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Prof. Dr.-Ing. Dipl.-Wirt.-Ing Carsten Deckert

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Now What You Hear Is Not a Test

The Invention and Commercialization of Rap Music

Carsten Deckert

Fachbereich Maschinenbau und Verfahrenstechnik
Faculty of Mechanical and Process Engineering

Hochschule Düsseldorf
University of Applied Sciences

HSD
VW
DSH



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1 Grandmaster Flash's epiphany

As so many stories in history, it is unclear if this story really happened the way it was told¹. However, if the story is not true, it deserves to be true. The story goes like this: Grandmaster Flash and Cowboy, one of the rappers from his crew, were in the VIP room at the Disco Fever at the end of 1979, when they heard a rap to a disco groove. The rhymes that came out of the speakers were²:

I said a-hip-hop, the hibbie, the hibbie

To the hip-hip-hop and you don't stop the rockin

To the bang-bang boogie, say up jump the boogie

To the rhythm of the boogedy-beat

Flash recognized the backing track as “Good Times” from Chic, a popular disco band. He recognized part of the lyrics from a standard routine from Cowboy (the “hip-hop-don't-stop” rhyme), but Cowboy was with him, so it couldn't be him. He surely also realized that other parts of the text were from DJ Casanova Fly of the Cold Crush Brothers (“I'm the C-A-S-A-N-O-V-A and the rest is F-L-Y”). So he expected to see him or someone recreating his and Cowboy's rhymes at the microphone. But there was nobody at the microphone, nobody on stage – just a DJ in the booth spinning a record. At that moment Grandmaster Flash must have realized that the rap was *on* the record.

Grandmaster Flash was one of the few respected artists in the hip-hop world at that moment in time and DJ to the rap group The Furious Five. Other well-known artists included e.g. DJ Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa and the Zulu Nation and DJ Hollywood. However, hip hop up to that point had been largely live music at parties with MCs rhyming over the break beats created by DJs at two turntables by repeating the break part of mainly funk and soul records. Rap music up to that point had no track record when it came to vinyl records.

The record Flash heard was “Rapper's Delight” by the Sugarhill Gang, a casted band of relative nobodies in the hip-hop world at that time. The group was on the newly founded label Sugar Hill Records and consisted of band members Michael "Wonder Mike" Wright, Henry "Big Bank Hank" Jackson and Guy "Master Gee" O'Brien. It was not the first rap song to be recorded and released as a record (That honor is usually given to “King Tim III (Personality Jock)” by the Fatback Band, although there are other aspirants to that title). It was recorded by a group of

relative outsiders, partly borrowing lyrics from other more well-known rappers such as DJ Casanova Fly. They rapped over a backing track played by a house band shamelessly copying a well-known disco track. However, all that did not matter: “Rapper’s Delight” turned into the first rap record with a major impact. According to the Smithsonian Anthology of Hip-Hop and Rap it has sold more than 14 million copies by now.³

At that moment at the Disco Fever, Flash must have thought that it should have been him or his crew. Or it should have been some other well-respected artist from the hip-hop culture such as Kool Herc or Afrika Bambaataa. The question that must have popped into his mind was something like: How could he have overlooked something which in hindsight seems so obvious? Putting rap music out as a record!

2 Rap’s history

Rap music is at the time of writing a multimillion-dollar business. According to the “Hip-Hop Cash Kings” list by Zack O'Malley Greenburg the top earners in 2021 were Jay-Z with \$ 470 million and Kanye West with \$ 250 million followed by Diddy (formerly Puff Daddy), Drake and Wiz Khalifa.⁴ With these figures Jay-Z and Kanye West rank third and fifth in the list of highest-paid entertainers by Forbes.⁵ Apart from music, rappers seem to dabble in almost anything from clothes and sneakers to alcoholic beverages to electronic equipment – and often successfully so. For example, Dr. Dre – founder of Gangsta Rap group NWA, label owner of Aftermath Entertainment and discoverer of Snoop Dogg, Eminem and Kendrick Lamar amongst others – partnered with Jimmy Iovine of Interscope Records to start the company Beats Electronics turning headphones into a fashion item (According to legend Iovine told Dre: “Fuck sneakers – let’s make speakers”). The company was bought by Apple for a staggering \$ 3 billion making Dr. Dre the first hip hop billionaire.⁶

