Somebody SCREAM!
Rap Music's Rise to Prominence in the Aftershock of Black Power

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Generation Remixed
Post-nationalism and the Black Culture Shuffle

Hip-hop emerged because nothing had changed since the '60s.
—Sonia Sanchez

A final goal should be to prevent the long-range growth of militant black nationalist organizations especially among the youth.
—FBI Counterintelligence Program memo

Whoa! What's that? I asked Uncle William. In the spring of 1975, a business card with a black panther on it caught my six-year-old eyes. It was exposed through the cardholder of my uncle's wallet as he searched for the usual dollar penance one pays a young nephew upon an occasional visit. After I'd gotten the money, I asked to hold the wallet and immediately extracted the card for a look. Next to the panther, seemingly about to jump from the matte paper and pounce, were the boldfaced words "Black Panther Party." I thought it was a gang (it sounded like one) because I vaguely remembered adults mentioning something about Black Panthers in quick, hushed tones. When I asked my uncle who the Panthers were, his brown bearded face broke into a mischievous smile. "Why don't you go ask your mother?" he said. Instantly, I whirled around and ran into the kitchen, card in hand.

"What's the Black Panthers?" I greeted my mother, holding the card up to her face. Once she'd gotten a look at what I was holding and understood what she was being asked—to explain the aftermath of the black power movement—the expression on her face morphed into
shock and anger. It was as if I’d discovered something I wasn’t supposed to, some deep, beaten-down secret freshly buried in a grave.

“Who gave you that?” she scolded, snatching the card out of my hand. After I explained that I had gotten it from William and inquired, again, who the Panthers were (from her response, I could see these dudes were bad, and from that moment my interest was piqued), my mother looked at me and twisted her mouth. “Don’t worry about who they are. They were a bunch of damn bank robbers!” she responded before storming out of the kitchen and into my room where my uncle was sitting, laughing to himself. I could hear her yelling at him, “Don’t start telling that boy about that Panther mess!”

Obviously, I couldn’t understand my mother’s dismay over a business card or a question about the Panthers, nor was I going to find out why she was so upset. So, shrugging off the curiosity, I proceeded to the living room to join millions of post-black power babies (later to be known as the Hip-Hop Generation) in watching and absorbing the phenomenon of Soul Train, the hippest trip in America. (Later in life, I learned that my mother responded as she did partly because of how close Panther super-baaadness had been to our family. Four years earlier, my cousin’s father, Iverson Burnett—a former Black Panther—had been a defendant in the trial of the Panther 21, a group of Panthers arrested and charged with conspiracy to blow up buildings in New York.) But the main reason for my mother’s response—like that of so many black folks who’d lived through the civil rights and black power heyday and were trying to move on—was merely a sign of the times. It was more of a disconnect between black baby boomers’ now fractured quest for the promised land (many had gone in with placards and guns and came out with jobs) and the post-black power generation’s journey toward finding its voice to speak its story in a revised black America.

By the early to mid-1970s, the black social, cultural, and political landscape was changing once again. From 1955 to 1965, the political thrust was the civil rights movement, galvanizing and organizing its grassroots constituency, primarily in the South, to fight Jim Crow segregation, discrimination, and racial oppression. Integration was the mandate. Two of the struggle’s most notable victories—the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts—provided black America unprecedented access to social access under the law. When fate in, the idea of using this leg communities and put it in b tionalist twin: black power. Ti ular at a park in Greenwoc Stokely Carmichael, fed up with enthusiastic enforcement of power” as the slogan for a ne the nationalistic sentiment ge who were inspired by the a Africa and Asia. From 1966 t ment, as an offshoot of the ci constituency (primarily in th idea of cultivating black em about establishing a racial an (and maintaining) political, and developing, as the write “nation within a nation.” Wt have produced such idealistic of racial pride, political optir black urban creativity into bo of black capitalism—all of t dance program.

