

1 “Rapper’s Delight”

From Genre-less to New Genre

I was approached in '77. A gentleman walked up to me and said, “We can put what you’re doing on a record.” I would have to admit that I was blind. I didn’t think that somebody else would want to hear a record re-recorded onto another record with talking on it. I didn’t think it would reach the masses like that. I didn’t see it. I knew of all the crews that had any sort of juice and power, or that was drawing crowds. So here it is two years later and I hear, “To the hip-hop, to the bang to the boogie,” and it’s not Bam, Herc, Breakout, AJ. Who is this?¹

DJ Grandmaster Flash

I did not think it was conceivable that there would be such thing as a hip-hop record. I could not see it. I’m like, record? Fuck, how you gon’ put hip-hop onto a record? ‘Cause it was a whole gig, you know? How you gon’ put three hours on a record? Bam! They made “Rapper’s Delight.” And the ironic twist is not how long that record was, but how short it was. I’m thinking, “Man, they cut that shit down to fifteen minutes?” It was a miracle.²

MC Chuck D

[“Rapper’s Delight”] is a disco record with rapping on it. So we could do that. We were trying to make a buck.³

Richard Taninbaum (percussion)

As early as May of 1979, *Billboard* magazine noted the growing popularity of “rapping DJs” performing live for clubgoers at New York City’s black discos.⁴ But it was not until September of the same year that the trend garnered widespread attention, with the release of the Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight,” a fifteen-minute track powered by humorous party rhymes and a relentlessly funky bass line that took the country by storm and introduced a national audience to rap. Although rap was written about as “black music” from its first mention in *Billboard*, the first rap song to call

attention to racial and ethnic difference was not recorded by an African American artist. This honor belongs to "Take My Rap . . . Please," a song released about one month after "Rapper's Delight" as various producers and independent labels attempted to cash in on the new craze for "rapping deejay records."⁵ The only recording ever made by Steve Gordon and the Kosher Five, this now forgotten but historically significant recording represents the first song by a white rapper as well as the first recorded rap parody.⁶

"Take My Rap" was written by Gordon, a part-time radio deejay, and his friends, including Richard Taninbaum and Bill Heller. Taninbaum (percussion) and Heller (bass) were studio musicians who often worked for Reflection Records, an upstart disco label that had scored a minor hit with "Struck By Boogie Lightning."⁷ Thinking back on the making of the record, the three men—all Caucasian Jews with Yiddish-speaking parents—remember that since rap was a "black thing," they thought it would be funny to write a song based on the question: "What would a Jew do with a rap song?"⁸

Although the song began as a joke between friends, the musicians were able to convince Reflection Records owner Jack Levy to record and release the single commercially. Figure 1 shows the twelve-inch cover, with the song title printed in faux Hebraic script. Dressed in beach attire, Gordon sits reclining between two women: a young blonde in short shorts and tank top and an elderly, gray-haired woman wearing a dress and fur coat.⁹ The odd pairing of sexy lady and Jewish grandma make the group's humorous intent clear, and the song itself offers up a number of ironic juxtapositions. The lyrics tell the unlikely story of a Jewish salesman who becomes a rap star after his date drags him to a club with music that is "too loud" and a DJ that is "talking to the crowd." Delivered in a thick Yiddish accent, Gordon's performance makes use of a variety of Jewish cultural references. He mentions chopped liver and Maalox, and describes rap as "just a simple spiel." Replacing the smooth rapping style and urban slang of black MCs with a stiff flow made more awkward by the insertion of various Yiddish idioms (e.g., "Oy vey!"), the song highlights Gordon's ethnic identity for laughs.

Although the main target of their humor was their parents' generation of Yiddish-speaking Jews, the Kosher Five's foray into rap also reveals a number of assumptions about the emergent genre. Most obviously, the song's humor depends on the incongruity of a Jewish man rapping, a style of music presumed to be the domain of African American performers. "Take My Rap" thus illustrates how rap music, from its very beginning as a commercial genre, could make identity audible. By subverting genre-specific expectations, Steven Gordon and the Kosher Five made a spectacle of their Jewishness.



Figure 1. Cover, Steve Gordon and the Kosher Five, “Take My Rap . . . Please,” Reflection Records MOM 667, 1979.

Although the lyrical clichés and Yiddish accent are indispensable, “Take My Rap” also draws upon its musical track—coded as dance music—to reinforce this ironic juxtaposition. As Taninbaum recalls in the epigraph to this chapter, he easily understood the formula behind the Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight” as “a disco record with rapping on it.”¹⁰ In the studio, Gordon performed his schtick over a funky disco arrangement—four-on-the-floor kick drum, syncopated guitar riffs, and bass ostinato—that was the standard accompaniment for the first rap singles released in 1979 and 1980. In fact, the beat used to record “Take My Rap” was also recycled to provide the backing track for *four* other rap songs released by Reflection Records.¹¹

On the one hand, the use of the same disco beat to create five different singles reflects the entrepreneurial spirit of rap's first years, a period when cash-strapped independent producers sought to maximize the return on their investments. On the other hand, the fact that the Koshers' beat could be used as the foundation for songs by African American performers—both male and female—suggests something else: in 1979, rap style might have been understood immediately as “black,” but rap beats had not yet begun sounding particular identities.

From where, then, did the stylistic norms of rap's first beats come? And what did it mean in the closing months of 1979 for rap to be understood as a “black thing”? In other words, what underlying forces allowed for the rise of this new entity, the rap song? To answer these questions, this chapter returns to a pivotal moment in hip hop and rap music history when DJs' and MCs' practices of live performance were being translated into studio-produced songs. The most important of these recordings was the Sugarhill Gang's “Rapper's Delight,” which spawned dozens of imitators and helped establish rap music as a new commercial genre. Although it was not the first commercially released song to feature rapping, “Rapper's Delight” shot up *Billboard's* Disco and Hot 100 charts to introduce millions of listeners to the new style.¹² Yet, rapping, one of the core elements associated with hip hop culture, dates back to the early 1970s. Its spread, like that of DJing, dancing, and graffiti, predated “Rapper's Delight” by more than five years. In fact, hip hop's key musical elements—rapping and DJing—were part of a thriving local subculture long before rap music captivated the national imagination. Within New York's club scene, the Sugarhill Gang, which included MCs Big Bank Hank, Wonder Mike, and Master Gee, were virtually unknown. The sudden success of their song “Rapper's Delight” shocked local figures who rightly considered themselves true pioneers of the style.¹³

In numerous ways “Rapper's Delight” represented a departure from what was occurring in New York's clubs. I will use the term *hip hop* to designate the culture and practices of live performance from which *rap* the genre of commercial music developed. A main difference between the two, as Joseph Schloss explains in his study of the relationship between dancers and DJs in hip hop's early years in New York, is that hip hop was not originally centered around the production of discrete songs. Instead, as I will discuss in detail, early disc jockeys or DJs laid down a nonstop flow of music for partygoers and dancers while rappers or MCs maintained a party atmosphere with lyrical routines and call-and-response chants. The advent of rap music recordings forever altered this dynamic and led to the creation of the rap song, tipping the balance of power away from the DJ and toward the MC.

The music industry's incursion meant that "hip hop as activity" became "hip hop as musical form," and the transformation of hip hop music into a recorded commodity produced important changes that distinguish commercially recorded songs from the live performances that inspired them.¹⁴ The recording session for "Rapper's Delight," for example, took place in two distinct stages. First, Sugar Hill Records co-owner and producer Sylvia Robinson worked with studio musicians to record the song's musical track. But, having trouble convincing a legitimate crew to record for her, Robinson decided to form her own group. Big Bank Hank was discovered during his shift at a pizza parlor. Some days later, after the group had been assembled, MCs Big Bank Hank, Wonder Mike, and Master Gee entered the studio to rap over the prerecorded track. Many of the lyrics that they recited were drawn from the routines of other, more established live performers. For example, weeks before the release of "Rapper's Delight," Grandmaster Caz of the Cold Crush Brothers remembers loaning Big Bank Hank a book of his lyrics. For the recording of "Rapper's Delight," Hank rapped lyrics from Caz's book, even reciting rhymes that include Caz's stage name: Casanova Fly.¹⁵ As one of the music's most notorious examples of "biting" (stealing another's style and attempting to pass it off as one's own), "Rapper's Delight" has become a paradigmatic symbol of hip hop's commercial exploitation.

