

The Mother of Hip-Hop

Written by Davey D ID2037

Monday, 24 October 2005 00:56 -

As a journalist we occasionally come across some things we regret doing or in my case not doing. About three weeks ago the Father of Hip Hop-DJ Kool Herc came to my house here in Oakland and we had a long in depth discussion about Hip Hop's history. I've known Herc for years and run into often when I am back in New York. I've interviewed him at least half a dozen times and it's gotten to appoint where the magnitude of who he is and what he's done doesn't always hit me...

But this particular day was special and while I've known Herc and our encounters have always been cool, this day I had to sit back and just let it all sink in. The guy who fathered what is now a world wide phenomenon called Hip Hop was sitting in my living room, in my easy chair kicking back and just chopping it up. It was a cool moment in my personal history and I made it a point not to take it for granted, even though I'll see Herc again in the next couple of weeks when I'm back in New York.

So that's the backdrop, so let me get to my regrets. Accompanying Kool Herc that day was a woman who has played a major role in his life. She's not seen on BET, MTV or VH1, but anyone who has ever dealt with Herc has crossed her path and come away knowing she is no joke. Others have heard her name but as it was with me seeing Herc all the time, the magnitude of who she is and what she did may not have sunk in. We're talking about Kool Herc's sister Cindy Campbell.

When we hear the story about Kool Herc doing his first party at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue, it is occasionally mentioned that it was his older sister who set things up for him. Herc explained things to me this way back in 1989.

"Hip-Hop started when my father brought a PA system and didn't know how to hook it up. I was messing around with the music and I started out by buying a few records to play at my house. When I was doing that I saw a lot of kids playing outside in the backyard. My sister asked me to give a party one day. Actually, she wanted me to play at a party [1520 Segdwick Ave] and I went out and got around twenty records that I felt was good enough and we gave a party and charged about twenty five cents to come in and made 300 dollars."

It seems like a small thing to most people, but considering that Jamaican born Herc was a young cat still trying to fit into the whole New York vibe, Cindy hooking him up and setting up

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that first Hip Hop gig in the West Bronx was a bigger thing than most of us realize. Hip Hop artists/poet and former Ambassador Toni Blackman made this point to me a few weeks ago in Montreal. She rhetorically asked, "Would there be Hip Hop as we know it had Cindy Campbell not been around?"

She went on to explain the under appreciated background role that women have long played in our lives and histories. Women are often a footnote or after thought when we tell the stories of cultural and political movements and sadly Hip Hop is no exception, especially when it comes to us truly understanding and appreciating the role of Cindy Campbell.

When she came to the crib that day, we joked around because as most writers and folks in the biz have come to know that Herc doesn't do anything without his sister making sure its right. Some have called her hardcore, unwavering and no nonsense. So when I met her I was like "Oh so you're Cindy Campbell". Her response was a confident unapologetic like 'Yep that's me'. She exuded that air, that said 'I hold my brother down through thick and thin. She wanted to know what the interview was for. Who I was filming things for. She wanted names numbers cards etc etc. Some of not always liked that, but in reality Cindy has done what any other good manager or agent would and should do. Over the years she has made sure her brother gets paid and gets his just due. She has long held Herc down and in doing so has made sure that important parts of our culture remained in tact.

I was speaking with Cindy and had expressed regret that early footage of our culture especially things featuring Herc were owned by other entities including the BBC. She smiled and reassured me that was not the case. Over the years she had negotiated deals and made sure that Herc's image is owned by him and that outlets that depicted Herc had to break them off. She spoke about some of the early deals she set up which at the time seemed outrageous but nowadays are standard fare. She spoke about how she had to learn the business and learn about licensing and intellectual property and all those things that at the end of the day help prevent someone from being exploited and taken advantage of.

From the looks of things Cindy Campbell was doing these things for her brother and for Hip Hop before a whole lot of people including well known entrepreneurs/managers like Russell Simmons.

So Cindy was at the crib and she humbly broke a lot of stuff down and then stepped back and let her brother take the floor. He engaged us for almost an hour. I told Cindy that we needed to

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interview her and that was the intention. But as time would have it she stepped up and shut our interview down and made sure that her brother was on his way to the next interview. I saw Cindy a couple of days later at Herc's gig in San Francisco where she was again holding him down, wanting to know who was taking pictures, who was interviewing him, who wanted him for his next gig etc. etc etc. Yes, it's the stuff that managers do, but Cindy had been doing this for a long time.

So to make a long story short, I never got a chance to interview her and that was a big regret, because I'm sure she had some compelling perspectives and deep history that she could share not just about her brother but also about herself being on the frontline back in the days as Black woman in an industry that was notorious for taking advantage of artists. I wanted to know her mistakes, her triumphs and her challenges etc.

When speaking with Toni Blackman she reminded me that woman always play the backdrop and serve the community. That's not a bad thing because it's natural for women to do that. Most are naturally nurturing. With that being said, it's important that us as men sit back and acknowledge and even celebrate those contributions.

As Toni Blackman said, 'Would Hip Hop be what we know it today had it not been for a nurturing sharp eyed Cindy Campbell who saw fit and loved her famous brother Kool Herc enough to seriously hold him down?'

A lot of times the women in our lives look out for us even when we can't and don't look out for ourselves. I'm gonna send this article off to the VH1 people who put on the VH1 Hip Hop Honors Awards and suggest that during next year's even that they give props to those unsung heroes who kept Hip Hop alive and Cindy Campbell should be at the top of the list.-Hip Hop's First Lady.