

Roots of Rap

A Reading A-Z Level X Leveled Book
Word Count: 1,312

LEVELED BOOK • X

Connections

Writing

Research an original hip-hop DJ. Write a biography describing the DJ's life, influences, and what the artist is doing today. Be sure to cite your references.

Social Studies

Create a timeline showing the evolution of rap music. Include key dates and people. Research additional information, if needed. Include at least five events on your timeline.

Reading A-Z

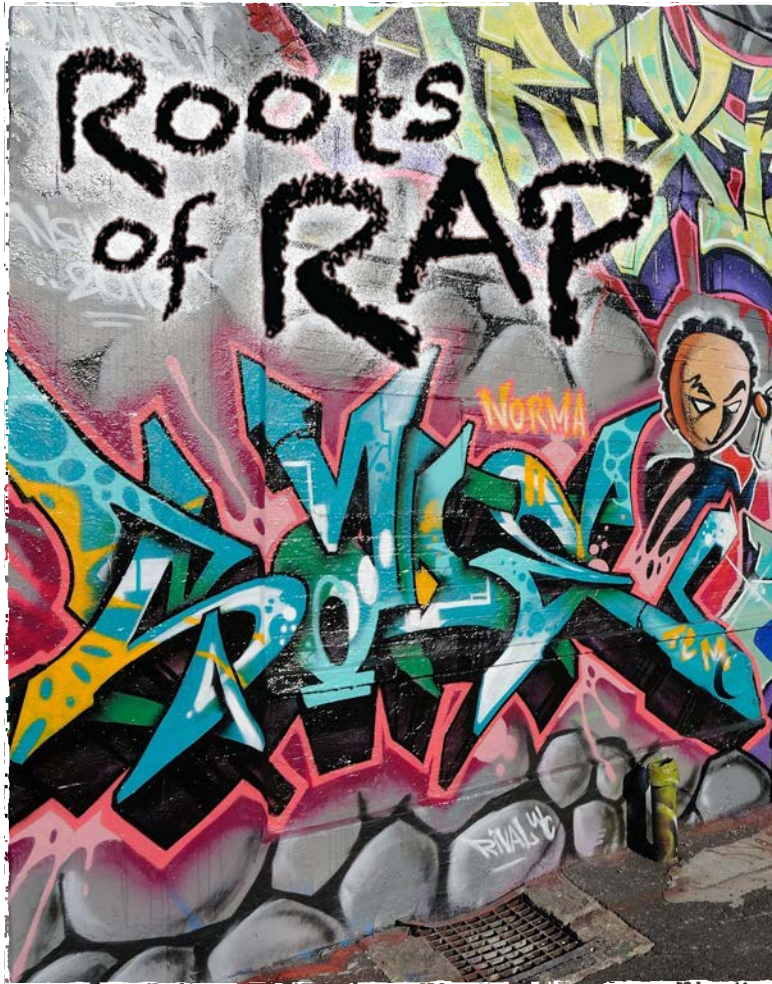
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Roots
of RAP

**Multi
level
X•Z¹•Z²**

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Focus Question

How has rap influenced the music that came after it?

Words to Know

amplifier	inspired
commentary	mainstream
culture	poverty
defacing	rivals
financial	turntables
influential	vinyl

Front and back cover: Grandmaster Flash and his group the Furious Five were the first hip-hop act to be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Page 3: Run-DMC and the Beastie Boys pose for their tour promotion photo, 1987.

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Correlation

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Run-DMC and the Beastie Boys

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Roots of Rap

New York City in the 1970s was a tough place to live. The city's growing **financial** and social problems resulted in high crime rates and soaring **poverty**.

Not much looked bright for the future of many New Yorkers, particularly those in poor neighborhoods. Out of this poverty, however, a new style of music would rise.

Hip-hop was born one afternoon in August of 1973 in the South Bronx in New York City. A teenager named Cindy Campbell asked her 16-year-old brother Clive if he would DJ (disc jockey) a back-to-school party.



In the 1970s, abandoned buildings were a common part of the South Bronx landscape.



Trash piled up as New York City faced big financial problems.

Clive didn't have any fancy equipment. He picked out some records and hooked up two **turntables** to a guitar **amplifier**. Clive, who was nicknamed "Hercules" due to his large size, performed as DJ Kool Herc. The party was a huge success. The next day Clive was famous throughout the Bronx.



DJ Kool Herc's success moved from block parties to nightclubs. Eventually, he was known as the Father of Hip Hop.

