How Hip Hop Lost Its Accent

Anakwa Dwamena/September 7, 2016

The history of hip hop as told in 'The Get Down' only hints at its immigrant heritage.

When twelve-year-old Clive Campbell arrived in the Bronx from Kingston, Jamaica in 1967, he found it hard to adjust to teenage life. He dressed like a Jamaican country boy with his corduroy coat and cowboy boots, his rasta twang 'Yeh Man!' was out of place, and he was advised to change his odd way of walking because "local gangs were throwing Jamaicans in garbage cans." In the late 60s, Bob Marley and the Wailers were only just starting to draw an audience outside of the Caribbean—their album *Wailing Wailers*, with the number one hit in Jamaica "Simmer Down," peaked in last place on the Billboard Top 200. Being Jamaican hadn't become cool yet.

"I was tired of hearing them say 'What did you say?'" recalled Campbell, better known as DJ Kool Herc, in *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, Jeff Chang's 2005 history of hip hop. In the Bronx, he actively worked to lose his accent, but it only happened gradually, with lessons in front of a turntable rather than a chalkboard, listening to venerable tutors like James Brown, Aretha Franklin, Smokey Robinson, The Temptations and "the sweet siren sounds of the Supremes sighing that 'Baby Love' to me." By the time Kool Herc started spinning—at first in basement parties and later outside in park jams when the crowds became too big—all that was left of his Jamaican childhood were his imitations of "toasting" selectors by Trenchtown DJs who would give shout-outs over songs and drop in rhymes over the beat. These elements would come together monumentally on August 11, 1973 in the rec room of 1520 Sedgwick Avenue. Hoping to raise money for his sister to buy new school clothes, Kool Herc played dancehall tunes like those found at any other Jamaican party in the Bronx. The crowd would not budge. But when Kool Herc transitioned to his merry-go-round technique—playing two records at the same time to extend the break—the crowd started to groove.

In episode five of *The Get Down*, Baz Luhrmann's six hour series which premiered on Netflix in early August, we meet a 22-year-old Kool Herc on a fictional version of that legendary night on Sedgwick Ave; he's now a fly American young man with a full beard and fro, decked out in 70s grandpa glasses, tan suit, and a gold medallion around his neck. […] The parties were started, he explains, to "stay out of all that static happening out there on the street… We made a spot for the young sprouts to come and see if they could bust it out. If you can rock, b-boy or be an MC Kool Herc party is the place to be."

The Kool Herc we meet in *The Get Down* is already a Bronx superstar; a sharp contrast both to the ethos of a rec room family party and his unassuming Jamaican parents, who spend the evening behind a table with hot dogs and condiments to serve the hungry kids. Here, Kool Herc's voice has no trace of an accent, in contrast to his mother's pronunciations of teen as *teeen* and child as *chiile*. […]

The passage of the 1965 Hart-Celler immigration bill transformed the face of immigration to America. The disproportionate allocation of quotas to the U.K., Ireland, and Germany was removed, beckoning immigrants from everywhere else to America's coasts. The number of Caribbean-born foreign immigrants doubled over the next ten years. Among these were Grandmaster Flash (born in Bridgetown, Barbados) and the family of Afrika Bambaataa (born to parents of Jamaican and Bajan descent) who along with DJ Kool Herc would form the three wise men who heralded the birth of hip hop. The descendants of this wave of immigration from the West Indies would include hip-hop luminaries like Busta Rhymes, who has made songs in patois, Phife Dawg, whose rhymes are littered with nods to his Caribbean roots, and Biggie Smalls—all of whom would occasionally put on their parents' accents into their songs.

[…] While *The Get Down* never promised to be a fact-checkable historical documentary—it has not been spared criticism for its chronological inconsistencies—the series passes up an opportunity to demonstrate the integration of immigrants as a process of acculturation rather than assimilation. Telling the story of hip hop's accent also captures a slice of the immigrant story in America. While DJ Kool Herc stripped away his accent in order to fit in, he retained the Jamaican mannerisms all other DJs to come would build upon. […]Hip hop is more salad bowl than melting pot.

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