



# DJ KOOL HERC: THE MAN WITH THE MASTER PLAN

by Jeff Chang

When Cindy Campbell and her brother Clive “DJ Kool Herc” Campbell threw a party in 1973, they had no idea what they were about to launch. At the end of the summer, they invited a hundred kids and kin to the modest rec room in their apartment building at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in the Bronx.

Kool Herc started off playing some reggae dancehall tunes on his turntables, similar to the music he had heard at sound system parties in Kingston, Jamaica, where he

had lived until the age of twelve. But this was the Bronx. The crowd, at first, wasn’t very happy; they wanted the breaks, the kind of beats that they could move and groove to. So, like any good DJ, Herc gave the people what they wanted, and dropped some soul and funk bombs, songs like James Brown’s “Give It Up or Turnit a Loose,” Mandrill’s “Fencewalk,” and Rare Earth’s “Get Ready.”

Word spread quickly about the back-to-school party, and the Campbells soon found themselves throwing parties in the rec room almost every month. By the following summer, the crowds were so big they had to move outside to Cedar Park, just up the block. For electricity, they tapped lampposts and work sheds. With the loudest sound system, the hottest records, and personality for days, Herc and the Herculords, his group of rappers, DJs, and dancers, became the number-one draw in the Bronx.

Herc carefully studied his audiences. The moment when the dancers went crazy was during a song’s short instrumental break, when the band would drop out and the rhythm section would get elemental. Herc zeroed in on the break. He started searching for songs based on the sound of their break, songs that he would make into his signature tunes: nonstop conga epics from the Incredible Bongo Band called “Apache” and “Bongo Rock,” Johnny Pate’s theme to “Shaft in Africa,” Dennis Coffey’s “Scorpio,” black soul, Latin funk, and white rock records with an up-tempo carnival-style backbeat.

In a technique he called the “Merry-Go-Round,” Herc worked two copies of the same record, back-cueing one record to the beginning of the break as the other reached the end, extending a five-second breakdown into a five-minute loop. Before long, he had tossed most of the songs, focusing on building excitement through the breaks

alone. His sets drove the dancers from climax to climax on waves of churning drums. In the cyphers—the circles where they competed with each other for cheers from the crowd—the dancers became personalities in their own right. These kids had too much flavor to conform to the precision steps of group dances like the Hustle. They would simply jump in one after another to go off, take each other out, and just “break” wild on each other. Herc called them “break boys”—“b-boys” for short.

Herc’s audiences were full of visionary youths. Afrika Bambaataa, a former gang leader from the Bronx River projects, was inspired to return to his neighborhood and reach out to former enemy gangs and crews. Bambaataa’s parties became common ground, and from them he created the Zulu Nation, hip-hop’s first official organization, and the Zulu Kings and Queens, two of hip-hop’s first dance crews.

A teen from Fox Street in the South Bronx named Joseph Saddler, who would come to be known as Grandmaster Flash, went up to Cedar Park to see Herc for himself. Based on Herc’s “Merry-Go-Round,” he refined turntable techniques until he had helped lay the foundation for the kind of seamless beat-mixing that every DJ learns today. Along with his rap crew, the Furious 5, he perfected the art of the hip-hop musical performance.

After a period of intense gang violence, amid ongoing deindustrialization and governmental disinvestment,

unrelenting white flight, and massive housing destruction, Herc’s parties became a refuge for young Bronxites. He worked hard to make his audience feel welcome. He shouted out their names and kept the peace by taking a live-and-let-live policy and skillfully working the mic.

Along with his friends Coke La Rock and Dickey, he rocked entertaining rhymes like:

*There’s no story can’t be told, there’s no horse can’t be rode, and 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!*

This adaptation of Jamaican sound-system toasting, jazz poetry, and soul radio host patter was called “MCing,” and it formed the foundation for what we now know as rap music.

Herc became a hero in the devastated Bronx, a salve to the borough’s many wounds. He and his fans were kids abandoned by America, left behind in the nation’s progress. But one can never underestimate the creative powers of young people. In time, hip-hop would inspire and redeem youths all around the world. And it all started with a small community party in the summer of 1973.

*Jeff Chang is the author of the American Book Award-winning **Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation** and editor of **Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop**.*