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in, the idea of using this legislation to take political control of black
communities and put it in black hands spawned the movement’s na-
tionalist twin: black power. The name of this revolution was made pop-
ular at a park in Greenwood, Mississippi, on June 16, 1966, when
Stokely Carmichael, fed up with nonviolent tactics and the less-than-
enthusiastic enforcement of civil rights, angrily introduced “black
power” as the slogan for a new political direction. He’d given a name to
the nationalist sentiment growing among young African Americans
who were inspired by the anticolonialist revolutions taking place in
Africa and Asia. From 1966 to the mid-1970s, the black power move-
ment, as an offshoot of the civil rights struggle, organized its grassroots
constituency (primarily in the urban ghettos of the North) around the
idea of cultivating black empowerment through black unity. It was
about establishing a racial and cultural identity as a means of obtaining
(and maintaining) political, social, and economic power, of realizing
and developing, as the writer Komoni Woodard would later call it, a
“nation within a nation.” While the struggles of black power may not
have produced such idealistic results, they did create the national swell
of racial pride, political optimism, and cultural commerce that turned
black urban creativity into both a strike for freedom and a wet dream
of black capitalism—all of this culminating in a Saturday television
dance program.

As African slaves had traveled the Underground Railroad in prepa-
rating for liberation from bondage of the body and spirit, the children
of post–black power were prepared psychologically for their sociocul-
tural movement, in part, aboard the vehicle of Soul Train. The brain-
child of a Chicago DJ, Don Cornelius, it began as a local television teen
dance show in 1970 on Chicago’s WCIU and went into national syndi-
cation a year later. That same year, the show moved to a new studio in
Los Angeles. With sponsorship from Sears and Johnson Products (the
Chicago-based, black-owned black-hair-care company), Soul Train
was, as the writer Greg Tate wrote in the Chicago Tribune, a product of
a “timely upswing of black power politics, soul music, and insurgent
black entrepreneurship.” The prominence and popularity of black na-
tionalism transformed black culture into “soul” culture, the word
“soul” not only celebrating the spiritual resilience of black people (soul music, soul food, and soul brothers) but becoming the signifier in the commodification of real black culture (soul music, soul food, and soul brothers and sisters dancing on Soul Train). As blackness crossed over (white boys wore 'fros, too), soul culture turned black culture—with all its pride and funkiness—into American popular culture. Soul Train emerged alongside such media moments as the blaxploitation film revolution, The Flip Wilson Show and Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids on television, and the trickling crossover of soul music.

Soul Train was definitely a black American Bandstand, but more than a mere dance show, it was a phenomenon. No longer were black music, fashion, and dance limited to developing regionally. Soul Train, for the first time in history, provided a national stage for black urban youth culture, displaying the funkiest cultural by-products of the ghettos of black America to have offered. Along with soul-music guests and wild, gawdy fashions (the platform shoes, bell-bottoms, micro/mini skirts, afros and afro-puffs), especially in the early to mid-1970s, one of the show’s most prominent attractions was its dancing. That’s because within all that bobbing, jerking, hopping, and gyrating was a celebration, the movements reflecting a sense of liberation from TV’s former programming mandate of dehumanizing black people or ignoring them (the youth, in particular) altogether. Now with the whole country watching and enjoying (and copying) those dance moves—especially in easing down the “Soul Train Line”—while looking great, the show echoed the affirmation of black creativity and humanity expressed in Sly and the Family Stone’s cry of “Thank you for lettin’ me be myself again.” One scene in particular exemplified the freedom Soul Train allowed young black folks: As guest James Brown and his band performed “Super Bad,” female Soul Train dancer Damita Jo Freeman, in an afro-puff, hot pants, and leather go-go boots, jumped onstage. After dancing a hot routine in front of James, which included locking and the robot (as if showing J.B. that girls could bust a few moves, too), the sista threw up her fist to give the musical guest and audience a black power salute. (You think that would have been allowed on American Bandstand?)

A vehicle for setting trends, Soul Train became the first media outlet showcasing an emerging street dance movement, one that would expand America’s dance lexicon and give the generation of post-black power its first taste of an appr. The first dance style was “locking” body into different poses in which exaggerated with style. “In locking pioneer and former star ing!,” “you don’t just point, you just look, you pop your neck a walk.” Locking was as much a confidence as the Lindy Hop, balance of America’s refusal to be greatness of Charles Lindbergh.

