

THE BEAT OF A SUBCULTURE: A STUDY OF THE
HISTORY AND IMPACT OF NON-PITCHED
PERCUSSION IN EARLY HIP-HOP

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ABSTRACT

The Beat of a Subculture: A Study of the
History and Impact of Non-pitched
Percussion in Early Hip-hop

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This document presents a study of the origins and role of non-pitched, percussion-based samples in the history and development of the hip-hop genre. The survey presents an historical synopsis of hip-hop's origins including the infrastructure of the genre, the DJ forefathers, and the music and drummers responsible for the subcultural emergence. Emphasis is placed on the specific genres of music that influenced the creation of hip-hop and the drummers responsible for the sounds that were appropriated to create new musical works. Influential drummers are examined, and transcriptions are given to aid the development of relevant drum set performance techniques. A portion of the manuscript will examine copyright effects on hip-hop music, including the ramifications of sampling and resulting adjustments to percussion performance practice. Finally, the document will serve as an appropriate vehicle for musicians and scholars to develop common ground on hip-hop culture.

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CHAPTER ONE: HIP-HOP ORIGINS

...this was the Bronx. They wanted the breaks.¹

Hip-Hop is an artform rooted in sampling, the process of appropriating sounds from previously recorded material and subsequently creating a new musical work from the sampled sounds. The origins of the genre derive from the block parties of 1970s Bronx, New York, a chaotic time in history for the borough; one marred in poverty, drug epidemics, violence, and overall urban decay. Amidst the economic collapse, music sprung from crate-digging DJs working to entertain public gatherings of New Yorkers. In this effort they discovered the instrumental breaks or “breakbeats,” a rhythmic fragment of non-pitched percussion appropriated from previous recordings that carry a unique ability to keep a crowd moving. Eventually DJs would play the breaks over and over until they sounded like a new composition. This practice, combined with a master of ceremonies who would rap and talk over the music, presents the roots of the musical aesthetics of hip-hop. The innovators of the genre abandoned the conventional pop music form to instead make a collage of ear-grabbing fragments, creating a new American type of music while commercializing music sampling. The breakbeat foundation of the new musical genre was recorded by a diverse group of mid-twentieth century drummers and percussionists. The artists responsible for the non-pitched percussion samples are crucial contributors to the rhythmic infrastructure of the musical component of hip-hop.

¹ Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 70.

FOUR COMPONENTS

The cultural phenomenon known as hip-hop is comprised of four components: rapping (i.e., “emceeing”), DJing (i.e., “turntablism”), b-boying (i.e., “break dancing”), and graffiti writing (i.e., “graffiti art”). Rap is the most widely recognized element of hip-hop, and often the terms are used interchangeably. Rap is a musical component of the subculture, characterized by semi-spoken rhymes, stylistically stated over the rhythmic backing of various audio production techniques. The 1979 single “Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugarhill Gang is generally cited as the first example of rap music garnering the national spotlight. The counterpart to rappers, particularly in 1970s New York, was the performing musician specializing on turntable. The hip-hop DJ emerged during block parties where “two turntables and a mixer were used to create a blend of beats, riffs, and hooks as a backdrop for early rappers.”²

B-boying, which has also been termed breakdancing, is an energetic form of dance developed by adolescents of 1960s and 1970s New York City. The practice is in a style of its own, with performers popping, locking, and spinning on their knees, hands, and head.

The action in the Bronx was dominated by the b-boys, and the DJ’s job was to keep the party going... The percussion breaks – where most of the band drops out, leaving the drummer and percussionists to carry the music – were the parts that the b-boys liked.³

Finally, graffiti writing, which has been around for nearly the entire history of mankind, experienced an atypical explosion as an artform in 1970s New York. The period allowed graffitiists to express themselves as artists, albeit secretly through flamboyant names known as “tags.”

² Ian Peel, “DJ (ii),” *Grove Music Online* (January 2014): 1, <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.ezproxy.library.unlv.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002256356?rskey=9pw7yw>.

³ Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn, *Yes Yes Y’all: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-Hop’s First Decade* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002), 23.

THE DRUM ROLE

A melting pot of oppression and civil unrest was rife throughout the 1970s in the South Bronx. There was a heroin crisis, police corruption was rampant, city leaders indulged in malpractice, and a considerable portion of the borough literally burned to the ground. Amidst the lack of civil control, a movement to transcend a hopeless situation began and the dire surroundings became a breeding ground for innovation. For the disenfranchised youth, experimentation and discovery led to drum and percussion breaks being torn from their original context and repeated in a theme and variation form. “At some point in the late 1970s, the isolation of the break, along with other effects (such as “scratching,” cutting,” and so on), began to be considered a musical form unto itself.”⁴ Similar to the drummer’s swing feel of the 1930s gradually infecting every corner of mid-twentieth century mainstream music, the sampled straight rhythms of 1960s and 1970s funk began a rhythmic transformation of late twentieth century popular music in the United States.

Ultimately, hip-hop would not exist without the help of the drummer. In certainty, the rhythmic foundation of nearly all early hip-hop was recorded by drummers and percussionists of contrasting genres in the decades preceding its inception. The brilliant innovations of hip-hop’s forefathers were not possible without the recorded percussion tracks of years prior, and the genre would not be what it is today without the work of mid-twentieth century drummers. It is definitive that the breakbeat is the foundation and most crucial component deployed by the earliest hip-hop DJs; “the drums are by far the most important element.”⁵

⁴ Joseph Glenn Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop*, ed. Jeff Chang (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), 33.

⁵ Schloss, 36.

This document utilizes the basic drum key found below which also serves as a quick reference for most common drum set notation systems.

Figure 1.1. Drum set notation key

The diagram illustrates the notation key for various drum set components, organized into two rows. Each component is represented by a specific symbol on a five-line musical staff.

Row 1:

- Crash:** An asterisk (*) on the top line.
- Hi-hat:** An 'x' on the top line.
- Hi-hat Open:** An 'x' on the top line with a small circle above it.
- Hi-hat Half Open:** An 'x' on the top line with a small circle and a slash above it.
- Hi-hat Closed:** An 'x' on the top line with a plus sign (+) above it.
- Ride Cymbal:** An 'x' on the top line.
- Tom 1:** A solid black dot on the top line.
- Tom 2:** A solid black dot on the top line.

Row 2:

- Snare Drum:** A solid black dot on the top line.
- Snare Accented:** A solid black dot on the top line with an accent (>) above it.
- Snare Ghosted:** A solid black dot on the top line with a small circle above it.
- Snare Buzzed:** A solid black dot on the top line with a slash below it.
- Tom 3:** A solid black dot on the top line.
- Kick Drum:** A solid black dot on the bottom line.
- Hi-hat w/ Foot:** An 'x' on the bottom line.

CHAPTER TWO: HIP-HOP INNOVATORS

...their ways of hearing and seeing once represented
the potent and tangible shock of the new.⁶

To understand how drummers helped shape the creation of hip-hop music, it is best to focus on the work of the DJ forefathers. These are the men responsible for the musical innovations of the genre and the start of a subcultural evolution. One legendary DJ is consistently credited as the founding father of hip-hop. Known for his booming sound system and Hercules-like stature, Clive Campbell is the original innovator.

DJ KOOL HERC

Clive Campbell (a.k.a. DJ Kool Herc) was born on April 16, 1955, in Kingston, Jamaica. As a child he witnessed neighborhood dancehall parties where MCs delivered rapid toasts and music emanated from towering sound systems. He transferred the knowledge to the United States upon emigrating to the Bronx, New York in 1967, and from there, he started the foundation for the materialization of hip-hop music. By 1973, DJ Herc and his sister were organizing parties in their apartment building's recreation room at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue, New York.⁷ The parties turned rowdy when Herc adjusted the music playlist from dancehall tunes to funk jams. The enthusiasm he witnessed during the breakdown sections of songs encouraged him to develop a technique to extend the drum breaks of tracks. Eventually naming his method the "Merry-Go-Round," DJ Kool Herc would purchase two identical records, find the breaks and extend them by moving from one record to the other with the help of the mixer and tonearm. While a pioneering DJ typically never divulges the records in his collection, Herc himself has acknowledged one of

⁶ Fricke and Ahearn, x.

⁷ Chang, 67.

the most notorious tracks in his repertoire as “Apache” by The Incredible Bongo Band. “I used that record to start what I called the Merry-Go-Round... I’d use it at the hyppest part of the night, between 2:30 and 3 a.m. Everybody loved that part of my format.”⁸

The drummers responsible for the infamous “Apache” track are none other than Jim Gordon, of Eric Clapton fame, and bongo and conga player King Errisson. Recorded in 1972, The Incredible Bongo Band’s rendition of “Apache” provides one of hip-hop’s most-sampled percussion breaks. The opening moments of the song showcase Gordon and Errisson, who deliver the ideal breakdown for use in the hip-hop medium.

Figure 2.1. Jim Gordon/King Errisson breakbeat transcription from “Apache”

The image displays a musical score transcription for the 'Apache' breakbeat. It is set in 4/4 time with a tempo of 116 beats per minute. The score is divided into two systems. The first system includes 'BONGO DRUMS' and 'DRUM SET'. The second system includes 'BGO. DR.' (Conga) and 'D. S.' (Drum Set). The Bongo Drums part features a complex rhythmic pattern with various note values and rests. The Drum Set part provides a steady, syncopated accompaniment. The Conga part adds a melodic and rhythmic layer with specific patterns and rests. The Drum Set part in the second system continues the accompaniment with similar syncopation.

⁸ Will Hermes, “All Rise for the National Anthem of Hip-Hop,” *New York Times*, October 29, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/29/arts/music/29herm.html>.

Although the two musicians were completely unaware of its power at the time, those eight seconds of audio are now some of the most sampled moments in the history of modern music. Before mental illness unfortunately drove him to murder his mother, Jim Gordon was widely known as one of the best session drummers in Los Angeles during the 1960s and 1970s. Currently 75 and still in prison, his meticulous playing can be heard on recordings by John Lennon, George Harrison, Frank Zappa, Steely Dan, and Derek and the Dominos. Beginning at the age of 23, King Errisson worked with a list of who's who in the popular music realm: Marvin Gaye, Diana Ross, The Temptations, Michael Jackson, Barry White and more. Still performing at the age of 79, King can occasionally be found onstage as a percussionist with Neil Diamond; a chair he has held since 1976. Jim Gordon and King Errisson did not work in the hip-hop genre, however their work with The Incredible Bongo Band solidified their status as two of the earliest percussion contributors to the medium.

