Hip-Hop Was Born in New York City, But Its Roots Are in the Caribbean

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Hip-hop is having a party. For the uninitiated, 2023 marks a year-long 50th birthday celebration for the genre. Celebrations and commemorations abound just about everywhere—even at unlikely places, like the Vice President's mansion.

This year affords us a unique opportunity to look back on a half-century of development, and to pause and consider the impact of the Black Caribbean artists who democratized broadcast, blended old genres to forge new ones, and, ultimately, helped to lay the foundation for the global phenomenon we know as hip-hop culture.

[…] In its infancy, hip-hop had no label. It was a product of DJs looping soul, funk, and disco—a new method of using percussive R&B music to entertain in an era of sweeping social changes. […]

Herc soon emerged as a pioneer of New York City hip-hop culture. In 1977, while hip-hop was still a mostly underground phenomenon, this titan of sound eventually squared off in a legendary battle at the Executive Playhouse. Herc and his West Bronx crew, along with other intrepid DJs offering up looped breaks and party vibes, eventually became the center of gravity for young people of color in 1970s New York. Among new innovators were Kool DJ Red Alert, Grandmaster Flash, and Afrika Bambaataa—all of them, like Herc, of Caribbean descent.

The Caribbean connection is critical to this history because it accounts for the competitive spirit, DIY inventiveness, and public spectacle of mobile jockey culture. These DJs, the stars of their neighborhood party scenes, relied on others—the MCs—to hype the crowd and boast about the supreme skills of the artist on the turntables. That relationship between the DJ and his MC derived from a Jamaican "toasting" tradition and its related "sound clash" culture.

Long before hip-hop's inaugural moment in the Bronx in 1973, sound clashing was a central fixture in the inner-city neighborhoods of Kingston, Jamaica. […]

In the early days of Jamaican sound clashing, DJ crews battled for supremacy over "turf"—small retail stores, public housing projects, or "government yards" where the public congregated. Traditionally, clashes—that is, competitions renown among partygoers—involved two or more sound systems. Each aspired to spin the best record selections in order to win the crowd's approval and become a reigning champion sound. Like hip-hop rivalries to come, friendly clash competitions could devolve into deadly violence. But, more often, clashes were improvised celebrations of dance and opportunities for poor communities to claim public space for themselves.

[…] At the moment of Jamaica's independence from Great Britain in 1962, sound systems were slowly becoming features of a widening Jamaican diaspora, with the cultural phenomenon reaching East London and, eventually, New York City. Important waves of Jamaican immigration to the U.S. and England continued mostly unabated during this period—a product of the fact that migrants could circumvent America's otherwise strict barriers by claiming British citizenship, a legacy of British colonization. […] Immigrants—among them Kool Herc's family—brought their folk cultures and sound system traditions with them.

[…]Making a name for himself in the Bronx just a few years after his family arrived in the United States, he distinguished himself by replicating Kingston's original sound system pioneers in the way he shaped his own mobile jockey enterprise. […] Born Joseph Richard Sadler, DJ Grandmaster Flash and his family immigrated from Barbados to the Bronx in the early 1960s, alongside a new generation of Caribbean immigrants making their way to the New York metropolitan area. As a technical pioneer, he'd become an early innovator of the genre. […]

As Flash was innovating his signature "quick mix" style on the turntables, new Caribbean-American DJs such as Afrika Bambaataa and Kool DJ Red Alert, among others, were creating the framework for the Universal Zulu Nation—a Black Power-inspired youth society for Bronx hip-hop culture. Collectively, these artists helped blend Caribbean music traditions with funk-era "rapping," the poetry of the Black Arts Movement, and other Black and Latino vernacular traditions, to become the foundation of a new rap genre.

[…]What began as a mission to win over the neighborhood, in the tradition of the Jamaican champion sound systems, became something else. By the 1980s, hip-hop DJs no longer just "rocked parties"; they forged rap's foundation and set the stage for the rise of the MC. The subtle art of turntable mixology transformed disc jockeys from creative spinners and record broadcasters to the creators of new and original music as beat producers and scratch artists.