Originally it was called the teenager who stumbled upon hip hop, invented locking in the dressed dance crew, the Campbell’s Soul Train, setting a fashion of (those knee-high striped sock sweeping the dance to a nation would garner their own celebrity major television star; Adolfo “Sh star in the 1984 classic hip-hop film Toni Basil, the only female (and hers. She would go on to sing the graph its video, which became a “Popping” and “boogaloo” in the mid-1970s by Fresno, Cal Boogaloo Sam, and their dance team). They built their moves off watching the Lockers on television body into a stop-start motion, li (borrowing from locking’s humid fluid execution of mime) emphasize multiple movement in the joi snaps his limbs into various poses person doing the boogaloo uses (like moonwalking) to keep time loo team also became stars of street dance into a profession. In
The first dance style was "locking," that animed dance off the floor. The first dance style was in the 1960's. Campbell, a Watts teenager who stumbled upon his creation while trying to learn another dance, developed the lock. Originally called the Campbell Crew, the Lockers became the first celebrities in this art form. Campbell was a young, energetic dancer, and his style was so unique that it quickly gained popularity. The Lockers' rough, physical style was a departure from the smooth, elegant movements of previous dance styles. They were known for their dynamic and powerful moves, which were often performed in public spaces like parks and streets.

Locking was more than just a dance style; it was a way of life. It allowed people to express themselves through movement, and it became a symbol of black pride and resistance. The Lockers' influence spread beyond Los Angeles, and the style eventually evolved into what we know today as locking. Today, locking is a popular dance style in its own right, with its own community of dancers and fans around the world.
ing Michael Jackson, who popularized the dance on a broader scale on shows like his family's short-lived 1976 variety show, The Jacksons, to perfect his own "moonwalk" into pop history.

Through the vehicle of Soul Train, post-black power America finally gained a mass-media outlet putting common black people and their style on display. Not actors. Not comedians. Not a scripted sitcom or variety show or protesters on the evening news angrily demanding "Power to the People." Just afro-wearing youngsters bumping, locking, and popping their bodies to their music—funk music—that expressed their feelings, being beamed to millions of American homes. The moves of those Soul Train hoofers in the early days were like a victory dance, overcoming America's denial of black humanity to prove to the country that "yeah, black really is beautiful." But it meant even more for the youngsters of black America who watched the show. For them, the dance moves and the black pride leaping from their television screens greatly informed their future reconfiguration of black popular culture. It was an inspiration that was wholly needed because, although the struggle for black power opened corporate doors for such displays of fashion and self-pride, in the street—where the collective bodies of black folks struggled in advocacy of the people—the black power movement and its spirit were crumbling.

Specifically, its grassroots muscle, the organizations, had either diminished in size and impact or vanished into history. The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. The Nation of Islam. The US Organization. The Black Liberation Army. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The Republic of New Africa. The Conservative Vice Lords and numerous others: intellectual offspring of black power's modern-day patron saint, Malcolm X, and the high priest of the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King, Jr. These groups were the community-based fuel for the modern black nationalist revolution, raising a new black consciousness out of the old Negro one. Where the civil rights movement had organized against America's legalized segregation and discrimination, wishing to get equal access and treatment legislated, the black power movement was about building and controlling institutions and resources vital to black communities, and about fighting de facto racism. Promoting self-realization, learning, and reclaiming a stolen identity (Africans in America)—connecting with nationalist struggle on a world Pan-Africanist quest for freed

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Giving voice to this sentiment rapping the struggle, so to speakwre leaders of black power. Malcolm X Huey P. Newton, Stokely Carmichael, Elijah Muhammad, Maulana Karenga, Imamu Amiri Baraka, and H. Rap Brown. Brown, who became SNCCs head after Stokely Carmichael in 1967, was known for his pro-black Afro-poetics, angrily advocating violence as a means of responding to Americas racial repression. I say violence is necessary, he famously declared at a rally in Washington, D.C. It is as American as cherry pie. Named for his deft skills at rapping running down one's pedigree within a rhyming performance poetry Brown's black power legacy, more than his organizing, was his verbal ability for speaking to the urgency of a black revolution. Through his name, the term rap, also a black slang word for talking, was further exposed to ears outside of black urban centers (read: white) at the height of the nationalist movement. But organizational leaders weren't the only ones rapping the movement's rhetoric.