Certainly, we will never know the entire list of songs played by DJ Kool Herc in the formative years of hip-hop, but beyond "Apache," Herc's selection of songs also included James Brown's "Funky Drummer," and Dennis Coffey and the Detroit Guitar Band's "Scorpio."⁹ Needless to say, since the infamous party at 1520 Sedgwick, Herc leaned heavily on the drum breaks from recordings in the funk and soul genre. James Brown's drummer Clyde Stubblefield IS the "Funky Drummer," and his drum break on said track is "universally understood to be the world's most sampled beat. And that's just one of several breaks that have ensured his legendary status."¹⁰

⁹ Joanna Demers, "Sampling as Lineage in Hip-Hop" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2002), 26, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

¹⁰ Jim Payne and David Stanoch, "Clyde Stubblefield Remembered," (Modern Drummer, August, 2017), 1, <https://www.modrndrummer.com/article/august-2017-clyde-stubblefield-remembered/>.

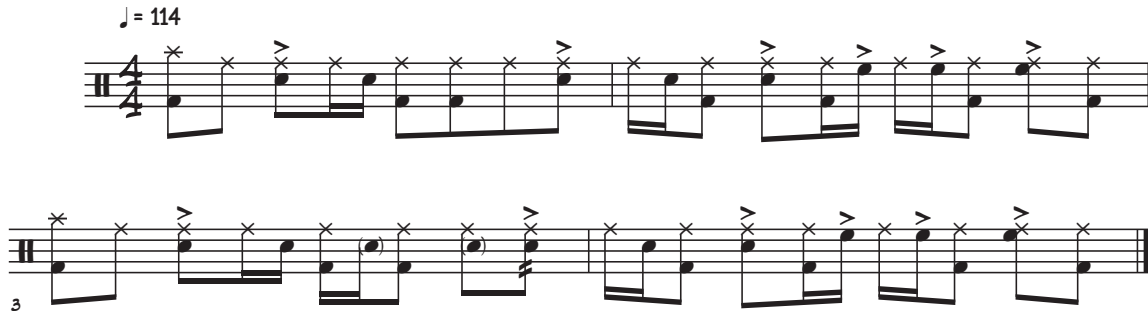
Figure 2.2. Clyde Stubblefield breakbeat transcription from “Funky Drummer”

The image displays a musical transcription of Clyde Stubblefield's breakbeat from the song "Funky Drummer". It is written in 4/4 time with a tempo of 101 beats per minute. The notation is presented in four systems, each representing a 2-bar phrase. The first system is marked with a '1' at the beginning. The second system is marked with a '3' at the beginning. The third system is marked with a '5' at the beginning. The fourth system is marked with a '7' at the beginning. The notation includes a series of 'x' marks above the staff, indicating cymbal hits, and various rhythmic patterns of eighth and sixteenth notes with stems and beams. There are also some notes with stems pointing downwards, possibly indicating bass drum hits or specific articulation. The transcription is a detailed representation of the iconic drum solo.

Stubblefield’s groundbreaking groove on “Cold Sweat,” also by James Brown, is the backbone of a track that serves a critical juncture in the evolution of funk music,¹¹ a genre that goes hand in hand with the history of hip-hop production. The track is also the first recording by Brown in which he calls for a drum break with the famous exclamation “give the drummer some.”

¹¹ The song “Cold Sweat” contains only one definite chord change, a move away from the conventional twelve bar blues chord progression found in Brown’s “Out of Sight” and “Papa’s Got A Brand New Bag.”

Figure 2.3. Clyde Stubblefield breakbeat transcription from “Cold Sweat Part 2”



Dennis Coffey worked nearly incognito every day as a member of the famed Funk Brothers, a legendary group of multi-talented musicians responsible for the instrumentals on countless Motown songs. Signed to record under his own name in the late 1960s, Coffey’s commercial breakthrough came in 1972 with the release of “Scorpio.” The drummers on the track, Uriel Jones and Richard “Pistol” Allen, were staples of the Funk Brothers. The two men are responsible for the drum audio on some of the biggest hits in the Motown catalogue. Little did they know that their work with Coffey would also solidify them as two of the drummers who helped shape the origins of hip-hop.

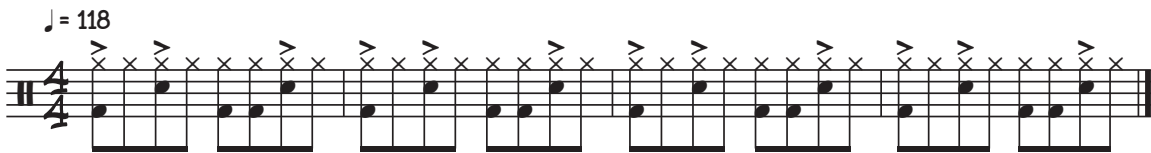
Figure 2.4. Uriel Jones/Richard “Pistol” Allen breakbeat transcription from “Scorpio”



AFRIKA BAMBAATAA

Prominent in the chain of pioneering DJs is Afrika Bambaataa, a southeast Bronx native known for having an eclectic taste in music. “An Afrika Bambaataa party was totally different... Bam would be playing the break-beats and then would jump off and start playing some calypso, reggae, or rock... his mindset was that hip-hop was an open field of music.”¹² Needless to say, Bambaataa found inspiration from some of the most unique musical examples because, according to him, hip-hop was not bound to the constraints of one style or genre. “I’d throw on ‘Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band’ – just that drum part. One, two, three, BAM – and they’d be screaming and partying.

Figure 2.5. Ringo Starr breakbeat transcription from “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band – Reprise”



I’d throw on the Monkees, ‘Mary Mary’ – just the beat part where they’d go ‘Mary, Mary, where are you going?’ – and they’d start going crazy.”¹³

¹² Fricke and Ahearn, 49.

¹³ David Toop, *Rap Attack 3: African Rap to Global Hip Hop* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2000), 66.

Figure 2.6. Hal Blaine/Jim Gordon breakbeat transcription from “Mary, Mary”

The image shows a musical score for three instruments: Tambourine, Shakers, and Drum Set. The tempo is marked as ♩ = 127. The time signature is 4/4. The score is divided into two measures. The Tambourine part consists of quarter notes with accents. The Shakers part consists of eighth notes with accents. The Drum Set part consists of a complex pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes, including a snare drum hit on the second measure.

According to Bambaataa, in the formative years of hip-hop, rock drummers like Ringo Starr and Hal Blaine (Jim Gordon sat in on Monkees sessions as well) were playing pivotal roles in the emergence of this new form of music. Perhaps one of the most significant contributions Bambaataa made to the history of hip-hop was his use of ideas from the German experimental pop band Kraftwerk. Although he didn't solely use Karl Bartos and Wolfgang Flür's drum audio from the 1981 song “Numbers,” he did use a programmable drum machine to mimic their sound on his breakthrough song “Planet Rock” in 1982.¹⁴ Since then, Kraftwerk has managed to become a staple in the catalog of hip-hop producers with their work being utilized by 2 Live Crew, Dr. Dre, and countless others.

¹⁴ Wayne M. Cox, “Rhymin’ and Stealin’? the History of Sampling in the Hip-Hop and Dance Music Worlds and how U.S. Copyright Law & Judicial Precedent Serves to Shackle Art,” *Virginia Sports and Entertainment Law Journal* 14, no. 2 (2015): 222.

GRANDMASTER FLASH

Joseph Saddler (a.k.a. Grandmaster Flash) grew up on Fox and 163rd streets in the heart of the Bronx, New York. As the fourth of five children of Barbadian immigrants, he spent his days repairing any electronic device he could procure. He used a screwdriver and soldering iron with insatiable curiosity. The burgeoning scientist also observed the crowds, equipment, and music at Kool Herc parties. He was inspired by the events, and his observations and enthusiasm for technology eventually led him to perfect the art of analog sampling:

My thing was, to every great record, there's a great part. This is what we used to call "the get down part." This is before it was tagged "the break" ... this particular part of the record... unjustifiably, was maybe five seconds or less. This kind of pissed me off. I was like, "Damn, why'd they do that?" You know?" So in my mind, in the early seventies, I was picturing, "Wow, it would be really nice if that passage of music could be extended to like five minutes."¹⁵

After months of study and refinement in an abandoned apartment in his building, Flash perfected the ideal way to precisely find the break on a record and re-enclose it as a new loop, a method he would label the Quick Mix Theory.¹⁶ He tested this new concept with an impromptu b-boy battle in his practice space, moving seamlessly between the breaks on "Assembly Line" by the Commodores and "It's Just Begun" by The Jimmy Castor Bunch.¹⁷ Walter "Clyde" Orange, the drummer for the Commodores since 1969, is responsible for several R&B hits, and, coincidentally, half of Grandmaster Flash's first test run of the Quick Mix Theory. The musicians sampled opposite to Orange that day were Lenny Friddle, Jr. (percussion) and Bobby Manigault (drums). The three of them together mark the beginning of Grandmaster Flash's new way to groove.

¹⁵ Fricke and Ahearn, 58.

¹⁶ Chang, 113.

¹⁷ Patrick Rivers, "The Mad Science of Hip-Hop: History, Technology, and Poetics of Hip-Hop's Music, 1975–1991" (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2014), 57, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Figure 2.7. Walter “Clyde” Orange breakbeat transcription from “The Assembly Line”

♩ = 112

3

Figure 2.8. Lenny Fridle, Jr./Bobby Manigault breakbeat transcription from “It’s Just Begun”

♩ = 118

CONGBELL

CONGA DRUMS

DRUM SET

C. BL.

C. DR.

D. S.

GRAND WIZZARD THEODORE

Theodore Livingston (a.k.a. Grand Wizzard Theodore) was born in the Bronx, New York on March 5, 1963. In the 1970s his older brother Mean Gene developed a partnership with Grandmaster Flash, which allowed young Theodore to serve as an apprentice. The training under this forefather of hip-hop led to Livingston’s universal acknowledgement as the primary innovator of “the scratch;” a technique of moving the record back and forth to produce rhythmic sounds. “I made a tune out of it, rubbing it for three, four minutes, making it a scratch... The first time I ever played it for people was at the Sparkle on Mount Eden. I wanted to do something different with this record “Johnny the Fox,” by Thin Lizzy. I’d play the drum part over and over. People were like, “Whoa!”¹⁸ The hard rock band known as Thin Lizzy formed in Dublin, Ireland in 1969, and their seventh studio album *Johnny the Fox* was released in 1976. The first track on side two of the vinyl version of the album is entitled “Johnny the Fox Meets Jimmy the Weed.” The opening moments feature drummer Brian Downey playing the drum break that Grand Wizzard Theodore utilized to expose his scratching technique to the public.