The Sugarhill Gang's blatant inauthenticity, however, tends to overshadow a profound formal shift that accompanied live hip hop's translation into commercial rap music. A key difference between live hip hop and recorded rap involves the role of the DJ in producing the musical beat that MCs rap over. For "Rapper's Delight," studio musicians—not a DJ—created the beat. Once the main attraction at live events, DJs suddenly found themselves relegated to a marginal role in the recording studios of rap's first years. In fact, it is even possible that the lack of a DJ was key to the success of "Rapper's Delight." The DJ was at the center of the club scene, and the MCs (or rappers) "were on stage at the discretion of the DJ, the king of the party, and at the mercy of his subjects, the audience."¹⁶ But the Sugarhill Gang, not beholden to a DJ, were free to create rhymes focusing more on the "funny stories" and "hookish slang" that appealed to a wider audience experiencing the music, not through live performances, but through the radio, as songs.¹⁷ The use of studio musicians to craft the beats for these songs remained the dominant approach to production in rap's first few years.

Comparing recordings of pre-1979 hip hop events to rap music's first hit single, "Rapper's Delight," we can see how the musical dimensions of rap songs differed from live DJ performances. Although producers like Robinson replaced the DJ with studio musicians, they did not wholly

abandon the concepts or aesthetic predilections that DJs had cultivated prior to the advent of rap. In particular, rap's first producers inherited from DJs a commitment to breakbeats: the relatively brief, polyrhythmic instrumental passages that appear on numerous recordings released in the 1960s and 1970s. This "break-centered" approach provided a foundation for numerous future developments in musical production. As rap musicians developed new ways of making beats—the musical tracks that supported a rapper's lyrics—they laid the groundwork for new ways of sounding race. Not surprisingly, news outlets that began to take notice of the rap phenomenon discussed its musical features in familiar terms, drawing upon and recycling long-standing notions about black sound. Revisiting the world of hip hop music before the advent of rap songs, we gain a greater appreciation for the musical innovations of hip hop's first artists, as well as a better understanding of the formal elements, musical concepts, and cultural meanings that would be manipulated for years to come by rap's producers.

HIP HOP BEFORE HIP HOP

Regarded as a key pioneer in hip hop's musical evolution, DJ Kool Herc (b. Clive Campbell) cultivated an approach to playing records that continues to inform contemporary hip hop and rap production. In the summer of 1973, Herc and his sister Cindy began throwing dance parties in the recreation room of their apartment building at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in the South Bronx. The positive response to these parties encouraged Herc to expand into larger venues, leading him to become one of the most famous DJs in the Bronx. He is regarded today as a founding father of hip hop, and his success depended in part on the musical techniques he pioneered at these parties. Herc's musical innovations, which laid the foundation for rap music, resulted from a dynamic interaction between the DJ and the dancers at his parties. Noticing that the dancers (hip hop's first "b-boys") were responding to certain kinds of records—and certain parts of those records that featured energetic polyrhythmic grooves—Kool Herc became the first Bronx DJ to develop a method for isolating and repeating breakbeats, or "breaks" as they also became known.¹⁸

Herc called his innovation, which involved using two turntables to shuttle back and forth between the break sections that he had identified on his records, the "merry-go-round." When one break was near ending, Herc could transition into a new one or repeat the one just played, providing partygoers with the juiciest parts of each song. As Herc explains, "On most records people have to wait through a lot of strings and singing to get to the

good part of the record. But I give it to them all up front."¹⁹ By playing the crisp, handclapping break from James Brown's "Give It Up or Turn It Loose," transitioning into the rapid-fire percussion of Michael Viner's Incredible Bongo Band's "Bongo Rock," and then fading into the chugging, anthem-like groove of Babe Ruth's "The Mexican," Herc created something new from previously existing materials.²⁰ Extending relatively brief moments of funk into something of greater length and significance, Herc and his followers recognized the power of what he had discovered, and Herc began reserving the merry-go-round for the climactic moments at his parties, ramping up the energy and inspiring the dancers at his parties late into the morning.²¹

The records that Kool Herc played were not hip hop as most people think of it today. Before there were commercially recorded and released rap singles, hip hop music did not exist independently of events held at clubs, parks, community centers, and other venues.²² In other words, although something conceptually distinct (if not always labeled "hip hop") existed for years prior to "Rapper's Delight," rap *songs* did not. Hip hop music began as the playing of recordings from soul, funk, R&B, rock, and other genres—recordings whose origins were often far removed from the Bronx.²³ To be a successful DJ, one had to amass and master a vast record collection, and a veritable cottage industry developed in New York to satisfy the demand for breakbeat records.²⁴ Knowledge about which records to buy and the location of breaks on these records became trade secrets.

As Kool Herc's approach to DJing garnered increasing attention, other aspiring Bronx DJs attempted to emulate and even improve on his style. In May of 1974, sixteen-year-old Joseph Saddler attended one of Herc's parties. Although inspired by what he witnessed, Saddler remembers having mixed feelings about Herc's technique. Despite his "monumental" insight about zeroing in on the breaks, Herc had not—at least to Saddler's ears—satisfactorily completed what he had begun. The problem, according to Saddler, was that Herc would literally "pick up the needle and drop it on the vinyl—first on one turntable and then on the next—taking a chance that he would land on the break." This lack of precision meant that Herc often missed the downbeat, interrupting the flow of the music and momentarily confusing dancers. Saddler remembers that "if you looked at the crowd in that moment between the songs, everybody fell off the beat for a few seconds. They'd get back on it again, but in those few seconds you could see the energy and the magic start to fade from the crowd."²⁵

In response, Saddler began searching for a more exact way to cue up breaks. After much trial and error, he arrived at a method where he could

precisely manipulate his records by placing his hands and fingers directly on the vinyl. Holding a recording in place on the rotating turntable, he could now “slip-cue” breaks with precision. By releasing the vinyl to spin at the exact moment the breakbeat on his other turntable was ending, he could transition cleanly into a new break. Using multiple copies of the same recordings, two turntables, and a mixer, a breakbeat could also be “looped,” meaning that it could be extended indefinitely and, what is more, stay in the pocket the whole time. Mark Katz neatly summarizes the procedure in his history of hip hop DJing:

- Put two copies of the same record on the turntables with the needles at the beginning of the break.
- Slide the crossfader [of the mixer] to the left position so that only turntable one will sound.
- Using a marked label as a guide, start playing the disc on turntable one at the beginning of the break.
- While turntable one is playing, start turntable two, but hold the disc in place so the needle doesn't move through the grooves.
- Right when the break on turntable one ends, quickly slide the crossfader to the right side and let go of the disc on turntable two.
- While the break is playing on turntable two, manually rotate the disc on turntable one backwards (this is called backspinning) to the beginning of the break and hold the record in place.
- Right when the break on turntable two ends, quickly slide the crossfader back to the left side and let go of the disc on turntable one.
- Continue at your pleasure.²⁶

Saddler named this achievement his “quick mix theory.”²⁷ Working to perfect his new approach to spinning breakbeats, he began earning a reputation for the ability to mix faster and cleaner than other DJs. Soon Saddler and his crew were performing at their own events, where he went by the name Grandmaster Flash.²⁸

