

CAN'T STOP WON'T STOP

A History of the Hip-Hop Generation

**JEFF
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Making a Name

How DJ Kool Herc Lost His Accent and Started Hip-Hop

. . . the logic is an extension rather than a negation. Alias, a.k.a.; the names describe a process of loops. From A to B and back again.

Paul D. Miller

It has become myth, a creation myth, this West Bronx party at the end of the summer in 1973. Not for its guests—a hundred kids and kin from around the way, nor for the setting—a modest recreation room in a new apartment complex; not even for its location—two miles north of Yankee Stadium, near where the Cross-Bronx Expressway spills into Manhattan. Time remembers it for the night DJ Kool Herc made his name.

The plan was simple enough, according to the party's host, Cindy Campbell. "I was saving my money, because what you want to do for back to school is go down to Delancey Street instead of going to Fordham Road, because you can get the newest things that a lot of people don't have. And when you go back to school, you want to go with things that nobody has so you could look nice and fresh," she says. "At the time my Neighborhood Youth Corps paycheck was like forty-five dollars a week—ha!—and they would pay you every two weeks. So how am I gonna turn over my money? I mean, this is not enough money!"

Cindy calculated it would cost a little more than half her paycheck to rent the rec room in their apartment building at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue. Her

brother, whom she knew as Clive but everyone else knew as Kool Herc, was an aspiring DJ with access to a powerful sound system. All she had to do was bulk-buy some Olde English 800 malt liquor, Colt 45 beer, and soda, and advertise the party.

She, Clive and her friends hand-wrote the announcements on index cards, scribbling the info below a song title like “Get on the Good Foot” or “Fence-walk.” If she filled the room, she could charge a quarter for the girls, two for the guys, and make back the overhead on the room. And with the profit—presto, instant wardrobe.

Clive had been DJing house parties for three years. Growing up in Kingston, Jamaica, he had seen the sound systems firsthand. The local sound was called Somerset Lane, and the selector’s name was King George. Clive says, “I was too young to go in. All we could do is sneak out and see the preparation of the dance throughout the day. The guys would come with a big old handcart with the boxes in it. And then in the night time, I’m a little itchy headed, loving the vibrations on the zinc top ‘cause them sound systems are powerful.

“We just stay outside like everybody else, you know, pointing at the gangsters as they come up, all the famous people. And at the time they had the little motorcycles, Triumphs and Hondas. Rudeboys used to have those souped up. They used to come up four and five six deep, with them *likkle* ratchet knife,” Clive says. He still remembers the crowd’s buzz when Claudie Massop arrived at a local dance one night. He wanted to be at the center of that kind of excitement, to be a King George.

Cindy and Clive’s father, Keith Campbell, was a devoted record collector, buying not only reggae, but American jazz, gospel, and country. They heard Nina Simone and Louis Armstrong and Nat King Cole, even Nashville country crooner Jim Reeves. “I remember listening to Jim Reeves all the time,” Clive says. “I was singing these songs and emulating them to the fullest. That really helped me out, changing my accent, is singing to the records.”

In the Bronx, his mother, Nettie, would take him to house parties, which had the same ambrosial effect on him that the sound systems had. “I see the different guys dancing, guys rapping to girls, I’m wondering what the guy is whisperin’ in the girl’s ears about. I’m green, but I’m checking out the scene,” he recalls. “And I noticed a lot of the girls was complaining, ‘Why they not playing that record?’ ‘How come they don’t have that record?’

‘Why did they take it off right there?’ ” He began buying his own 45s, waiting for the day he could have his own sound system.

As luck would have it, Keith Campbell became a sponsor for a local rhythm and blues band, investing in a brand new Shure P.A. system for the group. Clive’s father was now their soundman, and the band wanted somebody to play records during intermission. Keith told them he could get his son. But Clive had started up his own house party business, and somehow his gigs always happened to fall at the same times as the band’s, leaving Keith so angry he refused to let Clive touch the system. “So here go these big columns in my room, and my father says, ‘Don’t touch it. Go and borrow Mr. Dolphy’s stuff,’ ” he says. “Mr. Dolphy said, ‘Don’t worry Clive, I’ll let you borrow some of these.’ In the back of my mind, Jesus Christ, I got these big Shure columns up in the room!”

At the same time, his father was no technician. They all knew the system was powerful, but no one could seem to make it peak. Another family in the same building had the same system and seemed to be getting more juice out of it, but they wouldn’t let Keith or Clive see how they did it. “They used to put a lot of wires to distract me from chasing the wires,” he says.