Figure 2.9. Brian Downey breakbeat transcription from “Johnny the Fox Meets Jimmy the Weed”

The image shows a musical notation transcription of a drum break. It consists of two staves of music. The top staff is in 4/4 time and starts with a tempo marking of ♩ = 103. The notation includes various rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, rests, and accents. The bottom staff continues the transcription, featuring a triplet of eighth notes marked with a '3' below it. The notation uses standard musical symbols for drum parts, such as 'x' for cymbals and 'o' for snare drums.

¹⁸ Fricke and Ahearn, 63.

Early hip-hop DJs utilized aural playback devices to control noise and to create experimental music. DJ Kool Herc started the revolution with his Merry-Go-Round technique. Afrika Bambaataa's implementation of unique and definitive breaks provided a blueprint for future hip-hop producers. Grandmaster Flash conquered the art of breakbeat repetition, and Grand Wizzard Theodore uncovered a rhythmic and timbral sonic innovation. The common component of these pioneering musical ventures is the repurposed breakbeat.

CHAPTER THREE: BREAKBEATS

And once they heard that, that was it, wasn't no turning back...
They always wanted to hear breaks after breaks after breaks after breaks.¹⁹

Relying on older recordings of primarily funk, soul, and rhythm and blues music, early hip-hop DJs generated collages of brief segments of recorded sound to create a new musical genre. To form the core of the new aesthetic, hip-hop's innovators focused on the break—played and repeated in isolation—as their central musical characteristic. From 1973 to 1979, “before hip-hop was ‘commercialized’ in the form of recordings,”²⁰ the recontextualized breakbeat was a primary performance component. As percussion interludes came to the fore of Bronx popular music in the late 1970s, a pursuit of knowledge about the location of breakbeats was set into motion.

While nearly impossible to determine every drum break that bears responsibility for hip-hop's development, the following collection of fifty songs, recorded between 1967 and 1978, contain many of the breakbeats utilized to help create the genre. DJ forefathers, producers, and artists of the 1970s and beyond repurposed the percussion breaks of these musical works, among others, to create a new rhythmic infrastructure. The list provides familiarity with songs that helped shape early American hip-hop music, and the drummers and percussionists responsible for the sampled audio.

In the 1970s DJs required large physical libraries of readily available vinyl records. However as hip-hop nears fifty years of age, music can now be consumed in a digital format with

¹⁹ Chang, 79.

²⁰ Justin A. Williams, *Rhymin' and Stealin': Musical Borrowing in Hip-Hop* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 22.

a device and internet connection. The songs found in Figure 3.2 can be heard by visiting the following link:

Figure 3.1. The Beat of a Subculture playlist

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/44vgNdu07sXnZyAnRwCM7L?si=2908b4784f5c4358>

Figure 3.2. Influential tracks utilized in early hip-hop

| Song/Artist | Year/Label | Genre | Breakbeat Timestamp | Drummer(s) |
|---|-----------------------|------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Different Strokes/ Syl Johnson | 1967/Twilight | Funk/Soul/R&B | 0:00 | Morris Jennings |
| Mary Mary/ The Monkees | 1967/Colgems (RCA) | Rock | 0:00 | Hal Blaine |
| Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band – Reprise/The Beatles | 1967/Capitol | Psychedelic Rock | 0:00 | Ringo Starr |
| Sing a Simple Song/ Sly & the Family Stone | 1968/Epic | Funk/Soul | 2:10 | Greg Errico |
| I’m Chief Kamanawanalea (We’re The Royal Macadamia Nuts)/The Turtles | 1968/White Whale | Rock | 0:00 | John Barbata |
| The Champ/ The Mohawks | 1968/Pama | Funk/Soul | 0:00 | Byron Davis |
| Amen, Brother/ The Winstons | 1969/Metromedia | Funk/Soul | 1:25 | Gregory Coleman |
| Chocolate Buttermilk/ Kool & The Gang | 1969/De-Lite | R&B/Soul/Funk | 1:25 | George “Funky” Brown |

| Song/Artist | Year/Label | Genre | Breakbeat Timestamp | Drummer(s) |
|--|------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|---|
| Cissy Strut/The Meters | 1969/Josie | Funk/Soul | 0:24 | Joseph “Zigaboo” Modeliste |
| Funky Drummer/ James Brown | 1969/King | Funk/Disco/Soul | 5:34 | Clyde Stubblefield |
| Get Ready/Rare Earth | 1969/Rare Earth | Blues/Rock | 16:53 | Peter Rivera |
| Let A Woman Be A Woman – Let A Man Be A Man/ Dyke & The Blazers | 1969/Original Sound | Funk | 1:39 | James Gadson |
| Long Red – Live at Woodstock/Mountain | 1969/Windfall | Rock | 0:00 | N.D. Smart |
| Unwind Yourself/ Marva Whitney | 1969/King | R&B/Soul | 0:00 | Clyde Stubblefield |
| Get Into Something/ The Isley Brothers | 1970/T-Neck | Funk/Soul | 4:20 | George Moreland |
| Give It Up Or Turnit A Loose/James Brown | 1970/King | Funk/Soul | 5:12 | Clyde Stubblefield |
| Good Old Music/Funkadelic | 1970/Bellaphon | Funk | 0:00/5:16 | Ramon “Tiki” Fulwood |
| Melting Pot/ Booker T. & the M.G.’s | 1971/Stax | R&B/Instrumental Rock | 2:27 | Al Jackson Jr. |
| N.T./Kool & The Gang | 1971/De-Lite | R&B/Soul/Funk | 5:30 | George “Funky” Brown |
| Rock Steady/ Aretha Franklin | 1971/Atlantic | Funk/Soul/Pop | 2:27 | Bernard Purdie |
| Scorpio/Dennis Coffey | 1971/Sussex | Funk/Soul | 1:08 | Uriel Jones/ Richard “Pistol” Allen |
| Bra/Cymande | 1972/Janus | British Funk | 3:57 | Sam Kelly |
| It’s Just Begun/ The Jimmy Castor Bunch | 1972/RCA Victor | Funk/Disco | 2:09 | Lenny Fridle, Jr./ Bobby Manigault |

| Song/Artist | Year/Label | Genre | Breakbeat Timestamp | Drummer(s) |
|--|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| The Mexican/ Babe Ruth | 1972/Harvest | Rock | 0:17 | Dick Powell |
| Think (About It)/ Lyn Collins | 1972/People | Funk | 1:21 | John “Jabo” Starks |
| Apache/ Incredible Bongo Band | 1973/Pride | Funk | 0:00 | Jim Gordon/ King Errisson |
| Fencewalk/Mandrill | 1973/Polydor | Funk | 0:04 | Neftali Santiago |
| Impeach the President/ The Honey Drippers | 1973/Alaga | Funk | 0:00 | Unknown |
| It’s a New Day/ Skull Snaps | 1973/GSF | Funk | 0:00 | George Bragg |
| Synthetic Substitution/ Melvin Bliss | 1973/Sunburst | Funk/Soul | 0:00 | Bernard Purdie |
| The Breakdown (Part II)/Rufus Thomas | 1973/Stax | Soul/R&B/Funk | 0:00 | Terry Johnson/ Willie Hall |
| Ashley’s Roachclip/ The Soul Searchers | 1974/Sussex | Funk/Soul | 3:30 | Kenneth Scoggins |
| Hihache/ Lafayette Afro-Rock Band | 1974/Makossa | Soul/R&B/Funk | 0:00 | Ernest “Donny” Donable |
| Pick Up the Pieces/ Average White Band | 1974/Atlantic | Scottish Funk/R&B | 2:03 | Robbie McIntosh |
| Sneakin’ in the Back/ Tom Scott | 1974/Ode | Jazz Fusion | 0:00 | John Guerin |
| The Assembly Line/ Commodores | 1974/Motown | Funk/R&B | 4:08 | Walter “Clyde” Orange |
| A Funky Kind of Thing/Billy Cobham | 1975/Atlantic | Jazz/Funk | All | Billy Cobham |
| Ebony Jam/ Tower of Power | 1975/Warner Bros. | R&B | 0:00 | David Garibaldi |

| Song/Artist | Year/Label | Genre | Breakbeat Timestamp | Drummer(s) |
|--|------------------------|------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| God Make Me Funky/ The Headhunters | 1975/Arista | Jazz/Funk/Soul | 0:00 | Mike Clark |
| Heaven and Hell Is on Earth/ 20 th Century Steel Band | 1975/United Artists | Soul/Funk/Disco | 0:34 | Collins Moore |
| Shack Up/Banbarra | 1975/United Artists | Funk/Soul | 1:43 | John Cannon |
| Take Me To The Mardi Gras/Bob James | 1975/CTI | Jazz Fusion | 0:00 | Andrew Smith/Ralph MacDonald |
| Calypso Breakdown/ Ralph MacDonald | 1976/Marlin | Jazz/Funk/Disco | 0:00 | Ralph MacDonald |
| Jam on the Groove/ Ralph MacDonald | 1976/Marlin | Jazz-Funk | 3:45 | Ralph MacDonald |
| Johnny the Fox Meets Jimmy the Weed/ Thin Lizzy | 1976/Vertigo | Irish Rock | 0:00 | Brian Downey |
| The Fruit Song/ Jeannie Reynolds | 1976/Casablanca | Funk/Soul | 0:00 | Richard “Pistol” Allen |
| Walk This Way/ Aerosmith | 1976/Columbia | Rock | 0:00 | Joey Kramer |
| Trans-Europe Express/Kraftwerk | 1977/Kling Klang | Experimental Pop | 3:47 | Karl Bartos/ Wolfgang Flür |
| Footsteps in the Dark/ The Isley Brothers | 1977/T-Neck | R&B/Soul/Funk | 0:00 | Ernie Isley |
| Dance to the Drummer’s Beat/ Herman Kelly and Life | 1978/Alston | Funk/Soul/Disco | 1:03 | Herman Kelly |

TOP TEN WAYS TO BREAKBEAT

In the late nineteenth century, the drum set began to materialize from percussion instruments used in military and civic bands. The ensembles featured two percussion parts, one for snare drum and one for bass drum and cymbal. The percussionists who performed with the groups transitioned to positions in theater orchestras and dance bands, and by the turn of the century, percussion parts were commonly performed by one drummer. As musicians crafted drum stands, mounts, pedals, and other mechanisms to maximize independence and percussive reinforcement, the modern drum set began to evolve. After decades of development through various styles of drumming, including ragtime, jazz, swing, bop, fusion, and more, an intensive use of syncopation emerged during the drum solos of 1960s and 1970s popular music.