Like Clive, other kids from different backgrounds were **inspired** to take what little they had—beat-up turntables, **vinyl** records, a microphone—and use their creativity to invent hip-hop, an entirely new musical **culture**. Hip-hop featured a distinct kind of performance called *rapping* that showcased clever rhymes and catchy beats. This new sound caught fire all over the world.



DJ Kool Herc and Cindy Campbell



Neighborhood block parties helped develop a sense of community in cities across the country.

Born at the Block Party

During a block party, a neighborhood closes its streets to traffic. People come together outdoors to have fun. In the 1970s, block parties often took place in poor areas like the South Bronx. Here, many people could not afford to go to expensive dance clubs. They had to find creative ways to make their own entertainment.

Block parties were key to the growth of hip-hop. When a person performed, their live audience was made up of friends, neighbors, and even **rivals**. The audience gave honest feedback during the show—good or bad.



Grandmaster Flash

The original hip-hop artists knew they could become legendary among their peers. But they did not realize that what they were creating would become world famous. Looking back at those days, DJ Kool Herc noted that no one knew they were actually making history by creating a new culture. Grandmaster Flash, one of hip-hop's pioneer DJs, turned down his first offer to make a record. He was charging a dollar or two for local shows and couldn't imagine anyone would want to pay full price for a hip-hop record.

The Four Pillars of Hip-hop

Early hip-hop was not just music. It was a lifestyle.

Since the hip-hop community had no access to performing in clubs, dancing on stages, or exhibiting their art in galleries, they took their creativity to the streets and made them their stage—and the city, their audience.



KRS-ONE



Afrika Bambaataa

Early hip-hop DJs referred to the “four pillars,” or key parts, of hip-hop culture. These four elements of hip-hop—the DJ, the MC (rapper), breaking, and graffiti art—were all equally important.



The first hip-hop DJs used turntables to scratch and mix music.

The DJ

The job of the DJ has always been to keep the party music flowing. To play music, the DJ placed a turntable needle on a groove in the record, ideally as smoothly as possible. Typically, as a song was ending on one turntable, the DJ used the second turntable to fade in a new song.

Hip-hop DJs did something that was new and different. They took the tools made to play music and used them to *make* music.

One of the most famous sounds of early hip-hop was called *scratching*. DJs created a scratchy sound by moving the vinyl record back and forth with their hand while it was playing on the turntable.

In 1974, a year after his sister's block party, DJ Kool Herc noticed that crowds loved a part of the record called the *breakbeat*. The breakbeat was a short, catchy drum solo. He used his two turntables to repeat the breakbeat over and over. His live audience went crazy. From this came the idea of sampling, which meant taking a part (or sample) of a song and reusing it to make a new song.

Hip-hop DJs created their new music from records that already existed, whether they were making breakbeats, sampling catchy vocal bits or adding scratching. The creativity of early hip-hop DJs influenced music-makers outside the world of hip-hop for years to come.

Surviving Your Rival

Competition was an important key to every creative aspect of hip-hop—everybody wanted to be the best, the newest, and the freshest. A conflict that might once have been settled with physical confrontation could instead be addressed through the creative victory of a rap battle or a breakdance showdown.

Two rappers would throw down their best verses, or two dancers would show off their most impressive moves—and let the live audience decide who had won.



A b-boy performs one of many types of freezes.

Breaking

Although it's commonly known as breakdancing, the original street dancers called what they did *breaking*. They referred to themselves as b-boys, b-girls, or breakers.

Breakers danced to hip-hop, funk music, and, of course, breakbeats. They danced alone or as part of a dance crew.

Breakers would show off their skills while the breakbeat played, using four types of movement.

- *Toprock* is a dance done standing up to initiate breaking. A unique style is key.
- *Downrock* is a move usually performed with hands and feet on the floor. The emphasis is on foot speed and footwork combinations.

- *Power moves* are closer to gymnastics than dancing. This centerpiece of a routine relies on speed, momentum, and acrobatics.
- *Freezes* are just what they sound like—the breaker stops, or freezes, all bodily motion, typically in an unusual or difficult position.

Dance battles were common. Two breakers or dance crews would take turns showing off their best moves. The competition was judged by an audience that stood in a circle around the breakers.

Breaking became world famous. It made its way into movies and TV shows, and was adopted and adored by hip-hop fans all over the world.

Graffiti Art

The streets of New York had graffiti long before hip-hop. But in the early 1970s, hip-hop culture produced graffiti artists who began spray-painting their unique signatures in different places, called *tagging*. Tags began to spring up on buildings, subway cars, buses, and even places that seemed impossible to reach.



Some consider tagging vandalism, while others see it as a form of artistic expression.

