

**HIP-HOP IN THE HUB:  
HOW BOSTON RAP REMAINED UNDERGROUND**

**The story of Boston's hip-hop community from 1979-2000**

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## **HIP-HOP IN THE HUB: HOW BOSTON RAP REMAINED UNDERGROUND**

When you ask someone to name a famous rapper who came from Boston, a lot of people draw a blank. Some remember Edward “Edo G” Anderson’s breakout record Life of a Kid in the Ghetto (1991) and his golden age classic “I got to have it,” the video for which made it onto MTV and Vibe in the early 1990’s. Others might mention that Keith “Guru” Elam was originally from Boston before taking up residence in Brooklyn, helping to define the sound of mid 1990’s East Coast rap with DJ Premier in Gangstarr, and then achieving mainstream popularity with his Jazzmatazz releases. Fans of Boston’s harder beats may recall that The Almighty RSO got into a battle with Tommy Boy Records over their mid 1990’s song “One in the Chamba” and eventually reformed as the equally controversial group Made Men. Those with slightly deeper knowledge will trace Boston’s RSO connection through Raymond “Benzino” Scott’s relationship with The Source Magazine and its Harvard educated co-founder David Mays. People familiar with the history of breakdancing will certainly mention the foundational Boston b-boy crew The Floorlords. Fans who tracked the late 1990’s explosion of underground and alternative hip-hop will be quick to remind you that Boston artists like Mr. Lif, Akrobatik, and 7L and Esoteric have built reputations and careers on a foundation of gritty beats and east coast tongue trickery. Despite some clear successes, there remains a sense in the media and among fans that hip-hop never quite took off in Boston the way it did in other cities. Examining the record, there are good reasons for this perception.

Every other city of its size in the United States seems to have had a larger impact on hip-hop than Boston. The influence of New York in defining and promulgating the culture goes without saying. Los Angeles was the home of the gangsta rap explosion and just one group, the seminal N.W.A., spawned artists as influential as Dr. Dre, Ice Cube and Eazy E. In the late 1980’s, Miami had its 2-Live Crew and Skywalker Productions paved the way for the reign of the dirty South. Detroit had its Eminem and well before the Roots put Pennsylvania back on the map with Illadelphia Half Life, Philly beat Boston out of the box with nationally recognized artists like Schooly D. Despite the success of the Boston artists described above, it seems reasonable to ask why the city has not been more of a hip-hop hub over the years.

To tell the story of Boston hip-hop without addressing its underdog status would be to ignore an important identity within the community. At the same time, to focus only on this familiar angle would obscure the fact that Boston has had a vibrant (albeit underground) hip-hop scene from almost as soon as one emerged in New York. Given the proximity of the two cities, it should come as no surprise that Boston was an early recipient of the revolutionary music, dance and style that would come to be called hip-hop as it radiated out from its epicenter in New York. To tell the peculiar story of Boston hip-hop requires an exploration of the social and structural forces that it encountered in a city famous for its Irish bars, rock bands, college students and deep racial divisions. By tracing connections among Boston’s music industry, colleges, neighborhoods, nightclubs and artists, we can begin to understand how hip-hop remained underground in Boston all these years.

In the following, I provide a chronological account of the growth of Boston's hip-hop community from 1979 through the early 2000's. Because more has been written about the recent history of Boston's hip-hop scene, I pay more attention to its earliest years and less recognized founders. Although the article does not intentionally exclude any of the four elements of hip-hop, it is clearly more heavily focused on the music than on its dance and visual styles. This partly reflects my own bias as a record collector and DJ. It also reflects the simple fact that if little has been written about the early history of Boston's rap music scene, even less has been written about its dancers and graffiti artists. Certainly without the participation of the people I met and talked with about those early years, this work would not have been possible. Any errors or omissions are the author's alone.

## **THE BIRTH OF HIP HOP IN BOSTON: 1979-1988**

The 1979 release of "Rapper's Delight" by the Sugarhill Gang was a watershed moment for young people in Boston, as it was for kids across the country. While the origins of rap remain hidden in the tributaries that obscure all musical foundation stories, "Rapper's Delight", with its infectious party rhymes and familiar "Good Times" backing track, was the first rap song to reach large audiences. Skippy White, the owner of Boston's local record store chain of the same name, still remembers his encounter with this new art form vividly (White). On a Saturday afternoon in 1979, Skippy received a call from Joe Robinson of Sugarhill Records in New York. Joe was promoting the recently released single and encouraged Skippy to buy this indescribable new kind of music that was selling like crazy in New York.