One afternoon, fiddling around on the system behind his father’s back, Clive figured it out. “What I did was I took the speaker wire, put a jack onto it and jacked it into one of the channels, and I had extra power and reserve power. Now I could control it from the preamp. I got two Bogart amps, two Girard turntables, and then I just used the channel knobs as my mixer. No headphones. The system could take eight mics. I had an echo chamber in one, and a regular mic to another. So I could talk plain and, at the same time, I could wait halfway for the echo to come out.

“My father came home and it was so loud he snuck up behind me,” he remembers. Clive’s guilt was written all over his face. But his father couldn’t believe it.

Keith yelled, “Where the noise come from?”

“This is the system!”

Keith said, “What! Weh you did?”

“This is what I did,’ ” Clive recalls telling his father, revealing the hookup. “And he said, ‘*Raas claat*, man! We ‘ave sound!!!

“So now the tables turned. Now these other guys was trying to copy what I was doing, because our sound is coming out monster, monster!” Clive says. “Me and my father came to a mutual understanding that I would go

with them and play between breaks and when I do my parties, I could use the set. I didn't have to borrow his friend's sound system anymore. I start making up business cards saying 'Father and Son.' And that's how it started, man! That's when Cindy asked me to do a back-to-school party. Now people would come to this party and see these big-ass boxes they never seen before."

It was the last week in August of 1973. Clive and his friends brought the equipment down from their second floor apartment and set up in the room adjacent to the rec room. "My system was on the dance floor, and I was in a little room watching, peeking out the door seeing how the party was going," he says.

It didn't start so well. Clive played some dancehall tunes, ones guaranteed to rock any yard dance. Like any proud DJ, he wanted to stamp his personality onto his playlist. But this was the Bronx. They wanted the breaks. So, like any good DJ, he gave the people what they wanted, and dropped some soul and funk bombs. Now they were packing the room. There was a new energy. DJ Kool Herc took the mic and carried the crowd higher.

"All people would hear is his voice coming out from the speakers," Cindy says. "And we didn't have no money for a strobe light. So what we had was this guy named Mike. When Herc would say, 'Okay, Mike! Mike with the lights!', Mike flicked the light switch. He got paid for that."

By this point in the night, they probably didn't need the atmospherics. The party people were moving to the shouts of James Brown, turning the place into a sweatbox. They were busy shaking off history, having the best night of their generation's lives.

Later, as Clive and Cindy counted their money, they were giddy. This party could be the start of something big, they surmised. They just couldn't know how big.

Sacrifices

Clive Campbell was born the first of six children to Keith and Nettie Campbell. Nettie had moved to the city from Port Maria on the northern coast. Keith, a city native, worked as the head foreman at the Kingston Wharf garage, a working-class job with status.

Keith was something of a community leader, he held the kind of job title that drew the attention of politicians. But he chose not to take sides when the JLP and PNP began their violent jockeying for position. The year before Clive left for the United States, Edward Seaga had unleashed the West Kingston War in Back-O-Wall. Clive says, "I remember police riding around in big old trucks, tanks. And some people who were brothers or friends would turn on each other. It was like a civil war."

By then, the Campbells no longer lived in Trenchtown near the frontlines. They had moved east across the city to a house in Franklyn Town, a quieter urban neighborhood of strivers below Warieka Hill and the upper-class neighborhood called Beverly Hills. It was a modest but lush property near the famous Alpha Boys School.

"We had like seven different fruits growing in our yard. We had different types of peppers, flowers, you know, it was tight!" Clive recalls. "We wasn't too far away from the beach. So, as a matter of fact, it was a traditional thing with us for my father to take us to the beach on Sunday. Every Sunday we'd look forward to go out to the beach after church."

The Campbells were able to afford a housekeeper. Their grandfather, aunts and older cousins all pitched in to raise the children, a fact that would become significant when Nettie decided to supplement the family income by working and studying in the United States. Many other Jamaicans were already leaving for Miami, London, Toronto and New York City to escape the instability and seek their fortune. During the early 1960s, Nettie had departed for Manhattan to work as a dental technician and to study for a nursing degree. She saved money to send home and returned with a degree, convinced that the United States offered a better future for the family.

Cindy says, "She saw the opportunities. The public schools were free, because in Jamaica we went to private schools. So she told my father that when she finished with school that what she wanted was for the family to live here. And he didn't want to come."

But Keith could see Nettie's reasoning. Even his own friends and relatives were leaving the country. Before Nettie returned to New York City in 1966, they agreed to move to America. Clive would be the first to join her, then the rest of the family would follow. Cindy says, "A lot of immigrants have to do that. You have to make sacrifices. It breaks up the family for a small amount of time but eventually the family gets back together."

Clive and Cindy agree that Keith remained a Jamaican at heart. “He just said, ‘America was a place for you to excel and do better for your kids.’ But after a while you go back home, you go back to your country. And he believed in that. He loved his country,” Cindy says. Years later, after raising his children with Nettie in New York City and becoming an American citizen, he returned to his beloved island for a visit. While swimming in strong currents off Bull Bay, he had a heart attack. The Campbells buried him in Jamaica.