Flash's innovation was key. Manipulating breakbeats with greater accuracy and speed allowed him to create a more reliable rhythmic framework for dancers, and for his MCs to launch increasingly elaborate rap routines. What is more, Flash's focus on musical technique allowed him greater control of the general atmosphere at his parties. Just as he had first witnessed Kool Herc do at Cedar Park, Flash strategically ordered the records he played to keep his audiences engaged and build toward climactic moments.²⁹ But in addition to building energy through the ordering of the records he played and the volume at which he played them, Flash capitalized on his

precise technique, creating new musical arrangements by virtue of the way in which he looped individual breaks. Looping also served another valuable purpose: by avoiding the parts of songs that might be considered "cheesy" or undesirable for any number of reasons, DJs were able to draw on a much wider palette of sounds.³⁰ As we will see later in this chapter and throughout this book, the ability to select and repeat parts of a pre-existing recording plays an important role in rap's production of racial identity. By creating a new groove that repeatedly juxtaposes the end of one segment of a recording with its own beginning, quick mix theory "Africanizes" any slice of sound, aligning it with other Afro-diasporic forms, such as funk and Cuban *son*.³¹

AUDUBON ROCK ON

One of the best-preserved recordings of hip hop music prior to 1979 features Grandmaster Flash and the Four MCs (before they added Rahiem and became the Furious Five). The performance took place at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem on December 23, 1978, almost a full year before the release of "Rapper's Delight." Over the course of the thirty minutes of performance preserved by this audio recording, Flash applies his quick mix theory to eleven different recordings.³² The timings in table 1 illustrate how he moves through this set. For each artist and song title listed, Flash uses two identical copies of the respective recording to isolate and loop the breaks. But Flash did not simply repeat the breakbeats in unvarying cycles. By choosing exactly *where* and *when* to loop breaks, he created a live "remix" of the prerecorded material.

In graphically representing parts of Grandmaster Flash's routine, I have avoided staff notation in favor of an original method that calls greater attention to the process underlying the sounds captured on this recording. Rather than revealing particular pitches and rhythms, this method gives a measure-by-measure account of how Flash works with *his* fundamental musical unit: the break. There are two good reasons for this approach. First, this method prevents the abstraction of individual parts from a whole that in the world of the DJ never existed as separate entities. To distinguish between individual musical lines or instruments, as in a musical score, would disguise the fact that the sounds we hear come from the manipulation of two copies of a single record.³³ By focusing on Flash's use of particular breaks rather than transcribing the individual lines that can be abstracted from them, this method of transcription calls attention to the musical, which is to say expressive, priorities of the DJ. A second reason, closely

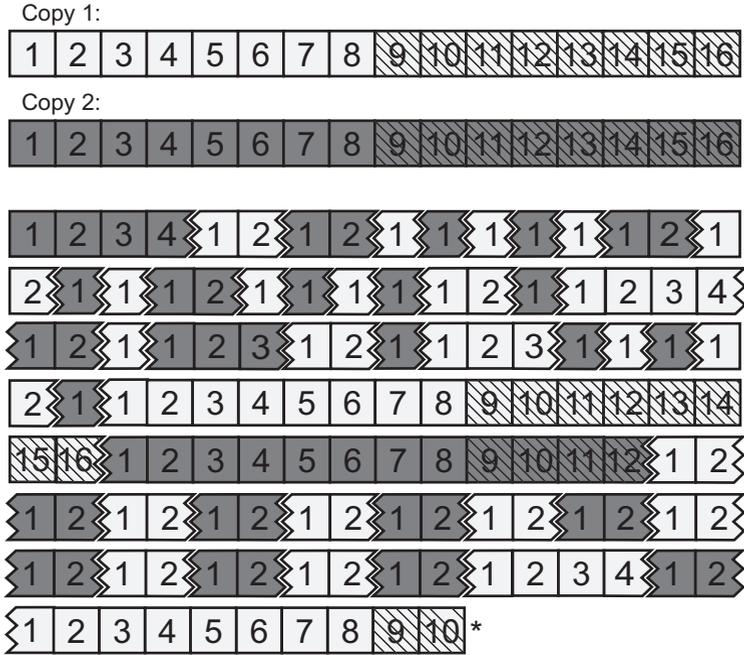
Table 1. Song titles and timings for the breakbeats Grandmaster Flash mixed in his performance at the Audubon Ballroom, December 23, 1978

<i>Group, song title (year)</i>	<i>Time</i>
Fatback Band, "Fatbackin'" (1973)	0:01–0:53
Brooklyn Dreams, "Music, Harmony and Rhythm" (1977)	0:54–4:56
Gaz, "Sing Sing" (1978)	4:57–9:23
Manzel, "Space Funk" (1977) [spun backwards]	9:24–11:08
Dynamic Corvettes, "Funky Music Is the Thing" (1975)	11:09–13:30
Duke Williams and the Extremes, "Chinese Chicken" (1973)	13:31–15:30
All Dyrections, "On Top Of It" (1973)	15:31–19:08
Pleasure, "Let's Dance" (1976)	19:09–22:09
John Davis and the Monster Orchestra, "I Can't Stop" (1976)	22:10–26:22
David Matthews, "Main Theme from <i>Star Wars</i> " (1977)	26:23–28:59
The Blackbyrds, "Blackbyrds Theme" (1974)	29:00–29:34

aligned with the first, is that doing so also sets up future analyses of rap songs. Because DJs and DJ techniques continued to play an important part in the development of rap's sound, focusing on the breaks—whether played directly from LPs, interpolated by studio bands, programmed into electronic drum machines, or digitally sampled—can offer insight into rap's formal evolution.

Examining Grandmaster Flash's use of Brooklyn Dreams's "Music, Harmony and Rhythm," which begins at just under a minute into the Audubon recording, we can hear how Flash applies his intimate knowledge of this recording to exploit its musical features. The break that Flash isolates is the song's opening sixteen measures, which can be divided into two eight-measure parts, A and B (fig. 2). Part A features drums and bass guitar, and part B adds a piano. The numbers in the boxes correspond to measures 1–16; I've shaded measures 9–16 to indicate the presence of the piano. Parts A and B each consists of two nearly identical four-measure units. If we label each of these units individually, the entire sixteen-measure break has an AABB form.

By manipulating two copies of this recording, Flash coaxes four minutes of music from a thirty-second break. Although he could have simply looped the entire sixteen measures eight times to supply the same duration, he chooses to work with "Music, Harmony and Rhythm" in tighter, more irregular cycles. Selecting varying points of repetition within the break, he



* Coincides with transition to "Sing Sing" break.

Figure 3. Transcription of Grandmaster Flash’s use of the “Music, Harmony and Rhythm” break in his performance at the Audubon Ballroom, December 23, 1978.

these MCs, offering the piano’s entrance as a kind of bridge between their two routines. This interpretation is supported by the fact that he cuts back to part A soon after Kid Creole begins rapping, and settles back into mixing just the break’s first two measures for another minute and a half. The next time Flash lets the break spin into part B, he uses the piano’s appearance in the break as a transition into the next recording: Gaz’s “Sing Sing.”

