Francisco. The Dead Kennedys' frontman pledges municipal rent rollbacks, the auction of public offices and the establishment of a Board of Bribery to set fair prices for building-code exemptions, liquor licenses and other privileges.

10 *The Rose*, a film starring Bette Midler and Kris Kristofferson that is transparently based on Janis Joplin's life, premieres in Los Angeles.

13 Rap debuts on the R&B charts with the Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight." The project of former soul singer Sylvia Robinson, the single will sell more than two million copies and pave the way for other rap pioneers, such as Kurtis Blow, Spoonie Gee, Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five and the Funky Four Plus One.

17 The Pittsburgh Pirates clip the Baltimore Orioles' wings in seven games to win the World Series.

20 Bob Dylan introduces his born-again Christian-rock phase, performing "Gotta Serve Somebody" on *Saturday Night Live*. His religious fervor will also surface on his *Slow Train Coming*, *Saved* and *Shot of Love*.

22 After much politicking and under a death threat from Khomeini, the exiled shah of Iran arrives in the U.S. for cancer surgery. Although he will later leave for Panama, this American hospitality fuels anti-U.S. sentiment in Iran.

31 The sexual-fantasy movie *10*, starring Bo Derek, and the horror flick *Halloween* are the first and second box-office draws.

1979 NOVEMBER

3 Six gunmen kill four protesters during an anti-KKK rally in Greensboro, NC. At their 1980 trial, an all-white jury will clear the six.

4 An angry mob of Iranian students storms the U.S. embassy in Teheran, demands the return of the exiled shah and takes 90 hostages. They will release all women and blacks but hold the remaining hostages for 444 days, monopolizing American attention and eventually striking a fatal blow to Carter's presidency.

29 Michael Jackson receives a gold record for "Don't Stop Till You Get Enough," the first of four Top 10 hits from his platinum LP *Off the Wall*.

two turntables & a microphone

by robert ford jr.

IN 1979 I was a *Billboard* reporter covering black music at a time when it was struggling to find its voice amid the drone of discomania. Venerable soul stars like Aretha Franklin, Diana Ross and James Brown were repeatedly resurrecting their careers, while Michael Jackson's *Off the Wall* was about to up the crossover stakes. Black music then encompassed everything from Barry White, Donna Summer and George Clinton to Teddy Pendergrass, Rick James and Prince. Over it all boomed the relentless 4/4 exhortations to dance, dance, dance. I was then a fairly conservative guy whose idea of style was a herringbone jacket, jeans and saddle shoes, and my income was low enough to make me consider working at the post office. But then something unexpected happened.

A friend from Queens named Russell Simmons had cajoled me into coming downtown to see a show at the Hotel Diplomat on Forty-third Street. There, in one of the ballrooms, he promised, I was going to see something I'd never seen before. Given my occupation, it was hard to imagine what *that* might be. I'd attended hundreds of concerts, including hip-hop shows (DJ Hollywood at the Apollo Theatre and Kool DJ Herc at Taft High School in the Bronx, to name just two), where fifty or maybe a hundred kids would be enjoying the rhythms and rhymes. But Russell was right – this one was different.

I stood among five thousand screaming kids, most of them young and black. Crushed closely together, the crowd defied every rule of prevailing party fashion, dressed in everything from elegant silk blazers (with no shirts underneath) to worn, nappy shearling. Among the young men, however, I saw the harbingers of B-boy style: Kangol caps, jogging suits and the latest sneakers.

Their eyes fixed on the stage, the revelers rocked in unison, under the spell of a solitary DJ whose only "instruments" were a microphone, a couple turntables and a stack of vinyl offering everything from James Brown funk workouts to spaghetti-Western soundtracks. These he spun with surgical precision, "scratching" or distorting the sounds by backspinning and phasing. In between vocal tracks, while the beat of the music continued, the DJ would grab the microphone and start shouting short, staccato bursts of rhyme:

Along with Kurtis Blow and the Sugar Hill Gang, rap DJ Grandmaster Flash *(at right)* made records in 1979 that pointed to the future of pop music.

