The Origins of Hip Hop
Finding a New Cultural Identity

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The hip hop lifestyle is the definitive cultural movement of our generation which birthed during the 1970’s and still lives on as a popular craze through the present year of 2003. Thanks to the media and to popular entertainment, the hip hop culture expands drastically as a central identity of an entire generation. From music videos and popular T.V shows, such as MTV and Fresh Prince of Bell-Air, to the fashion industry and to major motion films, such as “Boys in the Hood”; the hip hop way of life is constantly reflected and emulated by the youth of today. This street culture which has been manifested through numerous genres of entertainment media is exuberated with pride through the majority of the youth culture and is used as a major money making industry of today. However, to fully appreciate and to understand the growth of this hip hop identity and phenomena that globalizes throughout the different continents, the origins of this movement must be analyzed before it became a mainstream popular culture.

Hip hop originated during the 1970’s in the disco era and in the early 1980’s in areas such as the South Bronx, Harlem and Brooklyn in New York City. The roots of the hip hop revolution were shaped by the major sociopolitical forces of the formative years. The crucial environmental factors that gave birth to hip hop was the American societal depression represented by the Vietnam war, rampant narcotics and substance abuse such as cocaine, heroin and marijuana; political unrest and the high rates of unemployment. The South Bronx during this era was a neighborhood of high crime and violence rates in which the inhabitants of this era felt a sense of oppression due to the segregated
community of the ethnic races and economic statuses (Kitwana). However from this neighborhood and middle to lower class lifestyle, hip hop emerged.

Hip hop was produced through the African American community and the Latino community (mostly teenagers). The new dance style (break dancing), artistic expression through lyrical means (rap music) and visually means (graffiti art) was an evolution of this middle to lower class community expressing a new self identity with different values in congruence to their lifestyle in the Bronx.

A DJ and a hip hop pioneer by the name of Clive “Kool Herc” Campell made hip hop history during the early 70’s. Kool Herc, a Jamaican who migrated to the Bronx, was the first man to pioneer the “breakbeat” movement. This was done by mixing short percussion breaks with two turntables to extend the breaks in the music (Veran). By doing so the dancers would get down to these breaks. These “breakbeats” influenced the rhythm style of the poetic public voice of the youth known as rap lyrics. These “breakbeats” also influenced and introduced a new style of dancing called B-boying. Kool Herc created the term “B-boying” which stood for break boys, who danced to the break parts in the music. This was later termed as “break dancing” (http://rap.about.com). The dance moves known as Floor Rock and Up Rock, consists of syncopated floor work that integrates twirls, shuffles, bops, locks, pops, bounces, freezes and acrobatic stunts. These dance moves are very energetic and individualized to each dancer’s flavor and personality. Break dance moves were inspired by numerous cultures and famous personalities. The youth movement who participated in this dance form emulated different actions then modified it in order to produce their own technical step. Some
moves were inspired by the previous generation dance craze known as the “Lindy hop”, also gymnastics and acrobatic stunts were incorporated to add spice to the dancer’s routine. Different forms of martial arts have also influenced break dancing such as the African rooted Brazilian martial art form of capoeira. Dance moves such as the windmill, head spin and back spin resembles moves from capoeira and gymnastics. In addition the dance steps and music done by famous personalities popularized and influenced rap music as well as break dancing. Thanks to artists such as James Brown with the “Good Foot” dance steps, Funkadelic and the Jackson 5, hip hop music and dance developed.

Break dancing had numerous purposes for the youth in the middle to lower class community. It was first done out on the streets with a piece of linoleum or cardboard surface to act as a stage for sheer enjoyment, physical pleasure and simply to party. Break dancing which involves numerous improvisational moves was for the dancers to self express themselves, to glorify their personal identity. Break dancing then evolved to a very competitive recreational activity. This underground movement that caught on quickly began to emerge in the form of cliques. Teenagers formed street gangs or crews who battled against opposing crews; however the battle was done through break dancing instead of resorting to physical violence. Most battles were fought to prove which gang was the stronger and the better of the two or over certain territories other known as “turfs”. The battles were done in a circular formation. The members of the street gangs would circle around one dancer. During the time of the soloist in the center of the circle, the B-boy or B-girl (break girl) would show off their talent and dance skills in order to threaten their opponent. The moves done were individualized to the certain dancers as a way to taunt the next performer. Once the dancer was done with the routine, either which
was done in an improvised manner or rehearsed manner, the next challenger would enter into the center of the circle to show off new dance moves.

In the process of these physical dance battles, rhythm ing and DJ-ing developed and also became highly competitive. The biggest and baddest street gang during the late 1970’s was a crew by the name of the Black Spades. The man most responsible for the successful growth of break dancing was Afrika Bambaataa, the legendary grand master DJ who was the head in charge of the Black Spades group, which later during the 1980’s became to be known as the Zulu Nation (Veran). He encouraged break dancers to continue practicing their routines and styles for he saw the potential during the early 70’s of break dancing to achieve greatness. The hip hop dance movements and lifestyle was enforced strongly by Bambaataa which sped up the hip hop movement for the succeeding generations. Bambaataa also started another crew, the Zulu Kings, then during the early 1980’s a new group was organized by the name of the Rock Steady Crew. This group brought break dance moves into a higher level for they were the first crew to incorporate many acrobatic stunts that out dates the previous generation floor rock syncopated dance moves.

Break dancing and rap music increased in popularity during the 1980’s drastically changing the dance scenery from the streets in the South Bronx to the night clubs such as the Roxy and the Savory Manor Ballroom. The hip hop dance styles, rap music, graffiti art and DJ-ing created a turning point or a shift from practically no public voice for the young Black and Hispanic community (during the early 70’s), to Black youth culture as the rage in mainstream popular culture. Dance movies such as the 1983 motion film
“Flash Dance” broke global barriers introducing this very distinctive African-American street culture to the world. The pursuit for self identity battled in the Bronx through hip hop elements started as a very personal cause for the African-American and Hispanic youth culture, then over generations morphed into what it is today, the hip hop generation in which the media plays a crucial role to the popularization of the hip hop lifestyle. Bambaataa’s predictions of greatness within the hip hop culture that challenged old traditional conventions indeed prospered into something of greatness that has expanded to the year of 2003. The highly competitive and self expressive lifestyle is now a cross cultural identity of the present youth generation. From America, to England and to Japan the hip hop culture is recognized and known by the masses. Thanks to the sociopolitical factors during the early 1970’s in the Bronx, innovators such as Kool Herc and afrika Bambaataa, famous personalities such as James Brown and motivated preteens who challenged convention, the hip hop revolution occurred. Even though different aspects of the hip hop generation is sold out through the media via movies, advertisements and music industries, the fundamental root cause for the hip hop lifestyle is still recognized and present in today society as a mode for self expression and identity among the youth of today.
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