Becoming American

From Kingston to the Bronx. Stones that the builders refused.

Clive Campbell came to New York City on a cold November night in 1967. A fresh snowfall lay on the ground, something the twelve-year-old had never seen before. He took a bus from Kennedy Airport into the gray, unwelcoming city. This wasn’t the America he had seen on his neighbor’s television, or imagined from his father’s records. He had no idea how to begin again, he says, “All I could do was just look out the window.”

His mother’s apartment was at 611 East 178th Avenue, between the Bronx’s Little Italy and Crotona Park, in what had been the Cross-Bronx Expressway’s most contested mile. “Now I’m living in a tenement building. There’s no yard. This is all boxed and closed in,” Clive recalls. His mother feared Clive would fall prey to the heroin plague. She told Clive, “Don’t let anybody tell you they’re gonna stick something in your arm. Don’t let them trick you by calling you chicken.”

Clive looked and spoke and felt like a country boy. “Here I am all hicked out, got a corduroy coat on, with the snow hat with the flip-up-and-come-over-your-ears. I had that on with these cowboy boots,” Herc recalls. “And this girl at school started teasing the hell out of me. She was calling my shoes ‘roach killers.’ She had the whole hall laughing, ‘Ah roach killers, roach killers!’”

“At that time, being Jamaican wasn’t fashionable. Bob Marley didn’t come through yet to make it more fashionable, to even give a chance for people to listen to our music,” he says. “I remember one time a guy said, ‘Clive, man, don’t walk down that way cause they throwing Jamaicans in garbage cans.’ The gangs was throwing Jamaicans in garbage cans!”

Herc was learning the ways of the Bronx. He found himself hanging out with young Five Percenters, absorbing their slang and science. For a time, he even rolled with the Cofon Cats, the same Tremont gang that Benjy Melendez had joined when he first moved to the Bronx a few years before. It wasn't much of an experience. The Cofon Cats spent one long afternoon getting chased out of Little Italy by the Golden Guineas.

At Junior High School 118, Clive began running cross-country and track and winning medals. His physicality won him American friends. After school, he began hanging out with a Jamaican American named Jerome Wallace, who was a unicyclist. Jerome had already been through the transition Clive was going through. He taught Clive how to ride on one wheel, and how to balance his Jamaican past and his Bronx present. Clive began to see the Cofon Cats as punks who were nothing without the security of the gang. "The gang members started asking us to be division leaders because they see we have respect. So we didn't need that anymore," Herc says. "And I had a few other things to worry about besides the gangs, like getting my ass whipped by my father."

Clive tuned into rock and soul disc jockeys like Cousin Brucie and Wolfman Jack as if he had caught religion, listening to these smooth men rap their silver-tongued rap. He began going to "First Fridays" youth dances at a local Catholic school and at Murphy Projects. His mother took him to house parties, where he heard music he had never heard on WBLS or WWRL. The Temptations, Aretha Franklin, Smokey Robinson, and, most important, James Brown became his tutors; they were teaching Clive how to lose his accent.

"I was more around Americans. And I was tired of hearing them say 'What did you say?' My accent really started to change," he recalls. By the time Clive began attending Alfred E. Smith High School, some of his Jamaican friends didn't even know he was Jamaican. He was in the process of reinventing himself, creating a new identity.

He wasn't alone. All across the city youths were customizing their names or giving themselves new ones and scrawling them across the naked city surfaces. The young graffiti writers were the advance guard of a new culture; they literally blazed trails out of the gang generation. Crossing demarcated turfs to leave their aliases in marker and spraypaint, they said "I'm here" and "Fuck all y'all" at the same time. Gang members, who had trapped themselves in their own neighborhoods, had to give them respect.

Clive and the post-gang youths were a different breed, more interested in projecting individual flash than collective brawn, and they would soon render the gangs obsolete.

Graffiti expert Jack Stewart traces the emergence of the modern-day movement to Philadelphia's neighborhoods of color as early as 1965.¹ Aerosol artist and activist Steve "Espo" Powers says that the Black teenager, CORNBREAD, who is credited with popularizing the tagging of the Philly subways, was only trying to attract the attention of a beauty named Cynthia. By 1968, the movement had spread to New York City. CORNBREAD's protégé, TOP CAT, moved to Harlem and brought with him the "gangster" style of lettering. A Puerto Rican youth calling himself JULIO 204—the number was the street he hailed from—began at about the same time. When a Greek American named TAKI 183 told the *New York Times* in the summer of 1971 why he tagged his name on ice cream trucks and subway cars—"I don't feel like a celebrity normally, but the guys make me feel like one when they introduce me to someone"—thousands of New York youngsters picked up fat markers and spray paint to make their own name.² Writers like LEE 163d!, EVIL ED, CLIFF 159, JUNIOR 161, CAY 161, CHE 159 and BARBARA and EVA 62 were saying their names loud all across buildings, bus stops, and subway station walls uptown.