“Break beats are points of rupture in their former contexts, points at which the thematic elements of a musical piece are suspended and the underlying rhythms brought center stage. In the early stages of rap, these breakbeats formed the core of rap DJs’ mixing strategies.”²¹ Ultimately, the 1970s DJ breakbeat fixation initiated the birth and development of the music now known as hip-hop. The musical innovations also embarked the development of a substantial body of knowledge about the nature and location of percussion breaks.²² In addition to the tracks outlined in chapter two, the following ten songs contain some of the most recognizable and influential breakbeats in history. The examples provide the opportunity to learn about significant samples in hip-hop’s development, and to play a collection of celebrated drum and percussion breaks. The breakbeat ranking is based on author opinion.

²¹ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: Wesleyan University, 1994), 92-3.

²² Schloss, 32.

Number Ten: “Different Strokes” by Syl Johnson (1967/Twinight)

Syl Johnson’s echoey grunts, a cackle response from Chess Records secretary Minnie Riperton, and a classic drum break by Morris “Moe” Jennings are the components of the introduction of Johnson’s 1967 song “Different Strokes.” A fixture in the 1960s and 1970s Chicago soul scene, Johnson experienced a professional downfall throughout the late twentieth century, “and then, the first seven seconds of ‘Different Strokes’ save his life... When people ask him about the house he builds and the guitar on its façade, he sings a snippet from one of The Wu-Tang songs that built it.”²³ Moe Jennings was a studio musician at Chicago’s famed Chess Records in 1967. While best known for his work with Muddy Waters and Curtis Mayfield, his most heard performance is the opening four-bar groove on Johnson’s “Different Strokes.” A rhythmic backbone in the history of hip-hop production, the drum break is a four-bar phrase of driving funk with an open hi-hat, snare drum, and tom conclusion.

Figure 3.3. Morris Jennings breakbeat transcription from “Different Strokes”



²³ Mark Winegardner, “Syl Johnson,” *Oxford American*, November 21, 2011, <https://main.oxfordamerican.org/magazine/item/294-syl-johnson>.

Primarily self-taught, Morris Jennings was a rock solid and versatile performer who started working for Chess Records in his early twenties. “He was our drummer for a good while at Chess... He was just a dedicated musician. He wasn’t fancy, he was just very good.”²⁴

Number Nine: “Cissy Strut” by The Meters (1969/Josie)

The New Orleans funk group The Meters formed in 1967 as the house band for producer Allen Toussaint. Their gritty string of hits in the late 1960s reemerged years later thanks to hip-hop’s DJ forefathers. In the opening moments of Grandmaster Flash’s first block party opportunity, he captivated the audience with The Meters. “I dropped the needle on ‘Cissy Strut’... Right on the beat. The six-note lick ended in a double hi-hat right after the first chorus: Do-do-doo-do-DOO-DOO-TSS-TSS (fader, spin back).”²⁵

Figure 3.4. Joseph “Zigaboo” Modeliste breakbeat transcription from “Cissy Strut”



²⁴ Graydon Megan, “Morris ‘Moe’ Jennings, studio drummer at Chess Records, dies at 77,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 15, 2016, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/obituaries/ct-morris-jennings-obituary-20160615-story.html>.

²⁵ Grandmaster Flash and David Ritz, *The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash: My Life, My Beats* (New York: Broadway Books, 2008), 89.

Louisiana native Joseph “Zigaboo” Modeliste is a founding member of The Meters. As one of popular music’s most innovative and highly acclaimed drummers, his New Orleans Second Line style has been referred to as “the formula for funk and hip-hop as we know it.”²⁶

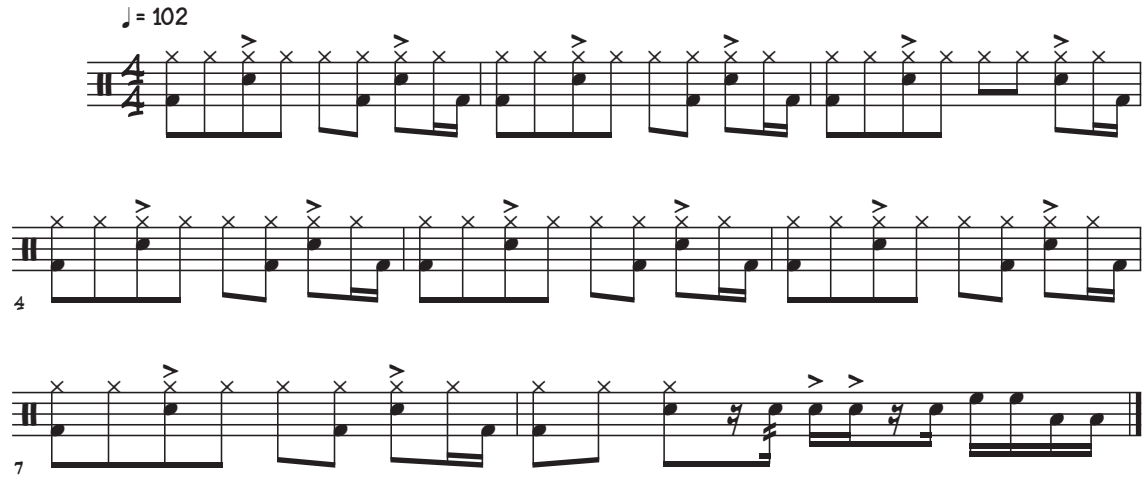
Number Eight: “Sing a Simple Song” by Sly & the Family Stone (1968/Epic)

Sly Stone approached his recording process as a unique art form. His background as a producer and arranger generated distinct choices in the creation of his celebrated music. In 1968’s “Sing A Simple Song,” Stone panned Greg Errico’s drum break all the way to the right-hand speaker and the guitar and horns entirely to the left-hand speaker. This decision allowed producers to solo the breakbeat by disconnecting the left channel. “The right channel of the break of ‘Sing a Simple Song’—that is, just the drums—would become the foundation of literally hundreds of hip-hop songs in the late 80s and early 90s.”²⁷

²⁶ Jeff Chang, “A bad contract tore New Orleans’ Meters apart, but they’re back and rebuilding after the storm,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 15, 2012, <https://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/A-bad-contract-tore-New-Orleans-Meters-apart-2560927.php>.

²⁷ Oliver Wang, Loren Kajikawa, and Joseph Schloss, “Breaking Down: Sly and the Family Stone’s ‘Sing a Simple Song’ (1968),” *Soul Sides/Sliced*, last modified May 15, 2012, <https://scalar.usc.edu/nehvectors/soulsides/simplesong-1>.

Figure 3.5. Greg Errico breakbeat transcription from “Sing A Simple Song”



At the age of 17 Greg Errico became a founding member and the original drummer for Sly & The Family Stone. His breakbeat from “Sing A Simple Song” has been utilized by some of hip-hop’s most celebrated artists, and his legendary grooves and steadfast pulse can be found on several Family Stone essential hits.

Number Seven: “Think (About It)” by Lyn Collins (1972/People)

John “Jabo” Starks was the other half of James Brown’s famous dual-drummer lineup. The self-taught Southerner joined the group in 1965, the same year as Clyde Stubblefield. He recorded drums for more charting singles than any other drummer in a James Brown ensemble. His breakbeat on the Brown produced, Lyn Collins single “Think (About It),” has made him one of the most sampled drummers in recording history.

Figure 3.6. John “Jabo” Starks breakbeat transcription from “Think (About It)”



Number Six: “The Champ” by The Mohawks (1968/Pama)

Pianist, composer, and producer Alan Hawkshaw, bassist Les Hurdle, and drummer Byron Davis recorded as a band for a single summer day in 1968. The collective of session musicians, formally known as The Mohawks, created a song in one take that would eventually influence nearly every corner of popular musical culture. With an unmistakable vocal chant, a catchy organ riff and a funky groove, “The Champ” is a staple of hip-hop musical activity.

Figure 3.7. Byron Davis breakbeat transcription from “The Champ”



Number Five: “Long Red – Live at Woodstock” by Mountain (1969/Windfall)

Drummer Norman “N.D.” Smart experienced several career shifts throughout the late twentieth century, including a brief stint with Leslie West and the band Mountain in 1969. During their blazing set of hard rock at the Woodstock festival, Smart delivered an opening drum

break on “Long Red” that has since been repurposed as the beat for multiple best-selling hip-hop songs. West discussed “Long Red” and hip-hop in 2015: “I’ve got six different platinum albums on my wall from all these different guys sampling my stuff. When I wrote that song in 1969, there was no hip-hop. It just so happens that song has a hip-hop beat.”²⁸

Figure 3.8. N.D. Smart breakbeat transcription from “Long Red – Live at Woodstock”



On August 16th, 1969, Leslie West urged a crowd of nearly half a million people to “clap your hands to what he’s doing!” over N.D. Smart’s distinctive beat on “Long Red.” Smart’s break combined with West’s banter is a timeless Woodstock moment. The breakbeat has quietly become one of the most prolific and formative samples of all time.

Number Four: “Impeach the President” by The Honey Drippers (1973/Alaga)

Soul singer Roy Hammond wrote and produced “Impeach the President” in 1973 as Watergate unfolded around President Richard Nixon. With lyrics deemed too controversial by

²⁸ Terry Mullins, “Feature Interview: Leslie West,” *Blues Blast*, November 13, 2015, <https://www.bluesblastmagazine.com/featured-interview-leslie-west/>.

Mercury Records, Hammond pressed the vinyl on his own Alaga label, releasing only one-hundred copies. Despite the limited release, the record found the crates of hip-hop pioneers DJ Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, and Marley Marl. “Number one, that was a staple in the streets... Every time we would throw it on in the park, people would go crazy.”²⁹ To record “Impeach the President,” Hammond recruited a group of teenage musicians from Queens, New York who called themselves the Honey Drippers. “I worked hard with the drummer because he wasn’t as good a drummer as I would have liked to have... I remember drilling him over and over in that basement in Jamaica, Queens.”³⁰ Roy’s tutelage helped the opening drum break of “Impeach the President” become an indelible component of hip-hop history. The name of the drummer who provided the immortal beat is unknown.

