When We First Began

New Sonic Histories of Hip Hop

No one makes me feel the way you do inside
And I don't know what I would do without you and that's no lie
If I die, I'd hope to find you in another life
So we could fall again
Be the way we were when we first began
Like the first time that I ever saw you smile
I want that feeling again
Let's be the way we were when we first began

—PJ Morton, *First Began*

"[. . .] From the players' deepening chemistry, transcendent songs materialized—not unlike the bonds that once inspired the Dungeon Family from which OutKast emerged in early-90s Atlanta. And though its meandering and meditative (though often hysterically titled) compositions exist in the tradition of Alice Coltrane, Laraaji, and Yusef Lateef more than anything conceivably Hip-Hop-adjacent, they're animated by a similar spirit to that which made OutKast's music stand apart: a dauntless dedication to one's own vision, alongside a belief in the power of creative communion. In that sense, it's the André 3000 album we'd been waiting for all along."

— Album Description for the Release of *New Blue Son* by Andre 3000 (Apple Music)

1520 Sedgwick Avenue. At the time, it was called it the "Rec Room." Today, most call it the birth certificate of Hip Hop. On August 11, 1973, DJ Kool Herc took over a house party in the Bronx and it had the entire city talking (Fig. 1). Fifty years later, the world is still buzzing about it. This cultural moment likely would have been overlooked if Nas and his company, Mass Appeal, had not worked tirelessly with Sony Music Entertainment, Live Nation, Yankee Stadium, and more to mark what has now become #HipHop50 (Laramore, 2023). 2023 was a monumental year and we should give it its due recognition. No doubt. Geography has left its imprint on the sound, meaning that we should not celebrate Hip Hop without celebrating the Bronx and the often-forgotten DJ Kool Herc. As Nas said, "No one, I think, was doing it on the level of the Bronx at that time" (Laramore, 2023). That being said, I still find that I readily pause when someone says, "The 50th Anniversary of Hip Hop," mainly because I recall several historians and Hip

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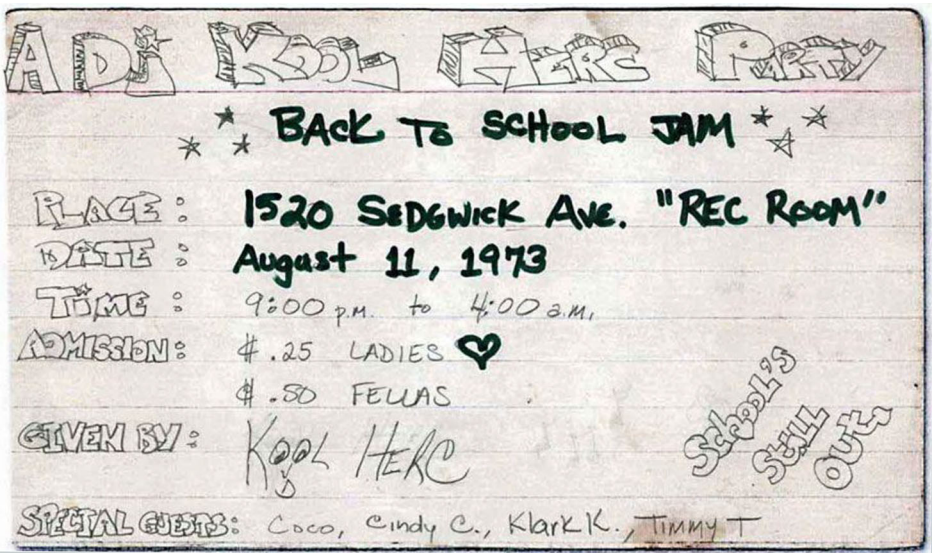

FIGURE 1. DJ Kool Herc Block Party Flyer, Reference: https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20130809-the-party-where-hip-hop-was-born

Hop artists themselves denoting the 1979 hit *Rapper's Delight* as the definitive starting point of Hip Hop.

For many, The Sugarhill Gang exhibited a distinct sound; some might even say unique. Their iconic track opens with a declaration of their avant-garde means of arrival: "Now what you hear is not a test: I'm rappin' to the beat. And me, the groove, and my friends are gonna try to move your feet." *Rapper's Delight* marked a major commercial moment, one in which Hip Hop was introduced to a much wider audience. Although these sounds and aesthetics were unfamiliar to some, they might've been relatively familiar to those who knew The Last Poets—a group of poets and musicians from Queens, Harlem, and the South Bronx who rose to fame in the late 1960s. Doing away with the minimalist percussion styles that were traditionally associated with spoken word, their hard-line rhyme schemes actively mixed jazz and poetry, inspiring a generation of musicians then and now to develop novel storytelling approaches and musical practices. The ebbs and flows of their politically charged poetics fundamentally transformed our sonic landscape. Some of the biggest names in music, from Marvin Gaye to Quincy Jones, explicitly reference the longstanding sonic impact of The Last Poets.[1] Hip Hop quickly became a sound of the mainstream, and today, any skepticism concerning its marketability seems nonsensical. Hip Hop *lives* and *breathes* with us in more ways than one. And so, I oftentimes wonder: How does sound shape our relationship to the world around us? When we reflect on what we feel, and when we reflect on what we hear, how might we re-conceptualize the very meaning of sonic resonance? Fundamentally, what do we mean when we say *the origins of Hip Hop?*

