

Hip-Hop Pioneer Melle-Mel Interview on Breakdown FM

Written by Davey D ID2657
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Taking You Back to the Foundation w/ Melle-Mel By Davey D

Interview by Jayquan for Breakdown FM

(Please note Melle-Mel's Audio is low quality cause he was on a cell phone)

My man Jayquan of The Foundation sat down with Hip Hop pioneer Melle-Mel to get his thoughts on the current state of Hip Hop and his upcoming projects. For those who are unfamiliar Mele-Mel who was the lead emcee within Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five Emcees is credited with being the one who sparked the current rhyme patterns and straight ahead 4 count cadence used by most emcees. In other words, before Mele-Mel came along most people who rhymed mimicked the polished, 'puking', rhyme styles and patterns of Black radio deejays that preceded early Hip Hop. This was best personified by early rappers like DJ Hollywood, Eddie Cheeba and later Kurtis Blow. Back then we called it disco rhyming. Melle-Mel's style was considered more street.

Later Melle-Mel went on to break ground when he recorded a landmark song along with Duke Bootee (Ed Fletcher) called 'The Message'. For many it was the first time they heard someone offer serious social commentary about Black inner city life for our generation. Later Mel would pen numerous other politically influenced songs. He was not only one of Hip Hop greatest emcees. He was our first political one and became inspiration for everyone from Chuck D on down to KRS who later followed.

In our interview Jayquan asked Mel about the origins of what many consider his most potent rhyme which comes in the last stanza of the message. The Message which came out in 1982 was not the first song that Mele-Mel kicked some of those lyrics. He had dropped them back in 1979 in the group's first song called 'Superrappin'.

Melle-Mel explained that when he first spit those rhymes he was simply trying to come up with something different and push the envelope as an emcee. He wanted to do more than just the average party rhyme. He went on to add that it was actually Sugar Hill record's president Sylvia Robinson's idea for him to use that verse in 'The Message'. He said it wound up being the icing

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on the cake. To him 'The Message' is the 'Ghetto Bible'.

During our interview Mele-Mel noted that the lack of social commentary in much of today's Hip Hop is the result of cats going for the commercialized, gangsta image which is embraced by record labels and popular media outlets. Instead of sitting down and writing about what's really going on in society, today's rappers go for what they think will make them money.

Jayquan asked Melle-Mel to talk about the inspiration behind an under-exposed song called World War III. It came out around 1984 and in that song he talked about clones, secret societies and wars being fought on the moon. The lyrics are considered by many to be among Mel's best.

He noted that again he was trying to stretch out creatively and put something out that was both relevant back then (There was a lot of talk about Orwellian Society in 1984) but could also spark though about what could possibly happen in the future. He said rappers have the responsibility of pushing the boundaries...

Is Rap Still Black People's CNN?

Melle-Mel was asked about Chuck D's famous quote where he described rapped as Black people's CNN with the rappers being the reporters. He responded by noting that the two artists who come closest to doing that today are Nas and Common. He said its unfortunate that they are the exception and not the rule. He added that if one was to look to rap as some sort of CNN today then they would have one big report on how to cook crack along with a general reinforcement and glamorization of drug culture. He said rap is no longer being used as a communication tool with the goal to educate. It's reverted to being about folks bragging about how they grew up and how much gold they have.

Jayquan pointed that in rap has always highlighted street culture. There are tapes of old school cats talking about smoking Cheeba(reefer) and we all saw Busy Bee in the movie Wild Style counting his money in a sleazy hotel while bragging about all his women. He asked Mel how is one talking about street elements today any different then what was done in the past during rap's pioneering era.

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Mel admitted that there was always a street element within Hip Hop and at the parties. He said there were always guys who smoked weed and sold angel dust. He said there were always guns. However, those street elements were not the main focus or the thing that drove Hip Hop. Connecting to those street elements was not the reason that people went out to the early park jams or participated in Hip Hop.

He said, Hip Hop offered people a way to come out of street life and into the music business. Today Hip Hop is no longer music driven. It's image driven with drug counter culture and violence being the main attractions. He said you can no longer be a regular guy who comes to the scene just wanting to make music. Now you have to be a guy who sold cocaine or went to jail who now makes music. It's those type of images that now drives your music sales. Now artists are being encouraged to have street image and credibility in order to be successful.

Jayquan continued the conversation by asking Mel if he felt the Crack epidemic of the 1980s had anything to do with influencing today's approach toward music.

Mel said it may have played a small part. The reality is that today we have a vicious cycle where art imitates life and life imitates art all the way to the point where we now have a situation where the 'streets' are now exactly what a popular song says.

Mel says that people have sold drugs in the hood for years, long before rap came along. The difference was that the drug dealer nor did the community take pride in that especially when it came to Blacks selling it to other Blacks. Drug dealers kept their business undercover and away from the spotlight. He never went out and tried to make records about his activities. The drug culture has been glamorized so much that now people think it's the right thing to do in order to feed your family. That was never ever the case for us in the community.

Hip Hop and Politics-Let's Talk About Jesse

During our interview Melle-Mel talked about his landmark song called 'Jesse' which he did in 1984 as Jesse Jackson made his historic run for the White House'.

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Mel was asked if there was any Black politicians that were worthy of having the Hip Hop community's weight and support being put behind him. He cited Senator Barack Obama as one guy he'd like to get behind. He said that it was unfortunate that so many Black politicians forget about the community once they get into office. They get elected and start playing the game of politics where the end game is to get re-elected and curry favors. They forget to bring real change back to the community.

New heat for Melle-Mel in Summer of 2006 Melle-Mel talked about some of his upcoming ventures. For starters he is releasing a new album in 2006. Contrary to what many may think, Mel along with his partner Scorpio formally known as Mr. Ness are constantly releasing music. Much of it finds a home overseas where they have huge fan base. This new album is going to be for the states. On it you will find a trilogy of songs called 'Cotton', 'Crossfire' and 'Messing with the Bushes (George Bush). You will also find a 2006 remake of 'The Message'. He has all sorts of producers included Dame Greese, The Arsonist, Rock and Rome, and Black Serat.

Mel explained the Trilogy of songs as one where he wanted to address some key social issues from a variety of perspectives. He says that people have to be conditioned to listen to social messages in songs because there has been this all out attempt to dumb people down and make politics too confusing and unattractive. He noted that rap has been dumbed down and that it's unfortunate that rap can be used for every reason except to be political. He also cautioned people not to believe the hype about political rap not being successful. He said messages in the music have always been successful.

Melle-Mel noted that on this album he made it a point not to do any features. He says all these guest appearances have hurt Hip Hop because it switches the focus from making a good album to having a big line up. The quality has dropped and he wants to pick it up. He pointed out how you never saw great musicians like Prince, Michael Jackson or Frank Sinatra do albums full of features. He said it's important to be completely responsible for the success or shortcomings of an album.

Melle-Mel concluded by noting how ironic it was that in the early days Hip Hop came about because R&B music was dumbed down and not saying anything. Rappers saved the day and got props because we were the one's pushing the envelope and actually saying something in our music. Rappers were credited with letting folks know what's going on. The music always gave people something to think about. He said it's too bad that so many are caught up in commercial gangsterism to the point that they forgot that there's more to making music.

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We should also note that word is Melle-Mel is gearing up to enter into the wrestling arena.. We'll keep you posted on that as it developes.

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