

# Roots of Rap

A Reading A-Z Level Z1 Leveled Book  
Word Count: 1,548

LEVELED BOOK • Z<sup>1</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

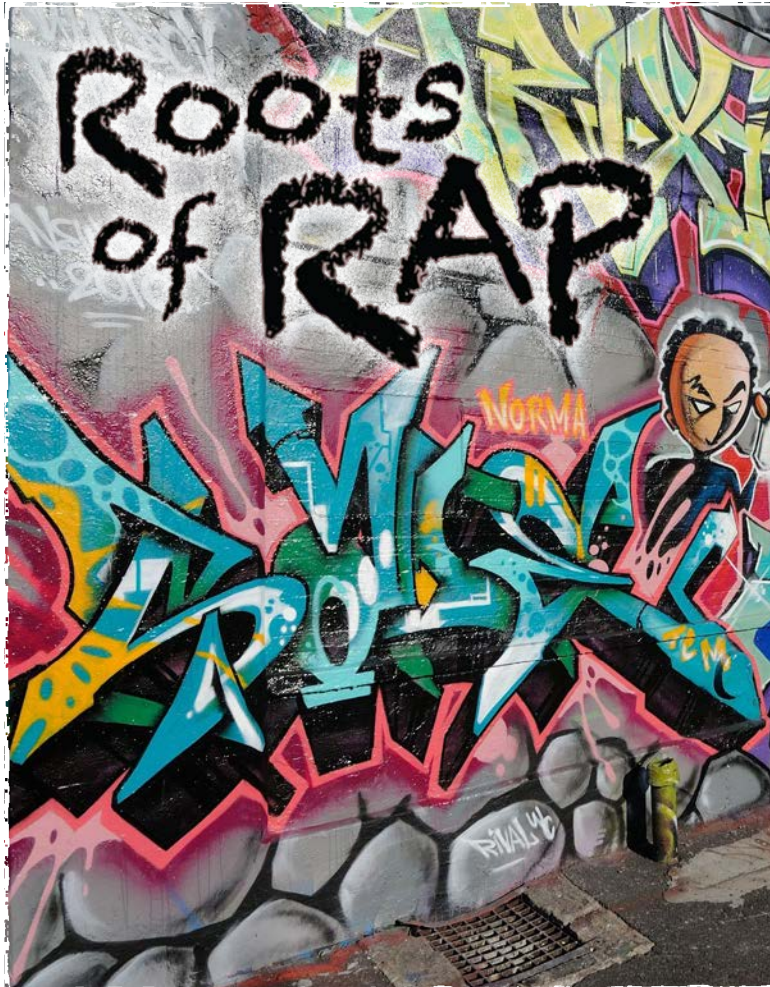
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Roots  
of RAP

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







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## Focus Question

How has rap influenced the music that came after it?

## Words to Know

amplifier	inspired
commentary	mainstream
cultures	poverty
defacing	rivals
influential	turntables
innovation	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 Z1

Fountas & Pinnell	W-X
Reading Recovery	N/A
DRA	60



Run-DMC and the Beastie Boys

## Contents

Roots of Rap .....	4
Born at the Block Party .....	6
The Four Pillars of Hip-Hop .....	7
The DJ .....	8
Breaking .....	10
Graffiti Art .....	11
Rap .....	12
Rap Evolves .....	13
The Party Doesn't Stop .....	14
Glossary .....	16

## 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.



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

Not much was looking bright for the future of 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, who was nicknamed "Hercules" due to 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 instantly 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,



DJ Kool Herc and Cindy Campbell

**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.



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 could not afford to go to expensive dance clubs. They had to find creative ways to make their own entertainment. Fortunately, entertainment technology had become widely available and affordable enough that more people could access it.

Block parties were essential to the growth of hip-hop. Live audiences were made up of friends, neighbors, and even **rivals**. They gave performers instant feedback, both positive and negative. This helped hip-hop constantly evolve. Every performer wanted to create the newest and most popular style.

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 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 equally important.



## The DJ

The job of the DJ has always been to keep the music flowing. To play music, the DJ placed the 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 a second turntable to fade in a new song.

Hip-hop turned this tradition on its head. Hip-hop took the tools designed to play music and turned them into tools to *make* music.