Roaming through gang turfs, slipping through the long arms and high fences of authority, violating notions of property and propriety, graffiti writers found their own kind of freedom. Writing your name was like locating the edge of civil society and planting a flag there. In Greg Tate's words, it was "reverse colonization."³ The 1960s, as the hip-hop generation would so often be reminded, were a great time to be young. The world seemed to shake under young feet so easily back then. The revolutionaries expected the whole world to be watching and when they were given the spotlight, they cast a long shadow. But these writers weren't like the revolutionaries, or even the philosopher-activist wall-writers in Lima, Mexico City, Paris, and Algiers. Theirs were not political statements. They were just what they were, a strike against their generation's invisibility and preparation for the coming darkness.

They held no illusions about power. No graffiti writer ever hoped to run for mayor. And unlike the gang bangers, none would submerge his or her name to the collective. They were doing it to be known amongst their peers, to be recognized for their originality, bravado, daring, and style. Norman

Mailer, one of the first to write seriously about graffiti, got it instantly: the writers were composing advertisements for themselves.

In the summer of 1970, TAKI 183's tags seemed to explode across the city. Like thousands of other kids, Clive, Jerome and their friend Richard picked up markers and spraycans. Rich became UNCLE RICH, Jerome became YOGI and Clive became CLYDE AS KOOL.⁴

"They couldn't recall my name Clive," he says. "So the closest you could come was Clyde, from the Knicks basketball player. They'd be like, 'You mean like 'Clyde' Frazier?' 'Yeah. Clyde. Let's leave it like that.' So I started to write that. And where I picked 'Kool' from was this TV cigarette commercial. A guy was driving one of them Aston-Martins, like this James Bond car, and his cigarette was right there by the gear shift, white gloves, dark glasses and just driving through the countryside—whoooooo! The girl with him, she reached over to touch his cigarette; and he goes—rrrrrrrrnt! Stops the car, leans over, opens the door, points his finger, tells her, 'Get out!' And she got out. And the commercial said, 'Nobody touches my silver-thin.' I was like, wow, that's 'Kool'! So I picked KOOL.

"Wherever you see UNCLE RICH, you see CLYDE AS KOOL," he says. "I put a little smiling face in it, the eyes, the nose, and mouth and a little cigarette hanging out, and a little tam on it, like a little Apple Jack's hat."

Writing brought him into contact with the premier stylists, and he began hanging out with the EX-VANDALS, the legendary supercrew that had begun in Brooklyn and now included SUPER KOOL 223, EL MARKO, STAY HIGH 149 and PHASE 2. As graffiti moved off the walls and onto the subway steel, EL MARKO and SUPER KOOL revolutionized the name game by painting top-to-bottom masterpieces on the train-cars in late 1971 and early 1972. Just as city officials enacted the first in what would become decades of increasingly severe anti-graffiti laws, the great Bronx writer PHASE 2 launched a series of next evolutionary steps, introducing ever more imaginative refinements on the rolling steel canvases.

But Clive would finally make his name elsewhere. He was running track, pushing weights, playing rough schoolyard basketball. His classmates kidded him, dubbing him "Hercules" for his bullish power drives to the hoop. "I went back to the block and I said, 'Yo fellas, this guy at school, man, he's calling me Hercules. I know he means well, but I don't like it.' So I said, 'What's the shortening for Hercules?' They said 'Herc.' Aaaaaah—

sounds unique! So I said, ‘Yo man, just call me Herc, leave off the ‘lees’, just call me Herc.’ Between high school and the block, I put the two names together and I dropped the CLYDE. I started calling myself Kool Herc, and that was it.”

New Fires

A fire sent the Campbells out of their Tremont apartment. Their baby brother was striking matches, lighting pieces of paper and tossing them out the window. A breeze caught a burning paper and blew it back in, setting the window curtains aflame. Although the firemen were able to put it out without anyone getting hurt, Cindy remains angry at what happened afterward. “When the fire department came in there, they were looking for money. The fire was really in one room, but in the bedroom the drawers were pulled out. My father had a tin-pan of quarters that he was saving, and that tin-pan had at least three- or four-hundred dollars in quarters at the time. That was just missing,” she says.

Populations were in flux. Whites were leaving for Co-op City and the suburbs. With government vouchers and assistance money, the Campbells joined the Black and brown exodus into the West Bronx. They moved into the Concourse Plaza Hotel on the Grand Concourse at 161st Street, where many burned-out families had been temporarily relocated.

