

Sylvia Robinson, in  
the studio in 1960



# SYLVIA ROBINSON

THIS ARTIST, MUSICIAN,  
PRODUCER, AND LABEL BOSS KICK-STARTED  
THE HIP-HOP REVOLUTION.

BY ALAN LIGHT

**S**ylvia Robinson played many roles in the music world – artist, producer, and, most notably, record executive. But as the founder and leader of the pioneering Sugar Hill label, she revealed herself to be something even rarer. She was a visionary.

In 1979, “Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugarhill Gang introduced hip-hop to the global mainstream, illustrating the genre’s commercial and creative potential. Robinson had overseen the record’s backing track, assembled the group members, and arranged their vocals – but fundamentally, it was her idea that rap was even viable as recorded music. Her place in history would be secured by that track alone, though it was far from her only impact on the direction of pop.

Robinson started her career in the early 1950s as teen-aged “Little Sylvia” Vanderpool with some minor R&B hits. After leaving show business, she was approached by her guitar teacher, MacHouston “Mickey” Baker, with the idea of a male-female duo inspired by Les Paul and Mary Ford. As Mickey & Sylvia, they had a Number One R&B hit in 1957 with the immortal “Love Is Strange.” The song would be covered by artists from the Everly Brothers to Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton and turn up constantly in movies and TV shows.

But Sylvia made her next significant contributions outside the spotlight, in breakthrough, if unrecognized,

roles. In 1960, she produced “You Talk Too Much” by New Orleans singer Joe Jones, which hit Number Three on the *Billboard* chart. According to Dan Charnas in *Billboard*, she would have been “the first-ever Black and female independent record producer to have a Top Ten pop hit” – if only she had gotten credit for the session.

The next year, she did the arrangement for Ike and Tina Turner’s “It’s Gonna Work Out Fine” and, she said, produced the track. “I paid for the session, taught Tina the song; that’s me playing guitar,” she said in a 1981 interview. Once again, Robinson received no acknowledgment for the Grammy-nominated song.

Throughout the sixties, Sylvia and Joe Robinson, whom she married in 1964, launched several record labels, most notably All Platinum Records (shrewdly choosing a name starting with an “A” because they knew labels were paid by distributors in alphabetical order). She built the company’s roster, signing the Moments and releasing hits like “Shame, Shame, Shame” by Shirley & Company. But the label’s biggest smash came in 1973 when Robinson, frustrated that Al Green passed on a song she had cowritten with him in mind, recorded a vocal herself over the demo track. The scandalous, overtly sexual “Pillow Talk,” released under the single moniker Sylvia, soared to Number One on the soul chart and Number Three pop.

Unable to follow up that success, All Platinum filed for bankruptcy in the late seventies. But in June 1979,



FROM LEFT: With Mickey Baker, 1960; hitting it big with “Pillow Talk,” on *Soul Train*, 1974.



Robinson left her home in suburban Englewood, New Jersey, for a party in Harlem – where she had been born and raised – and witnessed something that changed not only her life but the entire world. A DJ named Lovebug Starski was cutting up R&B hits and jumping on the mic with his own rhymes and chants. “I saw him talking to the kids and saw how they’d answer back,” Robinson later told *Vanity Fair*. “He would say something every now and then, like ‘Throw your hands in the air,’ and they’d do it. If he’d said, ‘Jump in the river,’ they’d have done it ... A spirit said to me, ‘Put a concept like that on a record and it will be the biggest thing you ever had.’”

Lovebug Starski didn’t see it. “I wasn’t interested in doing no record back in them days,” he said, “cause I was getting too much money for just DJ-ing.” Robinson tasked her teenage son, Joe Robinson Jr., with locating some rappers, and he brought her to the local Crispy Crust pizza parlor, where Henry “Big Bank Hank” Jackson – who was also managing the Cold Crush Brothers – would rap along with the group’s tapes behind the counter. Guy “Master Gee” O’Brien and Michael “Wonder Mike” Wright also climbed into Robinson’s Oldsmobile to bust some rhymes, and she immediately brought the three of them to her home studio, dubbing the group the Sugarhill Gang. The former All Platinum house band had already cut fifteen minutes’ worth of the groove from Chic’s “Good Times” (Robinson herself added a part on vibes), and she guided the trio through a marathon of verses that touched on battling Superman for Lois Lane’s affection, being served terrible food at a friend’s house, and a seemingly infinite number of boasts that countless kids (present company included) spent countless hours committing to memory.

