

What is Hip Hop An Interview w Grand Master Flash

Written by Davey D ID3219

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Breakdown FM: What is Hip Hop? We Interview Grand Master Flash

In honor of Grand Master Flash being inducted into the Rock-N-Roll Hall of Fame we decided to go digging in the crates and pulling out this interview we did with the pioneer the week 2Pac (Tupac) was killed in Las Vegas in Sept of '96. Flash gave us some incredible insight onto Hip Hop history as well as a definitive definition of Hip Hop and the direction it needs to headed. He also talks about teaching his protégé Grand Wizard Theodore how to spin. It's a claim that unfortunately Theodore vehemently denies. I'm not sure what that is about, but this is a dope interview.

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by Davey D

One of Hip Hop's foremost pioneers is Joseph Saddler aka Grandmaster Flash. Back in the day he epitomized what a DJ should be and headed one of Hip Hop's best and most enduring groups The Furious Four, which later became The Furious Five. Flash put his superstar crew together in 1976. They eventually went on to record some of Hip Hop's biggest hits including, 'White Lines', 'The Message' and 'Scorpio' to name a few. However, long before records came out, GM Flash was Hip Hop's most popular act. Going to a Flash party was an event. Old school headz all have fond memories of seeing Flash for the first time. Both him and his group's showmanship are unequaled to this day.

There's not enough that can be written about Flash's accomplishments. He invented all sorts of techniques from backspinning to cutting and scratching and of course quick mixing which are the foundations for today's Hip Hop DJs. He was also responsible for tinkering with a mixer and developing a cross fading cue. He was also the first DJ to use a drum machine that he called a beat box.... This interview took place several days after 2Pac's death in September of 1996.

Davey D: For people who aren't familiar, tell us what was Grandmaster Flash's legacy in Hip Hop? What were you best known for within the early days of Hip Hop?

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GM Flash: As an individual I was known as the DJ or the mixer. I was known for taking a particular passage of music and rearranging it. I called it the quick mix theory. It consisted of backspinning, the double back, cutting and scratching. I was also the first DJ to be known for doing acrobatics on the turntables. I would do 360 turns, cutting with my elbows, my mouth and crazy stuff like that.

Davey D: Not only were you the DJ, but you had some of the fiercest emcees in the business. Could you tell us the original members of your crew? A lot of people know you as Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, but I remember when you started off with just one, then it became three and then for a long time it was GMF and the Furious Four. Break this down for us..

GM Flash: The first member was who I called 'The crowd pleaser' was Cowboy. The second one who was recruited was Kid Creole. The third member who was recruited was Kid Creole's brother who was known as Melle-Mel. The fourth member recruited was Mr. Ness who later became known as Scorpio. The final person was Raheim. I also had my assistant Disco B.

Davey D: What ever happened to Disco B?

GM Flash: Disco B still rolls with me now. He's still doing his thing. He does clubs in different places. He was very instrumental in helping me perfect my craft.

Davey D: What have been some of the positive changes you've seen over the years within Hip Hop? What are some of the changes you've seen that you don't like?

GM Flash: What I've found appealing is the fact that Hip Hop can take from any other genre of music, recreate it, reform it, rearrange it and put poetry over the top of it. That's Hip Hop. That was a positive thing for it. Now, as for what I don't like, I'll try to explain this real carefully. Me, Bambaataa and Kool Herc planted this seed. This seed was a seed to a tree. This tree had a massive trunk and this trunk had branches and leaves. The leaves symbolize different subject matter that we can speak on. If you think about the history of Hip Hop we've had artist who can talk about from socially significant ideas to something as cool as sneakers. There was a time when all these various subject matters were utilized. But what has happened, we as Hip

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Hoppers are not fully utilizing this tree. At this point in time, I just feel that this tree is leaning. By that I mean, I think we are putting too much weight on one side of the tree, when this particular genre of music allows us to talk about many things.

Davey D: Why do you think this has happened?

GM Flash: I think the music business plays a big part. Let's say have two record company's which I'll call 'Company Left' and 'Company Right'. Let's say Company Left has an artist with a hit record. Company Right would rather come up with a record that sounds like Company Left as opposed to allowing the creative flow of the artist to come up with something just as comparable. If you think about my era to throughout the 80's, you had anybody from Eric B & Rakim who's subject matter was totally different from Chuck D, who's subject matter was totally different from LL's, who's subject matter was totally different from KRS-One. We were basically bombing the airwaves and the record companies could not figure out how and why. What has happened is that to some degree they have taken an attitude where they don't listen to demos of diverse subject matters. They're looking for demos like the record the guy on the left just did. Hip Hop has become real constrained. The creative juices and creative flows have been diminished.