On the strength of Joe's recommendation, Skippy agreed to take 50 of the records without even hearing them. This was just a week after the record had been released and in New York demand was already taking off. Given that the call arrived Saturday, Skippy estimates that he got the records no later than Tuesday. Whatever day they arrived, by the end of the week, they had sold out and he called Joe to get more copies of this strange new hit. By then, mere weeks after the release of "Rapper's Delight", Joe was already 10,000 orders behind and was struggling to keep up with demand.

Given the immediate appetite for "Rapper's Delight" at Skippy White's Records, it is clear that as early as 1979 there was a hungry market for rap records in Boston. Unfortunately, documentation of rap music and hip-hop culture in the city is rare before 1982. Perhaps the earliest Boston rap release is Kevin Fleetwood and the Cadillacs of Sound's 1983 record "Sweat it Off". Produced by Roxbury native Tony Rose, this funk infused party jam would have easily fit into the rapidly expanding Sugarhill catalog and was followed in 1984 by "Hood Rock". At the time of these releases, Kevin had been an active club and party DJ in Boston for a number of years and had a radio show on Northeastern University's radio station WRBB (104.9 FM).

While Fleetwood represented the college side of the nascent hip-hop scene, another crew with closer connections to the street was also making moves at the time. Chain Reaction was a crew that included DJs Michael K and Crystal C, Robbie Rob and Oogie. In addition to having a female DJ (Crystal C) long before Spindarella made the status famous with Salt N' Pepa's, DJ Michael K's version of Grandmaster Flash's "Adventures on the Wheels of Steel" routine was also the first time many people had seen turntablism performed by a Boston artist (Delgado).

Kevin Fleetwood, Chain Reaction and a young DJ named Rusty “the Toejammer” and his friend Skeeter (who was also a DJ on Northeastern University’s WRBB) were certainly among the first people to expose rap music to large audiences in Boston. However, it would not be until the 1985 appearance of Magnus Johnstone’s Lecco’s Lemma show on MIT’s radio station WMBR (88.1 FM) that the fledgling hip-hop community would have a real home on Boston’s airwaves. It would be even longer before Boston rap artists would have regular national exposure. In the years just before rap music took off, Boston’s urban music was dominated by the electro-funk sounds of the Johnson Brothers groups like Planet Patrol, Dwayne Omarr and Prince Charles and the City Beat Band.

#### Maurice Starr, Michael Jonzun, Tony Rose and the Hollywood Talent Nights

Maurice Starr (Lawrence Curtis Johnson) is widely recognized as the producer behind New Edition and New Kids on the Block. However, his role as accidental (and controversial) mentor to Boston’s earliest hip-hopers is less well known. His brother Michael Jonzun (Michael Johnson) is more closely associated with the origins of rap music for his 1982 electro 12” release “Pack Jam (Look out for the OVC)” on Tommy Boy records. Although the song contains no rapping, it was a national hit among urban audiences and rapidly became a breakdancing classic. Jonzun’s place in the hip-hop pantheon was solidified when “Pack Jam” was included along with “Space Cowboy” on Tommy Boy’s 1985 double LP *The Greatest Beats*. With the inclusion of two tracks by Boston’s own Planet Patrol and the Afrika Bambaataa/Arthur Baker classic “Planet Rock”, five out of the fifteen songs on the album had a Boston connection. In the early 1980’s, Boston was a hotbed of electro-infused R&B production and the Johnson brothers were in the middle of it (Morse, “Boston funk”, “Sky’s the limit”).

By the time they began receiving national acclaim in the early 1980’s for this work, both Johnson brothers had already been making a splash Boston’s urban music scene for quite some time. Having recently moved to Boston from Florida with their family, they began performing in Boston as the Johnson Brothers band in the 1970’s. Their 1978 single “Bout Time I Funk You” received heavy rotation on the urban-oriented AM radio station WILD (1090 AM) and became a local hit among nightclub audiences. In 1979, the record was picked up by RCA Victor and eventually sold 150,000 copies (Morse, “Sky’s the limit”). Around this time, Starr began making a name for himself (along with Boston native Tony Rose) as a producer with Prince Charles and the City Beat Band. By the mid-1970’s, Starr had started to throw his production expertise and industry contacts into a series of local talent shows he dubbed the Hollywood Talent Night. The impact of these shows on urban culture in Boston is hard to overstate. In addition to being the venue through which Starr developed and exposed acts like New Edition and New Kids on the Block, his Hollywood Talent Nights were galvanizing events for the community and provided an important incubator and outlet for emerging hip-hop talent. One of the regular performers was a young DJ who scratched with his feet.

