

Afrika Bambaataa, the godfather of hip-hop and creator of the 1980s electronic-beat classics "Planet Rock" and "Looking for the Perfect Beat," has been directing people to find their own beat ever since he helped design what is now a global culture.

"Hip-hop has brought more people together from different racial backgrounds and nationalities than all the politicians put together on the planet," says Bambaataa, who is performing at San Francisco's DNA Lounge on Saturday.

But, as hip-hop thrives as a billion-dollar industry, more fans seem to recognize its fruit rather than its seed. Eminem is a household name; Bambaataa is not.

"I see myself as the architect," he says, "with Father Kool Herc and Grandmaster Flash -- some people call us the holy trinity" of hip-hop.

"I'm glad to see it evolve. There are people becoming millionaires and becoming movie stars," says Bambaataa over the phone from Chicago. "I wish they'd show more respect to the pioneers who . . . helped make this. The so-called companies should be hiring some of these cats as A&Rs (talent managers) at some of these labels."

Hip-hop's roots reach back to the late '60s and early '70s, when Bambaataa was a member of the notorious Bronx street gang the Black Spades. He saw the need to make something more positive out of the gang culture that surrounded him. So instead of remaining a warrior against others, he transformed himself into a warrior for the community.

Inspired by a movie called "Zulu" in the 1960s, about African tribesmen fighting for what was theirs against British forces, Bambaataa named his movement the Universal Zulu Nation.

The message was "peace, unity, love, happiness and fun," says Bambaataa. It would take years, but eventually deejaying, emceeing, graffiti and dancing became the four elements of what became known as hip-hop.

"I'm trying to get everybody on the fifth element -- knowledge," says Bambaataa, who describes himself as humble. "I'm respectful to everybody, one who likes to know your mind first before I look at your color."

In 1973 and into 1974, it was Bambaataa's "jam parties" that helped kick off hip-hop. It was a time before the crossfader -- a device that enables seamless mixing of music from two turntables -- was used regularly by party DJs. Bambaataa says he used to "coordinate" DJs on two separate turntable setups, signaling with a flashlight from across the room. When one song was near its end, he would flash his light so the other DJ could start his song, keeping the music continuous.

It was a somewhat innocent start to a universe larger than any of them could imagine.

Now, as hip-hop officially turns 30, Bambaataa worries that it's losing its beat. He sees corporations dictating what hip-hop is, turning away from the original elements and defining it as a "\$200 sneaker and butts shaking all over the place."

He fears it is becoming an "apartheid system" where artists must label themselves with sub-genres, such as trance or drum and bass, and radio stations end up excluding certain types of hip-hop.

And it is a valid fear for someone like Bambaataa, who has created his own eclectic style, bringing together artists on vinyl that would never have reason to be on the same stage -- he has worked with Sting, Boy George and James Brown, to name a few. His latest album, "Dark Matter: Moving at the Speed of Light," is eclectic, as well, with electro-funk stylings, Indian rhythms and guest singer Gary Numan (best known for 1979's "Cars"). It hits stores Tuesday.

Not everything should be about "killing and beating, and calling women names. . . . There's got

Afrika Bambaataa Cultural Architect

Written by Westside ID229

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to be a balance," Bambaataa says. "There are other types of hip-hop . . . that have some soul to it."

About Bambaataa

Name means Affectionate leader

Has worked with German electronic group Kraftwerk, godfather of soul James Brown, ex-Sex Pistol John Lydon, funkmaster George Clinton, funk/R & B artist Bootsy Collins, Sting, progressive rock artist Bill Laswell, pop-reggae band UB40 and Boy George, among others

On `Planet Rock` "There's respect and love for `Planet Rock," but Afrika Bambaataa's got hundreds of other records. All these radio stations, I love you playing `Planet Rock," . . . but there are hundreds of other Afrika Bambaataa records you can play on the air, too. . . . `Planet Rock" is not my only record."

[Source](#)