

# Roots of Rap

A Reading A-Z Level Z2 Leveled Book  
Word Count: 1,761

LEVELED BOOK • Z<sup>2</sup>

## 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.

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Written by Randolph Heard

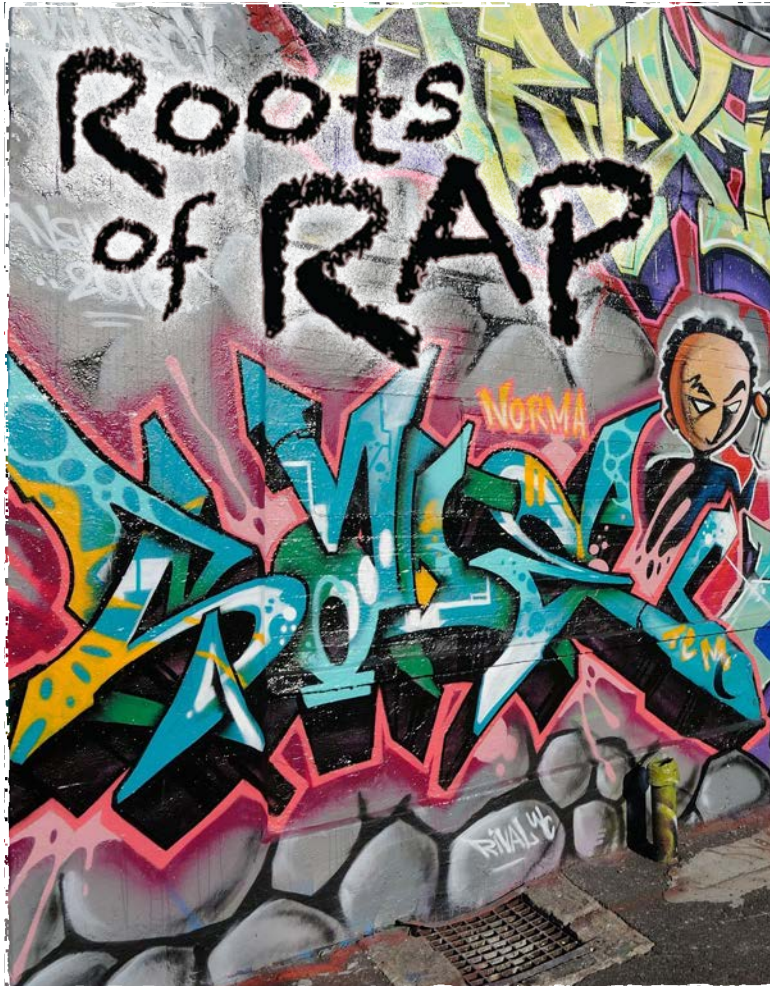
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Roots  
of RAP

**Multi  
level  
X•Z<sup>1</sup>•Z<sup>2</sup>**







Written by Randolph Heard

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## Focus Question

How has rap influenced the music that came after it?

## Words to Know

amplifier	innovation
commentary	inspired
cultures	mainstream
defacing	poverty
influential	turntables
infrastructure	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

#### LEVEL Z2

Fountas & Pinnell	Y-Z
Reading Recovery	N/A
DRA	70+



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## Roots of Rap

New York City in the 1970s was a dismal scene of twentieth-century urban decay. The city's growing financial and social problems resulted in high crime rates, soaring **poverty** and homelessness, and a crumbling **infrastructure**.



The future was dim for many New Yorkers, particularly those in poor neighborhoods with few resources to begin with. Out of this poverty and decay, however, a new style of music would arise.

One hot summer afternoon in 1973, teenager Cindy Campbell asked her sixteen-year-old brother Clive to DJ (disc jockey) a back-to-school jam. The party would take place on August 11 at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in their South Bronx neighborhood, which was made up mostly of African American and Puerto Rican immigrants. The Campbell family had emigrated from Jamaica five years earlier. In Jamaica, Clive had grown up going to local parties, known as dancehalls, that featured local DJs talking, or toasting, over music played on portable sound systems.



Clive didn't have access to much fancy equipment. He picked out some records from his large collection and hooked up two **turntables** to a guitar **amplifier**. Clive, nicknamed "Hercules" because of his large frame, performed under the name DJ Kool Herc. The party was an incredible success. Little did he know that this party would give rise to the birth of a global musical movement known as hip-hop. The next day Clive was famous throughout the Bronx, and he went on to become known as the Father of Hip-Hop.

Like Clive, other kids from different backgrounds and **cultures** were **inspired** to take what little they had—beat-up turntables, **vinyl** records, a microphone—and use their creativity to invent an entirely new musical culture. Hip-hop featured a distinct kind of performance called *rapping* that showcased clever rhymes and catchy beats. This winning combination of creativity 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 so people can come together outdoors to have fun. In the 1970s, block parties were especially common in poor communities like the South Bronx, where people had to find creative ways to make their own entertainment. At the same time, the technology needed to create one's own entertainment had become widely available and affordable enough that more people could access it.

