Mase got the ladies, Puff drives Mercedes
take hits from the '80s, don't it sound so crazy
Mase, "Bad Boy," 1997

On a Sunday morning in 1988 I was a guest, along with producer-songwriter Mtume and a
couple of other music industry types, on Bob Slade's Week in Review, a radio show on New
York's KISS-FM. We were kicking it about African-American culture and Mtume was wailing
hip hop upside its head. The man who wrote '80s standards like Roberta Flack's "The Closer
I Get to You" and Stephanie Mills's "I Never Knew Love Like This Before," Mtume is one of
the most articulate, thoughtful musicians I've ever encountered. He was a political activist
with Ron Karenga's nationalist U.S. organization in the '60s (with whom he survived a shoot-
out with the Panthers). He played with Miles Davis during his controversial funk period and
went on to write and produce for Flack, Mills, Levert, and Phyllis Hyman as well as with his
own band. Mtume's wide musical experience, balanced by his grounding in street politics, has
given him a provocative perspective on the evolution of black culture and music.

Mtume spent much of this particular Sunday morning blasting hip hop record production
for its slavish reliance on record sampling. He charged that "this is the first generation of
African-Americans not to be extending the range of the music" and that the resulting record-
ings "were nothing but Memorex music." To further illustrate his creative disdain, Mtume
made a bold analogy: sampling James Brown's drum beats in a hip hop album was like me
sticking chapters from James Baldwin in my books and claiming the words as mine.

Now let me be clear here. Mtume wasn't totally against sampling as a musical tool. What
he was objecting to was the use of sampling as a substitute for musical composition. It upset
him that so many hip hop producers had no understanding of theory, could play no instru-
ments, and viewed a large record collection as the only essential tool of record making. He
charged that this made for lazy musicians and listeners. If obscenity is what the general public
chiefly criticizes in hip hop as a social statement, the musically astute have long expressed
contempt for its rampant sampling.

Listening to KISS-FM that morning was Daddy-O (Glenn Bolton) of Brooklyn's Stet-
sasonic, a six-member crew composed of rappers, a DJ, and a live drummer, who boldly
proclaimed themselves a hip hop band. Just as Mtume's cold-blooded critique of sampling

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reflected the widespread disdain of soul-generation musicians for the use of sampling (especially when done without crediting the source recordings), Stetsasonic’s response to his comments spoke to hip hop’s warrior aesthetic: when challenged, dis back.

Stetsasonic’s answer was “Talkin’ All That Jazz,” a most articulate defense of sampling that became the band’s signature hit. Released in 1988, “Jazz,” which itself was based on a loop made from sampling ’70s keyboardist Lonnie Liston Smith’s instrumental “Expansions,” argued: “Tell the truth, James Brown was old / ’til Eric and Rak came out with “I Got Soul” / Rap brings back old R&B and if we would not / people could have forgot.” This was a reference to Eric B. & Rakim’s use of several James Brown samples and singer Bobby Byrd’s vocal in “You Know You Got Soul.” Mtume didn’t appreciate the line “You said it wasn’t art / So now we’re gonna rip you apart,” and he certainly wasn’t impressed with Stetsasonic’s reply.

Sampling represents the kind of generational schism that tore through the rock world when folk purists chastised Bob Dylan for plugging in electric instruments in 1965 and jazz purists attacked Miles Davis for rejecting acoustic instruments in the early ’70s. (Coincidentally, Mtume was Miles’s percussionist for much of that period.) What continues to be debated is whether sampling is a tragic break with African-American’s creative musical traditions or a radical, even transcendental, continuation of them.

New Toys

Since the end of World War II, technology has been a driving force in moving black music ahead—it has given musicians tools and opened possibilities their old instruments never suggested. While Charlie Christian, an extraordinary jazz musician, was the first to explore the possibilities of the electric guitar, it was country boys from the South and Midwest, men like Muddy Waters and Chuck Berry, who electrified the blues, giving rural music a hard, loud, citified sheen that set the stage for rock ’n’ roll. Monk Montgomery, a bass player in Lionel Hampton’s dance-crazy postwar big band, was the first to tour with the Fender bass guitar, an instrument that, along with the electric guitar and larger trap drum kits, recalibrated the sound of American dance music.

Quincy Jones once told me that the bass guitar’s sound was “so imposing in comparison to the upright bass . . . it couldn’t have the same function. You couldn’t have it playing 4/4 lines because it had too much personality. Before the electric bass and the electric guitar, the rhythm section was the support section, backing up the horns and piano. But when they were introduced everything upstairs had to take a backseat . . . . The old style didn’t work anymore and it created a new language.”

Similarly, Stevie Wonder’s embrace of the Moog synthesizer in the ’70s again revamped pop. As Wonder announced with Music of My Mind and then elaborated on in a series of masterpieces (Innervisions, Fulfillingness’ First Finale, Songs in the Key of Life), sounds filtered through then-novel computer technology could give an adventurous composer access to traditional sounds (strings, horns) and a wide range of new sonic textures. Just as the big bands were overwhelmed by enhanced rhythm sections of the ’50s, Wonder’s synthesizer-driven albums had a ripple effect throughout popular music. One by-product of the synthesizer’s versatility was that it eventually drove most of the great African-American bands of the ’70s to either shrink or disband in its wake.