Figure 3.9. Unknown drummer transcription from “Impeach the President”



Number Three: “Synthetic Substitution” by Melvin Bliss (1973/Sunburst)

In 1973, relatively obscure soul singer Melvin Bliss released a song that features one of the hallowed breakbeats of hip-hop production. Initially considered a throwaway B-side,

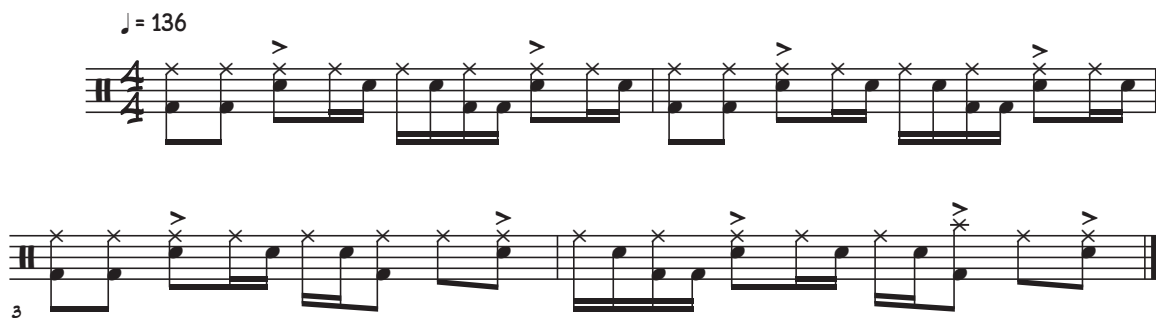
²⁹ Jon Caramanica, “Roy Hammond, 81, Soul Singer Whose Political Lyrics Birthed a Hip-Hop Heartbeat,” *New York Times*, September 24, 2020, <https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.unlv.edu/docview/2445250264?accountid=3611&pq-origsite=primo>.

³⁰ Caramanica, 1.

Number Two: “Amen, Brother” by The Winstons (1969/Metromedia)

Washington D.C. based funk band The Winstons recorded “Amen, Brother” in 1969 as a B-side to the hit “Color Him Father.” The instrumental funk rendition of the hymn “Amen” contains a six-second Gregory “G.C.” Coleman drum interlude that is known as the “Amen Break.” Afrika Bambaataa uncovered the breakbeat during hip-hop’s infancy and subsequently slowed and repeated it for partygoers and b-boys. Early hip-hop producers Lenny Roberts and Louis Flores uncovered the track to the public on the first volume of *Ultimate Breaks & Beats*,³² and Dr. Dre “bassed up the kick drum, cued an insistent double-time hi-hat, and added a ‘Yeah! Huh!’ affirmation... to propel the beat futureward”³³ on N.W.A.’s “Straight Outta Compton.” Although the “Amen Break” is widely considered the most sampled breakbeat in the history of modern music, G.C. Coleman was rarely compensated for the drum audio and died broke and homeless in Atlanta, Georgia in 2006.

Figure 3.11. Gregory “G.C.” Coleman breakbeat transcription from “Amen, Brother”



³² Released between 1986 and 1991, *Ultimate Breaks and Beats* was a series of twenty-five compilation albums containing songs with popular drum breaks.

³³ Chang, 318.

Number One: “Funky Drummer” by James Brown (1969/King)

It is difficult to overstate Clyde Stubblefield’s impact on hip-hop. The Chattanooga, Tennessee born drummer is one of the most sampled musicians in the history of modern music. His solid and uncompromising drum grooves are funk standards, and his breakbeat catalogue has been sampled for multiple generations of hip-hop performance and production. From the moment early hip-hop DJs repurposed his classic breakbeats, the recordings have enjoyed unimaginable lives beyond their original context. “Clyde Stubblefield was the baddest. First time I ever heard “Funky Drummer,” I started looking for his name on anything I could find.”³⁴ The “Funky Drummer” breakbeat is arguably hip-hop’s most definitive drum sample. It is also a prime example of how early copyright laws restricted drummer compensation. Stubblefield famously never received any royalties for the countless hits the breakbeat helped produce.

Figure 3.12. Clyde Stubblefield breakbeat transcription from “Funky Drummer”

The image shows a musical notation transcription of the Clyde Stubblefield breakbeat from "Funky Drummer". It is written in 4/4 time with a tempo of 101 bpm. The notation is spread across four staves, each starting with a measure number (1, 3, 5, 7). The first staff begins with a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. The notation includes various rhythmic symbols: 'x' for cymbals, 'o' for snare, and '+' for hi-hat. The bass line is represented by a double line with notes and stems. The transcription captures the complex, syncopated rhythm of the original recording.

³⁴ Flash and Ritz, 68.

CHAPTER FOUR: DRUMMERS AND FUNDAMENTALS

“...the music always returns to two basic elements – a funky drumbeat and some spoken or chanted words.”³⁵

The drum set provides the primary percussion parts of most popular American music in the twentieth century, including the funk music of the 1960s and 1970s. Drummers from the backbeat-driven era unwittingly contributed to the development of hip-hop music through a series of common performance techniques. The drum set fundamentals critical to playing the breakbeats that were appropriated to create hip-hop, and the musicians who recorded the rhythmic interludes are found below.

SEVEN FUNDAMENTALS

Fundamental Number One: Closed Hi-hat Patterns with Hal Blaine and George “Funky” Brown

American musician Hal Blaine is one of the most recorded studio drummers in the history of the music industry. He was a core member of the Wrecking Crew, a collective of Los Angeles session musicians who recorded on thousands of studio recordings, including several hundred Top 40 hits. In all, Blaine “played on 40 number-one singles and 150 records that made the Top Ten. In 2000, he was the first studio musician inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.”³⁶ He played drums on several Monkees songs in the 1960s, including the often sampled “Mary, Mary,” where he demonstrates a hi-hat quarter-note feel on his opening breakbeat. The drum break is an ideal example for a beginning drum set lesson in the breakbeat style.

³⁵ Toop, 115.

³⁶ Rick Mattingly, “2012 Hall of Fame Hal Blaine: Studio Pioneer,” *Percussive Notes* 50, no. 6 (November 2012): 14, [http://publications.pas.org/archive/Nov12/1211.14-17.pdf#search="hal%20blaine"](http://publications.pas.org/archive/Nov12/1211.14-17.pdf#search=).

Figure 3.13. Hal Blaine/Jim Gordon breakbeat transcription from “Mary, Mary”

♩ = 127

TAMBOURINE

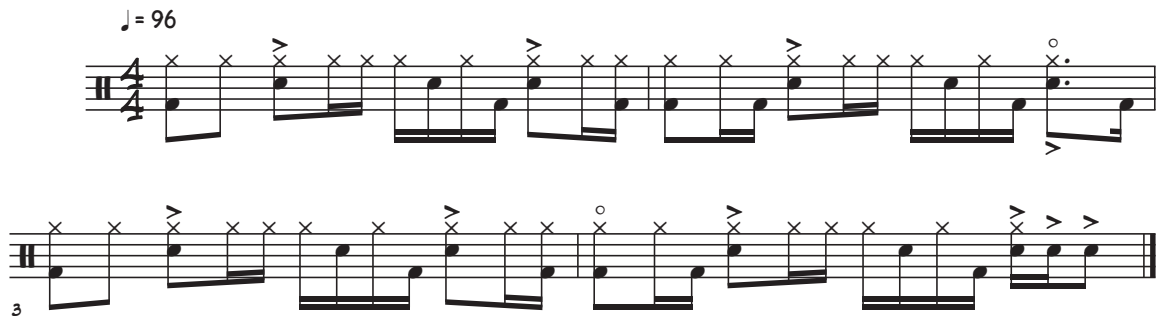
SHAKERS

DRUM SET

George “Funky” Brown is an original member and main songwriter for the band Kool & The Gang. The ensemble explored many musical styles throughout their history and are now considered “one of the primary architects of hip-hop’s esteemed ‘Golden Era.’”³⁷ Brown’s break from 1971’s “N.T.” has been repurposed as drum audio for several influential songs and is one of the most crucial elements of the band’s impact on hip-hop music. The break deploys an alternating pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes on the hi-hat.

³⁷ J-Zone, “Give the Drummer Some: George Brown, Kool & The Gang’s Legendary Drummer,” Red Bull Music Academy, September 15, 2015, <https://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2015/09/george-brown-interview>.

Figure 3.14. George “Funky” Brown breakbeat transcription from “N.T.”



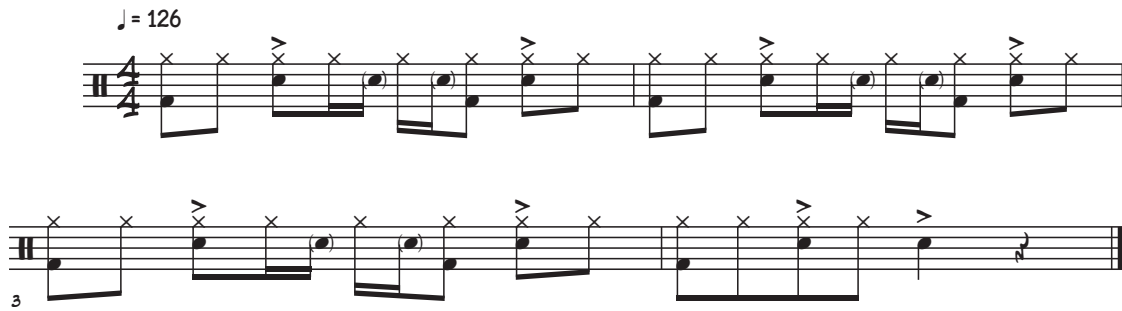
Fundamental Number Two:

Snare Drum Ghost Notes with Clyde Stubblefield and Bernard Purdie

Ghost notes on the snare drum are notes that are purposely deemphasized to help create texture. Single or double stroke ghost notes often occur between the accented beats and can be played with different degrees of emphasis. The notes create multiple layers of independent dynamics and are crucial to giving a drum pattern musical depth. Clyde Stubblefield’s ghost notes are indelible components of drum set performance history; “there have been faster, and there have been stronger, but Clyde Stubblefield has a marksman’s left hand unlike any drummer in the 20th century.”³⁸ His breakbeat ghost notes on Marva Whitney’s “Unwind Yourself” provide an ideal introductory lesson example on adding intrigue to a groove.

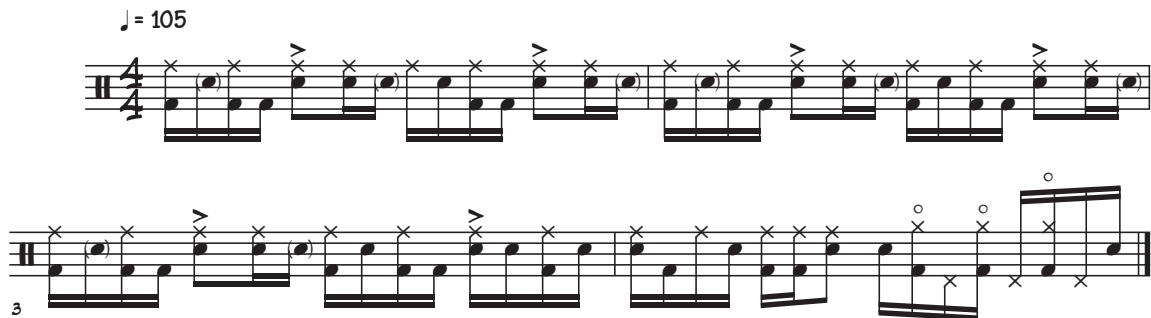
³⁸ “James Brown’s Widely Sampled ‘Funky Drummer,’” *Washington Post*, editorial, February 24, 2017, <https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.unlv.edu/docview/1871366960?accountid=3611&pq-origsite=primo>.