It is worth stating that there is nothing anomalous about Flash’s approach to the “Music, Harmony and Rhythm” break. Every other breakbeat he manipulates on the Audubon recording receives similar treatment. Gaz’s “Sing Sing” break, for example, begins with a bass ostinato that repeats four times before a quick three-note pickup leads into a lengthy twenty-two-measure percussion groove. In performance, however, Flash reorders these occurrences, beginning with the percussion groove and only cutting back to the bass ostinato after the break reaches its end. After allowing the ostinato to be heard, Flash returns to playing the percussion groove; only this time

he tightens the loop, cutting back repeatedly to the three-note pickup before the percussion groove ends. Then, to create a climactic moment in his use of the break, he loops just the three-note pickup and backspins it rapidly so that only the first note of the bass guitar sounds repeatedly in quarter note bursts. Not only does this quick mixing allow him to effectively improvise a new bass line, but it also introduces the sound of the record being "scratched" as its grooves are pulled back rapidly beneath the stylus.³⁴

In the performance preserved on this audio recording, it is clear that Flash's role as a DJ involved more than just replaying prerecorded songs. Quick mix theory allowed him to assert a fair amount of creative control over the sounds coming from his turntables. First, the mixing transcribed in figure 3 suggests that Flash imbued different parts of the break with different functions. For example, part A of "Music, Harmony and Rhythm," without the piano, leaves more open space for the MCs' rapping, and it is not surprising to hear Flash reserve the piano part for dramatic moments in the performance, whether they be a transition between MCs or breakbeats. Secondly, Flash's quick mix theory fostered a sense of drama and created a new musical accompaniment that his MCs actively engaged in their lyrical routines. Because Flash did not always loop breakbeats the same way, the musical surface constantly shifted, and MCs had to adjust their flows to match it. These rapid changes in rhythmic texture—what Tricia Rose would later identify as hip hop's propensity for "rupture"—encouraged MCs to alternate between the delivery of rhyming couplets (what we might hear as short verses) and single-line phrases that allowed them to navigate rapid changes in the musical surface. Consider, for example, Flash's transition between the "Music, Harmony and Rhythm" and "Sing Sing" breaks (fig. 4). Kid Creole is in the middle of a short verse when Flash introduces the new break. Melle Mel quickly takes control of the microphone, using a short, repeated chant, "Let's rock y'all, nonstop y'all," to accustom himself to the new instrumental track before beginning a short verse. As the breakbeat changes, we can hear Melle Mel comport himself to the new rhythm, getting his bearings before launching into a longer, more elaborate verse.

Looking back on these live performances, Flash emphasizes the amount of effort and practice it took for MCs to be able to navigate his beats. "You just didn't get it over night. You had to play with it, develop it, break things, make mistakes, embarrass yourself."³⁵ To avoid embarrassment and captivate their audiences, Flash and his MCs clearly worked out short routines to capitalize on the musical juxtapositions enabled by quick mix theory. Turning to another bootleg tape recorded in 1978, we can hear Flash and the Four MCs performing at the Bronx's Jackson Housing Projects. At just

Kid Creole:

*Hip hop shooby doo Whatcha wanna do
When a boy like me and a girl like you
got a bad case of the boogaloo flu
We called the doctor and the doctor knew
We called the nurse the nurse had it, too
So whatcha wanna do in order to
give everybody the boogaloo flu*

Melle Mel:

Rock rock y'all, you don't stop. Keep on.

*Let's rock y'all, non stop y'all
Let's rock y'all, non stop y'all*

*We're two for one, we're twice the fun
We rock you hard from sun to sun
It's the face of the place with the bass in your face
The funk machine, rock the whole place*

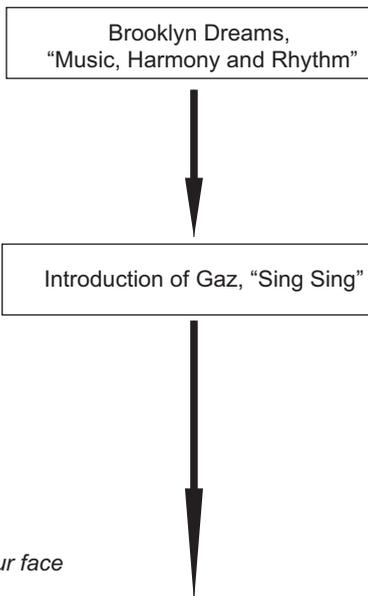


Figure 4. Transition between rappers Kid Creole and Melle Mel. Melle Mel uses a short, repeated phrase to accustom himself to the rhythm of Gaz's "Sing Sing."

under five minutes into the recording, Flash begins alternating between two of the most famous breaks in hip hop and rap music history: the Incredible Bongo Band's "Apache" and the 20th Century Steel Band's "Heaven and Hell Is On Earth." Here, Flash mixes the opening two measures of "Apache" with the opening two measures of "Heaven and Hell" to create a new four-measure loop. Although "Apache" is pure percussion, "Heaven and Hell" features vocals that make it unsuitable as an accompaniment to rapping. Thus, Flash and his four MCs created a routine—a call and response of sorts—between these breaks. The MCs remain silent during the two measures of "Heaven and Hell" which feature vocals, and they respond with their own couplets when Flash switches to "Apache." Trading measures two at a time, this section recalls the interaction between jazz instrumentalists:

"APACHE" + MELLE MEL: Yes, yes y'all! Freak, freak y'all!
You say hit it Flash!

"HEAVEN AND HELL": Children growing, women producing,
men go working, some go stealing.

- "APACHE" + MELLE MEL: [rest]
Hit it Flash!
- "HEAVEN AND HELL": Children growing, women producing,
men go working, some go stealing.
- "APACHE" + MELLE MEL: Melle Mel rocks so well,
From the world trade to the depths of hell.
- "HEAVEN AND HELL": Children growing, women producing,
men go working, some go stealing.
- "APACHE" + MR. NESS: I'm Mr. Ness and I sound so good
As I rock side-side, I rock side-ways
- "HEAVEN AND HELL": Children growing, women producing,
men go working, some go stealing.
- "APACHE" + COWBOY: I'm the C-O-W-B-O-Y
The man is bad and you can't deny
- "HEAVEN AND HELL": Children growing, women producing,
men go working, some go stealing.
- "APACHE" + KID CREOLE: Too hot to handle, too cold to hold
I go by the name of the Kid Creole

Although we hear something that resembles later commercial rap music—namely MCs rapping over beats—there are several aspects of these live performances that distinguish them from later studio-produced music. First, as these examples demonstrate, the DJ controlled the musical texture and set parameters for the MCs to negotiate. Far from a regularized musical backdrop, Flash's accompaniment was constantly in flux. His interaction with the four MCs resembles something akin to a game of musical cat-and-mouse. Although Flash's mixing could create a dialogue with his MCs (as in the most recent example), we also hear him move from one breakbeat to the next with little apparent regard for his rappers. If one of his MCs happens to be in the middle of a verse, so be it; it is up to the MC to adjust his flow and make the most of the transition. Second, much like Flash's approach to DJing, the MCs' rhyming roams freely, an approach sometimes referred to as freestyling. We hear MCs drop out to call attention to what the DJ is doing (particularly at 9:24, when Flash demonstrates his virtuosity by quick-mixing Manzel's "Space Funk" in reverse); we hear them shift into conversational speech to advertise upcoming performances; and we hear them repeat favorite couplets multiple times without any particular fear of sounding unoriginal. It is easy to imagine why such spontaneity and flexibility were necessary. Without any solid assurances about exactly how and when Flash was going to loop the breaks, developing longer verse structures or narrative forms would be a pointless exercise.

A final difference between these live performances and recorded songs is that Flash's application of quick mix theory gives rise to a sense of musical spontaneity that one rarely hears in commercial rap recordings after 1979, even those by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. Although he cuts from one record to another strictly on the downbeat, allowing him to maintain a steady 4/4 rhythm for dancers and MCs, Flash does not seem concerned with repeating cycles of symmetrical length as would become common practice in hip hop music after its translation into rap songs (to be explained shortly). Instead, he improvises how and when he will loop a given break, a practice that gives rise to music with a steady beat, but also much room for variation. The remnants of pre-1979 hip hop music preserved on these audio recordings offer an alternative view of hip hop music, a world where performances unfold over the course of an evening and the musicians emphasize process more than production. No doubt this capacity for spontaneity helps explain why DJs were the focal point in early hip hop. Not only were they in control of *what* music got played, but they developed new and exciting techniques that informed *how* they played it. And in so doing, they commanded MCs, inspired dancers, and enlivened the atmosphere at their events for partygoers. The appropriative and transformative nature of these practices is what led Grandmixer D.ST (one of hip hop's early DJs) to characterize the essence of hip hop as a "genre-less" approach to music.³⁶ Theoretically speaking, according to this approach, any recording from any genre has the potential to be grist for hip hop's mill. Later sample-based production in hip hop as well as the practices of electronic dance music producers are indebted to this philosophical innovation, which allows producers to assemble new tracks from diverse snippets of sound.