The cultural influences of hip hop and rap music in particular are not only felt in music where in the 90s almost every successful song seemed to have a rap part but also in language (with new word creations such as “def” or “bling”), fashion (e.g. the baggy pants look), the art world (e.g. Jean-Michel Basquiat or Andy Warhol) and lifestyle in general. Hip hop has (or had) its own magazines (e.g. Source, Vibe), its own radio and TV shows (e.g. Yo! MTW Raps) and its own movies (e.g. Beat Street, Breakdance, Wild Style, Rappin – to name only some of the better-known early ones).

Hip hop is an umbrella term spanning the four pillars of rapping, breakdance, DJing and graffiti. Adepts of the culture see the four pillars as inseparable components of hip hop, but rap music soon gained a momentum of its own. Rapping can be described as a rhythmic recital of poetry to a beat or rhythmic speech to music. It arose from the oral tradition of toasting as part of the African-American culture.⁷ Early examples or forerunners can be found in R&B, Soul and Funk: The compilation “Early Rappers” contains several examples of sprechgesang or speech song from the 1950s to the 1970s in the form of “Jive, talking blues, spoken poetry, soul preaching and love raps”⁸.

In its early days, there were two developmental trajectories of rap. One started with park jams in New York City where DJs (short for disk jockey) plugged into the electricity grid of a street lamp and played records for the local neighborhood – a way for people who couldn’t afford or were not let into clubs for whatever reason to party and enjoy music. The first of these parties is supposed to have been started by DJ Kool Herc – an iconic figure in hip-hop culture. One of the inventions of Kool Herc was to prolong the break of a funk or soul record – usually the middle section of a song where the drummer lets loose – by repeating it and mixing it seamlessly on two turntables over and over again to keep people dancing. This created the breakdance – a very athletic form of dancing almost turning dancers into gymnasts – and the terms “b-boys” and “b-girls” – the “break-boys” and “break-girls” dancing to the break beats.

The DJ often tried to animate the crowd with short shouts such as “Throw your hands in the air” over the PA system. As the mixing of the break beats and later the scratching of records – pulling a record back and forth to create new sounds, a technique invented by Grandmaster Flash – afforded more and more attention, this duty was later “outsourced” to a second person – the MC (short for master of the ceremony). This led to crews such as Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five, the Cold Crush Brothers or the Zulu Nation consisting of a DJ playing the records and one or more MCs rapping over the DJ’s break beats.

The other trajectory were Disco DJs such as DJ Hollywood or Eddie Cheeba talking over the records they played in the club. This trajectory is sometimes neglected when the early days of hip hop are recounted, but it is important to understand the meteoric rise of “Rapper’s Delight” – a song based on a catchy disco groove by Chic.

In both of these trajectories, rapping was initially only a supplement to the DJ spinning his records and subordinated to the music. Soon, however, the power relation shifted from the DJ as the center of attention to the MC rapping center stage. There is no exact moment in time

when the relation reversed but rather a fluid continuum. This change, however, led to the birth of rap music as we know it.

3 Sylvia's big bet

By the time she founded Sugar Hill, Sylvia Robinson was an established artist. She recorded records as Little Sylvia and as part of the duo Mickey & Sylvia. She was also running the record label All Platinum with her husband Joe. So she was no newcomer to the world of music business. By the end of the 70s though, All Platinum was struggling, and Sylvia was on the lookout for a new venture in the summer of 1979.

As is so often in history, there are different competing stories of how the idea of “Rapper’s Delight” emerged.⁹ In one version of the story well-known rapper Busy Bee gave Sylvia the idea, while she visited a disco with her niece. Another story claims that her son played her a tape by a friendly rapper called Casper. However the story went, Sylvia realized the potential of rap music and got her house band together to record a backing track based on the popular hit “Good Times” by Chic. Then she went in search for a rapper to rap over the backing track, as Busy Bee and Casper both declined.



