

Early Hip Hop

Background

Hip-hop music and culture started as an artistic response to the social and economic crisis in the 1970s Bronx. In the wake of extreme violence and poverty, block parties encouraged embattled communities and neighborhoods to come together peacefully. Disc Jockeys (DJs), while not new to hip-hop culture, provided the musical soundtrack. These DJs began using their vinyl records on turntables in new and innovative ways.

DJ Kool Herc—famous in the Bronx for throwing the best parties—played the “break” of different songs. The break is a danceable section of a song that often highlights the drums, bass, and other rhythm section instruments. Grand Wizard Theodore rhythmically enhanced songs by moving a record back and forth on a turntable to produce a “scratching” sound. Grandmaster Flash wowed audiences with his technical prowess, developing his “quick mix theory”—a rapid-fire back-and-forth between two records.

During the early block parties in the Bronx, the Master of Ceremonies (MCs) would only use a microphone to make announcements. MCs then started rapping because the repetition of the rhythmic breaks gave the MCs a musical foundation to rap over. This made parties more exciting and interactive, and eventually paved the way for more complex rhymes and concepts. In addition to party themes, lyrics started expressing the anger, mistrust, and resentment felt about peoples’ brutal circumstances in US inner-cities. This is heard in “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five.

Playlist

Some of these songs contain explicit language. Preview all songs for appropriateness for your students.

- The Fatback Band, “King Tim III (Personality Jock)” (1979)
- Sugarhill Gang, “Rapper’s Delight” (1979)
- Kurtis Blow, “The Breaks” (1980) from *Kurtis Blow*
- The Funky 4 +1, “That’s the Joint” (1980)
- The Treacherous Three ft. Spoonie Gee, “New Rap Language” (1980)
- Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, “The Message” (1982) from *The Message*
- Afrika Bambaataa and the Soulsonic Force, “Planet Rock” (1982)
- Whodini, “Friends” (1984)
- The Cold Crush Brothers, “Fresh, Wild, Fly and Bold” (1984)
- Roxanne Shante, “Roxanne’s Revenge” (studio version) (1985)