"Grandmaster, cut faster/than any known, stone to the bone,/home grown, better leave him alone."

The lyrics – the raps – focused on putting down rival rappers (the original "Sucker MCs") or boasted about the rappers' proficiency at turning a rhyme. And the featured artists (for that's what these DJs obviously were), wielding their gift for sharp, rhythmic rhyming like weapons, turned out to be the hottest ones on the scene in 1979: Grandmaster Flash, Kurtis Blow and Eddie Cheeba.

They were unknown outside New York's tri-state area, and the genre "rap" or "hip-hop" had yet to be discovered by the record industry or a mainstream audience. But uptown, and around town, it was growing.

Rap was too spontaneous, too homegrown and too verbal to be defined by an irrefutable, written history. Geographically, it came from Harlem and the Bronx. Musically, it grew out of a singular mission to keep the party going when there were few other choices. Culturally, rap emerged during a time of economic recession, when stable urban communities were following a general downward slide. Contrary to popular belief, disco had not swept the entire nation. Disco was glamorous, and the downtown discos had become expensive, leaving uptown kids on the street. So they started creating their own entertainment, employing DJs and partying wherever they could: high school gyms, neighborhood clubs, block parties, community parks and even empty apartments.

1979 DECEMBER

3 Eleven Who fans are crushed to death at a concert in Cincinnati's Riverfront Coliseum as an insufficient number of doors are opened to admit the crowd.

4 Carter announces his intention to run for reelection, facing Democrats Edward Kennedy and Jerry Brown and Republicans Ronald Reagan, Bob Dole and George Bush.

6 Australian metal rockers AC/DC break through with their fifth U.S. album, *Highway to Hell*, which goes gold. Two and a half months later, vocalist Bon Scott will die from choking on his own vomit after an all-night drinking binge.

10 A Gallup Poll shows Carter's approval rating at 61%, up from 39% a month ago – the largest leap in popularity ever recorded – in response to his initial handling of the Iranian crisis.

22 The first of four benefits for the people of Kampuchea takes place at London's Hammersmith Odeon. Paul McCartney, the Clash, Queen, Ian Dury, Elvis Costello, Rockpile, the Who, the Pretenders, the Specials and Robert Plant lend their talents to the cause.

25 Kurtis Blow releases rap's first holiday hit, "Christmas Rappin'."

27 A pro-Communist regime backed by an estimated Soviet force of 30,000 overthrows Afghanistan president Hafizullah Amin. Nations ranging from China and the U.S. to neighboring Pakistan are outraged. Later reports will show that the coup was engineered with little Afghan involvement; this will lead to economic sanctions against the U.S.S.R., a U.S. boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow and a Vietnam-like conflict in Afghanistan for the Soviet Union.

30 Emerson, Lake & Palmer call it quits.

31 Most popular music, books and film – 1979: the Knack's "My Sharona" (pop single); the Eagles' *The Long Run* (pop album); Chic's "Good Times" (R&B single), Eddie Rabbitt's "Every Which Way but Loose" (C&W single); Richard Bach's *Illusions* (fiction); James F. Fixx's *The Complete Book of Running* (nonfiction); *Kramer vs. Kramer* (film).

As the parties grew and gathered larger crowds, the competition heated up among the masters of the wheels of steel and early mobile DJs experimented with new ways of working their magic. They sped up and slowed down short, rhythmic passages in obscure records that they would play over and over to the delight of the dancers, urging on the crowd with snappy patter. Soon DJs like Pete "DJ" Jones, Rip and Cliff, DJ Hollywood, Ras Maboya and Afrika Bambaataa developed huge followings based as much on their rhymes as on their mixing finesse.

I first came on the scene as an observer. My 1978 *Billboard* piece on Kool DJ Herc ("B-Beats Bombarding Bronx") and his unique way of cutting up records was one of the very first stories about rap to appear in a major white publication. I recall trying to define these new terms; I had first heard "hip-hop" in one of DJ Hollywood's raps: "A hip, a hop, a hibby, dibby hop and you don't stop."