Fig. 1: German versions of the 12”-single of “Rapper’s Delight” (including the 15 min version and a 6:30 min version on B side) and the first LP of the Sugarhill Gang (including a 4:55 min version of the song)

She found Henry “Hank” Jackson at Crispy Crust Pizza through an acquaintance and played him the tape of the song in the back of her car. Hank was a bouncer at a club and also worked for the Cold Crush Brothers, but wasn’t a formal member of the group. However, through his involvement with the group, he knew many of the Cold Crush routines and could rap of the top to the beat provided by Sylvia. Sylvia and Hank were soon joined by Guy O’Brien and Mike Wright who happened to be nearby. After moving to the studio for a more formal audition, Sylvia decided to hire all three of them to form a group. As she had decided to call her new label Sugar Hill, they became the Sugarhill Gang.

Sugar Hill released “Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugarhill Gang in October 1979 as a twelve-inch single. The record was an instant success selling 75,000 copies per day. It peaked at No. 4 on the R&B charts and at No. 36 on the pop charts. By the end of 1980 Sugar Hill had released ten more twelve-inch records, and the Sugarhill Gang had recorded their first album.¹⁰

4 Impact of “Rapper’s Delight”

Many rap pioneers didn’t see it coming and were taken by surprise by the success of “Rapper’s Delight” and the Sugarhill Gang. The reasons for this seeming contradiction can be found in the context of rap at the beginning of the emerging hip-hop culture. The situation before “Rapper’s Delight” is vividly described by Will Smith aka The Fresh Prince in his autobiography¹¹:

Back then, hip-hop wasn’t as it is now. [...] you had to know somebody who knew somebody who could get you a cassette tape of one of the live performances exploding from the epicenter: New York City. People would literally go stand in the audience at a party and hold up a boom box over their heads to record the performers. That’s how mixtapes were created – people physically going to a party and holding a big-ass radio up in the air for an hour, two hours, then making copies of the tape and giving them to friends. People in New York would cut a tape of some of their favorite hip-hop artists, make a copy, then take it to their friend in Boston, mail one to their brother in LA, or play one for their little cousin in Philly. These tapes got traded, sold, copied, and traded again. This hand-to-hand exchange across the country was what drove the rocket-fueled expansion of hip-hop. It was grassroots. It was viral before anyone knew what ‘going viral’ was. It was straight from the street to the heart.

Rap music was strictly a party format in New York. The rapping was supposed to take place *to* a record spun by a DJ and not *on* a record. The only recordings of rap music were tapes of performances at the parties. However, the idea of a rap record seems to have been in the air before Sylvia Robinson made her move, as there were some forerunners such as “King Tim III” by the Fatback Band. And other artists had been asked before the Sugarhill Gang and declined, as Grandmaster Flash remembers: “I was asked. I was asked before anybody. And I was like, ‘Who would want to hear a record which I was spinning re-recorded, with MCing on it?’ I told these record companies, these small mom-and-pop record companies, just leave me alone. I’m not interested.”¹² The general mood with regard to rap records is expressed by Chuck D of Public Enemy: “I did not think it was conceivable that there would be such a thing as a hip-hop record. I could not see it.”¹³

Another reason that hip-hop pioneers could not image a rap record was that the party format of rap required a length of the music to keep people on the dancefloor that was compatible with neither the seven-inch nor the twelve-inch single format. In the words of DJ Eddie Cheeba: “I’m like, a record? Fuck, how you gon’ put hip-hop onto a record? ‘Cause it was a whole jig, you know? How you gon’ put three hours on a record?”¹⁴ True to this fact, the original version of “Rapper’s Delight” is close to 15 minutes long. It was released as a twelve-inch maxi single and is said to have revived that format. Later, shorter edits were cut but it stayed a maxi single and never reached the seven-inch-friendly 3:30 minutes. Or in the words of Chuck D: “Bam! They made ‘Rapper’s Delight’. And the ironic twist is not how long that record was, but how short it was. I’m thinking, ‘Man, they cut that shit down to fifteen minutes?’ It was a miracle.”¹⁵ What was also missing completely – due to the adherence to the party scene – was a classical song structure and any form of chorus – sung or otherwise.