One of the most famous sounds of early hip-hop, called *scratching*, was developed by early hip-hop DJs from New York City such as Grand Wizard Theodore. 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 became popular enough to get shows in Bronx clubs. Kool Herc noticed that the crowd loved a part of the record called the *breakbeat*—a short, catchy drum solo. He used his two turntables to repeat the breakbeat over and over. His live audience went crazy. From this musical **innovation** came the idea of sampling, or taking a part (sample) of a sound recording and reusing it in a different song.

Hip-hop DJs created their music from records that already existed, whether they were making breakbeats, sampling catchy vocal bits, or adding scratching. The innovations of early hip-hop DJs influenced music-makers far 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 became known as breakdancing, the original street dancers called 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 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.

Breaking became world famous. It was featured in movies, shown on TV shows, and adopted and adored by hip-hop fans all over the world.

## Graffiti Art

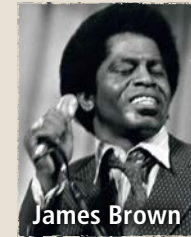
The streets of New York had graffiti before hip-hop. But in the early 1970s, graffiti artists expressed hip-hop culture by spray-painting personalized signatures on, or tagging, the sides of buildings, subway cars, buses, and even places that seemed impossible to reach.

Graffiti artists wanted the fame that came from other people seeing their enormous, aerosol-painted street tag on the side of a building or bridge. They got more attention if they had a unique visual style. Bubble lettering was popular first. But the elaborate, almost unreadable “wildstyle” that came out of Brooklyn proved to be the defining look.

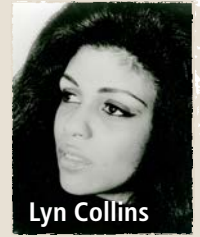
Graffiti artists were committing criminal acts by **defacing** public property. However, hip-hop fans saw graffiti as their own art form. Eventually, classic hip-hop graffiti was preserved in museums and art books, and on the Internet.

## 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

## Rap

In the beginning, the rapper was called the MC (which traditionally stands for Master of Ceremonies). As the DJ played music, the MC did call-and-response to excite and involve the crowd. Rappers soon found they could please the audience even more by making 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 boastful rhymes to social and political **commentary**; everything was fair game. Good flow meant staying true to the beat while delivering lyrics, and the delivery indicated the mastery of the voice. This involved vocal presence, enunciation, and breath control.

## 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. 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.

### Rapped in Controversy

Political and social topics have often been an important 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 growth of gangsta rap in the 1990s, some rap lyrics shifted to more controversial issues such as violence, sexism, gangs, and drugs.

With this shift, anti-rap feelings began to grow. Gangsta rap was targeted by Parental Advisory labels, which warned consumers against potentially offensive lyrics. Some rap artists believe their music has been unjustly targeted, when music of other genres might be seen as equally offensive.

Rap will continue to create controversy as artists keep on relaying the reality of life as they see it through their lyrics.

Although it has always been 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, rapping can be heard in everything 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. Hip-hop took root in France, Mexico, South Africa, and Brazil. Breakdancing spread worldwide through news reports and the release of films such as *Wild Style* (1982) and *Breakin’* (1984), especially in the United Kingdom, Canada, Japan, Germany, France, Russia, and South Korea. To this day, hip-hop has become part of many aspects of popular culture globally, leaving a lasting mark.



Countries around the world have embraced hip-hop culture.



## 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" found an eager audience among the Māori, the indigenous Polynesian people of New Zealand.

Like many in the South Bronx in the early 1970s, large numbers of Māori faced more obstacles, higher levels of crime, health problems, and poorer education than the rest of society. Hip-hop resonated strongly with Māori bands such as Upper Hutt Posse and Third3ye, who embraced it as their own musical culture.



What started at a young girl's party in the South Bronx in 1973 has become a global phenomenon. Poverty and the lack of means to develop new **mainstream** music 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. 12)
<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. 11)
<b>influential</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	having the power to shape events (p. 15)
<b>innovation</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a new idea, product, or way of doing something (p. 9)
<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. 15)
<b>poverty</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the state of being poor (p. 4)
<b>rivals</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	competitors for superiority or a prize (p. 6)
<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)