At the tail end of the ’70s the Fairlight Computer Musical Instrument appeared out of Australia. Sampling was not the main feature of this machine, though many musicians utilized it for that. With a Fairlight you could digitize a real sound, manipulate its pitch or tone, and then replay it. English artists such as the estimable Peter Gabriel and lesser acts like Heaven 17 and the Human League utilized the Fairlight in the early ’80s. So did R&B producer Kashif and Earth, Wind & Fire, on its abysmal Powerlight album.
Around 1981 the E-mu Emulator, the first pure sampler, was developed and put on the market in the United States. This digital device, and the many others that followed, possessed the ability to store, manipulate, and play back any sound that had been stored in it. No musical expertise was needed to use it, though there is an inherent musicality required to understand how elements from various recordings can be arranged to create something new. But to make it work, you just had to know how to push the buttons.

Legend has it that the Emulator was first used in hip hop to capture the drum sound from an old record, which became the centerpiece of rap record production, by accident. Marley Marl was doing a remix in either 1981 or 1982 and was trying to sample using his Emulator when "accidentally a snare went through," as he told Harry Allen. He loved the sound of this old snare on his remix and realized "I could take any drum sound from any old record, put it in here and get that old drummer sound on some shit."

Kurtis Blow claimed that in 1983 he used a Fairlight to snatch the "one, two" countdown from "A.J. Scratch," making the first sample loop, using go-go band Trouble Funk's "Pump It Up," on his hip hop standard "If I Ruled the World."

Before hip hop, producers would use sampling to disguise the absence of a live instrument. If a horn was needed or a particular keyboard line was missing, a pop producer might sample it from another record, trying to camouflage its artificiality in the process. However, a hip hop producer, whose sonic aesthetic was molded by the use of breakbeats from old records pulled from dirty crates, wasn’t embarrassed to be using somebody else’s sounds. Recontextualizing someone else’s sounds was, after all, how hip hop started. For example, producer Marley Marl became known for the "dusty" quality of his productions. In his records for Big Daddy Kane, Biz Markie, and L.L. Cool J, you could damn near hear the pops, scratches, and ambient noise of old vinyl.

To the post-soul generation that makes and consumes rap—people who grew up using remote controls, microwaves, and video games—employing an E-mu SP-1200 (favored by Public Enemy’s producers) or an Akai MPC-60 (utilized by Teddy Riley) to sample, then loop and surround with other percussive elements is making music and no amount of bitching can change that.

Sample That

In 1979, the Sugar Hill house band replayed Chic’s “Good Times” to provide musical backing for “Rapper’s Delight.” Eighteen years later, Sean “Puff Daddy” Combs sampled Diana Ross’s “I’m Coming Out” to provide musical backing for the Notorious B.I.G.’s “Mo Money Mo Problems”—both sampled songs were written by the team of the late Bernard Edwards and Nile Rodgers. The Sugar Hill Gang, and many of the early studio band-generated rap records, used live musicians to replicate the feel of a DJ spinning. They may have been trying to create a sound that black radio DJs felt more comfortable airing, but it had nothing to do with the way authentic rap was made or sounded. Rather, this strategy reflected the sensibility of the soul-era producers who controlled the recording process at Sugar Hill, Enjoy, and elsewhere.

Sampling’s flexibility gave hip hop–bred music makers the tools to create tracks that not only were in the hip hop tradition but allowed them to extend that tradition. For them the depth and complexity of sounds achievable on a creatively sampled record have made live instrumentation seem, at best, an adjunct to record making. Records were no longer recordings of instruments being played—they had become a collection of previously performed and found sounds.

Hip hop’s sampling landmarks were both recorded in the late ’80s by two acts from Long Island. The power of the first, Public Enemy’s It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back from 1988, is not simply its evocation of the Black Panthers, the Nation of Islam, and fearless
brothers confronting anti-Nigga Machines. All that rhetoric is intensified with heavy-metal vigor by a tapestry of samples that set standards few have come close to since.

Greg Tate described it as "a songcraft from chipped flecks of near forgotten soul gold. On Nation a guitar vamp from Funkadelic, a moan from Sly, a growl abducted from Bobby Byrd aren't rhythmically spliced in but melodically sequenced into colorful narratives. Think of Romare Bearden." The revered African-American painter used color, texture, and collage (photos, ads, fabric) in a visual approach that is comparable in many ways to what the Bomb Squad production team achieved with Nation. Pulling from the Nation of Islam's Sister Ava Muhammad, a John Coltrane solo, an Anthrax rock riff, and scores of other sound sources, Nation fulfilled the visionary promise of sampling as an agitprop tool.