Graffiti artists wanted the fame that came from other people seeing their street tags on a building or bridge. They got even more attention if they had a unique style. Bubble lettering was popular first. But the artistic, hard-to-read “wildstyle” that came out of Brooklyn proved to be the defining look.

Graffiti artists were committing a criminal act in **defacing** public property. However, hip-hop fans saw graffiti as their unique art form. Eventually, hip-hop graffiti was featured in many places, including museums, books, magazines, and websites.

Rapped in Controversy

Political and social themes have often been a part of popular American music. Blues, jazz, and rock ‘n’ roll have all created their share of controversy. Rap, however, brought the idea of controversial music to an entirely new level.

Like many genres of music that preceded it, rap changed as its popularity grew. With the success of gangsta rap in the 1990s, some rap lyrics shifted to more controversial issues such as violence, sexism, gangs, and drugs.

Anti-rap feelings began to grow. Gangsta rap became a target of Parental Advisory labels. These labels warned that the music’s lyrics could be offensive.

Rappers report on their experiences. Some rap artists believe their music has been unjustly targeted, when music of other genres might be seen as equally offensive.

Rap will always create controversy as its artists continue to show the reality of life as they see it through their lyrics.

Rap

In the beginning, the rapper was called the MC (Master of Ceremonies). As the DJ played music, the MC did a call-and-response to excite the crowd (MC: “Everybody say *ho!*” Audience: “*HO!*”). Rappers soon found they could please the audience even more by making simple rhymes that worked with the beat.

A rapper was judged by the content, flow, and delivery of his or her rap. The content covered a wide range of subjects—from boastful rhymes to social and political **commentary**; all were fair game.

The flow meant staying true to the beat while delivering the lyrics. To keep the same rhythm as the music, rappers stress a particular syllable to match the beat.

Good delivery showed the mastery of the voice. This involved vocal presence (a unique, recognizable rapping voice), enunciation (clarity or stylized slurring of words), and breath control (breathing without interrupting flow).



Hip-Hop Goes Global

It's 8,928 miles (14,368 km) from the Bronx, New York, to New Zealand. But in the early 1980s records like “Rapper's Delight” and “The Message” traveled that great distance and found an eager audience among the Māori, the native Polynesian people of New Zealand.

Much like the population of the South Bronx in the early 1970s, large numbers of Māori lived poverty-stricken lives outside the mainstream of society when hip-hop arrived. They experienced more challenges, higher levels of crime, health problems, and poorer education than the rest of society.



The Māori people felt they were not represented in mainstream New Zealand media and culture. Hip-hop spoke strongly to them, and Maori bands such as Upper Hutt Posse and Third3ye adopted it as their own musical culture.



Rap Evolves

Although breaking, graffiti art, and DJing are still popular, rap as a musical art form clearly broke away from the pack. In the beginning, the rapper was just a part of the hip-hop party. But once hip-hop records started becoming successful, the rappers themselves became the stars. Now, rap music has grown to the point where it is heard in almost all forms of music today, from hard rock to country pop.

The Party Doesn't Stop

In the early 1980s, as rap records became popular around the world, hip-hop culture became a global phenomenon.

What started at a young girl's street party in the South Bronx in 1973 has become a part of the world's popular culture. Poverty and the lack of means to develop new **mainstream** music led to creativity and some of the most **influential** sounds of the twentieth century. All it took was imagination, the ability to express oneself, and the desire to have fun.



Countries around the world have adopted hip-hop culture.

Glossary

amplifier (<i>n.</i>)	a piece of electronic equipment that makes sounds louder (p. 5)
commentary (<i>n.</i>)	an expression of one's views on a subject (p. 13)
culture (<i>n.</i>)	the ideas and customs of a certain group of people (p. 5)
defacing (<i>v.</i>)	marking or damaging the surface of something in a way that ruins its original appearance (p. 12)
financial (<i>adj.</i>)	of or relating to matters dealing with money (p. 4)
influential (<i>adj.</i>)	having the power to shape events (p. 15)
inspired (<i>v.</i>)	prompted to be brave or creative (p. 5)
mainstream (<i>adj.</i>)	of or relating to the most widely accepted ideas, beliefs, or choices in a society (p. 15)
poverty (<i>n.</i>)	the state of being poor (p. 4)
rivals (<i>n.</i>)	competitors for superiority or a prize (p. 6)
turntables (<i>n.</i>)	parts of a record player upon which records are spun (p. 5)
vinyl (<i>adj.</i>)	made of a strong, light, plastic material (p. 5)