After the family moved into a brand new apartment building at 1520 Sedgwick, Kool Herc would return to the hotel to frequent the disco downstairs, the Plaza Tunnel. A friend of his from high school named Shaft spun records there, as well as a DJ named John Brown. In gay and Black clubs at the time, DJs were pushing the emerging four-on-the-floor disco beat. But the Plaza Tunnel DJs had a rawer sound. John Brown “was the first to play records like ‘Give it Up or Turn it Loose’ by James Brown and ‘Get Ready’ by Rare Earth,” pioneering hip-hop journalist Steven Hager wrote. “[‘Get Ready’] was a favorite in the Bronx because it lasted over twenty-one minutes, which was long enough for the serious dancers to get into the beat. They loved to wait for the song’s two-minute drum solo to show their most spectacular moves.”⁵

The dance styles began as elaborations of moves people had seen James Brown doing on TV. Zulu Nation DJ Jazzy Jay, who began as a b-boy says, “You could be dancing with your girl and spin away from her, hit the

ground, come back up. It was all about ‘smooth.’ Like how James used to slide across the floor and the fancy footwork and all of that.” They even called it—a hard-won irony—”burning.”

James Brown’s career had peaked in the late 1960s with the Black Power Movement. He performed “Say it Loud (I’m Black and I’m Proud)” without apology on national television, and his mere presence in town, it was said, prevented riots in racially tense Boston in the immediate aftermath of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination.

But during the early 1970s, attitudes changed. Across the country, Black mayors took over in cities that had once burned, class gaps widened and Black radio shifted to the tastes of upwardly mobile listeners. Coleman Young became mayor of Motown, while Berry Gordy departed for Hollywood. James Brown’s career went into steep decline.

Bronx-born hip-hop historian Davey D recalls, “If you listened to the Black radio station at the time, WBLS—Black-owned, Black-run, the station that everyone listened to—you did not hear James Brown. Not even at nighttime. So while James Brown was being tossed out, we were embracing him.”⁶ His music, dance and style now possessed outlaw appeal. At the climax of a Plaza Tunnel night, when DJ John Brown put on “Soul Power,” Hager says Black Spades would overrun the floor, hollering “Spade Power!” The firecracker energy being generated at the Plaza Tunnel gave Herc the standard to aim for with his own parties.

The Man with the Master Plan

At the same time, discos were shutting down and house parties were declining, partly because gangs like the Spades were making them unsafe. But the West Bronx had not suffered the same kind of devastation as the South Bronx. And all these youths needed somewhere to party. These reasons may explain why Sedgwick Avenue was ripe for a fresh new party scene.

The crowds at the Campbells’ early Sedgwick parties were mainly high school students who were too young or too clean or living too far west to fall under the waning influence of the gangs. In those days, Herc would tell the weed-smokers to head around the block, and he’d even play slow jams. “Now and then a mom or pop might come in to see what’s going on,” says Herc.

Cindy adds, “My father was always there. People knew him in the neighborhood and they respected him so we never had violence or anything like that. We didn’t have to hire security guards. We never searched people. When people came, they came out of respect. It was a recreation thing for them to meet people. A lot of people met their boyfriends or girlfriends there.”

Buzz spread about the back-to-school party, and they found themselves throwing parties almost on a monthly basis at the rec room. “Herc actually took away a lot of house parties and basement parties,” says Cindy. “At those house parties, after a while, the parents would come in, flick on the lights and tell you, ‘You kids got to get out’ or ‘Too many people in here’ or ‘I don’t know who this one is’ and ‘Who’s this burning up my floor with the cigarettes?’ People didn’t want to go back to that anymore.”

Herc’s reputation spread along the Bronx high-school circuit as well, after Cindy, through her role in student body government at Dodge High School, secured a successful boat cruise dance. By the summer of 1974, when Herc was playing regular parties to a loyal following, he decided to play a free party on the block. “And after the block party,” he says, “we couldn’t come back to the rec room.”

Outdoors, he knew he was putting the sound system at risk, and that fights could potentially break out. “So when I come out there, I said, ‘Listen. The first discrepancy, I’m pulling the plug. Let’s get that straight right now. There’s kids out here, there’s grown folks out here and we’re gonna have a good time. So anybody start anything any disturbance or any discrepancy, any beef, I’m pulling the plug because I’m not gonna be here for the repercussions. All right?’ So they said, ‘All right, Herc, no problem.’ And I start playing for the older heads, and then I go on for the younger heads and I’ll go back and forth like that,” he says. “We broke daylight. I played to the next morning.”