My belief is that at the heart of hip-hop lies the essence of black expression: the beat and the word – the gift of rhythm and subtle-but-telling inflection that has always colored black speech. From the down-home drawl of Stepin Fetchit to the affected, pseudointellectual accents of black politicos like Julian Bond and Percy Sutton, we have always spoken with a certain cadence. Compact phrases like "bad mama jama" and "too through with you" can speak a world of meaning with the right rhythm, accent and tone.

It's doubtful hip-hop pioneers ever heard of, much less grooved to, the recorded sermons of master preachers like the Reverend C.L. Franklin; the good-natured, slang-happy bouncing lyrics of bandleader Louis Jordan's Forties hits ("Five Guys Named Moe") and raps ("Beware"); or Gil Scott-Heron and the Last Poets' militant spoken-word-over-percussion albums of the early and mid-Seventies. And not rap's first stars, but maybe their parents listened to popular radio DJs in the Fifties like Dr. Jive and Douglas "Jocko" Henderson, whose lightning-quick verbal acrobatics plugged such items as hair-care products:

"If your hair is short and nappy,
Conkoline will make you happy.
Kings and queens may rule the world,
but Conkoline will rule your curl."

And then there are the Jamaican toasting DJs, the mock insults and one-upmanship of the Dozens, schoolyard double-Dutch rhymes keeping time for jump-rope. Black verbal expression is so rich that rap could have come from more than a dozen sources. I believe a majority of the early rappers owe as much of their inspiration to the rapid-fire, internal rhyme schemes of Dr. Seuss's subversive kiddie books as they do to any other origin.

In 1979, rap was the right music at the right time. Its strength at the outset was that it was easy to produce, to record, to perform and to promote. By then rappers were popping up all over, working the microphones exclusively and letting the DJs handle the turntables. Kurtis Blow stood out in my mind because he was good-looking and the only Harlem rapper who would work with Russell Simmons, a middle-class black boy from Hollis, Queens. Russell, who would soon produce his little brother Joey's (a.k.a. Run) hip-hop trio Run-D.M.C., later cofounded the genre's most influential label, Def Jam, and has since become a successful Hollywood producer. He was already showing signs of becoming the P.T. Barnum of hip-hop, but under his fast-talking exterior beat the heart of a true believer who saw in rap a revolutionary black genre with the potential for mass acceptance.

The intensity and excitement of that night at the Diplomat Hotel had made me an easy mark for Russell's persuasive, persistent nagging. Before long, he had me looking at rap like a fellow entrepreneur. And there was one other thing: I was about to become a thirty-year-old, first-time father. My child's mother had recently moved in with me and my less-than-enthusiastic mother. I soon came to realize that the whopping two-dollars-an-inch raise in my freelance fee would not stretch far enough to support my new child. With the post office beckoning, I had to make a decision.

So, since there was no one else to share in Russell's dream, I – with no experience whatsoever in producing a record and no musical skills – became a record producer. I partnered with J.B. Moore, a white boy from Plandome, on Long Island's posh North Shore,

who invested $10,000 in my crazy idea. The result was Kurtis Blow's "Christmas Rappin'," the first major-label rap single.

I believed in rap's potential. I knew it was edgy, new, different and challenging. But as I began to shop the tape around in hopes of having it released in time for the appropriate season, I might have given up before I started had I foreseen the industry's intensely hostile reaction to the recording. Rap was unsophisticated and raw. It did not promote melodies or singers. It was not the R&B most middle-class blacks grew up with. If anything, it seemed to exemplify everything mainstream blacks and whites wished would go away. It could be loud, arrogant, in-your-face and urban. Record company responses ranged from polite rejection to downright – and racist – hostility: "We don't put out that kind of ghetto crap."