Maverick black entertainers also articulated the ideas of black power through the poetry of rap within American popular culture. Like boxing great Muhammad Ali, who, while stunning the country by joining the Nation of Islam and declaring himself a Black Muslim, taunted opponents and incensed white America with his boastful rhymes. Or the Last Poets, the New York-based poetry group who fused spoken word poetry and African rhythms with the message of black pride nationhood, and activism. Or, most notably of all, James Brown, the Godfather of Soul and innovator of funk music, who popularized the idea of this new racial identity with the 1968 hit song Say It Loud (Im Black and Im Proud). Brown's rhythmic innovation, deepening the polyrhythms of soul music into a groove theory we now know as funk, became the new musical expression for this black consciousness. And Brown, known as Soul Brother Number One and Brother Rapp, became the voice of the people, speaking the concerns of folks who congregated in churches as well as on street corners. Brown and numerous other figures informed the lyrical and contextual voice, the vanguard cultural and musical expression, of the generation
after civil rights and black power. Only it was the ghosts of their inspiration that did so. That's because at the dawning of post-black power America, the voices and the vanguard organizations that inspired them were no longer on the scene. Systematically, most of the remnants of the black power struggle—the leaders, the language, the grassroots fire, the music, even the fashion—had been buried like the secret I discovered in my uncle's wallet.

A major part of the destruction was government sanctioned, courtesy of the FBI's Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO). Initiated by FBI head J. Edgar Hoover in 1956 during the early days of the civil rights movement, the program had as its primary purpose the surveillance and disruption of groups deemed subversive, such as communists and socialists, and hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan. But as the fight for civil rights gained momentum (and national attention), much of COINTELPRO began to focus on tailing, disrupting, and attempting to discredit the movement's leadership, namely Martin Luther King, Jr. (who Hoover thought was being influenced by communists). As impatience with the quest for civil rights gave way to cries of nationalism, Hoover expanded the objectives of COINTELPRO on August 25, 1967, to include the growing black power movement. (Hoover's disdain for progressive black power actually went as far back as 1922, when he destroyed the nationalist leader Marcus Garvey and his organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association.)

With fears of a black revolution rekindled, Hoover concentrated his efforts on two of the most influential groups of the black nationalist movement: the Nation of Islam (NOI) and the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP). Founded in the 1930s, the NOI advocated religious nationalism, declaring that white people were devils and that blacks should separate from whites and build their own nation as Black Muslims. The NOI set the standard for black power's recruitment, fishing for its members and leadership among the urban ghettos and black lower class. Unlike the civil rights movement, whose key figures came from the middle class, the NOI pulled its leaders from the lower rungs of black society: prisons, pool halls, and drug dens. Through the dynamic speeches and celebrity of its national spokesman, Malcolm X, an ex-con and an ex-junkie, the NOI inspired the youth of the civil rights nationalist movement.

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the youth of the civil rights era to begin forming a modern black nationalist movement.

Following Malcolm's assassination in 1965, the Black Panther Party, formed in 1966, became the most famous by-product of his call for self-defense. Influenced by the organizational structure and recruitment philosophy of the NOI, the BPP also aimed at organizing young blacks who were on the lower rungs of black society (gang members, convicts, and street-corner hustlers). Taking up arms, the BPP organized around the concept of *revolutionary nationalism*, the idea that a community should govern, feed, and protect itself against any threatening force (i.e., the police). The romantic image of the Panthers, with black-beret-covered afros, black leather blazers, and rifles in their hands, bravely standing up against the cops, motivated ghetto (and middle-class) black youth across the country to join the black liberation struggle. The impact of the Panthers also scared Hoover into labeling them "the greatest threat to the internal security of the United States."

