

## THE MESSAGE: HIP-HOP CULTURE

### Get Ready to Rock! A Pre-Visit Guide for the Classroom Teacher

#### Class description:

In the early 1970s the Bronx borough of New York City was home to the beginning of hip-hop culture. By the 1980s, rap recordings took the voices of inner-city life into the mainstream, spreading it around the United States. Since then, parts of hip-hop culture – including the MC, the DJ, the graffiti writer and the break dancer – have become some of the most important forms of expression for young people on the planet. In this class, students will learn about this history, along with the musical tracks and vocal raps of “old school” artists such as Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Afrika Bambaataa, and Queen Latifah – musicians who sent a “message” to American audiences about what life was like in inner-city communities. Explore the history of the sound that changed American popular music forever.

#### Class objectives:

As a result of this class, students will be better able to:

1. Analyze and evaluate lyrics in order to comprehend themes related to inner city life and hip-hop culture.
2. Explain how the character of a place reflects a society’s economics, politics, and values.
3. Describe how social events and technological innovations during specific historical periods have influenced the development of music, art, and dance.

*NOTE: Preview all materials for appropriateness prior to classroom use.*

#### Selected songs (listed by performer):

Grandmaster Flash, “The Message”  
The Sugarhill Gang, “Rapper’s Delight”

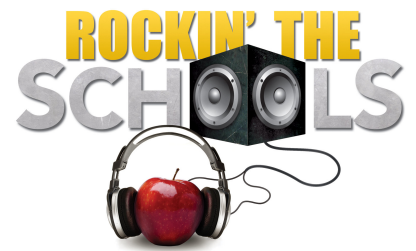
Queen Latifah, “Ladies First”  
Afrika Bambaataa, “Planet Rock”

#### Pre-visit activities for your classroom:

1. Open the activity by asking students why they think New York City is important and having them locate it on a map. Have students research the history of New York City (see <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/newyork/>). You may wish to focus on the 1970s and events in the particular New York City Boroughs. Guiding questions could be: How old was the City in 1970 and what was daily life like for New Yorkers in the 1970s? During this time, what successes did the City accomplish? What challenges did the City face? Were these the same for each Borough? Extend the activity by comparing New York City with their own city or town during the 1970s.
2. Explain to students that they will attend a program at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum on hip-hop culture; this activity introduces some terms and concepts that relate to the program. Ask students what they think hip-hop culture is? Why do you think studying hip-hop could be valuable? Point out to students that studying culture is one way to see how people identify themselves, or show who they are and what they think is important as they interact with others. Select several of the *Key Words* listed on the next page and ask students to define each term and use it in a sentence. Then group students to share the sentences they wrote, compare the definitions of each term, and identify relationships among the terms. (*Continued on next page*)



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## Pre-Visit Activities (Continued):

For example, *New York City Boroughs* are examples of *urban* areas. How many meaningful connections can they draw between the terms? What important connections does hip-hop culture have to understanding important aspects of life in the U.S.? Then have each group use several terms as key words to search articles in *Time Magazine* published from 1968 through 1978 (at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine> or use any other news publication with free access to archived articles.) What issues surrounded the terms? Were all terms found? The concept of hip-hop culture had not received significant mainstream attention by 1978, though it began to develop in the early 1970s. What major events occurred in 1968 and 1978? Extend the activity to current events by having students answer the same questions based on a key word search for the same terms in recent publications.

## Key Words and Definitions

- Hip-hop:** A predominantly African-American cultural movement that developed in the Bronx, a borough of New York City, in the mid-1970s; consists of graffiti, break dancing, turntablism, rapping, and other expressive forms. The musical parts of hip-hop consisted of DJs playing breaks and scratching records on turntables with MCs rapping over the beats. The term is frequently used within mainstream media as a stylistic category for the music.
- Rap:** A vocal style characterized by semi-spoken rhymes declaimed over a rhythmic musical backing.
- Turntables:** The most common device for playing recorded sound of records from the 1870s through the 1980s. Turntables and vinyl records remain popular for “scratching” in hip-hop music, though for recording use it has largely been replaced by the sampler or compact disc. The person who plays music on a turntable is called a DJ, or disc jockey.
- Urban:** Relating to or concerned with a city or densely populated area.
- Culture:** The customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group; the characteristic features of everyday existence shared by people in a place or time, such as “popular culture.”
- Economy:** The structure or conditions of economic life in a country, area, or period; systems for trading goods and services.
- New York City:** A city and port in South East New York State located at the mouth of the Hudson River; includes the boroughs of Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens, and Staten Island. Population 8,008,278.
- Black pride:** A concept spread by the Black Power movement that encouraged holding and spreading positive attitudes about African-American communities and heritage.
- Community:** A group of people with a common characteristic or interest living together within a larger society
- Graffiti:** In the context of hip-hop culture, a kind of art that combines tags, stylized lettering, and eye-catching images or colors; often created with spray paint to decorate abandoned buildings or mark public spaces
- Break dancing:** A style of dancing that combined older funk music dance elements with innovative moves at hip-hop parties for enjoyment and later dance contests