One take later, while fending off calls from Hank’s boss at Crispy Crust, and for a total cost of \$750, “Rapper’s Delight” was complete. Hank failed to mention that many of his rhymes had been lifted from Cold Crush Brother Grandmaster Caz’s notebook, and Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards of Chic later had to sue for a share of the songwriting credit. Teenage rap fan Chuck D, meanwhile, simply could not fathom the idea of putting the form on wax. “I did not think it was conceivable that there would be such a thing as a hip-hop record,” he said.

After a St. Louis DJ added the record, “Rapper’s Delight” exploded. “An order for five thousand records came in off a few plays,” Robinson said. “We couldn’t press it fast enough – you had to order it and wait weeks for the next shipment.” A single in an unknown genre on a new independent label was selling fifty thousand copies a day on its way past a million copies; it reached Number Four on *Billboard’s* R&B chart and Number 37 on the Hot 100.

Robinson quickly signed acts who became legends – the Funky Four +1, the Treacherous Three, Spoonie Gee, the Sequence. Sugar Hill put out ten 12-inch singles in 1980 and became one of the country’s leading independent labels. The roster’s most notable addition was future Rock & Roll Hall of Famers Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, and it was Flash who would lead the company’s, and the music’s, next transformation. While all of Sugar Hill’s early singles were recorded with the ace house band, “The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel” was the first record that documented a virtuoso DJ, with six minutes of cutting, scratching, and cross-fading, the way you would hear hip-hop in a city park. “It was the first record really to



FROM LEFT: Running Sugar Hill Records, 1983; speaking at the R&B Foundation Pioneer Awards, 2000.



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show that rap was something more than an offshoot of disco,” wrote David Toop. “While other releases translated hip-hop, ‘Adventures’ was as close as any record would ever come to being hip-hop.”

In 1982, Robinson changed the course of pop music yet again, establishing rap as a sociopolitical voice when she produced “The Message,” written by Melle Mel and percussionist Duke Bootee. Flash had no interest in recording the song (“You went to a party to forget about shit like this,” he said), while Kidd Creole of the Furious Five said, “We was afraid of the song because we didn’t think it would work.” But Doug Wimbish, bassist in the Sugar Hill band, noted Robinson’s foresight. “She could see things,” he said. “Somebody might come up with an idea, and she knew how to take key elements out of it, magnify it, and turn things into a recording.”

The followup by Grandmaster Flash and Melle Mel, “White Lines (Don’t Do It),” and the Furious Five’s “New York, New York” were hits, but changes in the record industry and in hip-hop taste – especially after the emer-

gence of RUN DMC – set Sugar Hill back. A sketchy distribution deal with MCA Records went sour, leading to years in court. In the nineties, Sugar Hill sold its catalog to Rhino Records, and in 2002, most of the label’s master recordings were destroyed in an electrical fire.

Sylvia Robinson died of heart failure in 2011. The altar at Englewood’s Community Baptist Church displayed the Sugar Hill logo re-created with flowers. The label’s music lives on, though – not just in a perpetual flow of covers, samples, and quotes from classic lyrics, but in every facet of hip-hop’s takeover of youth culture around the world, a revolution that Robinson helped set in motion.

When Jimmy Jam, a member of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame’s Class of 2022, was asked recently which of his fellow inductees he was most excited about, he did not hesitate. “Sylvia Robinson is truly the queen of hip-hop,” he said. “In starting Sugar Hill Records, the Sugarhill Gang, ‘Rapper’s Delight’ – all of that started because of her. I think for her, *overdue* is definitely the word.”