Meanwhile, Sylvia (of Mickey and Sylvia fame) and Joe Robinson's New Jersey–based Sugarhill Records, turned out the Sugar Hill Gang's more lighthearted "Rapper's Delight." To the world below 125th Street and beyond, this happy-sounding, bouncy rap was a novelty song, a fluke. To us uptowners, it was a watered-down version of what Kurtis and Grandmaster were hitting hard with at the time. But it was big (because of rampant bootlegging we'll never know just how big) enough to get the rap ball rolling downtown and then across the nation.

So, as the door opened for rap, I got lucky.

The unlikely heroes of my first rap hit were a Greek woman named Dottie Psalidas, who was in A&R administration at Mercury Records, and the Englishman she convinced to listen to our tape. John Stainze signed our future King of Rap, and by the end of 1979 Kurtis, J.B. and I were coconspirators in rap's inexorable march toward world domination.

Rap has come a long way, evolving through many stages and growing to become the most significant musical genre to emerge from black America since jazz. In fact, rap took the sound of B-boys, the sound of New York's urban center, and helped introduce a whole street culture to the world. It's amazing to consider the global impact: Rap can now be heard in Irish pubs, French discotheques, Polish bars – all rapped by local artists in their native dialects. Even Brazilian Portuguese and South African Zulu rappers are charting locally.

Closer to home, rap's family tree is awe-inspiring; it boasts a broad spectrum of artists and subgenres whose existence not even the visionary Russell Simmons could have foreseen. Like most forms of popular music, rap can be serious and political (N.W.A), light and bubblegummy (DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince), macho and boastful (L.L. Cool J), cartoony and fun (Pharcyde), suggestive if not X-rated (2 Live Crew), feminine (Salt-n-Pepa), feminist (Queen Latifah), hippy (De La Soul), trippy (Digable Planets) and just plain dippy (Vanilla Ice).

Born at the same time that digital technology was becoming widely available, rap also has the distinction of bringing tape loops and sampling into the mainstream.

But like other popular musical styles, rap does not always live up to the promise of its earlier masterpieces: Kurtis Blow's "The Breaks," Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message," Run-D.M.C.'s "It's Like That" and Public Enemy's "Fight the Power." But when message, music and artist come together in the right way – when the beats and rhymes create the same kind of magic that I first heard back in 1979, with just two turntables and a microphone – it's simply impossible to resist.

Like anything that grows so powerful, rap lost its innocence long ago. I imagine one day a form of music as new and fresh will emerge, and I wonder whether – and hope that – it's out there now, in someone's basement in Brooklyn or in someone's dreams in China. I hope that when we do hear it, we still will have the capacity to be as surprised, as enthralled, as swept up as we were back then. The landscape has changed; it's been darkened and flattened by an increasingly corporate, tied-in, market-driven record industry that is more inflexible than ever. In 1979 there were still places a record would be played simply because it was good; videos could be shot in a day for a few thousand dollars. We need to have conditions like those again.

I always said that hip-hop was a mutation of disco. The poor kids in the ghetto didn't have the money to pay to get into the discos, so they created their own discos in the ghetto. We had block parties, house parties and small clubs in the ghettos where we would pay two dollars to get into. It was that ideology which gave way to the creation of the B-boy. –*Kurtis Blow*

After producing five albums with Kurtis Blow and a few other rap projects, I'm still a fan of rap, though coming full circle, I'm again an observer. Looking back at that time, I *still* don't know what the hell I was doing. But would I do it again? In a scratch beat. It was a great ride. Although it's hard to be optimistic, I hope that younger generations will experience the wild adrenaline rush of belonging to something so vital, so powerful, so pure, so creative and so . . . fresh.

Time moves on. As I write, that baby I worried about supporting is a nineteen-year-old Syracuse University sophomore. Although my son spent his early childhood around rap artists like L.L. Cool J and Run-D.M.C., he was never very interested in his old man's music. Recently, I was thrilled when he asked me for a copy of *The Best of Kurtis Blow*. He has finally come to appreciate my contribution to the musical revolution that began the year he was born. ⊕