Equally visionary was De La Soul's whimsical debut, 3 Feet High and Rising, a 24-track collection of raps, songs, puns, skits, and amused good feeling that was released a year after Nation. While P.E. looked for sounds that articulated anger and contempt, De La Soul sought bemused, off-handed noises and deceptively childlike melodies: De La Soul's "Eye Know" features Steely Dan's "Peg" rubbing up against Otis Redding's "Dock of the Bay," and on "Say No Go" Sly Stone fragments meet the Hall and Oates hook from "I Can't Go for That." Over these crafty Prince Paul–produced tracks, rappers Trugoy and Posdnous intone their lyrics with a witty, conversational ease.

It Takes a Nation and 3 Feet High and Rising were both products of a more carefree environment regarding sampling. Producers in the '80s tended to make liberal use of musical samples and were not as concerned about copyright issues. That philosophy has been replaced by greater sophistication on the part of everyone involved—the record labels, the producers, and especially those with catalogs that have been heavily sampled, who are now eternally vigilant. After "Rapper's Delight" hit the charts in 1979, Edwards and Rodgers eventually sued and got full songwriting credit (and royalties) on the Sugar Hill Gang hit. The case was widely covered, but sampling still went on for years before attorneys really caught on to how lucrative sampling could be for the original sound creators.

There is an evident racial aspect to this wake-up call. It was only when progressive groups such as P.E. and De La Soul began expanding beyond black music for samples that the form truly attracted negative attention. When rock or pop musicians found that—horror of horrors!—a rap group was using their music, they tended to go after the offense with an outrage that spoke to their contempt for the form. Old R&B performers on the whole were not aggressive enough, or maybe they were just more used to being ripped off. Prince Paul, a member of Stetsasonic when they made "Talkin' All That Jazz," was, along with De La Soul's other members, sued for using a bit of a song by the '60s band the Turtles on De La Soul's "Transmitting Live from Mars," resulting in a costly out-of-court settlement.

The most damaging example of anti-hip hop vindictiveness in a sample case came from a most unlikely source. In 1992, the gentle-voiced '70s balladeer Gilbert O'Sullivan sued Cold Chillin'–Warner Bros. signee Biz Markie for unauthorized use of his 1972 hit "Alone Again (Naturally)." But instead of sticking up Biz and his record companies for a substantial royalty on all records sold—which he was certainly entitled to—O'Sullivan successfully forced Warner Bros. to recall all pressings and stop selling the album until the song was removed. The resulting loss of visibility severely damaged Biz Markie's career as a rapper and sent a chill through the industry that is still felt.

Obviously, sampling hasn't disappeared from hip hop, but the level of ambition in using these samples has fallen. The high-intensity sound tapestries of P.E. have given way to often simple-minded loops of beats and vocal hooks from familiar songs—a formula that has grossed Hammer, Coolio, and Puff Daddy millions in sales and made old R&B song catalogs potential gold mines.

The most audacious uses of sampling in the '90s has not come from hip hop proper but
from acts directly influenced by hip hop aesthetics (the Beastie Boys, Beck, Tricky, Forest for the Trees) and from those for whom hip hop is but one key point of reference (Prodigy, the Chemical Brothers). The gulf between instruments and sampling, bridged by hip hop, is now a given in progressive dance music around the world. Hip hop moved sampling technology to a central place in record making, the same way R&B did the electric guitar and bass in the '50s and Stevie Wonder did the synthesizer in the '70s.

That undisputable fact doesn’t always cheer me. Sometimes when I hear a record I grew up with—say, Diana Ross’s Bernard Edwards and Nile Rodgers produced “I’m Coming Out”—reused in a contemporary record, I get pissed. I rail against the lack of creativity in the hip hop generation. I long for old familiar sounds to remain in their original context and for younger musicians, with new approaches, to dominate the musical mainstream.

But those are the cries of an old-school purist and this decade’s culture has little use for such arguments. My answer to the question—is or isn’t sampling an extension of African-American tradition?—is a straight-forward no and yes. If creating new notes, new chords, and harmonies is what the African-American musical tradition is about, then sampling is not doing that. However, if that tradition means embracing new sounds, bending found technology to a creator’s will in search of new forms of rhythm made to inspire and please listeners, well then sampling is as black as the blues. Sampling has changed the way a generation hears, and hip hop was central to that change. To quote Run-D.M.C., “It’s like that and that’s the way it is!”

A side note: Up to this day Mtume, who spent much of the '90s creating the hip hop–flavored score for Fox’s New York Undercover, continues to be a vocal critic of rap’s overuse of sampling, doing it now from his regular spot giving commentary Sunday mornings on WRKS in New York. Even the fact that “Juicy Fruit,” the biggest hit his band enjoyed, has become an extremely popular sample—used quite prominently (and one imagines lucratively) in the Notorious B.I.G.’s “Juicy”—hasn’t softened his opinion, though he no longer calls it “Memorex music.” No, on that he’s moved on. These days he calls it “artistic necrophilia” and has a good laugh.