Herc wanted to summon the same kind of excitement he felt as a *pickney* down yard. Along with his immigrant friend Coke La Rock, he distinguished their crew from the disco DJs by translating the Kingstonian vibe of sound system DJs like Count Machuki, King Stitt, U-Roy and Big Youth for the Bronxites. Herc hooked up his mics to a Space Echo box, yard dance style. They set off their dances by giving shout-outs and dropping little rhymes. They developed their own slang. At an after-hours spot Herc spun at, a drunken regular greeted his friends with the call: “To

my mellow! My mellow is in the house!” With lines like these, the two created larger-than-life personas.

Herc carefully studied the dancers. “I was smoking cigarettes and I was waiting for the records to finish. And I noticed people was waiting for certain parts of the record,” he says. It was an insight as profound as Ruddy Redwood’s dub discovery. The moment when the dancers really got wild was in a song’s short instrumental break, when the band would drop out and the rhythm section would get elemental. Forget melody, chorus, songs—it was all about the groove, building it, keeping it going. Like a string theorist, Herc zeroed in on the fundamental vibrating loop at the heart of the record, the break.

He started searching for songs by the sound of their break, songs that he would make into his signature tunes: the nonstop conga epics from The Incredible Bongo Band called “Apache” and “Bongo Rock,” James Brown’s “live” version of “Give It Up Turn It Loose” from the *Sex Machine* album, Johnny Pate’s theme to *Shaft in Africa*, Dennis Coffey’s “Scorpio”—Black soul and white rock records with an uptempo, often Afro-Latinized backbeat.⁷ Then he soaked off the labels, Jamaican style. “My father said, ‘Hide the name of your records because that’s how you get your rep. That’s how you get your clientele.’ You don’t want the same people to have your same record down the block,” Herc says. Here was one source of hip-hop’s competitive ethic and beat-this aesthetic.

In a technique he called “the Merry-Go-Round,” Herc began to work two copies of the same record, back-cueing a record to the beginning of the break as the other reached the end, extending a five-second breakdown into a five-minute loop of fury, a makeshift *version* excursion. Before long he had tossed most of the songs, focusing on the breaks alone. His sets drove the dancers from climax to climax on waves of churning drums. “And once they heard that, that was it, wasn’t no turning back,” Herc says. “They always wanted to hear breaks after breaks after breaks after breaks.”

To accommodate larger crowds, Herc moved his parties further up Sedgwick Avenue into Cedar Park. He had seen construction workers hooking up power by tapping the lightposts, and so he started doing the same. “I had a big Mackintosh amp. That thing cost a lot of money and it pumped a lot of juice. It was 300 watts per channel. As the juice start coming, man, the lights start dimming. And the turntables, I had the Technics 1100A, the big ones, so it wouldn’t turn.” Finally they found a

tool shed in the park. They would send a young boy through the stone-broken window to plug into enough juice for the sound system.

The results shocked the borough, and brought in new audiences. Aaron O'Bryant, who would later become DJ AJ, was a marijuana dealer living near St. Mary's Park. "Everyone was talking about this guy DJ Kool Herc. And I was really excited. I knew all the women was gonna be there. I was excited by Herc but I really wanted to see could I bag something!" he laughs. "I became a Kool Herc freak. Everywhere he played I was there."

A teen from Fox Street in the South Bronx named Joseph Saddler, who called himself Flash, also heard about Herc's exploits and went up to Cedar Park to see it for himself. "I seen this big six-foot-plus guy with this incredible sound system, heavily guarded. People just enjoying themselves from like four years to forty. I'm like, wow! He looked sort of like this superhero on this podium playing this music that wasn't being played on the radio. I liked what he was doing and what he was playing, and I wanted to do that, too."

The gangs were dissolving and Herc was popularizing a new hierarchy of cool. Turfs were still important but in a different way. Jazzy Jay says, "Instead of gangs, they started turning into little area crews where they would do a little bit of dirt. In every area, there would be a DJ crew or a breakdance crew. They would be like, 'Okay, we all about our music and we love our music but you come in this area wrong and we all about kicking your ass.' Competition fueled the whole thing."

Herc's parties drew in the crews, gave them a chance to strut their stuff and make their names. He kept the peace by taking a live-and-let-live policy and skillfully working the mic. "Everybody had to make money, even the stick-up kids. The guy selling weed would come to me, 'A-yo Herc, man, say I got weed.' I'd say, 'You know I can't say you got weed!' So I'd say it indirectly, 'Yo, Johnny, you know I can't say you got weed, right?' He'd take the heat."

"Or if I know there's a certain party up in there starting trouble, I never would say their name, I just say, 'Yo kill it, cut the bullshit out. You're my man, cut the dumb shit. *You* know and *they* know who I'm talking about. Okay? Alright.' They'd be like 'Oh shit, Herc gave me a little warning.' I might be playing music but I'm no sucker."

