GRANDMASTER FLASH & THE FURIOUS FIVE

• • •

BY ROB PATTERSON

I was first," Grandmaster Flash said in 2002. "I don't care who's better, who's worse. My contribution is first. Because first is forever."

The Sugarhill Gang may have released the first rap single with "Rapper's Delight" in 1979. Kurtis Blow may have been the first hip-hop artist to sign a major-label record deal. But Flash's contention is correct: On any number of counts, Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five were innovators who drove the birth of hip-hop on the streets and later in the clubs of New York City's South Bronx in the 1970s. During the early eighties, they etched the basic elements of the new musical style into the grooves of such elemental and influential tracks as "Freedom," "The Birthday Party," "The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel," "It's Nasty (Genius of Love)," "The Message," and "White Lines (Don't Do It)."

And when it comes to being first, Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five originated a number of key elements of a musical form that has since become, over the past quarter century, a major commercial musical force and a pervasive international cultural influence. Flash's genius as a DJ was the source of new spinning, scratching, and mixing techniques that established hip-hop's musical style, and with his (pardon the pun) flashy physicality on the turntables, he was the first spinner to demonstrate that a DJ could be a performer and musical-group leader as well as a musical creator on the same order as any artist playing an instrument. And under the Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five banner, social commentary became an integral component of hip-hop.

But Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five were also a bridge from musical styles of the past to the contemporary rock & roll scene of the day and toward what popular music is now. After witnessing Flash & the Furious Five at a Bronx street dance, Blondie's Debbie Harry paid tribute to the act with some key lines in the Number One single "Rapture": "DJs spinnin' are savin' my mind/Flash is fast, Flash is cool." Flash was as likely to spin a snippet from a rock record like Queen's "Another One Bites the Dust" as a classic James Brown funk groove or current hot dance track, and he later incorporated the Tom Tom Club's "Genius of Love" into his group's single "It's Nasty." Flash & the Furious Five opened shows for the Clash, and Duran Duran later recorded the Grandmaster and Melle Mel song "White Lines." For all the aforementioned reasons and others, it's utterly fitting that Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five are the first hip-hop artists to be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Some three-plus decades ago, hip-hop developed out of a congruence of musical and cultural forces within the poverty-stricken neighborhoods of the South Bronx. Funk had picked up the tempo of African-American dance music, and the emergence of disco had raised the spinning of records to a high art dedicated to keeping the dance floor packed and moving into the wee hours of the morning. The traditional storytelling and braggadocio of black Americans' back-and-forth street-corner banter of playing the dozens, as well as the Jamaican technique of "toasting" (speaking) over instrumental tracks, provided precedents for what became known as rapping. Meanwhile, to counter the negativity of gang culture on the youth of the Bronx, there was a need for social activities offering a positive and even celebratory relief from the harsh realities of life in what was one of the nation's harshest ghettos.

Into this crucible emerged Grandmaster Flash, born Joseph Saddler on January 1, 1958, in Barba-

Grandmaster Flash (center front) and the Furious Five: Melle Mel, Kid Creole, Rahiem, Cowboy, and Scorpio (from left)

Grandmaster Flash on the wheels of steel, London, 1982

dos. Growing up in the Bronx, where his family had migrated, Saddler was an inveterate electronic tinkerer from his childhood, taking apart electric appliances and equipment to try to determine how they worked. Records were also an early obsession, thanks to his father's jazz collection – which he was forbidden to play, making them that much more alluring – and the salsa records one older sister favored and the pop-soul discs of another. He later studied electronics at Samuel Gompers Vocational and Technical High School and continued to build and adapt his own sonic equipment at home.

As a teenager, Saddler briefly flirted with break dancing (later reflected in his theatrical way of manipulating records with his elbows and even his toes as he spun). He then fell under the spell of local DJs Pete DJ Jones (whose seamless sets were legendary in the disco world) and Kool Herc (who set up his sound system in local parks for free dances, impressing Saddler with his mixing technique between song snippets). By now Saddler had become known as Flash, thanks to a school friendship with a fellow named Gordon (i.e., Flash Gordon). Accounts vary as to how he acquired the "Grandmaster" descriptive, from adopting it from older DJ Grandmaster Flowers to emulating martial-arts master Bruce Lee to a compliment after a street dance that he spun records with the skill of a chess grand master. Whatever the case – mythology would hope all three apply – the sobriquet stuck.

Living large in 1987: Kid Creole, Melle Mel, Flash, Cowboy, Rahiem, Scorpio (from left)

FROM LEFT: Scorpio, stylin' in 1987; Flash and Melle Mel, the same year.

Experimenting in his bedroom with turntables and a mixer, Flash began to develop his Quick Mix Theory, or cutting, in which he mixed the short rhythm break on two copies of the same record to extend the groove indefinitely (a feat later made easy by digital sampling). He also came up with his Clock Theory, by which he could manually spin a record back to the start of the break. Putting together his own sound system, Flash began DJ'ing at impromptu street and dance parties in the Bronx's vacant lots, parks, and basketball courts, often hotwiring into streetlight poles for power.

At the time, DJs would announce songs on a mike through the sound system, as well as juice the crowd and offer shout-outs to the dancers. Being microphone shy, Flash would allow others to get up and take the mike and MC. The first MC to sign on with Flash's crew was Cowboy (Keith Wiggins), followed by brothers Melle Mel (Melvin Glover) and Kid Creole (Nathaniel Glover). By 1978 Flash had landed a Tuesday-night residency at Disco Fever in the Bronx. When MCs Scorpio (Eddie Morris, a.k.a. Mr. Ness) and Rahiem (Guy Williams) joined up, the Furious Five were complete.