At the Audubon Ballroom and other pre-1979 hip hop performances, DJs took pre-existing records from multiple genres (rock, disco, jazz, funk, etc.) and literally spun new musical forms into existence. Although Grandmaster Flash and the Four MCs' performance does not hang together as a series of songs, we would be mistaken to hear the loose feel of this recording as a sign of sloppiness. The group's job was to maintain control of the vibe at their events, to keep people dancing and engaged with what the DJ was doing, not to create a coherent work of art. We can imagine MCs and DJs reacting to specific things that were happening in the room at that moment—arguments, somebody wearing a crazy outfit, a drunk person falling down—that by their very nature cannot be understood through audio recordings alone. (In contrast, everything one needs in order to appreciate a commercial recording has to be on the record itself.) Looking

back on these live performances, Grandmaster Flash recalls: "If you could tell where one record stopped and the next one began, or where Mel handed off to Cowboy, or if Rahiem rapped the same part of the jam last night as he did tonight, then your ears were better than mine."³⁷ As Flash makes clear, the lack of beginnings or ends within the set was deliberate. Hip hop's early DJs and MCs were not concerned with crafting songs, only with rocking parties.

FROM GENRE-LESS TO NEW GENRE

Within a year of Grandmaster Flash's Audubon Ballroom and Jackson Projects performances, the first rap songs began hitting the airwaves, clubs, and record shops. Once independent music labels began marketing the first rap singles to a regional, then a national commercial market, the musical practices and priorities of Bronx DJs and MCs were complicated by a new set of concerns and issues related to the (racialized) popular music industry. In attempting to craft hit singles, rap's first producers significantly altered the music as it was heard in New York's clubs. Nearly all were inspired by the success of the Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight," the influential single that relied on the recording studio to translate live hip hop into a rap song. In this context, the music producer—a central figure in the history of recorded popular music—enters our story to challenge the sovereignty of the hip hop DJ. By examining this first stage in rap music production beginning in 1979, a period that has sometimes been referred to as "disco rap," we can begin to understand how rap's reliance on breakbeats helped give rise to new racial meanings.

Hip hop music is often colloquially referred to as the art of beats and rhymes. But in 1979, no standard procedures existed for making beats. There was no recorded rap tradition to provide guidance, and Sugar Hill producer Sylvia Robinson's arrangement for "Rapper's Delight" departed significantly from the practices of DJs such as Grandmaster Flash. As already mentioned, instead of employing a DJ with two turntables and a mixer, Robinson directed the musicians in her studio to record the song's backing track. Yet, even under these new circumstances, the break remained an important organizing concept. In fact, the instrumental track for "Rapper's Delight" was a composite of *two* breaks. The song opens with an eight-measure vamp derived from a portion of Love De-Luxe's "Here Comes That Sound Again" (1979), a mostly forgotten track from the disco years. This groove, whose relationship to "Here Comes That Sound" is most clearly audible in the vamp's piano part, is abruptly interrupted

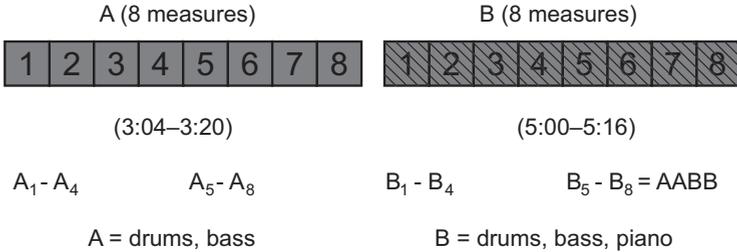


Figure 5. Two different eight-measure sections of the instrumental break from Chic’s “Good Times.”

(almost like a DJ cutting from one record to the next) to give way to the main beat that the MCs rap over. The source of this second interpolation is well known as one of the hottest singles of the disco years: Chic’s 1979 megahit, “Good Times.” What is not commonly acknowledged, however, is that the studio musicians at Sugar Hill Records based their arrangement on two different portions of the instrumental break that occurs at the three-minute mark of “Good Times” (fig. 5).

Splicing these parts together, Robinson’s arrangement for “Rapper’s Delight” foreshadows the chopping and looping of sample-based production that would become the industry standard in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The resulting composite break, which the musicians reproduced with remarkable accuracy, consists of two eight-measure units. Part A features drums, bass, and handclaps, and part B adds guitar and piano. Each of these eight-measure units consists of two repeating four-measure units. In fact, the form of this studio interpolation should be familiar: it shares the same structure as the opening sixteen measures of “Music, Harmony and Rhythm” (see fig. 2) that Flash used in his Audubon performance.

Despite maintaining the centrality of breakbeats, however, the way that Robinson treated “Good Times” in the studio marked an important shift in musical priorities. Rather than attempt to “remix” the break as Flash did during his live performances, the musicians settled on a strictly regularized arrangement for the Sugarhill Gang to rap over. They simply repeated the entire sixteen measures without variation for the duration of the song. To emphasize this point, consider figure 6, in which the backing track to “Rapper’s Delight” is represented as a function of what a DJ would have to do to achieve the same result using two copies of the same record: simply cut from part A of one record to part B of the other, *ad infinitum*.

The repetitive nature of the arrangement confused, even frightened, some of the musicians who had been called into the studio that day. Chip

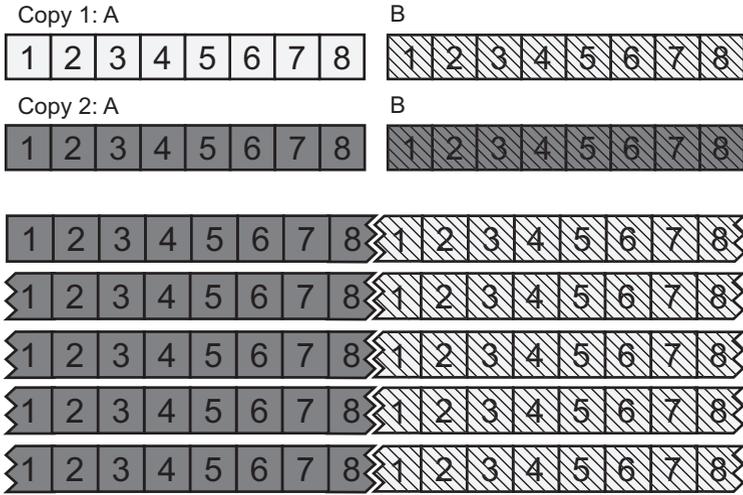


Figure 6. Backing track to “Rapper’s Delight” as a function of what a DJ would have to do to achieve the same result using two copies of the same record.

Shearin, then a seventeen-year-old aspiring jazz musician, played bass guitar at the session and remembers being puzzled by Robinson’s instructions. Shearin’s job was to play the intricate bass line from Chic’s “Good Times” for fifteen minutes without stopping or making mistakes. He remembers, “The drummer and I were sweating bullets because that’s a long time.”³⁸ Although he was unaware of it at the time, Shearin and his fellow session players were being used to recreate something that approximated a DJ looping portions of Chic’s “Good Times.” In other words, Robinson translated Flash’s quick mix theory into a studio setting—only with a rigidity and evenness that was rarely, if ever, a goal in Flash’s live performances! Although the replacement of the DJ with a studio band has been acknowledged and commented on, no one to my knowledge has explored the significant shift in *form* brought about by how this change was implemented.