The real action was in the dance ciphers, with the kids who had come for Herc's "Merry-Go-Round," and were becoming personalities in their own

right. They were too excitable and had too much flavor to conform to the precision group steps of dances like The Hustle. They would simply jump in one after another to go off, take each other out, just “break” wild on each other. Herc called them break boys, b-boys for short.⁸

There was Tricky, Wallace Dee, the Amazing Bobo, Sau Sau, Charlie Rock, Norm Rockwell, Eldorado Mike, and Keith and Kevin, the Nigger Twins. They did dances like The Boyoing, where a b-boy sported a Turbans-like pom-pom topped hat, and stretched, wiggled, and shook back and forth to make the ball go “boyoing.” “It was called that because that’s basically what they see,” says Jazzy Jay, “just bounce all over the place, hit the ground, go down. It wasn’t like a lot of the acrobatics. It was more from style and finesse. You could do a whole routine standing up before you even hit the ground.”

“Another kid uptown called it the cork-and-screw,” says Jeffrey “DOZE” Green, a Rock Steady Crew member and second-generation b-boy who first saw The Boyoing in the North Bronx in 1975. “It’s ‘cause they used to spin down, pop up, do a split and then go whoop! Come up, and then go down again into a split into a few baby-rocks into a little baby freeze. People were spinning on their butts then, too.”

“Tricky had a huge afro,” says Cindy. “And he had that soft hair because his hair grew. And he did a move where he would jump up and his afro would start to bounce also. There was also a move called the Frankenstein move, where he’d start moving like Frankenstein and his afro would start bouncing. It was like a show, you know?”

Herc assembled his own clique of DJs, dancers and rappers, and dubbed them the Herculords: Coke La Rock, DJ Timmy Tim with Little Tiny Feet, DJ Clark Kent the Rock Machine, the Imperial JC, Blackjack, LeBrew, Pebblee Poo, Sweet and Sour, Prince, and Whiz Kid. He refused to call them a crew. “That name ‘crew’ took the place of gang. When they said, ‘crew’, we knew it was a gang. So it was never the Herculord crew. That’s what people start calling us. But we never had on our flier saying ‘The Herculord crew.’ It was billed with the sound system we called the Herculoids.”

After reinvesting his money in a few different sound system sets, Herc was ready to take it to the next level. By 1975, he was doing all-ages dances at the Webster Avenue P.A.L. But he was turning twenty, and didn’t only want the kiddie crowd anymore. He found a club called the Twilight Zone

on Jerome Avenue near Tremont, and started hosting parties there with his clique and his sound system. He says he screened Muhammad Ali videos until they said, “Yo Herc, stop showing them Ali fights, you souping them motherfuckers up!”

At a hot spot called the Hevalo, he passed out flyers for his Twilight Zone shows until he was chased out. One day, he vowed, I’ll play this spot. On a stormy night, Herc emptied the Hevalo by playing a party at the Zone. “Rain,” he says, “was a good sign for me.” The Hevalo owner quickly called him up to make a deal. Soon, Herc was playing there and at another club called the Executive Playhouse for a full-fledged adult crowd.

They came to hear Herc rap: “You never heard it like this before, and you’re back for more and more and more of this here rock-ness. ‘Cause you see, we rock with the rockers, we jam with the jammers, we party with the partyers. Young lady don’t hurt nobody. It ain’t no fun till we all get some. Don’t hurt nobody, young lady!”

Coke and another crew member named Dickey let the crowds know: “There’s no story can’t be told, there’s no horse can’t be rode, a no bull can’t be stopped and ain’t a disco we can’t rock. Herc! Herc! Who’s the man with a master plan from the land of Gracie Grace? Herc Herc!”

By 1976, he was the number-one draw in the Bronx. No more roach killers. DJ Kool Herc dressed the role, sporting fabulous Lee or AJ Lester suits. All the high rollers, bank robbers, and hustlers from Harlem were coming up to see him. He says, “The reputation was, ‘Who is making money up in the Bronx? Kool Herc and the guy Coke La Rock with the music.’ ”

Two Sevens Redub

1977 started off very well for Herc. But as it would be everywhere, trouble was ahead.

It was not, as many well-meaning journalists and academics would later erroneously write, that the block party or sound system showdown had replaced the rumble or the riot. That notion was as misguided as Robert Moses’s contention that nothing good could ever again come from the Bronx. The truth was, in fact, much less dramatic and much more profound. In the Bronx’s new hierarchy of cool, the man with the records had replaced the man with the colors. Violence did not suddenly end; how could it? But

an enormous amount of creative energy was now ready to be released from the bottom of American society, and the staggering implications of this moment eventually would echo around the world.