1. Hip Hop Scriptures: https://www.hiphopscriptures.com/the-last-poets

To paraphrase Olúfẽmi Táíwo, perhaps our inquiries don't always have to delineate the precise origins of terms or even their lineage (Táíwo, 2023). Musical borrowings, commonly referred to as samples, connect Hip Hop to a long durée of sonic schemes that push the established boundaries of music engineering (James, 2019). These means of influence and patterns of expression are endless. In his seminal text, *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy (1993) argues that discourses across the Atlantic world are complex products of hybridization and syncretism. Turning to Hip Hop, Gilroy documents the popularity and adoption of the Jamaican sound system in parts of the South Bronx, ultimately posing the question: Why do we assert the making of diasporic cultural forms in such nationalistic ways? Some have read these provocations as a rejection of critical events, moments, dates, or details. However, I would contend that postcolonial theorists such as Gilroy encourage us to understand the history of cultural products as a series of concentric circles, in and between the state. This doesn't render notions of 'belonging' or 'ownership' entirely obsolete, but it does complicate the lens through which we write, theorize, and examine these cultural histories. In much of my past and ongoing scholarship, I argue that too many scholars work from the assumption that Hip Hop is solely a musical genre rather than a field of intellectual and ideological production; in other words, it's a space that sheds light on the history of ideas, how they circulate, and what they mean to different groups of people (Seth et al., 2022; 2023). Hip Hop enables us to trace the means through which sounds, ethics, and politics are reproduced and transformed.

For example, when I think about some of my favorite artists—individuals such as D'Angelo, Lauryn Hill, and PJ Morton among them—they undeniably straddle a multitude of brilliant sounds and lyrical styles. Albums such as *Brown Sugar* and *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* are commonly referred to as the beginning of the neo-soul movement, what Mark Anthony Neal (2003) defines as "everything from avant-garde R&B to organic soul [. . .] a product of trying to develop something outside the norm of R&B." For some, this designation was quite unpopular. On the one hand, neo-soul was suggestive of a rather short period, roughly 1995-2001. On the other, it was viewed as a marketing scheme that pigeonholed artists to make them legible to the public, that is, to ensure that listeners *understood* what they were buying. Given that Hip Hop was regularly characterized as *Black music*, some business executives questioned its long-term marketability, believing that artists should make an effort to "de-racialize" the sound. While these genre classifications don't preclude the ubiquity of other musical styles, they often presume a kind of linearity to sound and subjectivity (Weheliye, 2005). Put plainly, they demarcate when one genre starts and another ends. William Kedar Massenburg, the individual who trademarked the term neo-soul, said himself that he wanted to create a genre that acknowledged the influence of Hip Hop and other electronic-influenced musical styles, suggesting that one could surely raise the question: Is this just Hip Hop by another name?[2]

2. For more on the neo-soul, see the following digital exhibit: https://www.jazzhistorytree.com/neo-soul/

Rather than debate the merits of these exact musical genealogies, I've become increasingly more interested in what Regina Bradley (2012) calls "Black cool," what Corey J. Miles (2023a; 2023b) terms "the vibe," and what Travis Harris et al. (2022) describe as "that Hip Hop feel." These analytic frames consider the different ways that individuals make sense of and approximate their own feelings and experiences. As I see it, these scholars attend to an often-overlooked question: When you listen to a track, what do you *feel*? For me, some tracks, albums, and flow just simply have "that Hip Hop feel." Here, I'm reminded of someone like PJ Morton. In his most recent album, *Watch the Sun*, Morton includes features from Jill Scott, Stevie Wonder, Wale, Alex Isley, and El DeBarge, to name a few, each of whom has released albums in R&B, jazz, funk, soul, and Hip Hop. The album ends with the track, *The Better Benediction*, a song that one could easily classify as gospel. In recent years, Morton has also released two separate albums titled *Gospel According to PJ* and *Christmas with PJ Morton*, showcasing a vast array of musical interests. Personally, I haven't heard anyone classify the work of PJ Morton as either neo-soul or Hip Hop. At the same time, artists have the right to identify in whatever manner they choose. But when I consider my own everyday life, I feel as though I've known Hip Hop for a very, very long time. Street art. Slang. Fashion. Graphic design. For me, Hip Hop always feels so familiar, constantly parading elements that predate its dance and music scene.

At its best, Hip Hop can be one of the highest forms of creative literature. Yet, this tradition of cultural expression is far more than a literary genre. It's an aesthetic. It's a flow. It's a vibe. It's a feeling. It's a lived experience. It's a way of being. And yes, I'd be willing to bet that we could make these arguments about a host of musical genres. Sound has an uncanny ability to reverberate through our lives in modest and inconspicuous ways. All things considered, my stance is this: You don't necessarily need to be sold on when Hip Hop *first began*, and you don't necessarily need to be sold on its exact ebbs and flows. Instead, just look and listen. Perhaps its first sight and impressions have been with us longer than we can imagine. ■

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