Figure 3.15. Clyde Stubblefield breakbeat transcription from “Unwind Yourself”



Bernard Purdie’s breakbeat in Aretha Franklin’s “Rock Steady,” a groove often recognized as an apex of funk drumming, is a masterful example of ghost note technique. “Purdie uses the ride cymbal, kick and snare to subdivide the whole in a way that reflects how hip-hop would later take songs apart. It isn’t just that this break is such a great loop – it is that Purdie breaks ‘Rock Steady’ into pieces that you didn’t know were there.”³⁹

Figure 3.16. Bernard Purdie breakbeat transcription from “Rock Steady”



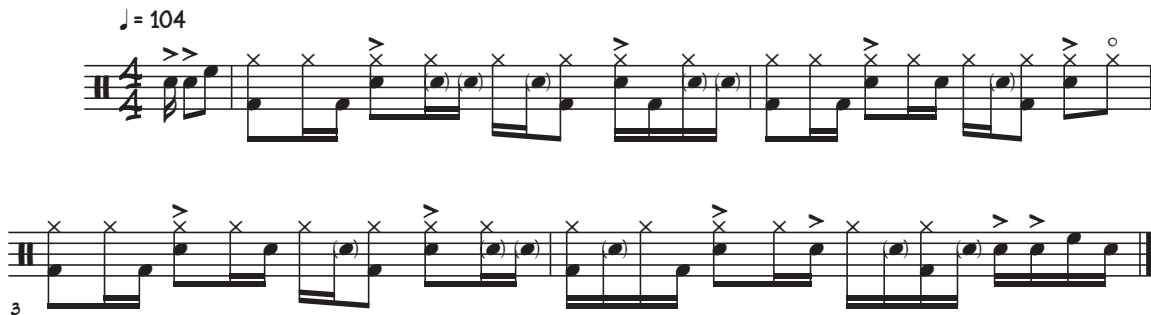
³⁹ Sasha Frere-Jones, “How Aretha Franklin Planted the Seeds of Hip-Hop,” *Billboard*, August 23, 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/8471747/aretha-franklin-hip-hop-influence>.

Fundamental Number Three:

Kick Drum Independence with Andrew Smith, Kenneth Scoggins, and George Bragg

In 1975, Bob James covered Paul Simon’s “Take Me To The Mardi Gras” as an instrumental version with a Latin groove. The song begins with a jazz-funk drum pattern performed by Andrew Smith, an unsung Detroit musician who was highly regarded by his peers. His work can be found on recordings by the Four Tops, The Temptations, Marvin Gaye, Dennis Coffey, Bob James, and more. For Smith’s opening breakbeat on “Take Me To The Mardi Gras,” he deployed a single sixteenth-note kick drum subdivision to determine the flow of the beat. The break has become a recurring resource for prominent hip-hop DJs and producers, including Grandmaster Flash, Run-DMC, N.W.A., and countless others.

Figure 3.17. Andrew Smith breakbeat transcription from “Take Me to the Mardi Gras”



Drummer Kenneth Scoggins was a member of the funk group The Soul Searchers in the early to mid-1970s. The Washington D.C. based ensemble, led by “The Godfather of Go Go” Chuck Brown, released the instrumental song “Ashley’s Roachclip” in 1974. The track features a legendary eight-bar drum figure by Scoggins that has been sampled countless times as a hip-hop

beat template. The groove of the breakbeat is determined by a motivic shaped bass drum figure of eighth and sixteenth-note subdivisions.

Figure 3.18. Kenneth Scoggins breakbeat transcription from “Ashley’s Roachclip”

The image shows a musical transcription of a breakbeat in 4/4 time, with a tempo of 100. The notation is spread across four staves, each beginning with a measure number: 1, 3, 5, and 7. The notation includes various rhythmic symbols such as eighth notes, sixteenth notes, and rests, along with dynamic markings like accents and breath marks.

The mysterious funk trio known as the Skull Snaps entered New Jersey’s Venture Sound Studios in early 1973 to record an album. The ensuing self-titled record, featuring nine tracks which were all captured in a single take, represents the ensembles’ entire recorded catalogue. The introductory two-measure drum break on “It’s A New Day,” played by George Bragg, features a combination of eighth and consecutive sixteenth notes on the kick drum.

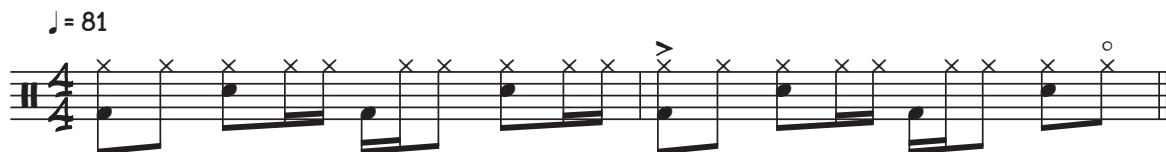
Figure 3.19. George Bragg breakbeat transcription from “It’s a New Day”



Fundamental Number Four: Open Hi-hat Notes with Ernie Isley and Mike Clark

The 1977 song “Footsteps in the Dark” by The Isley Brothers begins with an Ernie Isley drum break. The two-measure solo features a combination of eighth and sixteenth notes on the hi-hat before closing the phrase with an opening of the two cymbals. The soulful breakbeat is the primary rhythm source for one of hip-hop’s most iconic songs, Ice Cube’s 1993 hit “It Was A Good Day.”

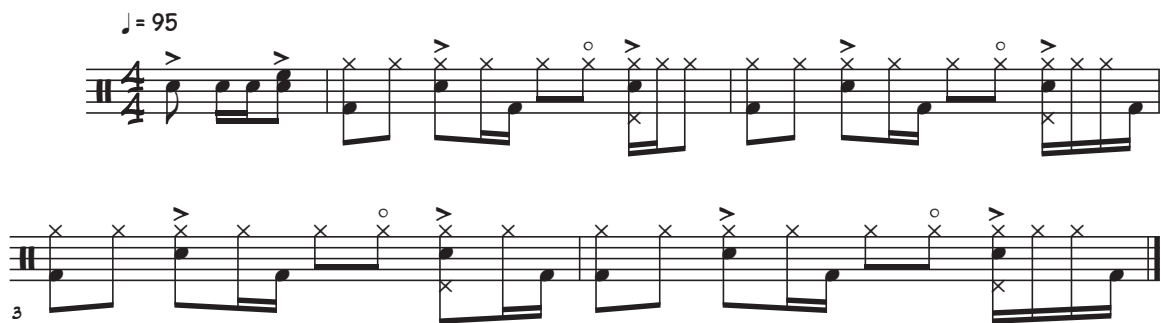
Figure 3.20. Ernie Isley breakbeat transcription from “Footsteps in the Dark”



Mike Clark is one of America’s foremost jazz drummers, a reputation he developed while playing with Herbie Hancock in the early 1970s. The California native was a childhood prodigy and by his early twenties “he was known as one of the founders of the distinctive East Bay sound

coming out of Oakland, California.”⁴⁰ As a member of the pioneering jazz-funk group The Headhunters, Clark unleashed an iconic introductory breakbeat for the band’s 1975 song “God Make Me Funky.” Recognized as one of the music industry’s most sampled percussion interludes, the break utilizes an open hi-hat note on the “and” of the third beat of each measure.

Figure 3.21. Mike Clark breakbeat transcription from “God Make Me Funky”



Fundamental Number Five:

Shifted Snare Drum Accents with Gregory “G.C.” Coleman and Clyde Stubblefield

Most breakbeats feature snare drum notes on beats two and four of each measure, however two innovative breaks shift the snare accents to create new texture. The unique element is found in the closing measures of Gregory Coleman’s breakbeat on “Amen, Brother.” In the final two measures of the four-bar pattern, Coleman deploys consecutive displaced snare drum notes on the “and” of beat four.

⁴⁰ Mike Clark, “Bio,” Drummer Mike Clark, accessed July 19, 2021, <https://www.drummermikeclark.info/bio>.

Figure 3.22. Gregory “G.C.” Coleman breakbeat transcription from “Amen, Brother”

The musical notation for Figure 3.22 is presented in two staves. The top staff begins with a tempo marking of ♩ = 136. The music is written in 4/4 time and features a complex, syncopated rhythm. The notation includes various note values, rests, and accents, with 'x' marks above notes indicating specific rhythmic elements. The bottom staff continues the transcription, starting with a measure marked with a '3' below it, indicating a triplet. The notation is dense and detailed, capturing the intricate patterns of the breakbeat.

The displaced snare drum element is also a defining component of Clyde Stubblefield’s breakbeat on “Cold Sweat Part 2,” where he shifts the snare accent to match a grunt from James Brown. In the moments leading up to Stubblefield’s break, Brown repeatedly calls to “give the drummer some!” over a grooving rhythm section. When the rising tension reaches an apex, Brown summons the Stubblefield solo with the chant “you got it drummer!” The shifted snare drum accent can be found on the “and” of beat four in the first and third measures. The displaced note is repurposed as a buzz stroke in the third measure of the break.

Figure 3.23. Clyde Stubblefield breakbeat transcription from “Cold Sweat Part 2”

The musical notation for Figure 3.23 is presented in two staves. The top staff begins with a tempo marking of ♩ = 114. The music is written in 4/4 time and features a complex, syncopated rhythm. The notation includes various note values, rests, and accents, with 'x' marks above notes indicating specific rhythmic elements. The bottom staff continues the transcription, starting with a measure marked with a '3' below it, indicating a triplet. The notation is dense and detailed, capturing the intricate patterns of the breakbeat.

Fundamental Number Six: Snare Drum Buzz Strokes with George “Funky” Brown

The multiple bounce roll, or closed buzz roll, is a controlled stroke that produces multiple notes in a short period of time. The stroke is often utilized to sustain sound on the snare drum and is an essential technique for concert percussionists and drum set players. The buzz stroke provides a unique character of sound and requires training and practice to be unleashed in a breakbeat, particularly the “Chocolate Buttermilk” break from Kool & The Gang’s self-titled debut album. During the song’s five-second percussion breakdown, George Brown expertly deployed a series of buzz strokes for a two-measure, paradiddle inspired breakbeat.