With a growing number of black power organizations being created in the late 1960s, COINTELPRO's aim was to stop any coalition from forming between black nationalist groups. For these so-called hate groups the goal of COINTELPRO was to "prevent the rise of a 'black messiah' who could unify, and electrify, the militant black nationalist movement." Covert opposition was increased. Phones were tapped. Groups and their leadership were under constant surveillance. Divisions between groups were fostered and exacerbated. Violence between opposing groups was covertly encouraged. Propaganda aimed against organizations and their leadership was secretly coordinated with "friendly" media outlets. Constant police harassment was facilitated with help from local police departments across the country. Much of that harassment resulted in false imprisonment of activists and the murder of numerous black power figures such as that of Chicago Black Panther leader Fred Hampton in 1969. The end result was the deterioration of vanguard organizations, many of which were constantly mired in turmoil, battling the police, other organizations, their own members, or numerous court cases. Much of the movement became weighed down in chaos—paranoia, infighting, violence, numerous celebrated trials, and plenty of causes célébres. Free Huey! Free
Angela Davis! Free the Soledad Brothers! The Chicago 8! The New York 21! By the time the covert actions of COINTELPRO were exposed by the Senate’s Church Committee in 1975, the damage to and deterioration of a movement had begun.

At the same time, black power politics and black political leadership experienced a steady mainstreaming. Passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, along with a significant population shift in major cities (white flight left many of them predominantly black and brown), caused a historic shift in America’s political landscape. Elections in 1970 saw a record twelve African Americans elected to Congress. Over the next four years, cities nationwide elected America’s first generation of black mayors. There was Kenneth Gibson in Newark, New Jersey, thanks to community organizing by the poet Amiri Baraka and the organization Citizens for a United Newark. Maynard H. Jackson won Atlanta, aided by a grassroots campaign advocating equality on behalf of the city’s black majority. Gary, Indiana, elected Richard Hatcher, and Walter Washington became the mayor of Washington, D.C. (both called “Black Power Mayors”). Black political struggle seemed finally to produce some black political leverage (or at least folks with some political clout). And with black political leadership overwhelmingly pledging its loyalty to the Democratic Party, it seemed the black liberation movement now had a political party to protect its interests. “You don’t need the bullet when you got the ballot,” rapped funk pioneer George Clinton, on Parliament’s 1975 hit, “Chocolate City,” celebrating the black urban population boom and asking the inhabitants, “Are you up for the down stroke?”

Replacing radical black power leadership, black politicians were the new power brokers of black America, expected to deliver the goods of equal access and empowerment. Despite resistance from the white business establishment and white political opposition, parts of this mandate were fulfilled. Through enforcement of affirmative action policies, African Americans were given a fair chance at education, business-building, and job opportunities. The proportion of young blacks in college increased from 10 percent in 1965 to 18 percent in 1971. And while 48 percent of black families lived below the poverty line in 1959, that number had dropped to 27.8 percent in 1974. The writer Peter Shapiro noted in his book Turn the Beat Around that “from 1965 to 1969, the percentage of blacks making less than $3,000 de-

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increased, while the percentage of blacks earning over $10,000 increased to 28 percent.” Given a way of entering the professional workforce, numerous blacks joined the ranks of the middle class, giving rise to what Black Enterprise magazine, founded during these progressive years, dubbed the “black professional class.”

These developments translated into promise only for those who could take advantage, which was hardly comparable to the whole of black America after black power. Other than welfare assistance and numerous poverty programs (thanks to President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society initiatives), not much in the way of economic progress trickled down to African Americans living in urban ghettos. The writer Tom Wolfe put it bluntly while observing Oakland’s poverty program in his 1970 essay “Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers”: “The bureaucrats at City Hall . . . talked ‘ghetto’ all the time, but they didn’t know any more about what was going on . . . than they did about Zanzibar.” While the government offered Band-Aid remedies like welfare and poverty programs, they did very little (almost nothing) to fight the invisible hand of institutional racism that made lives worse. And so by the mid-1970s most cities, which had been devastated by riots and afterward by governmental neglect, were becoming major concrete pockets of poverty, left behind not only by a society hightailing it for the suburbs but by manufacturing jobs fleeing major cities as well.