With “Rapper’s Delight” a new kind of stability and symmetry emerged. With no scratching, no rapid transition between breaks, and no ruptures in the musical surface introduced by a DJ, MCs (or rappers as they increasingly became known) were granted an unprecedented amount of space to fill with their vocals. Rather than freestyling loosely as live MCs tended to do, the Sugarhill Gang neatly arranged their verses into four-measure

units to correspond with the orderliness of the beat. Of course, the majority of MC couplets and party chants were not designed to fill such long uninterrupted stretches, and such sudden unencumbered freedom might have seemed daunting to live MCs suddenly turned recording artists. Indeed, the majority of the Sugarhill Gang's lyrics sound like a pastiche of an MC's live repertoire, a "mesh of rhymes," as one critic put it.³⁹ Although "Rapper's Delight" does not develop a particular theme or broadcast a specific message, these longer verse forms eventually enabled the development of more complex narratives as MCs began turning their attention to the process of recording songs. In other words, the practice of matching a stable musical arrangement to a particular set of lyrics granted hip hop lyricists new creative license and eventually led to the thematic diversity, longer narrative forms, and poetic prowess of more recent hip hop and rap music.

If we examine an audio recording of Grandmaster Flash performing together with MCs Melle Mel and Kurtis Blow at the Armory in Jamaica, Queens, on October 6, 1979, we can hear just how different the musical track for "Rapper's Delight" was from live DJ-centered events. Approximately five minutes of their performance that evening featured the MCs rapping over Flash's quick mix of Chic's "Good Times," the same song that had formed the basis for the Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight." Alternating between different parts of the song, Flash scratches and cuts the recording in dozens of ways, using scratching and quick mix theory to add percussive accents and new rhythms to the mix. Melle Mel actively engages with Flash's mixing. When he hears Flash scratching the title phrase ("good times"), he sets up a call-and-response routine:

MELLE MEL: "Come on Flash! Let's have a . . . have a . . .
have a . . ."

FLASH (VIA CHIC'S RECORD): "GOOD TIMES!"

As in the Audubon tape, Flash rearranges the order of musical events on these recordings, highlighting different sections at different times. At times, he plays just the drum-and-bass breakdown section; at other times he cuts to portions that feature singing and Chic's full band. Toward the end of the excerpt, Flash even demonstrates what later became known among hip hop DJs as "beat juggling." Creating entirely new rhythms and melodies by rapidly alternating between the two recordings set out of phase with one another, he spontaneously recomposes Bernard Edwards's iconic bass line.

In retrospect, the Armory recording captures a moment where change hangs in the balance—an instant where Flash and Melle Mel hold up what has been in the face of what would be. As Mark McCord writes about the Armory concert for *Wax Poetics* magazine, "At least for that one night, it didn't matter if there was a record selling in stores all over the country, because it was the guys on the stage that night who were the real stars."⁴⁰ Even as "Rapper's Delight" climbed the charts and attracted waves of outsiders who had never heard or cared about live DJs and MCs, Flash's Armory performance exemplifies a dynamism and sense of musical spontaneity absent from Sugar Hill's interpolation of the "Good Times" break.

These differences between live hip hop and recorded rap songs have led some historians, musicians, and critics to treat "Rapper's Delight" as hip hop's original sin, or as what Jeff Chang refers to as its "first death."⁴¹ It is easy (and perhaps even fair) to look back on "Rapper's Delight" as a corruption of hip hop performance practice that exploited the culture for profit. That the Sugarhill Gang was a studio creation, totally unknown within New York's club scene, is an often-repeated fact, and the story of how Sylvia Robinson auditioned and assembled the group herself has been documented in great detail. In fact, the Sugarhill Gang did not perform together live until after they had a hit record; and when they did, they worked through a set of songs, not the kind of spontaneous party music Flash and his MCs specialized in providing. The group's many critics have emphasized their lack of credibility as live performers as well as their "borrowing" of other, more famous MCs' rhymes. Thus, previous accounts tend to highlight the inauthenticity of "Rapper's Delight" as well as the shady, exploitative financial practices of Sugar Hill Records, a bias that tends to shield from view the profound shift in form that accompanied hip hop's translation from live performance to recorded rap.

The musical differences brought about by this transformation had significant consequences for rap music, and it is important that we acknowledge the effect of Robinson's and other early producers' decision to record *songs* rather than attempting to capture or re-create live hip hop practices.⁴² Not only did this decision create discrete units that could be sold and played on the radio, but the practice of matching a particular musical arrangement to a particular set of lyrics also unleashed new creative possibilities. Although it is fair to look back on "Rapper's Delight" as a corruption of hip hop practices, the backing tracks of later hip hop and rap songs *all* draw from a similar logic. The basic idea that rap producers should

construct stable backing tracks and pair them with particular MC verses to create discrete songs links “Rapper’s Delight” to just about every rap song that came after it. Without meaning to, perhaps, Robinson had translated the way DJs and MCs worked with breaks into a new form of songwriting.

Through the force of recording practices, which emphasized efficiency and predictability, Robinson and the producers that followed her changed the relationship between MCs and the musical track, expanding the possibilities for rappers to expound on particular themes. No doubt the regularity and symmetry of the backing track to “Rapper’s Delight” had a practical purpose, making it easier for the musicians to coordinate their arrangement and easier for the rappers to deliver their lines cleanly in the pocket. Yet these new recording practices also encouraged hip hop practitioners to begin thinking in terms of discrete units that could be recorded, sold, and played on the radio. Songs need titles; titles suggest themes; themes require lyrical development, and so on. Not surprisingly, the majority of early rap songs, including Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s “Super Rappin’” and Kurtis Blow’s “The Breaks,” turned directly to the practices of live hip hop performance itself for thematic inspiration. Not long after, however, aspiring recording artists began searching for new ways to distinguish themselves, expanding the purview of rap music to include new topics and scenarios, including some, such as “Take My Rap . . . Please,” that broadcast distinctly racialized meanings. In rap music’s first few years as a commercial genre, MCs took leading roles as songwriters and stars while DJs mostly watched from the sidelines. The late Sylvia Robinson—who Grandmaster Flash still refers to as “the queen,” with a mixture of reverence and resentment—had overthrown the kings of the party.

RAP MUSIC AND THE DISCO BACKLASH

The shifts accompanying live hip hop’s translation into recorded rap music were more than purely formal. They were inextricably tied to social currents in contemporary U.S. popular music. Early rap music’s characteristic sound was not wholly unfamiliar to national audiences, even those ignorant of New York’s underground hip hop culture. With its backing track based on Chic’s “Good Times,” one of the biggest disco recordings of 1979, “Rapper’s Delight” combined the novelty of rapping with a musical accompaniment that was recognizable even to those who had never witnessed Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, Afrika Bambaataa, or other New York DJs in performance. In fact, before rap came to be understood as a

genre in its own right, the industry treated it as a species of disco/R&B recording.

Rap's proximity to disco was not something wholly fabricated by the recording industry. Many of the mixing techniques employed by hip hop DJs, such as slip-cueing, were pioneered by so-called disco DJs. In his autobiography, Grandmaster Flash recalls picking up tips from disco DJ Pete Jones.⁴³ Moreover, the records that Grandmaster Flash and others spun were often the same recordings featured at downtown disco clubs and marketed by the recording industry as disco records.⁴⁴ Although there were differences in how DJs from downtown and the Bronx tended to approach their craft (not to mention profound social distances between the whiter, Manhattan dance clubs and the uptown venues where hip hop flourished), there is no evidence to suggest that in 1979 hip hop and disco represented distinct musical genres.⁴⁵ The term *disco* itself indexed a number of overlapping meanings: a commercial music genre, a musical style, a type of dance, a kind of dance club, and a style of DJing. On the Audubon tape, for example, MC Melle Mel repeatedly refers to Grandmaster Flash as "king of the disco mix." And the Armory performance discussed earlier was billed as "The First All-Star Disco Concert." Following this fluidity in usage of the term, rap's first singles were also often conflated with disco releases.