The five MCs developed a tag-team style of trade-off rapping over the grooves created by Flash, which influenced most rap that followed. As writer Chuck Miller noted in a 1997 article in *Goldmine,* "The group . . . passed their raps back and forth amongst each other like basketball players passing the ball on a fast break."

Although Flash & the Furious Five were offered chances to make records in the late 1970s, ringleader Flash passed on them, thinking that the mixing and rapping that occurred at dances wouldn't translate to record. But after Sylvia Robinson of Sugar Hill Records put together the Sugarhill Gang and cut "Rapper's Delight," inspired by the new sounds out of the Bronx, hip-hop was proved viable as a recorded medium.

In 1979 Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five released their first 12-inch single, "Superappin'," on the Harlem-based label Enjoy Records, but it failed to register any impact on radio, in record stores, or on the street. The group then moved to Sugar Hill, where they scored in 1980 and '81 with two simmering slabs of party rap: "Freedom" (which broke the Top Twenty on *Billboard's* black singles chart) and "The Birthday" (a Top Forty black single). On those two releases, the Furious Five were backed by the red-hot Sugar Hill house band rather than Flash, though the Grandmaster soaked up what he could about studio recording in the control room during the sessions.

The group's third 1981 single, "The Adventures of

Scorpio (left) and Grandmaster Flash, 1983

Kid Creole, Rahiem, Scorpio, Cowboy, and Melle Mel (from left), 1987

Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel," was a seven-minute tour de force on which Flash created all the backing tracks with his turntable work. Quoted in the liner notes to the 2002 compilation *The Official Adventures of Grandmaster Flash,* hip-hop historian Harry Allen invokes the track as hip-hop's Rosetta stone: "It's a record that documents the culture. It's a record done live. It's Flash at his peak, doing what he did. It's not him multitracking it. It's a record about hip-hop culture and how it begins."

Using such recordings as "Good Times" by Chic, "Another One Bites the Dust," and "Rapture," "Wheels of Steel" reflected the broad and eclectic musical palette that had all along been a defining characteristic of Flash's DJ'ing. "It wasn't just a black thing or a rock thing, or a funk thing or a jazz thing or a blues thing," wrote Flash in the *Official Adventures* liner notes.

Meanwhile, Flash and his crew were touring the world with a show as kinetic and entertaining as the most theatrical rock or R&B band. As DJ Grandmaster mixed behind his turntables like a whirling dervish, the Furious Five roused and exhorted crowds like street preachers afire with the holy spirit of the new musical form becoming known as hip-hop. With just one DJ, two turntables, and five rappers, the group could raise a holy fire in concert.

The 1982 recording that would become the most successful Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five release, "The Message," was also a catalyst in the group's undoing. Primarily written by Sugar Hill house songwriter and studio-band percussionist Duke Bootee, the hard-hitting message song about ghetto life – "It's like a jungle sometimes/It makes me wonder how I keep from going under," echoed the infectious chorus – was initially resisted by Flash and his crew. Only Melle Mel appears on the recording, to which he contributed some of his own raps, including snippets that originally appeared in "Superappin'." The single reached Number Four on the black singles chart and Number Sixty-two on the pop singles chart, and served as the title track of the group's sole Sugar Hill album release.
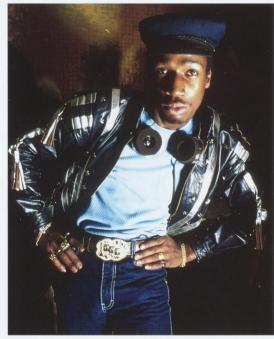
In 1983, Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five broke into the black singles Top Twenty one more time with "New York New York." But internal dissension, as well as creative and business conflicts with Sugar Hill, would soon tear the group apart. As Sugar Hill released the cocaine-abuse cautionary "White Lines," credited to Grandmaster and Melle Mel, Flash, Rahiem, and Kid Creole departed to sign with Elektra and record as Grandmaster Flash. Meanwhile, Melle Mel, Cowboy, and Scorpio remained on Sugar Hill as Grandmaster Melle Mel & the Furious Five.

Flash & the Furious Five would reunite on record for the 1988 Elektra album *On the Strength* but failed to capture their original groove and audience. The following year, Keith "Cowboy" Wiggins died from health problems caused by AIDS. In 1994 Flash and the surviving four rappers rejoined forces for an old-school hip-hop tour with Run-D.M.C., Kurtis Blow, and Whodini.

Grandmaster Flash has remained musically active, DJ'ing on a number of New York radio stations, acting as the musical director for *The Chris Rock Show* on HBO, and currently hosting a show on Sirius Satellite Radio. Melle Mel has collaborated over the years with a variety of hip-hop, rock, R&B, and pop artists and recently recorded a new album, *The Muscle.*

As Harry Allen observes in the liner notes for *The Official Adventures,* Grandmaster Flash was "the first great drummer of the culture . . . one of the most articulate and insightful spokespersons for the culture. He's a hero." And in collaboration with the Furious Five, he created music whose vitality and creativity still impresses and echoes worldwide as hip-hop has become an international phenomenon. Without them and the music they recorded during three all-too-short years in the 1980s, hip-hop music would not be what it is today. ⊠

Pioneering hip-hop DJ Grandmaster Flash, 1983