Davey D: Now this is very different from the days when you first came out, because the name of the game was to be creative and stand out as much as possible.

GM Flash: Exactly, especially when you're talking about a music where you can do just about anything. We can talk about just about anything lyrically. We can even sing off key, but if it's produced properly it can be a hit. What has happened is that there's just too much of one particular subject matter being talked about. Classical, R&B and Blues are constrained. They have a bridge. They have a chorus. They have to sing in a certain key and have some sort of key. With Hip Hop that's not the case.

Davey D: When is something not Hip Hop? I run into people who will listen to a group like the 2 Live Crew and say 'That's not Hip Hop' or they would hear someone who has an R&B beat in the background and they'll say 'That's not Hip Hop'. The definition of Hip Hop has become narrowly defined. There are a lot of people who will maintain that music from the West Coast is not Hip Hop. They'll say that E-40 or Too Short is not Hip Hop. Now coming from one of the people who pioneered this how would you definitively define Hip Hop music?

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GM Flash: Let me just say this and I want to be real clear. As being one of the pioneers who was known for the ability to mix music, I mixed anything from Billy Squire, Michael Jackson, to Beethoven. When I laid this foundation down, the key was being able to take almost anything musically just as long as it had a beat to it, so that the rhymer can syncopate to it. So what I'm trying to say is from a musical aspect for anybody to say that whatever they're doing in Florida is not Hip Hop or whatever they're doing in LA is not Hip Hop, who are these people to say that?

There were songs that Bambaataa played that were so funky and when I had the privilege of getting to know what they were, I was surprised. You take a song like 'Apache' which is considered one of the themes of Hip Hop. The guys who did were The Incredible Bongo Band. They were a bunch of white guys. There was one person in there who was Black and that was King Erickson. He was a percussionist. For anybody to say well this is not Hip Hop and that's not Hip Hop, that is not the way the formula was laid down. It was for the people who were going to continue take anything musically and string it along.

Davey D: Do you the media has given Hip Hop it's due? Have we in the Hip Hop media treated it correctly? Have we defined it correctly? I mean there are a lot of magazines who have put out different definitions for Hip Hop other then the one's you, Bambaataa and Kool Herc have laid out for years. You have guys who get on radio, who just got into Hip Hop two years ago asserting their own misleading definitions, but because they have access to the airwaves, they're able to make those definitions stick. Do you think this sort of activity has led to Hip Hop becoming stagnant?

GM Flash: I think what's happening here is, there's a group or maybe one person who is saying this is gonna be the definition and this is what we want to get the kids to do now. The definition just keeps changing. It keeps changing even though there was already a floor plan. All the newer artists had to do was build upon the floor plan. The definition has already been set and that is, unlimited subject matters, unlimited music genres. This was already set in the early 70's. All that had to happen now was people build upon it. So if a person has an R&B track in the background and he's rhyiming over the top of it, it's Hip Hop. If it's a techno track and he's rhyiming over the top of it, it's Hip Hop. It's even to the point where now that R&B needs major assistance from our genre. That goes to show you that there is so much power in the derivative of the musical aspect of Hip Hop. The definitions have already been laid. For us to keep claiming this isn't Hip Hop and that isn't Hip Hop doesn't make sense to me.

When we were going into the studios, my point of view of course would differ from Heavy D's

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point of view. It would differ from Snoop Dogg's point of view or it would differ from LL's or any other artist. Of course we would differ, but that's the beauty of Hip Hop. We can come from our own particular point of view and lay it down. We should not be throwing verbal rocks at each other. We're all responsible to continue the growth of Hip Hop. You have to remember that after a while when your career is over, there's a child that's looking at you that wants to do the same thing that you're doing, so why not give him all the avenues? Give him all the avenues so that when he puts pen to paper he explores all avenues. We have enough black eyes coming from people who don't like Hip Hop. So for us who do love Hip Hop we should not be throwing black eyes at each other.

Davey D: Hip Hop and violence, how do you see it?

GM Flash: Hip Hop has always been a dynamo. It's the only genre of music where we hit a stage the objective is to get everybody as hyped as possible. That has been the objective. That's why Hip Hop works so well with an audience. Now the violence mixed in between, I personally feel that the business aspects have played a role. Meaning that you have some people in the music business that have the power to sign artists who will take an artist aside and plant a negative seed. They will encourage artist to do something just because the guy across town is doing it. He will tell an artist to escalate it to another level. They would set the stage.