This combination of white flight and corporate divestment would, according to a 1971 report by the National Urban Coalition, render the majority of these urban centers “black, brown, and totally bankrupt” by the end of the decade. By 1975, over 12 percent of African-American adults and almost 40 percent of work-age youth were unemployed—hardly a triumphant picture in the aftermath of a struggle for black pride and political empowerment. Although economic opportunities opened by the civil rights and black power struggles created avenues of advancement for blacks, they also drained working-class black communities of their middle and professional classes (most of which also fled to the suburbs).

The diminishing voice of the people and the devastating economic shifts of American cities came to define the sociocultural needs of the generation that succeeded groups like the Panthers and the NOI. The children of the 1970s (and even their young counterparts in the ’80s) were the ones expected to reap the benefits available to them in a
changing society. But how could they, while trying to survive in America's ghettos and left with little or no resources (community-based or otherwise) to do so? They were expected to forge and build black America's future, but with no guidance or grassroots leadership or organizational component to constructively thrust them forward, they lived in an environment that had become comparable to the one in *Lord of the Flies* where children stranded on an island with no adult guidance create a new, brutal social order of their own. While parents were out working, many attempting to capture gains from the struggle, these "latch-key kids," as they were referred to by the press, were left to fend for and supervise themselves. Existing in postindustrial urban centers that were becoming increasingly poor and violent, the youth set out on their own quest for power. Street power. Neighborhood power. So, in between the descent of the black revolution and the development of a new black America, there was the resurgence and growing problem of street gangs.

Nationwide, gangs have always existed in one form or another in urban communities—white, black, Latino, and so on—especially in major urban centers. Harlem. Chicago. Los Angeles. In low-income communities with no resources to nurture their young, gangs were (and still are) simply expressions of a youthful need for power, organization, protection, and, in the absence of a solid familial structure, family. At the height of the black power struggle, though, there were signs of that wayward energy merging with the consciousness of the movement. In 1967, the Vice Lords, one of Chicago's largest gangs, were incorporated and turned into a pro-black community development organization after their leader, Bobby Gore, was moved by a Martin Luther King, Jr., speech. Two years later, the Black P. Stone Nation (also called the Blackstone Rangers), a confederation of Chicago street youths, moved to form an alliance with the Black Panther Party, which was attempting to politicize street gangs (though the plan was thwarted by COINTELPRO). In fact, numerous members of the Panthers, including the head of its Los Angeles chapter, Bunchy Carter, were former gang members who had been recruited from the ranks of their gangs. The Young Lords Organization, a Puerto Rican gang in Chicago's Lincoln Park, was also inspired by the Black Panther Party to restructure itself into an organization fighting police brutality, racism, and the urban renewal that displaced poor Latinos out of their community. The Young Lords Party in New York while struggling for Puerto worked to reprogram the gan Los Angeles Crips gang, four Panther Party. According to black leather blazers like the acronym for "Community Rev a way to unify and protect loc

But in the wake of black economic devastation that blight through the '80s, this youthful destructive ends. No place ex where by 1973 there were an reaching 19,503. The genesis o borough devastated by the eff ization. In 1948, urban planne path through the borough to Cross-Bronx Expressway. The munities and initiated a gre Through the 1950s and '60s, r Irish fled the heart of the Bron or, once it was opened in 1968 built Co-op City, located at the ness and factories also relocate Bronx's white middle-class poj Afro-Caribbean, and Latino f where 600,000 manufacturing decades. Low-income housing influx of low-income families lords, who hastily sold off their new landlords, who refused to properties, found destroying t more profitable than keeping Bronx, as well as other parts o scams, leaving the area so fille and trash-strewn lots that it res a war-torn planet.

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Young Lords Party in New York, another “brown power” organization, while struggling for Puerto Rican independence and justice, also worked to reprogram the gang energy growing in the Bronx. Even the Los Angeles Crips gang, founded in 1969, was inspired by the Black Panther Party. According to Crip lore, its founders, initially sporting black leather blazers like the Panthers, used the word “Crip” as an acronym for “Community Revolution in Progress,” forming the gang as a way to unify and protect local youth.

