

DJs vs. Samplers

by Suzanne McElfresh

In rap's early years, when DJs Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, and Grand Wizard Theodore block-rocked parties in the Bronx and Harlem with two turntables and a crate of vinyl, technology itself was their musical instrument. In the early '80s, when DJs and producers like Afrika Bambaataa, Kurtis Blow, and Marley Marl first substituted drum machines and synthesizers for a live band, they put more control in their own hands. And when Blow (along with DJ Davey DMX) and Biz Markie (with DJ Ultra) began using an electronic sound recorder—otherwise known as a sampler—to make records a few years later, they altered the way hip hop would be made forever after.

As important as the human voice is to hip hop, it is the DJ—sonic archivist, cut creator, musical inventor—who instigated the rap revolution. Mixing, scratching, and cutting together a synthesis of already recorded sound, he created the music of the future by fashioning five-minute jams from 40-second drum breaks. In that regard, the first authentic hip hop record was Flash's 1981 single "The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel." A dense sound collage composed of fragments from half a dozen

records played on three turntables, "Adventures" was a more accurate portrayal of live rap than the Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight," the 1979 single that, though it used a band and not a DJ for its instrumental track, is acknowledged as the first rap hit.

As early as 1982, Bambaataa (collaborating with Arthur Baker and John Robie) reconfigured the domain of the DJ with "Planet Rock," a Kraftwerk-inspired bit of techno freak constructed from a Roland TR-808 drum machine beat and a peppy synthesizer melody. As electronic equipment became cheaper to buy and simpler to use, more DJs and producers made tracks the D-I-Y way, and "Planet Rock" inspired a host of electro-fueled hits—the Fearless Four's "Rockin' It," Grandmaster and Melle Mel's "White Lines (Don't Do It)," the Jonzun Crew's "Pack Jam," Whodini's "Magic's Wand"—that transformed rap decisively. The backlash began in 1984, when Run-D.M.C. and L.L. Cool J dropped hard beats and stark tracks on the cheesy synth-pop movement, marking a return to rap's DJ and MC roots.

Ultimately, however, the introduction of the sampler engendered a genuine revolution in the way hip hop was made.

A recording device that captures sound as digital information, which is then saved in computer memory instead of on magnetic tape, the sampler made it possible to create intricate soundscapes with virtually any source material, including already recorded music and live instruments. Records by Marley Marl and Eric B. and Rakim illustrated how samples could be endlessly manipulated—sped up or slowed down, played backward, or isolated as a sound and used to write new melodies, harmonies, and beats—and then layered: a bass line from one source mixed with horn lines and a vocal from another; a guitar chord distilled into a percussive element; a "drum set" pieced together from various records. Like a souped-up turntable, the sampler could be used to more effectively transform sounds from the past into music of the future.

Samplers were the secret weapon behind Public Enemy's *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, N.W.A.'s *Straight Outta Compton*, the Beastie Boys' *Paul's Boutique*, Ice Cube's *AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted*, De La Soul's *3 Feet High and Rising*, Gang Starr's *Step in the Arena*—albums released between 1988 and 1991 that are still among hip hop's most creative, influential, and enduring. Constructed from multiple samples and densely layered, a song from any one of these albums plays like a mini-archive of pop music. "I loop the samples, then put a drum track over it," Gang Starr's DJ Premier