However, the catchy groove of the Chic song combined with the almost “innocent” rhymes by virtual nobodies of the hip hop party scene somehow hit the sweet spot between street and pop. As such, “Rapper’s Delight” is a song performed by rap fans rather than die-hard rappers. On the contrary, many rap pioneers were critical of rap on a record, as they wanted to preserve the culture and saw a record as commercial exploitation to make quick money. As Afrika Bambaataa observes: “A lot of us in the Zulu Nation stayed away from it at first because people thought that once it got onto vinyl it was going to kill the culture.”¹⁶ Rappers were content to represent their borough or crew at the party and did it to gain respect rather than cash. However, once the Sugarhill Gang had shown what was possible, there was no turning back, as Grandmaster Flash remembers: “The game of hip-hop changed. ‘Rapper’s Delight’ just set the

goal to a whole ‘nother level. It wasn’t rule the Bronx or rule Manhattan, or rule whatever. It was now how soon can you make a record.”¹⁷

The song lead to numerous other rap songs being recorded such as “Christmas Rap” and “The Breaks” by Kurtis Blow. But most of all it lead to a torrent of songs based on the replay of hit songs by a band. Sugar Hill took the lead with songs such as “Apache” by Sugarhill Gang (based on “Apache” by the Incredible Bongo Band, a favorite break of DJ Kool Herc), “Freedom” by Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five (based on “Get Up and Dance” by Freedom) and “That’s the Joint” by Funky Four + One (based on “Rescue Me” by A Taste of Honey) – to name just a few. Examples from other labels include “Genius Rap” by Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hide (based on “Genius of Love” by Tom Tom Club), “Planet Rock” by Afrika Bambaataa (based on “Trans-Europe Express” by Kraftwerk) and “I Can’t Wait” by Spyder D (based on “I Can’t Wait” by Nu Shooz) – and there is no way to compile a complete list. Sugar Hill also lead to imitators such as the Enjoy label owned by Bobbie Robinson (no affiliation to Sylvia and Joe). Enjoy started their own business shortly after and released the first records of Spoonie Gee, Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five, Sequence and The Treacherous Three; all four later switched to Sugar Hill Records.

The Sugarhill Gang and their approach to rap music even inspired songs in other countries such as “Rapper’s Deutsch”, a German parody by G.L.S. United from 1980, a group including entertainer Thomas Gottschalk with radio and TV hosts Frank Laufenberg and Manfred Sexauer, and embarrassingly the first German rap song to be recorded. Another example is “Holiday Rap” by the Dutch duo MC Miker Gee and DJ Sven from 1986 based on the Madonna song “Holiday” with undisputably classic lines such as “We gonna ring-reng-a-dong for a holiday”.

Furthermore Sugar Hill Records introduced two further innovations: In one of their later recordings, they prepared the re-introduction of the DJ instead of a house band with “The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash at the Wheels of Steel”, and they released the first politically conscious rap with “The Message”, both songs by Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five. In an almost ironic twist of fate, with these innovations the label laid the foundations for its subsequent downfall. New rappers emerged with a harder, edgier style using more realistic and even political lyrics as well as sampling and scratching by a DJ instead of a house band – two trends Sugar Hill Records helped to initiate with “The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash at the Wheels of Steel” and “The Message”. One of the first groups in this style was Run DMC. One of the first labels to capitalize on this trend was Def Jam with acts such as the Beastie Boys, LL

Cool J and Public Enemy. As Reggie Reg, actor and comedian, puts it: “When Def Jam came out, that was like a nail in Sugar Hill’s coffin”¹⁸. After a series of bad business decisions, Sugar Hill Records closed down in 1986.