Figure 3.24. George “Funky” Brown breakbeat transcription from “Chocolate Buttermilk”



Fundamental Number Seven: Adding Fills with Robbie McIntosh

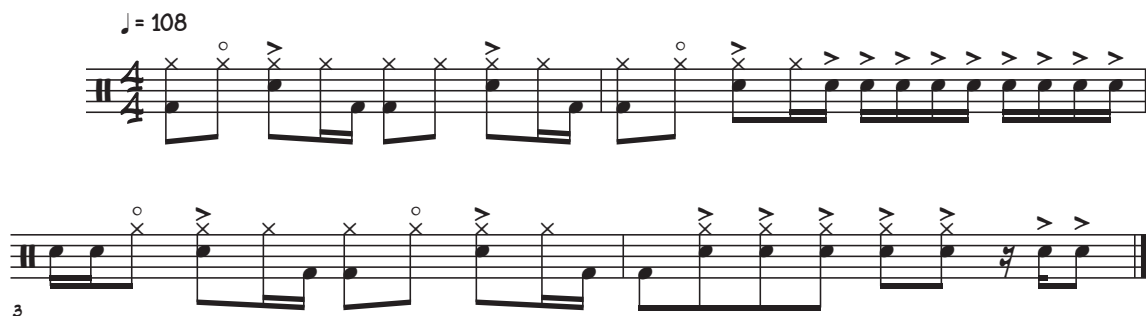
Robert Broderick James “Robbie” McIntosh was a drummer from Dundee, Scotland. He was a founding member of the Average White Band, a Scottish ensemble which specialized in performing and recording American funk music.

“People were always asking us: ‘How on earth did a bunch of white Scotsmen end up playing black American funk in the 1970s?’ Well, we were all into James Brown – but a lot of it was down to our drummer, Robbie McIntosh. If the music wasn’t funky, he

wouldn't play. He was an absolute groove-master, which was strange for a guy from Dundee.⁴¹

McIntosh died of an accidental heroin overdose at the age of 24, a few months before the monumental track "Pick Up the Pieces" reached number one on the Billboard Hot 100. The break from the song, which features a call and response of groove and fills, was consistently repurposed by DJ Kool Herc in the formative years of hip-hop.⁴² Consequently, a drummer from Scotland is one of the musicians who helped create the American genre's original sound.

Figure 3.25. Robbie McIntosh breakbeat transcription from "Pick Up the Pieces"



The examples in this survey demonstrate the rhythmic elements of the breakbeats that helped shape hip-hop. The fundamentals are presented to provide a beginning understanding of seven drum set skills that are essential to perform in the breakbeat style. Materials found in Appendix I are recommended to develop technique beyond the fundamental components.

⁴¹ Dave Simpson, "Average White Band: how we made Pick Up the Pieces," *Guardian*, August 14, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/aug/14/average-white-band-how-we-made-pick-up-the-pieces-interview>.

⁴² Nelson George, *Hip Hop America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 17.

Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the crucial component of learning to listen will determine a musician's overall development.

In addition to performing the breakbeats found in this study and learning from the texts presented in Appendix I, drum set students are encouraged to analyze and decipher the characteristics of various styles and performers through the development of aural skills. "The only way to play any style of music correctly is to become familiar with the sound and feel of it by listening to as many recordings and checking out as much live music as you possibly can."⁴³ The development of aural skills allows students to analyze and decipher the characteristics of various styles and performers, to identify drum set patterns and grooves more quickly and efficiently, and to develop their musical expressiveness and individuality. The drummers presented in this study, including Clyde Stubblefield, listened to extensive amounts of music throughout their development; "I was listening to everybody – rock 'n' roll, R&B, country and western. In Chattanooga, they had a lot of variety... I listened to everybody, not one particular person."⁴⁴ Through the amalgamation and interaction of the knowledge and skills gained from listening, practicing, and playing, the "combination will lead inevitably to our final goal: the making of the best music of which we are capable."⁴⁵

⁴³ Dave Weckl, *Ultimate Play-Along for Drums, Level 1 Vol. 1* (Miami: Manhattan Music Publications/CPP Media Group/Warner Bros., 1993), 4.

⁴⁴ Jim Payne, *The Great Drummers of R&B, Funk, & Soul* (New York: Mel Bay Publications, Inc., 2010), 69.

⁴⁵ Rick Van Horn, "The Fine Art of Listening: Making Yourself More Marketable," *Percussive Notes* 47, no. 4 (April 2009): 41.

CHAPTER FIVE: HIP-HOP EVOLUTION

“...it is inarguable that for thousands of years, creations of all kinds on this Earth have been mostly inspired by previous creations and works in some way.”⁴⁶

The DJ forefathers’ alteration of preexisting recordings is a primary component of the musical system of hip-hop. While analog sampling through vinyl manipulation provided an infrastructure for the genre, hip-hop’s emergence was foreshadowed by a series of technological advancements in rhythm-based musical equipment.

MACHINES AND SAMPLERS

Nearly 700 years prior to the development of the modern drum set, a working drum machine was imagined and engineered by Ismail al- Jazari. Described in his text *The Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices* from the year 1206, is a device consisting of four automaton musicians, two of which were drummers whose rhythms and patterns could be programmed by moving pegs within the mechanism. The device was built and used for entertainment purposes.

Seven centuries after the first operative drum machine was conceived, the first electronic percussion instrument was created. In 1931 electronic-sound pioneer Lev Termen (Leon Theremin) constructed the Rhythmicon for composer Henry Cowell, who composed two pieces for the instrument entitled *Rhythmicana* and *Music for Violin and Rhythmicon*. The device was a polyphonic keyboard that produced rhythms through a series of rotating wheels interrupted by beams of light. The Rhythmicon failed to capture public approval and was never used in performance.

⁴⁶ Cox, 219.

Various approaches to creating rhythms and beats electronically were developed over the ensuing decades, and in 1972, EKO released the ComputeRhythm. The device was a fully programmable analog drum machine that featured a six-row push-button matrix for programming beats. It established the future template for drum machines and pattern sequencers.



Figure 4.1. EKO CompuRhythm⁴⁷

In the same year, Panasonic introduced the Technics SL-1200, a direct-drive turntable released as a high-fidelity consumer record player. The high torque motor design was ideal for rhythmic manipulation through mixing and scratching and allowed hip-hop’s forefathers to develop their innovative techniques. As a catalyst in the birth of DJ culture and hip-hop music, the SL-1200 is one of the most reliable and iconic turntables ever produced.

⁴⁷ “EKO Computerhythm holy grail of drum-machines drumcomputer,” Matrixsynth, last modified February 16, 2013, https://www.matrixsynth.com/2013/02/eko-computerhythm-holy-grail-of-drum_16.html.



Figure 4.2. Technics SL-1200⁴⁸

The Roland Corporation introduced a legendary implement of modern music-making in 1980. The Roland TR-808 software rhythm composer was created to use analog synthesis instead of samples due to the high cost of memory at the time. The transistors inside the 808 created a one-of-a-kind sound that was initially dismissed by a music industry rapidly turning digital. As music producers embraced the device to forge new developments, it eventually became an intrinsic component of hip-hop production.

⁴⁸ “The evolution of the Technics SL-1200 turntable – an interactive timeline, The Vinyl Factory, last modified January 19, 2016, <https://thevinylfactory.com/features/the-evolution-of-the-technics-sl-1200-turntable-an-interactive-timeline/>.



Figure 4.3. Roland TR-808 Rhythm Composer⁴⁹

While machines and turntables bolstered the rhythmic infrastructure of hip-hop music, a new technology emerged in the early 1980s that would permanently alter the music industry.

Hip-hop's digital revolution materialized with the invention of the digital sampler, an electronic musical instrument which has no sound of its own, but whose sounds are entirely derived from digital recordings.⁵⁰ The credit for exploiting the technology to sample drum sounds is given to Queens-based producer Marley Marl.

One day I was in the studio, and I was working on a Captain Rock record. And what happened, I was actually trying to get a riff off of a record. I made a mistake and got the snare in there before the sound came... So I was playing it and the snare sounded better than the snare that I had from the drum machine... I was like, "Hold up!" This will enable me to take any kick and a snare from any record that people love and make my own beat.⁵¹

Through accidental good fortune Marley Marl discovered modern drum-sound sampling. The concept of breaking down and manipulating breakbeats into smaller units was quickly embraced

⁴⁹ "TR-808 Drum Machine Flashback," Roland, last modified February 13, 2014, <https://www.rolandus.com/blog/2014/02/13/tr-808/>.

⁵⁰ Hugh Davies, "Sampler," *Grove Music Online* (January 2001), 1, <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.ezproxy.library.unlv.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000047621?rskey=GbCtOF>.

⁵¹ Ali Shaheed Muhammad and Frannie Kelley, "Marley Marl On The Bridge Wars, LL Cool J And Discovering Sampling," *NPR Music*, September 12, 2013, <https://www.npr.org/sections/microphonecheck/2013/09/11/221440934/marley-marl-on-the-bridge-wars-ll-cool-j-and-discovering-sampling>.

by the industry and essentially ended the era of analog sampling. From 1982 to 1986, many hip-hop beats were re-creations of popular breakbeats programmed from sampled drum sounds. DJs began to call themselves producers and new musical collages were created from the library of recordings that were unearthed by hip-hop's forefathers.

In 1986, E-mu Systems introduced the SP-12, the first commercially successful drum machine and sampler that was also known as the "sampling drum computer." The device was created to streamline the process of digitally recording a live drum sound. The SP-12 also allowed the operator to manipulate resultant samples and to precisely organize multiple samples within a sequential framework.



Figure 4. 4. E-mu Systems SP-12 Sampling Drum Computer⁵²

Eventually the technology was used to sample entire melodies, taking digital sampling into a new spectrum of hip-hop production. "As the 1980s wore on, the potential of digital sampling to

⁵² "E-mu SP-12 Drum Machine," National Museum of American History, accessed July 12, 2021, https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1316931.

go beyond the mere replication of deejaying techniques led to an increasingly sophisticated aesthetic for hip-hop music.”⁵³ As the exploitation of sampling persisted and commercial success increased tenfold, the late 1980s developed a reputation as the “golden era” for hip-hop. The age of musical enlightenment screeched to a halt in December of 1991.

COPYRIGHT: THE END OF AN ERA

The Copyright Act of 1976, the last substantial revision to copyright law by the United States Congress, often fails to provide transparency for those who create and invest in music in the twenty-first century. The current framework for basic copyright law has caused several legal dilemmas in the music industry, including a 1991 lawsuit regarding sample-based hip-hop. The case established a legal precedent for sampling and forever altered how record labels and artists approach the music-making process.

In August of 1991 rapper Biz Markie released an album entitled *I Need a Haircut*. The twelfth track on the record, “Alone Again,” contained two samples lifted from a song by Irish singer-songwriter Gilbert O’Sullivan. The rights to O’Sullivan’s tune, “Alone Again, Naturally,” belonged to Grand Upright Music, who filed a copyright infringement case against Markie’s record label Warner Brothers. The lawsuit was based on the failure to license the samples before the album’s release. Eventually a decision by Justice Kevin Thomas Duffy was handed down, ruling in favor of Grand Upright Music and recommending the case for criminal prosecution.