But in the wake of black (and brown) power’s demise, and the economic devastation that blighted American cities from the early 1970s through the ’80s, this youthful energy was once again left to develop to destructive ends. No place exemplified this more than New York City, where by 1973 there were an estimated 315 gangs with membership reaching 19,503. The genesis of the resurgence occurred in the Bronx, a borough devastated by the effects of urban renewal and deindustrialization. In 1948, urban planner Robert Moses began clearing a massive path through the borough to make way for the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway. The project uprooted small, tight-knit communities and initiated a great white exodus out of the borough. Through the 1950s and ’60s, middle-class Jews, Italians, Germans, and Irish fled the heart of the Bronx for the suburbs of Westchester County or, once it was opened in 1968, the promise of ownership in the newly built Co-op City, located at the northeastern end of the borough. Business and factories also relocated. By the end of the 1960s, replacing the Bronx’s white middle-class population was a population of poor black, Afro-Caribbean, and Latino families, especially in the South Bronx, where 600,000 manufacturing jobs had been lost over the last two decades. Low-income housing was abundant in this area, but the mass influx of low-income families panicked the otherwise reputable landlords, who hastily sold off their property to professional slumlords. The new landlords, who refused to keep up the basic maintenance of these properties, found destroying their buildings for the insurance money more profitable than keeping them. So, in the early 1970s, the South Bronx, as well as other parts of the borough, was eviscerated by arson scams, leaving the area so filled with burned-out apartment buildings and trash-strewn lots that it resembled, as has been said so many times, a war-torn planet.

The population upheaval of the South Bronx, with black and
brown kids being terrorized by bands of white youths whose families remained in the area, initiated a surge in New York gang culture in the early 1970s. Blacks and Latinos formed makeshift street families to protect themselves, not only from the white gangs but also from other black and brown gangs. The Black Spades, one of New York's largest street gangs, were predominately black. The Savage Skulls, another of the city's largest gangs, were primarily Hispanic. In between these two groups sat a massive roster of other street organizations (black, white, and Hispanic) helping to carve the Bronx into territories and turfs. The Savage Nomads. The Seven Immortals. The Ghetto Brothers. The Golden Guineas. While the activities of these gangs consisted primarily in robbing the elderly and beating up non-gang-affiliated youths and rival groups, their wrathful violence against drug dealers and junkies, in the early days of the gang surge, made them appear to be equally an asset to the communities they terrorized. “There are no junkies on Hoe Street in the South Bronx,” wrote *Amsterdam News* reporter Howard Blum about one street gang. “The Royal Charmers ordered all junkies and dealers to leave.” The antidrug stance of the gangs may have made their reemergence seem like the “best single thing” to happen to New York City, as *New York Post* columnist Pete Hamill wrote, especially given the reduction of services (sanitation, health, transportation, education, and police) to the inner city. But these gangs were less interested in leading or sustaining their community's fight against a growing drug problem than they were in the brutal flexing of a collective muscle. And so from 1970 to 1973, with each passing summer the strength of the Bronx's gang culture (and its violence and self-destruction) grew.

Then out of the gang violence and destruction and quests for power came the rumblings of an urban cultural movement in the Bronx, an alternative way for ghetto youth to say (as Jesse Jackson put it) “I am somebody.” First graffiti, the aerosol art form growing from names of gangs painted on walls to the “tags” of individuals spray painted big, bold, and stylish. On buildings. On buses and trains. These youths could capture fame through this illegal art, constructing identities that were larger than the overcrowded and crumbling environment around them. The painter Catherine Mackey described it best on her 2005 painting *Red Wall (Recombinant)*: “Graffiti is an index of the intersection of public architectural, monumental structures with individual.”

Then came the music, dJ Herc, who reconfigured the b the huge, intricate rhythms w ished a population that desire which was slowly disappearin James Brown's "In the Jungle Just Begun." At Herc's partie dance, breaking, its acrobatic Brown and developed by str who attended Herc's parties a to Herc, as a way of "expressi to mid-1980s, breaking would wide to become part of a st this rhythmic dance revolutio they had seen on *Soul Train.* 1 is this generation.