Block parties proved to be essential to the growth of hip-hop. Unlike **mainstream** music lovers who went to live performances in concert venues, audiences at block parties participated by giving performers instant, live feedback—both positive and negative. These were people from

the surrounding community—peers, friends, neighbors, and even rivals. Hip-hop thrived and constantly transformed because of this immediate feedback from live audiences.

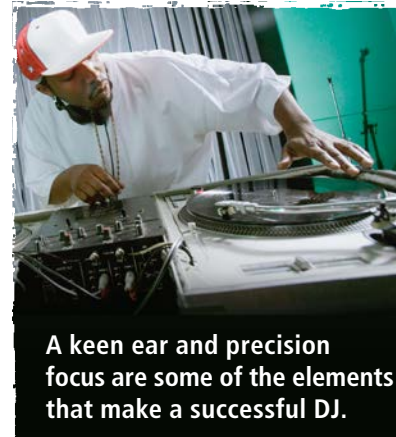
The original hip-hop artists knew they could become legendary among their peers. But they did not realize that what they were creating would become world famous. Looking back at those days, DJ Kool Herc noted that no one knew they were actually making history by creating a new culture. Grandmaster Flash, 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.

Grandmaster Flash was one of several pioneer DJs who created and popularized the breakbeat.

## The Four Pillars of Hip-Hop



A keen ear and precision focus are some of the elements that make a successful DJ.

Early hip-hop was more than just music; it was an entire culture. It had a lifestyle all its own that was expressed in different ways.

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

Early hip-hop DJs, such as Afrika Bambaataa, and MCs (rappers), such as KRS-ONE, referred to the “four pillars,” or key elements, of hip-hop culture: the DJ, the MC, breaking, and graffiti art. Each was considered equally important.



Afrika Bambaataa



## The DJ

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

Hip-hop, however, turned this tradition on its head by taking the tools designed to play music and transforming them into tools to *make* music.

One of the most distinctive sounds to come out of early hip-hop, called *scratching*, was developed by early hip-hop DJs from New York City, such as Grand Wizard Theodore. DJs started to experiment and created a scratchy sound by moving the vinyl record back and forth with their hand while it was playing on the turntable.



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

In 1974, DJ Kool Herc became popular enough to get shows in Bronx clubs. Herc noticed that the crowd often loved a part of the record called the *breakbeat*—a catchy rhythmic phrase. He used his two turntables to repeat the break over and over, creating a brand-new sound from just the breakbeat.

From this musical **innovation** also came the idea of sampling, or taking a part (sample) of a sound recording and reusing it in a different song. These musical innovations of early hip-hop influenced music-makers for years to come.

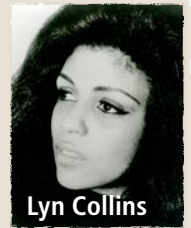
Hip-hop DJs created this new music from records that already existed, whether they were making breakbeats, sampling catchy vocal bits, or adding scratching. This new idea proved to be profoundly **influential** far outside the world of hip-hop.

## Breakbeats

Some of the most widely used breakbeats of early hip-hop were originally found in The Winstons' "Amen Brother" (1969); James Brown's "Funky Drummer" (1970); Lyn Collins's "Think (About It)" (1972); and the Incredible Bongo Band's cover of "Apache" (1973). Despite their forming the foundation of countless other songs, these breakbeats weren't very long. The breakbeat from "Amen Brother" is a drum loop that lasts only six seconds.



James Brown



Lyn Collins



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

## Breaking

Although the media called it *breakdancing*, the original street dancers preferred to call what they did *breaking* and 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 demonstrate their improvisational skills while the breakbeat played, typically 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 to 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, where two breakers or two dance crews would take turns showcasing best moves, were common. They were judged on their creativity, skill, and musicality by audiences that encircled the breakers.

Breaking became world famous because of its uniquely appealing style. It was featured in movies, parodied on TV shows, and adopted and adored by hip-hop fans all over the world.

## Surviving Your Rival

Competition was an important part of 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.





## Graffiti Art

The streets of urban New York had graffiti well before hip-hop. But in the early 1970s, graffiti artists expressed hip-hop culture by spray-painting personalized signatures on, or tagging, the sides of buildings, subway cars, buses, and even places that seemed impossible to reach.

Like many DJs, MCs, and breakers, graffiti artists were extremely competitive, each desiring the fame that came from the community's seeing their enormous, aerosol-painted street tag on the side of a building or bridge. This sense of competition bred artistic innovation. Bubble lettering was popular first. But the elaborate, almost unreadable "wildstyle" that came out of Brooklyn proved to be the defining look.

