



Hip-Hop: From the Streets to the Mainstream



Cornell University has the largest collection of Hip Hop artifacts and recordings in the world. *Lindsay France/ University Photography*

Hip-hop is more than just music. The term encompasses a whole culture, and that helps explain how it has become one of the most influential elements shaping global entertainment and youth self-expression. All over the world, hip-hop is a tool for explaining the complexities of daily life and speaking truth to power, whether through spoken lyrics, graffiti art, dance or disc jockey mastery.

Not to be confused with commercial rap — which often glorifies material excess, violence and misogyny — hip-hop was born in the South Bronx, New York, more than 40 years ago as an alternative to self-destructive gang culture. Hip-hop gave disaffected youth in impoverished neighborhoods an opportunity to channel their frustrations into art rather than violence.

In a rented Sedgwick Avenue recreation room on August 11, 1973, a Jamaican-born DJ named Kool Herc debuted the art of separating the breakbeat from recorded songs and extending it using two turntables that were playing the same record. Herc's friend Coke La Rock began rapping over the infectious beats. The sound sparked an instant revolution, and it was soon being recreated at parties all over the South Bronx. The extended breakbeat also encouraged the evolution of break dancing, in addition to rapping, and graffiti artists offered a visual complement to the musical and dance performance.

"Culture doesn't begin on a single day, but events can happen on a single day that put a lot of things in motion," says Ben Ortiz, assistant curator of Cornell

University's Hip Hop Collection in Ithaca, New York. The university has been preserving hip-hop artifacts and recordings since 2007 and boasts the largest collection of its kind in the world.

Cornell's curator of rare books and manuscripts, Katherine Reagan, says the university not only is preserving the story of hip-hop's

DJ Kool Herc's discovery of how to isolate and extend breakbeats set Hip Hop in motion. *AP Images*



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beginnings, but also giving its originators and new artists a chance to tell the story to students and community youth organizations, as well as musicologists. “We want to give this living culture a voice because the originators of that culture are by and large still alive and we want to include them in this process of documentation while we still can,” she said.

Cornell has recruited hip-hop pioneer Afrika Bambaataa as a visiting scholar. The South Bronx DJ and founder of the hip-hop awareness group the Universal Zulu Nation chose the term “hip-hop” as the name for the culture and identified its core elements as rapping or emceeing, breakbeat deejaying, break dancing (b-boying and b-girling) and graffiti art.

“The fifth element that Afrika Bambaataa described is knowledge, and hip-hop’s art forms are the tools to achieve it,” Ortiz said. “Knowledge, in this case, means an awareness, a consciousness and understanding about the world and understanding of yourself,



Rapper/MC Rakim poses with graffiti art of turntable deejaying. AP Images

your history and heritage and the heritage of other people.”

Hip-hop grew to include techniques such as vocal percussion, known as beat boxing, and vinyl scratching, and through recordings such as the Sugarhill Gang’s 1979 hit “Rapper’s Delight,” its fan base began to expand from the urban African-American, Afro-Caribbean and Latino communities of the South Bronx to include suburban American kids of all racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Today, without question, hip-hop is a global phenomenon. Break dance moves have spread to countries that only recently have been connected to the Internet, and rap lyrics are being spoken in nearly every language. Easily adapting hip-hop to their own cultures, young artists worldwide are using it to express themselves, as bluntly or as eloquently as they prefer, making statements on anything from love and abandonment to poverty and corruption.

Noting hip-hop’s amazing growth from its roots in the South Bronx, Bambaataa said the culture “has brought more people together than all the politicians on Earth put together.”

“Through hip-hop, people in different religions who wouldn’t ever speak to one another come together. People of different races and nationalities who would never cross barriers and borders or come into each other’s homes do so because of the music and culture of hip-hop,” Bambaataa said. “Understanding each other is the power of hip-hop.”

University of Florida students perform a breakdance moves on their campus in Gainesville. AP Images