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Then came the music, developed by the Jamaican-born DJ Kool Herc, who reconfigured the break beats of funk music records so that the huge, intricate rhythms were continuous. Herc’s beat sensation satisfied a population that desired a return to the funk of black music, which was slowly disappearing with the approaching tide of disco. James Brown’s “In the Jungle” and “Soul Power.” Jimmy Castor’s “It’s Just Begun.” At Herc’s parties also came the development of a new dance, breaking, its acrobatic style inspired by the moves of James Brown and developed by street dancing celebs like the Nigga Twins, who attended Herc’s parties and skillfully used their bodies, according to Herc, as a way of “expressing how the music sounded.” By the early to mid-1980s, breaking would inspire black and Latino youth nationwide to become part of a street dance movement, their enthusiasm for this rhythmic dance revolution informed by the popping and locking they had seen on *Soul Train*. Then came rap music; the musical poetry of this generation.

In 1974, the waning spirit of black power would come to be anchored within this cultural movement by way of Afrika Bambaataa, a DJ and former gang member. As a member of the Black Spades, Bambaataa was radicalized by the teachings of the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party. Inspired by their ideals of racial unity and consciousness, Bambaataa redirected his life away from gangs and organized the components of this burgeoning cultural movement (breaking, graffiti, rapping, and DJing) under the banner of the Zulu Nation, envisioning this new street movement as a “revolutionary youth culture.” By way of this radical street development—soon to be dubbed “hip-hop”—Bambaataa offered the youth of his community a new identity and an alternative to the destructive life of street gangs the same way his nationalist predecessors had.

The components of hip-hop may have initially come together within the “jams” (or parties) thrown by Herc, but it was Bambaataa who incorporated the spirit of black power (and the 1960s ideals of peace) into hip-hop, consciously organizing the movement under the tenets of cultural and racial pride and self-awareness, as well as peace,
music, creativity, and fun. Bambaataa's political awareness was opened by the sounds of socially conscious funk, tunes like "Stand!" by Sly and the Family Stone and James Brown's "Say It Loud (I'm Black and I'm Proud)." In the book *Yes Yes Y'All: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-Hop's First Decade*, former gang member Lucky Strike remembers being told about the Zulu Nation by one of its members after attending the funeral of another gang member: "What he talked to me about in the Zulu Nation was about finding yourself, who you are . . . They were teaching me things about my culture that I never knew and things I never learned in school." Although hip-hop was, by no means, a political movement, it was through the unifying efforts of Bambaataa, as well as jams thrown by other DJs such as Grandmaster Flash, that hip-hop grew and expanded, helping socially reshape the identities of its urban followers. Hip-hop turned politically abandoned and socially outcast black and brown youths into celebrities and cultural power brokers, this notion especially holding true for the rapper or MC.

Their art was street poetry, braggadocio rhymes recited over break beats to excite, enthrall, and entertain hip-hop's faithful. Much of their metered speech and tall tales were rooted in black oral traditions of African griots (storytellers and history holders), in toasts (black epical, rhyming poetry), in the fiery, rhythmic cadence of black Baptist preachers, in the oral acrobatic put-downs of the "dozens." Not surprisingly, though, it was from the mouths of the civil rights/black power era that rappers drew most of their poetic technique, inspired by the rapping virtuosity of figures like Muhammad Ali, James Brown, H. Rap Brown, George Clinton, and the Last Poets. Before they shook up the world, rappers simply rocked the party, giving a voice to the DJ's set and dazzling the crowd with verbal derring-do. From hip-hop's ghetto, stars grew. Chief Rocker Busy Bee. Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five. Cold Crush Brothers. The Fantastic Five. Funky 4 + 1. Sequence. Lisa Lee. Treacherous Three. These artists laid the foundation for the musical voice of post-black power America: its youth, nationwide, prepared for the music's arrival by the rapping (and popping and locking) voices of black history. The mainstreaming of black music and leadership by the late 1970s was leaving the generation after black power without voice or representation in the world of art, culture, and politics. Luckily, the impact of
politics. Luckily, the impact of rap music and the MC eventually reached beyond the borders of New York City by decade's end, redefining the idea of a black cultural revolution and offering a voice to the power and pain of youth in the new sociopolitical fun house of black America.