A part of this association was due to obvious musical similarities. Although the modern recording studio would eventually allow rap artists to exploit its technical attributes to "experiment and develop more complex beats and rhythms," the early rap singles that followed "Rapper's Delight" adhered to conventions already familiar to fans of contemporary dance music (i.e., disco), or what Rickey Vincent calls "dance soul."⁴⁶ Executives at the independent labels responsible for recording the first wave of rap records encouraged these stylistic trends. Many of them had entered the business to capitalize on the disco boom. As the dance fad fizzled, they recognized rap as a new way to transform recent hits into profit, and many of the first rap singles were, like "Rapper's Delight," covers of existing dance singles.⁴⁷ In fact, early creative choices seem to have been dictated by relatively conservative musical tastes and shrewd business sense. In addition to "Good Times," rap producers also seized on Cheryl Lynn's 1978 dance floor anthem, "It's Got To Be Real." Table 2 lists rap singles recorded and released in 1979 that interpolated breaks from pre-existing disco hits, all of which reached No. 1 on the *Billboard* charts.

However, the preference for popular disco records cannot be attributed solely to calculating producers. Hip hop DJs had used these singles with live audiences before they became the foundation for new rap recordings. In

Table 2. Rap singles released in 1979 that were based on pre-existing disco hits

<i>Artist</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Covered artist, song title (year)</i>
Sugarhill Gang	"Rapper's Delight"	Chic, "Good Times" (1979)
Xanadu & Sweet Lady	"Rapper's Delight"	Chic, "Good Times" (1979)
Sicle Cell & Rhapazooty	"Rhapazooty in Blue"	Chic, "Good Times" (1979)
Joe Bataan	"Rap-O, Clap-O"	Cheryl Lynn, "Got To Be Real" (1978)
Funky Four Plus One More	"Rappin' and Rockin' the House"	Cheryl Lynn, "Got To Be Real" (1978)
Jazzy 4 MCs	"MC Rock"	Cheryl Lynn, "Got To Be Real" (1978)
Jocho	"Rhythm Talk"	McFadden and Whitehead, "Ain't No Stopping Us Now" (1979)
Mr. Q	"D.J. Style"	Michael Jackson, "Don't Stop 'til You Get Enough" (1979)

fact, it was hearing Lovebug Starski rap over the "Good Times" break at a Harlem club that first inspired Sylvia Robinson to record "Rapper's Delight."⁴⁸ Even when rap producers did not copy breaks from extant hit recordings, the original arrangements that they used drew on the stylistic conventions of contemporary dance music. As Richard Taninbaum, the percussionist and co-writer of "Take My Rap . . . Please," put it, the musical formula was simple: "disco with a guy rapping over it."⁴⁹

Rap producers also tried to imbue their studio productions with elements, such as handclaps or the cacophony of overdubbed voices, evoking the atmosphere of the discotheque.⁵⁰ Even the packaging of some recordings testifies to rap's close ties to the disco genre. One of the first rap singles recorded in the wake of "Rapper's Delight" was a track called "We Rap More Mellow" by the Younger Generation.⁵¹ Released on the Brass label by Brasilia Records, the single arrived in stores in a package that rendered explicit the connection to disco (fig. 7).

Given these multiple points of overlap, it would be a mistake to assume that rap and disco were immediately understood as distinct and opposed genres. Although some observers frame the birth of hip hop and rap music as a reaction *against* disco,⁵² the often-cited animosity between disco and hip hop has been more of a retroactive phenomenon.⁵³ In fact, printed materials and recorded evidence of hip hop music in the years leading up to "Rapper's Delight" give no indication that "disco versus hip hop" was a

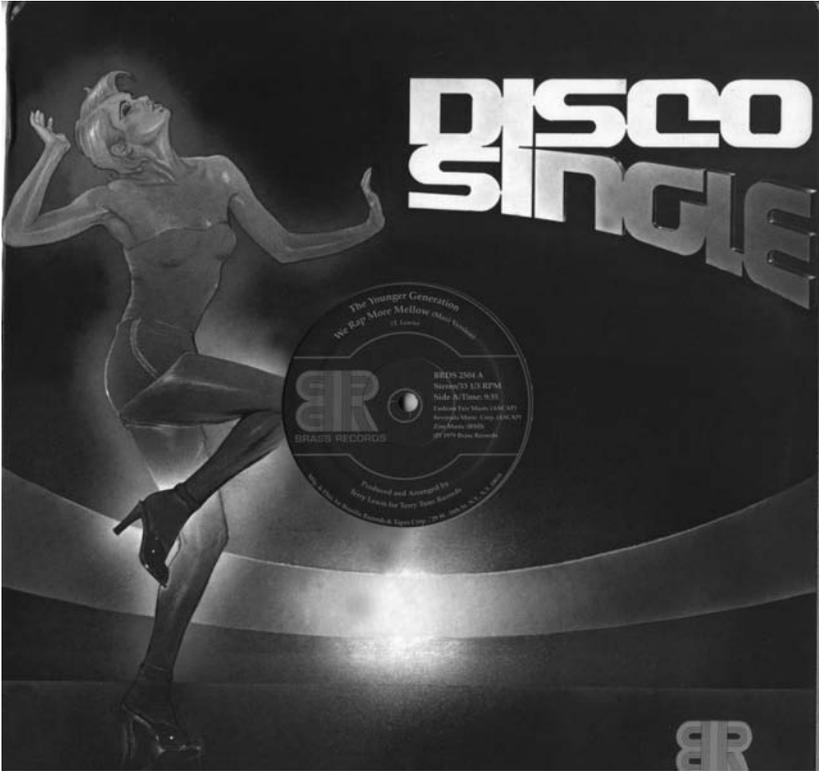


Figure 7. Cover, the Younger Generation, “We Rap More Mellow,” Brass Records BRDS 2504, 1979.

meaningful topos. There are numerous examples of hip hop DJs, MCs, and promoters embracing the term “disco” to describe their events and performance practices. These observations are significant when considering rap music’s racialization, because its national debut coincided with a growing backlash against disco that was itself saturated with race and gender anxieties. By the time “Rapper’s Delight” rose to the top of the charts, a widespread movement against disco’s ubiquity was well underway.⁵⁴

The eventual “death of disco” was not really a stylistic change; it was more of a shift in the categories used by the recording industry to market music.⁵⁵ As musicologist Jeffrey Kallberg explains, genres—such as disco or rap—represent more than a species of classification. A piece of music’s genre identity is not inherent in the music itself, nor is it reducible to a set of particular stylistic traits. Genre is better understood, Kallberg argues, as

a relational and hierarchical concept addressing the way that music makers and music listeners negotiate shared expectations and cultural values.⁵⁶ In other words, genres serve as sites where music's meanings are contested.

The "disco" genre itself emerged from a live, DJ-centered club scene popular in New York and other urban centers. The name itself simply comes from the location (discotheques) where DJs played records for crowds of dancers. As the phenomenon picked up steam, the music industry translated a fluid, live experience of dancing to pre-existing songs in discos into a genre of recordings for sale. Thanks in large part to the runaway success of the film *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) and its accompanying soundtrack by the Bee Gees, disco became a dominant force in the recording industry. *Saturday Night Fever* brought a wider audience into the genre's folds, and soon disco clubs were popping up in cities and towns nationwide. By 1979, there were over two hundred all-disco radio stations across the county.⁵⁷

It is possible to view the advent of the first rap songs as another round in the commodification of New York's disco scene. In fact, the scene was already selling itself in more ways than one. In May of 1979, months before the release of "Rapper's Delight," Robert Ford, Jr., reported in *Billboard* that New York's "rapping DJs" were recording and selling tapes of their live performances, noting that "tapes of [DJ] Hollywood's raps are considered valuable commodities."⁵⁸ In fact, the Audubon and Jackson Projects recordings analyzed earlier in this chapter were products of this local New York market. Looking back on this moment prior to the advent of the first rap songs, DJs Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash reminisce about these tapes as their "first albums."⁵⁹ In an early example of grass-roots cross-promotion, Flash explains that the tapes were popular with cab drivers and luxury car services: "How it worked is people would call for a car, and if they had a dope [Kool] Herc tape, or a dope Bam[baataa] tape, or a dope [Grandmaster] Flash tape, that particular customer might stay in the cab all day long. So these cab drivers were making extra money and at the same time they were advertising us."⁶⁰