Unfortunately we are arguing amongst each other so much when the bottom line is we don't own anything. We are offspring to a record label owner. So what the owners see is that we are fighting amongst each other and causing controversy, but as long as it's selling records they don't care. We have to take responsibility to say 'hold up, wait a minute this thing has gone to far'.

There's gonna always be an element of violence in all genres of music. It's with Rock-n-Roll and all the other genres. When it comes to the point that there is a tragedy over it that scares me. That scares me because all the owners will do is find some new element and back it and sit back and collect the dough. We gotta stop fighting amongst each other. I think the only rift should be when take it the stage and try to out perform each other.

Davey D: There were some legendary battles that you and your crew participated in, name some of those battles.

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GM Flash: Before I was a recording artist I didn't look at things as battles. For example, me and Bambaataa might play in the same room. Me and Kool Herc might play in the same room. Myself and DJ Breakout might play in the same room. Now the audience might've look at that as a battle which was fine, but our true battles didn't come until we started touring.

Davey D: I heard you guys used to battle against bands like the Barkays and Lakeside?

GM Flash: This is what I'm trying to tell you. For example, I didn't take the word battle seriously until we started making records. When we started making records we would go into towns and get ready to do sound check. All we would bring was our turntables and a couple of microphones and other bands would say stuff to us like 'Oh you guys must be here for intermission music'. We would hear this sort of stuff from these big time groups. I won't name no names but they know who they are. When they read this interview they'll know who they are. We would take that as a slap in the face. We would find out when we went on stage and when we performed we used the formula of Hip Hop, which was to drain the audience. We would get them to clap their hands and say 'Ho!' As we were leaving off stage we would knock on the dressing room door of the next act and say 'Good Luck'. We would then sit back on the side and watch them play to a tired worn out audience. That's when the battle was on. I had love for Breakout; I had love for Bambaataa. I had love for Kool Herc.

Davey D: I know you don't call it a battle, but a lot of us did and if there was one rival group you guys had it was Grand Wizard Theodore and The Fantastic Romantic Five.

GM Flash: Ok, let me put that into perspective. Before I had fully put my group together, I was down with another group called the L Brothers. It was Gene Livingston, Corey Livingston and this little kid who was little brother named Theodore Livingston. Now when I was creating this formula, not everyone truly understood what I was trying to do. What I would notice was this little kid watching me do all this because the equipment was in Gene Livingston's house. Now his little brother would watch me, but Gene would say 'Whatever you do, Do not let my little brother touch the turntables. When Gene used to go to work, I used to sneak Theodore in the room and teach him. He had been watching me all the time. What I would do is put a milk crate under him and let him get up on the turntables and I watched this kid duplicate what I did. We kept it a secret for a long time, me and Theodore.

One day we did a block party and I stepped to Gene who was his older brother and I said 'Gene, your little brother would bring us so much more notoriety if we let him get on the

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turntables. For a long time Gene would resist because he couldn't catch what I was doing on the turntables. Finally he said 'ok' and I brought that same milk crate and that lunch kitchen table, I pulled out the turntables. I introduced him to the crowd as my student Grand Wizard Theodore. He did his thing and the crowd went nuts. He was a little kid and could hardly reach the tables. It put a damper on his older brother, because he couldn't catch the tricks. So it was a rivalry from there. I broke off from the L Brothers and created my own situation. I have love for Theodore because he was there. I have love for Gene. I have love for all these people because they were there. . The audience would look at me and Theodore as battling when we played a room, but all he doing was what I did.

Davey D: Where do you see Hip Hop going?

GM Flash: I'm a little afraid right now because now that it has escalated to someone getting the ultimate punishment which only God is allowed to do, as far as 2Pac dying. No one had a right to have done that. I know he has done things to people that were sort of insulting or not agreeable, but for him to die that's not good at all. Where is Hip Hop going? I'm hoping that this tragedy will help us to see we can't fight amongst each other, because we're gonna burn it out if we don't. Stop fighting. Right now I couldn't tell you where Hip Hop is going. There's gonna be a major summit held at Mosque 7 later this afternoon and we're gonna talk about it. We're gonna figure out how to put a stop on the violence.

Davey D: Last question, people are saying that pioneering groups like yourself have gotten ripped off from record companies and in a sense are winding up like the blues artist of the past that were exploited and left for broke. What advice would you give to young artist coming into the business so they could avoid the same mistakes?

GM Flash: Do not let any record company disturb your creative flow. You are not writing for the record company. You're writing for the public. The public makes you who you are. Also I would say do not enter into any agreement unless you are assisted by family and lawyer. This thing that was a dream at one time is now a multi-billion dollar business so make sure your business is straight.

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