5 Entrepreneurial achievement of Sylvia Robinson

Sylvia Robinson is not only the first female entrepreneur in hip-hop, but the first entrepreneur in hip-hop in general. And Sugar Hill Records was the most successful label for a while, until new labels such as Def Jam and Tommy Boy took over. As such Robinson was successful in transforming the invention of hip hop into a commercially viable innovation of rap music by finding a suitable market.

In general, innovation can be defined as an invention and its commercialization. The innovation process starts with a new idea from which an invention is developed which is normally a principally functional prototype. The persons who realize the invention are called the inventors. Only when the invention has been made saleable, i.e. successfully brought onto the market, it is usually called an innovation. The people who popularize an invention and put it onto a market are called entrepreneurs.

An entrepreneur can be described as “a person with the vision to see an innovation and the ability to bring it to market”¹⁹. The personality of an entrepreneur is fundamentally different from that of an inventor, as first described by the famous economist Joseph Alois Schumpeter²⁰. While the inventor is a tinkerer very well versed in the technical intricacies of his subject, the entrepreneur is a person of economic action willing to create a market if need be by force. The originality of an inventor is to come up with a technical solution, the originality of an entrepreneur is to take already existing inventions to fulfil some customer needs in an attempt to make money out of it.

Entrepreneurs are characterized by an Entrepreneurial Mindset. This mindset enables entrepreneurs to spot new business opportunities and to cherry-pick the most promising ones. If they commit to a business idea they pursue it with tenacity, while simultaneously putting an emphasis on trial and error as well as adaptation. In doing so they often include people from their personal network.²¹

New business opportunities are usually not at the core of an industry but at its periphery. The exploration of new business ideas implies that innovative companies respectively entrepreneurs need as a core capability “a peripheral vision that allows them to see beyond their immediate

focus and escape the bounds of their cognitive frames”²² Otherwise they stick to the tried and true and, thus, are stuck in existing ways of doing business. Scott Anthony calls this phenomenon the “sucking sound of the core business”²³. This often leads to a situation in which especially experts in a given field overlook an opportunity which in hindsight seems to be all too obvious.

To escape this kind of thinking entrepreneurs usually do not follow the linear causality of target-means planning as preferred in classical management theory but a circular and dynamic approach of action and adaptation. One approach incorporating the entrepreneurial mindset is Effectuation which is based on five core principles²⁴:

1. Pilot-in-the-plane principle: To deal with the Knightian uncertainty of new businesses entrepreneurs do not try to predict the future but they actively create it.
2. Bird-in-hand principle: Entrepreneurs start with their existing means and capabilities.
3. Affordable-loss principle: Entrepreneurs control the downside risk by investing what they can afford to lose.
4. Lemonade principle: Entrepreneurs turn contingencies into opportunities.
5. Crazy-quilt principle: Entrepreneurs leverage their networks to form alliances and get precommitments from stakeholders.

After an entrepreneur successfully brings a new business to market, there are usually imitations of his value proposition and further innovations based on his initial idea.

Joe Robinson Jr., the son of Sylvia and Joe Sr., once remarked: “We never said we started hip hop. We admit that the Sugarhill Gang weren’t a group, that my mother put it together. We never said we were in the same category as Kool Herc or other pioneers. But we did make our contributions.”²⁵ And that contribution was not a small one.

With regard to the contributions of Sylvia Robinson and Sugar Hill Records, there are the following questions:

- What is the achievement of Sugarhill Gang’s first vinyl release? Why didn’t experts in the field, i.e. established rap groups and DJs, see the opportunity?
- How can the principles of Effectuation explain how Sylvia Robinson put the Sugarhill Gang together making her the first female hip-hop entrepreneur?
- What are imitations and further innovations that came out of the original idea of Sylvia Robinson?

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Prof. Dr.-Ing. Carsten Deckert
ORCID 0000-0001-6883-566X
Hochschule Düsseldorf
Fachbereich Maschinenbau und Verfahrenstechnik

IMPRESSUM



Hochschule Düsseldorf
University of Applied Sciences

Fachbereich Maschinenbau und Verfahrenstechnik
Münsterstraße 156
40476 Düsseldorf

mv.hs-duesseldorf.de

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