Reaching further from downtown in search of new sales, independent record producers like Sylvia Robinson sought to tap this underground market and translate uptown New York's particular take on the disco scene into hit records. Not surprisingly, "Rapper's Delight" came packaged with a familiar disco beat and a music video featuring the Sugarhill Gang performing in a club, complete with disco ball and costumed, choreographed dancers. Yet, by 1979 disco was experiencing a breathtaking drop in popularity, and being labeled "disco" had become a cause for concern. A look at

the *Billboard* Hot 100 singles charts gives an idea of how rapidly the effects of the disco backlash were felt. Halfway through 1979, over half of the top ten tracks in the nation were disco songs; six months later, only one was. Disco declined so fast that Gloria Gaynor's 1980 Grammy Award for "I Will Survive" was the first—and *only*—Grammy Award ever given for Best Disco Recording. After 1980, the term *disco* virtually disappeared from marketing and publicity.⁶¹

As the disco bubble burst, music industry observers presumed that rap would also be short-lived. Even producers making money from rap records wondered aloud how long it could last.⁶² Reactions to early rap music reflected the backlash culture that had grown up around the anti-disco movement. Rap was denigrated as "crap," and, as we have seen, it was parodied and lampooned. What is more, it was marginalized within the recording industry and by radio. Rap—like disco, or as a part of it—was heard *in relation* to "higher" commercial youth genres, such as rock. These genre distinctions helped maintain a musical color line separating black artists and listeners from white ones. As Alice Echols explains, "By the late seventies rock fans understood their music to be implicitly (if not explicitly) white, and pretty much all music by black musicians to be disco."⁶³ As radio stations converted their formats, abandoning disco and returning to rock, the airwaves became increasingly segregated.

The pressure that this new regime exerted on black musicians was evident in a *Billboard* article on Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards. In the issue of December 15, 1979, just one month after their smash hit "Good Times" had inspired the backing track for "Rapper's Delight," the two African American masterminds behind the music of Chic revealed that they were abandoning disco.⁶⁴ The attention-grabbing headline seems aimed at surprising readers, given that the group was currently a leading presence in the genre. The next issue of *Billboard*, for example, announced that the magazine had named Chic the top soul artists of the year and that the group's single "Good Times" and album *C'est Chic* had also been ranked No. 1 by *Billboard*.⁶⁵ The article reveals that the duo's stance appears to have been motivated by unease about the confluence of racial identity and musical style limiting their creative and financial opportunities. Edwards explained that the group wanted to be able to "to work with a white artist so people could stop tagging us as black producers or disco producers."⁶⁶ Edwards's comments, in which he conflates the labels "black" and "disco," are telling, and reflect the growing perception that disco was moribund as a genre as well as the reality that, by the end of the 1970s, the U.S. recording industry had become increasingly segregated. Having been branded as too

disco to touch as a solo act, Nile Rodgers retreated into studio work, and became one of the most successful music producers of the 1980s. Crafting hits for white artists David Bowie, Madonna, and Duran Duran, among others, Rodgers continued to shape mainstream dance music away from the public eye.

Rap artists enjoyed no similar alternatives. As a musical form that placed black bodies and black vernacular rhyming at its center, rap songs highlighted the identity of their performers from the very beginning. (Recall how quickly Steve Gordon and the Koshers were able to make a rap parody that played on the music's presumed blackness.) As many cultural critics have noted, rap music brought African American street culture to the mainstream with unprecedented force.⁶⁷ Highlighting the MC as a new kind of performer, early rap singles put black male stars at center stage. Paired with backing tracks often resembling disco music, "Rapper's Delight" and other "rapping DJ" songs inaugurated a genre situated on the margins of the margins of the industry.⁶⁸

CONCLUSION

As the first rap hit, and a song that today's critics and fans often identify as the beginning of more than three decades of music, "Rapper's Delight" offers a logical starting point for the commercial music genre known today as hip hop and rap music. Although there is undeniable truth to this view (i.e., the song was hugely popular and influenced subsequent producers), the assignment of exact beginnings to musical genres is always retroactive. Rap music did not arrive as a fully formed, self-contained genre. Seeking to make sense of rap's growing popularity for the paper's white, middle-class audience, *New York Times* journalists John Rockwell and Robert Palmer initially wrote rap off as a "novelty phenomenon," or at least hedged their bets by suggesting it could be short-lived.⁶⁹ Despite this skepticism about its longevity, from the beginning rap was unmistakably black. Rockwell and Palmer contextualized it as the music of "urban communities" and "black neighborhoods," once even suggesting that their presumably white readership would most likely encounter rap on the subway and in parks as "intrusive noise."⁷⁰ Although these early reviews and write-ups were not always in agreement, some general similarities are worth noting. For example, when examining how the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* connected rap's sonic qualities to identity, the emphasis was clearly on rap's verbal style, with hardly any serious discussion of its backing tracks or beats. The papers described rap as "rhythmic black street chant" with ori-

gins in "street slang" and "jive talk."⁷¹ By contrast, the musical accompaniment, if mentioned at all, was described as simple ("rudimentary") and incomplete ("skeletal").⁷² In other words, in its first years (roughly 1979 to 1981), rap was certainly identified as black music, but its potential as a genre—in particular, the force of its musical style—was far from knowable.⁷³

Concentrating on this liminal moment in music history, the profound difference between DJ and MC club performances and the first commercial rap songs becomes clear. The world of mid-to-late-1970s hip hop music was both musically and conceptually distinct from the commercially released rap recordings that followed it. The tapes of live hip hop performance prior to 1979 provide evidence of how Grandmaster Flash and other DJs transformed pre-existing recordings into something new. Hip hop music was defined not so much by *what* was on the records that DJs played, but by *how* they played them. In using their skills to refashion breaks and reorder the contents of individual songs, DJs found a new way to bring people together on the dance floor. While the primary role of downtown disco DJs was to blend one song's ending into the next song's beginning as smoothly as possible, "eliminating or masking the breaks between songs," Bronx hip hop DJs fostered a style of music and dance that emphasized the breaks within and between songs.⁷⁴ Unconcerned with crafting individual songs, hip hop's first performers specialized in moving the crowd, providing a continuous, engaging musical presence that enlivened the party atmosphere of the club, recreation room, or park where their audiences had gathered.⁷⁵

As producers such as Sylvia Robinson translated these practices into shorter, saleable units, however, a new form of songwriting was born. The ten-hour party jam became the ten-minute rap single. But although "Rapper's Delight" differed greatly from live hip-hop music, Robinson and other rap producers relied on the break as a fundamental musical unit. In heavy rotation, the Sugarhill Gang's hit single became the center of a new solar system, pulling other bodies into orbit, inspiring other producers and MCs to try their hands at making records in a similar fashion. In the studio environment of rap's first years, producers used this break-centered approach to craft discrete songs, opening the door for MCs to concentrate on developing new themes and expanding upon them.⁷⁶

In the next chapter, we will examine how, as rap music developed in the 1980s, the success of the genre hinged on changes that its producers made to renegotiate rap's image and push it into new territory. Like Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards rejecting the disco label in an attempt to reboot their careers, rap producers, DJs, and MCs in the 1980s sought to free themselves

from the constraints of race and genre. Instead of working behind the scenes for mostly white artists, however, rap musicians increasingly sought to own blackness, cultivating new themes, imagery, and sounds that became central to the genre and their artistic strategies. MCs, DJs, and producers might not have been able to escape race, but they could renegotiate what it meant.