Graffiti artists were committing a criminal act in **defacing** public property. Those outside the culture saw it as environmental pollution. However, for those entrenched in hip-hop culture, graffiti was considered high art. Eventually, many of the artists' work was sought after and welcomed in art galleries around the world. Classic hip-hop graffiti has been preserved in museums and art books, and on the Internet.

## Rapped in Controversy

Political and social topics have often been an integral 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 evolved as its popularity grew. With the growth of gangsta rap in the 1990s, the focus of some rap lyrics shifted to more controversial issues such as violence, sexism, gangs, and drugs.

With this shift, anti-rap sentiment began to grow. Gangsta rap became synonymous with the Parental Advisory labels that had begun appearing on records in the mid 1980s. These labels warned consumers that the content of the lyrics could be considered offensive.

Throughout the history of hip-hop, rappers have reported on the reality of 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 undoubtedly keep creating controversy and provoking conversation as artists continue to relay the reality of life as they see it through their lyrics.



## Rap

In the beginning, the rapper was called the MC (which traditionally stands for Master of Ceremonies). As the DJ mixed dance records to keep the party moving, the MC grabbed the microphone and did call-and-response to excite and involve the crowd (MC: “Everybody say *ho!*” Audience: “*HO!*”). Rapping progressed rapidly from shouting out friends’ names and audience call-and-response to simple rhymes that worked well with the beat.

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



Run-DMC is considered one of the most influential hip-hop groups of all time. From left: DMC, Jam Master Jay, and DJ Run

Having good flow meant staying true to the beat while delivering the lyrics. To maintain the same rhythmic pulse as the music, rappers stress a particular syllable of their lyric to match the beat. Good delivery indicated 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 delivery).

## Rap Evolves

Although breaking, graffiti art, and DJing are still present and vibrant, 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, adding flavor to the DJs’ mix of songs and getting the crowd more excited and involved. But once hip-hop records started becoming hugely popular, the rappers themselves became the stars.

From the release of “Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugarhill Gang in 1979, rap’s first worldwide hit, through the present day, rap music has evolved and transformed in many different ways. Although it has always



functioned as party music, even the earliest rappers used their skills to address serious social and political issues.

“The Message,” released in 1982 by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, described a blistering portrait of urban poverty and misery in the streets of New York.



Now, rap music has grown to the point where it can encompass any style, and rapping has been featured in songs of almost every genre, from hard rock to country pop.

## These Are the Breaks

In 1979, Kurtis Blow became the first commercially successful solo rapper. He was the first to be signed by a major record label, the first to tour both nationally and internationally, and the first to receive an endorsement deal. Blow's second single, "The Breaks" was the first rap single to go gold. Considered one of the early pioneers of the hip-hop movement, Kurtis Blow was a huge influence on many rappers that followed.



Kurtis Blow

## 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 indigenous Polynesian people of New Zealand.

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



Upper Hutt Posse

The Māori people felt they were not represented in mainstream New Zealand media and culture. Hip-hop resonated strongly with them, and Maori bands such as Upper Hutt Posse and Third3bye embraced it as their own musical culture.



Third3bye



## The Party Doesn't Stop

In the early 1980s, as more and more rap records became popular around the world, hip-hop culture became a global phenomenon. Hip-hop took root in France, Mexico, South Africa, and Brazil—virtually everywhere that had pop music. Breakdancing caught the media's imagination, through news reports and the release of films such as *Wild Style* (1982) and *Breakin'* (1984), and spread worldwide, especially in the United Kingdom, Canada, Japan, Germany, France, Russia, and South Korea. To this day, hip-hop has permeated many aspects of popular culture globally, leaving an indelible mark.



Countries around the world have embraced hip-hop culture.

What started at a young girl's street party in the South Bronx in 1973 has become a global phenomenon. Poverty and the lack of means should have stopped hip-hop's success. Instead, it inspired creativity and some of the most influential musical innovations of the twentieth century. All it took was imagination, a determination to express oneself, and the desire to have fun.

## Glossary

<b>amplifier</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a piece of electronic equipment that makes sounds louder (p. 5)
<b>commentary</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	an expression of one's views on a subject (p. 15)
<b>cultures</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the ideas and customs of a certain group of people (p. 5)
<b>defacing</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	marking or damaging the surface of something in a way that ruins its original appearance (p. 14)
<b>influential</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	having the power to shape events (p. 10)
<b>infrastructure</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the framework of public structures and systems that a region depends on to function, such as roads and utilities (p. 4)
<b>innovation</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a new idea, product, or way of doing something (p. 10)
<b>inspired</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	prompted to be brave or creative (p. 5)
<b>mainstream</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	of or relating to the most widely accepted beliefs in a society (p. 6)
<b>poverty</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the state of being poor (p. 4)
<b>turntables</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	parts of a record player upon which records are spun (p. 5)
<b>vinyl</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	made of a strong, light, plastic material (p. 5)