate and extend the percussion and bass of a song. His sonic secret was to ignore the majority of the record, playing only the danceable sections at the beginning and/or in the middle of the song. Herc referred to it as "the get down part," because that was when the dancers got excited and really moved. Later the rest of the world would refer to that as "the break."

Though the popular genres of the day were pop, rock, soul, and disco, Herc used breaks from them all to create a new category of music that wouldn't even have a name until several years later. Herc wasn't merely playing rec-

ords, he transformed the two turntables into a singular instrument and began making new material from other people's records. As Herc told me in 1998, "Once they heard that, there was no turning back. They always wanted to hear breaks after breaks after breaks. In the beginning, I used my father's Shure speakers and I was able to get a great sound out of them. After that first party, people kept asking when we were going to do it again."

Though rapper Coke La Rock has often been written out of the history of that night, he too was there, talking jive on the microphone that Herc left on the table. "Rapping" over the music, he created rhymes and made observations that entertained the crowd. "Coke is an unsung hero," rap radio veteran DJ Red Alert said. "He was a party rocker who could keep the party going. He didn't rap like guys do today. Coke had his own vibe, a different sound. Herc and Coke were like Batman and Robin. Everyone knows that Batman was the main man, but Robin helped his ass out too."

Without a doubt, that era in New York City will go down in history as one of the wildest. The nearly bankrupt town was in decline, crime was on the rise, Vietnam vets were returning home with serious mental health and drug issues, and many buildings in the Bronx and other low-income communities were being burned down for the insurance money. Meanwhile, dangerous street gangs (the Savage Skulls, the Black Spades, Ghetto Brothers, and numerous others) rumbled on the rub-

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KOOL HERC DROPPED THE TURNTABLE NEEDLE ON A FUNKY BEAT AND COMMITTED A REVOLUTIONARY ACT THAT SERVED AS THE FOUNDATION OF RAP.

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ble. For those tired of that bleak street life, Kool Herc provided the perfect escape, and more than a few gang members, most notably Afrika Bambaataa, chose beats over beat-downs.

People who experienced that first Herc party spread the word to their family and friends. While most new music was transported into our homes via radio stations playing your favorite songs, rap wouldn't be recorded until 1979 – with the Fatback Band's "Kim Tim III (Personality Jock)" being the first, but the Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" being the best. In those early years, the only way to hear the music was at neighborhood block parties, park (playground) jams, and firetrap venues (Hevalo, Executive Playhouse, Twilight Zone, Harlem World, and the Audubon Ballroom) scattered throughout the Bronx and upper Manhattan.

A few of Herc's favorite discs to blare included "The Mexican" (Babe Ruth), "It's Just Begun" (Jimmy Castor Bunch), and "Give It Up or Turnit a Loose" (James Brown). "I lived down the street at River Park Towers, but when Herc put those speakers outside, you could hear the music from blocks away," former rapper and Mercedes Ladies member Sheri Sher said. "Herc became a hood superstar, but that first night nobody knew who he was. The next day, it was a different story. Later, when Herc played at Cedar Park, it felt as though I was down with a movement."

Herc was, as *The Source* magazine labeled him in 1998, "an aural visionary." Rapper Grandmaster Caz said, "I lived right up the street from Sedgwick Avenue, so anything that went down over there, the entire neighborhood knew about it. That first party was epic. That element sparked everything. Afterwards, everybody attempted to re-create the energy of that night."

Undeniably, Kool Herc's role as an influence on music, in the minds of future innovators Grandmaster Flash, AJ Scratch, and Grand Wizard Theodore, to name a few, began that night and quickly spread. "Kool Herc was my idol," the late AJ Scratch, who was once Kurtis Blow's DJ, said in 2008. "I used to go to all his parties. I studied him. I was selling weed at the time, but I went and invested my money in DJ equipment. People like Grandmaster Flash and myself all took bits and pieces from him, and put together our own styles. Still, Herc's style of mixing records was the foundation for the entire movement."

There were rivalries with some other DJs, including Grandmaster Flash and DJ Pete Jones, but Kool Herc was

active in the Bronx for a steady four years, playing in various clubs and putting together a crew of helpers dubbed the Herculords. As writer Mark Skillz noted in a 2006 *Wax Poetics* story, "The squad consisted of the Imperial Jay Cee, LaBrew, Sweet and Sour, Clark Kent, Timmy Tim, Pebblee Poo, Eldorado Mike, the Nigger Twins, and Coke La Rock." However, in 1977, Herc's world came to a sudden halt when he was stabbed at the former Executive Playhouse that had changed its name to the Sparkle.

"The night Herc got stabbed, guys came to the party starting trouble at the door and wanted to be let in for free," Coke La Rock told *Wax Poetics* in 2020. "Our boy Mike Mike was at the door and he called Herc over. One guy got nervous and he stabbed Herc. I had gone home and when I came back, there were all these police cars outside. The thing that saved Herc was the thick suede hunting jacket he was wearing that night. If he had been wearing something thinner, he might not be here today."

Herc spent weeks in the hospital, with the incident leaving him mentally scarred and forcing him to retreat from the public eye for a time. Meanwhile, rap was already beginning to change, with the focus being less on the DJ and more on the rapper. In the same way other musical genres had lead singers and bands, rappers began stepping into the spotlight while the DJ was cutting and scratching in the background. In addition, the music spread its wings as hip-hop kids began popping up in every hood of New York City's five boroughs, as well as traveling downtown to the Mudd Club and other venues, where it shared space with punk and reggae.

When new independent labels began cropping up in the wake of Sugar Hill Records' success – the entrepreneurs behind the Sugarhill Gang's smash single "Rapper's Delight" – Kool Herc became passé. Although his legacy as the primary pioneer of the music was cast in platinum, the hip-hop sound evolved quickly. A few folks, regardless of their contributions, were either left behind or chilling in the shadows.

"A lot of cats didn't think making records was real," the late A&R man Gary Harris explained to me in 2008. "Some of the original talent thought of records as a bastardization of the art form. People respected Herc and Coke, but by the early eighties those guys were like specters – they just aren't visible on the scene anymore. Herc was the Don, but he wasn't connected to the scene anymore."

However, according to Herc, that's not completely true. "I was still making money giving parties, so I wasn't



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: In the late 1970s; with sister Cindy Campbell, 2009; T-Connection flyer for a Herculords dance party, 1979; Herc (center) with Melle Mel and Grandmaster Caz (from left) at *The Source's* 360 Icons Awards Dinner, New York City, 2019; at the birthplace of hip-hop, Cedar Playground, New York City, 2005.



worried about making records. Dudes who had record contracts wasn't making real money anyway. They had songs on the radio, but they were still living with their mom in the projects and bumming cigarettes from me."

It's been five decades since Kool Herc dropped the turntable needle on a funky beat and committed a revolutionary act that served as the foundation of rap as well as other genres, including New Jack Swing, trip-hop, drum and bass, electronica, turntablism, and various hybrids.

Today, at 68, DJ Kool Herc has seen the music grow and change and morph, but it's still here. Rap music has gone from the streets to the suites, from an idea in young Clive Campbell's mind to a global influence that is as loved across the world today as it was that humid night in the Bronx, back in 1973.

