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50 Years of Hip-Hop (1973-2023)

On August 11, 1973, DJ Kool Herc threw a party at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in the Bronx. He used two copies of the same record to loop instrumental breaks. This gave “break boys” and “break girls” more time to dance. It also gave Herc a rhythmic canvas for his announcements on the mic—a style that opened the door to what we now know as rapping.

Hip-hop was born.

50 years of hip-hop...unpacked.

Herc’s techniques spread to house parties and outdoor gatherings across New York City. Young Black and Latine people began shaping the five pillars of hip-hop: DJing, MCing, breakdancing, graffiti, and knowledge —of self, one’s surroundings, and the history of the movement.

DJs like Grandmaster Flash and Grand Wizzard Theodore expanded upon Herc’s style, while MCs like Coke La Rock and members of groups like the Furious Five and Cold Crush Brothers rocked the mic.

Breakbeats dubbed onto cassettes helped hip-hop spread, allowing MCs and b-boys and b-girls to show their skills in school yards and on neighborhood streets. At the time, MCing was strictly a live, in-person experience. That all changed when hip-hop caught the attention of the music industry.

In 1979, the first commercially released hip-hop record came out: “Rapper’s Delight” by Sugarhill Gang. The song charted in the Top 40, pushing the genre into the spotlight and MCs into the studio. Early ’80s dance tracks like Kurtis Blow’s “The Breaks” were complemented by socially conscious songs like “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. Movies like Wild Style, Style Wars, and Beat Street showcased hip-hop culture to a widening audience.

Eventually breaks were replaced by drum machines and synthesizers, as the old school gave way to the new

school in the mid-80s. Artists like Run DMC, LL Cool J, The Beastie Boys, and Public Enemy became rap celebrities, while producers like Rick Rubin and The Bomb Squad embraced sampling like never before.

By the late '80s hip-hop had spread globally. Women MCs and acts from outside New York stepped into the spotlight, and a major shift toward the West Coast came with NWA, whose aggressive style spawned gangsta rap and a new set of influential artists.

Back east, rappers were pushing lyrical boundaries. Changing production techniques brought forth new sounds in the early '90s, ranging from gritty and grimy to playful and afrocentric—and everything in between.

Mainstream artists became A-list celebrities in the mid-'90s, like Diddy and Jay-Z on the East Coast and Dr. Dre on the West. Displays of wealth increased alongside music video budgets as a rivalry between coasts developed—one that led to the death of both Tupac and the Notorious B.I.G.

By the late '90s, hip-hop was the best-selling genre in the US, with an increasingly White and suburban audience. Hip-hop's musical and visual style was everywhere as a new region rose to prominence: the South. Southern artists added bounce to the genre with innovative cadences and a distinct production style.

The early and mid-2000s ultimately became an era of super producers. Dr. Dre signed Eminem and 50 Cent, and producers like Timbaland, Kanye West, and the Neptunes worked with an array of talented MCs. At this point, hip-hop was a fully commercial product. Some artists were just as well known for their movie roles or business ventures as they were for their music. Many underground acts still earned acclaim, but hip-hop was big business.

But as the Internet became a part of daily life and piracy threatened the music industry, commercial hip-hop sales slipped. Consumer recording technology began to rival professional studios and artists could release their own music online. By the late-2000s, social media and file sharing introduced a new set of popular artists to a global audience.

Now, in the streaming era, hip-hop has regained commercial prominence, with the genre's global appeal becoming clearer than ever.

50 years in, hip-hop has changed the world. What started with DJ Kool Herc in a Bronx basement led to Jay-Z selling out Madison Square Garden and Kendrick Lamar winning a Pulitzer Prize.

Hip-hop has evolved and changed so much, but it's still a relatively young genre. What do you think will happen next?