By 1977, Herc and his competitors had divided the Bronx into a new kind of grid. In the South Bronx from 138th to 163rd streets, where the Bachelors, the Savage Nomads, the Savage Skulls and the Ghetto Brothers had once run, Grandmaster Flash, backed by the local Casanova Crew, was emerging as the area celebrity. In the Southeast, formerly the territory of the Black Spades, P.O.W.E.R. and the Javelins, Afrika Bambaataa held sway with his Zulu Nation. In the north, there was DJ Breakout and DJ Baron. And the West Bronx neighborhood and the East Bronx nightclubs were still Herc's. Herc remained the undisputed king of the borough by virtue of his records, his loyal crowd, and his sound system.

“It was ridiculous. He was god,” says Zulu Nation DJ Jazzy Jay. At a legendary Webster P.A.L. contest, Herc drowned out Bambaataa's system with little effort. “Whenever Kool Herc played outside, shit was loud and crystal clean. When we'd play outside, we'd be hooking up a whole bunch of little wires, a bunch of four or five amps and—errnt! Zzzzt! Shit would be blowing up.” And every time Grandmaster Flash came to a Herc party, Flash chuckles, “Herc always used to embarrass me.”

After being threatened by some cops for his drug selling, Herc's fan Aaron O'Bryant moved on to promoting parties. He rented the Savoy Manor nightclub on 149th Street and the Grand Concourse. “I wanted to have Kool Herc versus Pete DJ Jones. Back then Pete DJ Jones was number one on the disco set and Kool Herc was just number one, period,” he recalls. “So I had a commitment from Pete DJ Jones because he was a businessman, he took on all bookings. The first thing Kool Herc wanted to know was where did I get his telephone number from. And he was explaining to me that I was not a proven promoter. Plus, he also insinuated that he could go to the Savoy Manor and rent it himself and do that battle if he wanted. He didn't want to let me eat.”

By the end of the spring, Herc noticed his audiences were declining. “People are getting older now, it wasn't all about me. All of a sudden now you're not eighteen no more, you're twenty-four and twenty-five. You can drink now. You ain't coming to no little seventeen-, eighteen-year-old party,” he recalls. “And other people was coming up.”

After the blackout and the looting, there were plenty of new crews with brand new sound systems in the streets, and Herc's main rivals were luring away his crowd. Flash had precision, sophistication and an entertainer's flair. Bambaataa had his records and the power of Bronx River behind him. O'Bryant himself had begun DJing. As DJ AJ, he teamed with a new turntable tutor, Lovebug Starski, and expanded into Harlem. Herc says, "I stayed behind, I didn't move with them to downtown. I stayed up in the Bronx."

Herc finally agreed to play with DJ AJ at a back-to-school party at the Executive Playhouse. It was sold out, AJ recalls, but Herc was no longer the main draw. "Flash was at my show. I let Flash get on and I let Melle Mel get on the mic," AJ says. "But it didn't help Herc's career at all because he was fading fast."

A few months later, Herc was preparing for another night at the Playhouse, now renamed The Sparkle, when he heard a scuffle breaking out. "Mike-With-The-Lights had a discrepancy with somebody at the door," Herc recalls. Mike was refusing to allow three men into the club and they had become increasingly agitated. When Herc went to mediate the situation, one of the men drew a knife. Herc felt it pierce him three times in the side. As he put his bloodied hand up to block his face, the attacker stabbed him once more in the palm before disappearing with the others up the stairs and into the night. "It made me draw back into a little shell," Herc says, exhaling for a long moment.

It was 1977.

Bob Marley was in a foreign studio, recovering from an assassin's ambush and singing: "Many more will have to suffer. Many more will have to die. Don't ask me why." Bantu Stephen Biko was shackled, naked and comatose in the back of a South African police Land Rover. The Baader-Meinhof gang lay in suicide pools in a German prison. The Khmer Rouge filled their killing fields. The Weather Underground and the Young Lords Party crawled toward the final stages of violent implosion. In London, as in New York City, capitalism's crisis left entire blocks and buildings abandoned, and the sudden appearance of pierced, mohawked, leather-jacketed punks on Kings Road set off paroxysms of hysteria. History behaved as if reset to year zero.

In the Bronx, Herc's time was passing. But the new culture that had arisen around him had captured the imagination of a new breed of youths in

the Bronx. Herc had stripped down and let go of everything, save the most powerful basic elements—the rhythm, the motion, the voice, the name. In doing so, he summoned up a spirit that had been there at Congo Square and in Harlem and on Wareika Hill. The new culture seemed to whirl backward and forward—a loop of history, history as loop—calling and responding, leaping, spinning, renewing.

In the loop, there is the alpha, the omega and the turning points in between. The seam disappears, slips into endless motion and reveals a new logic—the circumference of a worldview.