Following the final judgement in the Grand Upright Music vs. Warner Brothers case, “the art of sampling now bore the label of an obvious example of copyright infringement under U.S. copyright law.”⁵⁴ Although the defendants made a case for the ubiquity of sampling, the courts

⁵³ Schloss, 39.

⁵⁴ Cox, 229.

were not ready to accept the technique as anything other than outright theft.⁵⁵ The ruling stunned the hip-hop community and abruptly transformed how hip-hop artists generate music. Producers were imposed with a series of choices when creating new arrangements: pay for every sample used, abandon the art of sampling, or uncover new methods around litigation while continuing to sample.

In terms of drum sampling, copyright owners often have a difficult task proving the allocation of a single drum sound, particularly when sampled sounds are manipulated and layered into new compositions. Nonetheless, any musical performance that is recorded in any form has automatic copyright holding. To sample or exploit a recorded performance without consent is technically a violation of copyright law. Overall, drummers from this study rarely received compensation for the sampling of their work, as royalties are paid to the listed songwriter. The rules encompassing drum sampling spawned several adjustments within the percussion industry.

INDUSTRY ADJUSTMENTS

The extraction of rhythm-laden passages of music by hip-hop's forefathers ultimately influenced several drum and percussion-related developments. In 2021, selling a retooled Clyde Stubblefield breakbeat from 1975 is legally dubious. Now a single snare drum hit, a booming soloed kick drum, and open and closed hi-hats are recorded and prepared digitally and offered as sample packs. The sample pack is a collection of sounds intended for producers to use as the infrastructure for new compositions. The percussion digital sound package has become the

⁵⁵ Amanda Sewell, "How Copyright Affected the Musical Style and Critical Reception of Sample-Based Hip-Hop," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 26, no. 2-3 (June-September 2014): 297.

modern-day approach to breakbeat isolation. Drummers and percussionists throughout the world have generated income creating live drum loops and samples.

Nearly every twenty-first century profession is influenced by technology. “With an increase in home studios, changes in production styles, vast sample libraries, current trends in popular music, and high-performance expectations, the modern-day professional drummer certainly qualifies for that distinction.”⁵⁶ Technology has drastically altered the drummer’s live-performance approach, and we are often required to fill rolls beyond the acoustic drum kit. The simultaneous usage of acoustic drums and electronic devices is a fast-growing and popular solution for live-sound reinforcement. In the recording studio, modern drum machines and samplers can emulate the sound of any percussion instrument. Today we can digitally tweak hits, beats, and breaks, sample sounds from a variety of sources, or create completely new sounds during the creative process. Countless twenty-first century percussionists utilize their skills for beat production, an intrinsic component of hip-hop culture.

As drummers and percussionists, we are aware of a plethora of traditional instruments available for creating grooves. With the incorporation of electronic instruments continuing to expand throughout our medium, “a new set of skills must be acquired... Modern music production techniques will be as essential as stick control and solid timekeeping.”⁵⁷ The ever-expanding world of music technology requires the modern drummer to develop a solid foundation in as many techniques and understanding of instruments as possible.

⁵⁶ Matt Billingslea, “Half Man, Half Machine: Exploring Sound Design, Hybrid Kits and Samples,” *Percussive Notes* 54, no. 4 (September 2016): 16, [http://publications.pas.org/Drumset/1609.16-17.pdf#search="matt%20billingslea"](http://publications.pas.org/Drumset/1609.16-17.pdf#search=).

⁵⁷ Tony Verderosa, “Blurring The Lines,” *Percussive Notes* 36, no. 3 (June 1998): 55, [http://publications.pas.org/Technology/9806.55-56.pdf#search="tony%20verderosa"](http://publications.pas.org/Technology/9806.55-56.pdf#search=).

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Hip-hop was created by DJs exploiting the recorded work of 1960s and 1970s drummers and percussionists. The drummers are unintentional champions of the genre as they were unaware that their contributions would be used to significantly shape the music of future generations. The combination of their work with the innovative techniques of the DJ forefathers is the recipe for an American subcultural emergence.

Kool Herc is the original breakbeat DJ and the founding father of hip-hop. His groundbreaking concept of breakbeat isolation started the subcultural movement and provided a blueprint for future innovators. Afrika Bambaataa is a pioneer for extending musical boundaries, Grandmaster Flash is an icon for expanding the art of turntablism, and Grand Wizzard Theodore is recognized for his explorations in controlling noise. All of hip-hop's original innovators appropriated the work of the percussionist to help expand their musical ideas.

The isolation of the breakbeat is a main musical component of the formative years of hip-hop. As an aesthetic mainstay of the genre, breakbeats have been repurposed for decades as the central percussive component of innumerable hip-hop songs. While nearly impossible to uncover every drum break that helped shape hip-hop's development, the Beat of a Subculture playlist⁵⁸ will be an ever-expanding resource for the music and breakbeats that helped create the genre. The list will be updated indefinitely and will continue to provide familiarity with recordings that helped shape new music. The songs also provide percussive fragments of music that keep a party moving.

⁵⁸ Link to the Beat of a Subculture playlist:
<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/44vgNdu07sXnZyAnRwCM7L?si=2908b4784f5c4358>

The breakbeats that were appropriated to launch hip-hop music were recorded by mid-twentieth century drummers and percussionists. The musicians are crucial contributors to the rhythmic infrastructure of the genre. Ultimately, hip-hop would not exist without the help of Clyde Stubblefield, Bernard Purdie, Jim Gordon, Gregory Coleman, Robbie McIntosh, and many others. Their contributions to the infrastructure of early hip-hop was essential, and it is conclusive that the genre would not be what it is today without their work. The innovations that spurred hip-hop's development were possible because of the recorded drum tracks of years prior.

Hip-hop's evolution was aided by a series of technological advancements in musical equipment. These include the development of the drum set, improvements in recording technology, innovations to turntables, a refinement of drum machines, the creation of digital samplers, and more. The evolution was briefly interrupted in 1991 due to United States copyright law, which led to alterations of the music-making process and new opportunities for percussionists in the popular music realm.

In the 1970s, the Bronx borough of New York City celebrated the recorded works of drummers and percussionists. The beginnings of b-boying, rapping, and the DJ components of hip-hop were bound together by drums. In an effort to strengthen a decimated social environment, hip-hop's forefathers exploited non-pitched percussion recordings and sparked the creation of a new American musical genre. The amalgamation of pioneering DJ techniques with unaccompanied drum recordings produced the beat of a subculture.

APPENDIX I: REVIEW OF EXTANT MATERIALS

In lieu of providing exercises to help develop the fundamentals necessary to playing the breakbeats presented in this study, this section will briefly examine significant drum set texts that address the techniques that are essential to perform in the style.

The materials examined pertain to drum set performance in funk, soul, rhythm and blues, and breakbeat styles, however the techniques are also applicable to various genres. The reviewed materials are texts and are presented chronologically by publication date.

Rick Latham published *Advanced Funk Studies* in 1980 “to give the advanced drummer some insight into the techniques involved in playing today’s Funk and Fusion Music.”⁵⁹ Included in the text are exercises that deal with different combinations of the hi-hat, snare drum, and bass drum, a collection of funk and fill patterns that can be used in performance situations, a series of transcriptions of many well-known recordings, and ten solos that use the patterns found throughout the pages. Since its release, Latham’s drum set method book has become a classic, best-selling work.

David Garibaldi’s 1990 text entitled *Future Sounds: A Book of Contemporary Drumset Concepts*, is a presentation of ideas he developed and implemented over the course of his groundbreaking career. The opening section highlights various techniques to aid the development of “Two Sound Levels.” Included are chapters on four-bar patterns, groove playing, and funk drumming. The final two sections of the book present a series of challenging exercises with 17 permutation studies and 15 groove studies. The techniques, all within the funk/jazz-fusion

⁵⁹ Rick Latham, *Advanced Funk Studies* (Los Angeles: Rick Latham Publishing Company, 1980), 5.

category, provide the opportunity “to help the aspiring drummer in the lengthy process of becoming an individual with a unique, original drum-set vocabulary.”⁶⁰

Jim Payne’s *Complete Funk Drumming Book*, published by Mel Bay Publications of Pacific, Missouri in 1994, features content geared to prepare students for survival in a live playing situation. With fifteen sections of material covering coordination, rhythms, patterns, and phrasing, the “book is a valid representation of what people want to hear from a drummer in a working situation – live or in the studio. Rock ‘n’ roll is not about technique – it is a feeling. This book conveys that feeling.”⁶¹

The Commandments of R&B Drumming: A Comprehensive Guide to Soul, Funk, and Hip-Hop, is an historical and in-depth study written by world-renowned drummer Zoro. The 1998 publication contains transcriptions and analyses of grooves from multiple musical eras, a section on how to create and play with loops, a listening guide of influential soul, funk, and hip-hop music (The Ten Commandments), a play-along CD, and a R&B history tree. The text is considered to one of the most comprehensive books about rhythm and blues drumming.

Stanton Moore’s *Groove Alchemy* from 2010 is a well-structured text that examines the chronological history of the rhythmic foundations of funk drumming. The 152-page book features detailed transcriptions, play-along drum charts, and educational insight from the author. Every written example in the book is also available for download or streaming, all being performed by Moore. *Groove Alchemy* was written “to present my approach to groove playing from a creative point of view,”⁶² and is an essential study for drummers interested in maximizing their groove potential.

⁶⁰ David Garibaldi, *Future Sounds: A Book of Contemporary Drumset Concepts* (USA: Alfred Music, 1990), 4.

⁶¹ Jim Payne, *Complete Funk Drumming Book* (Pacific: Mel Bay Publications, 1994), 2.

⁶² Stanton Moore, *Groove Alchemy* (Milwaukee: Hudson Music, 2010), 7.

The Breakbeat Bible by Mike Adamo is a definitive guide to breakbeat and hip-hop drumming. The text focuses on the fundamentals of hip-hop drumming by dissecting the foundation of the genre – the breakbeat—and presenting it in a systematic way for practice. Included in the 2010 publication is an historical account of breakbeats with biographies of significant drummers and DJs, transcriptions of some of the most important breakbeats of all time, audio examples of several beats from the book, play-along tracks, and a sample library featuring individual drum and cymbal sounds. Adamo’s book is an in-depth examination of the drum grooves and breaks that have shaped the landscape of modern music, and it is an indispensable resource for all students of hip-hop and contemporary funk drumming.

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