Rusty “the Toejammer” Pendleton made a name for himself as a teenage DJ with his unique ability of scratching records with his feet. His friend and production partner Skeeter worked with Maurice Starr and by the early 1980’s Rusty had become the first call for all of Starr’s DJ needs. Prominent among these was the Hollywood Talent Nights where Rusty would whip the crowd into a fever in anticipation of the announcement of the winners. Rusty was already a polished and beloved

showman even in his early teens. With frequent college radio spots and an appearance on Peter Wolf's post J. Geils solo album, *Lights Out* (1984) which led to a performance on Saturday Night Live, Rusty was one of Boston's first local rap music stars. His teenage role in Starr's Hollywood Talent Nights was a critical early exposure of hip-hop music and style to a general audience.

Press reports described one of the events as a three day affair including 37 acts and as many as 3,000 attendees (Bourne). The dance crew Funk Effects (which included the popping and locking twins Billy and Bobby McClain, David Clemens, Tony Lopes and Andy Thomas) were regular attendees. By that time, Funk Effects was already a professional outfit managed and instructed by Boston dance pioneer David Vaughn who would go on to work with New Edition. With their elaborate space suit costumes and stage show, Funk Effects was a sight to behold. The Unikue Dominoes, another of Boston's premier dance groups, were also regular attendees. While Funk Effects represented the most professional and polished of Boston's dancers, their younger farm team, Boston Poppers and Lockers represented the younger generation. As popping and locking gave way to breakdance routines, shows began to include younger groups like the Boston Poppers and Lockers, The New York Puppeteers (which included future Floorlords member Lino "Leanski" Delgado), Cosmic Reaction and Mass Break Team (which included future Floorlords member Megatron). Other early local b-boy crews included HBO (Homeboys Only) Crew, Boston City Breakers, Spin City Rockers and TMC from Providence, RI.

In Starr's showcases, emerging hip-hop styles found a home beside the polished R&B and electro-funk sounds for which the Johnson Brothers had become famous. A picture from the middle 1980's documents the intersection of these two sides of urban youth culture. The picture depicts a young Rusty "the Toejammer" Pendleton with his mixer on a pile of milk crates and his turntable on the floor. As he cradles his knee with his toe scratching the record below, four even younger white teenagers look on from backstage apparently waiting for their chance to perform. The members of New Kids on the Block were still a year away from releasing their self-titled 1986 debut and were clearly soaking up the hip-hop style all around them.

Another critical node in Boston's urban music network was Roxbury native Tony Rose. Having grown up in the housing projects on Whittier St. in Roxbury, Rose moved to Los Angeles to pursue a career in the music industry. His success included positions at Burbank Studios (Warner Brothers and Columbia Pictures), in the accounting and sales division at Warner/Electra/Atlantic Records (WEA), as an accounts representative at Warren Lanier Public Relations and as an A & R representative at RCA Records. It was his deep industry connections that served as a critical catalyst for the emergence of the Boston black music scene in the late 1970s that paved the way for artists like Prince Charles and the City Beat Band, Maurice Starr, the Jonzun Crew, New Edition and eventually New Kids on the Block.

In 1977, Rose came back to Boston for a visit and ran into his childhood friend Lawrence "Larry Wu" Wedgeworth who took him to see a group called the Energetics at Roscoe's Lounge on Northampton St. According to Rose, things started to click from that point on (Rose). With his New York and Los Angeles contacts and industry experience, Rose began to connect Boston's urban talent with national distribution deals. The first act to benefit was the Energetics themselves. Mr. Rose provided the connections that eventually led the band to a record deal on Atlantic Records in 1979 and their first full length release "Come Down to Earth". Significantly, this group who would later be

renamed Planet Patrol and appear on the foundational Tommy Boy release “Planet Rock” as well as their own Tommy Boy release “Play at Your Own Risk” (the tracks for which were recorded at the same time as “Planet Rock”). For this contribution alone, Mr. Rose deserves a central place in the story connecting Boston’s 1970s black music scene to the birth of rap music a few years later. However, his contributions did not end there.

To provide a local outlet for the talent he was discovering in Boston, Rose founded the label Solid Platinum Records. Its first release was the 7:11 synth-funk workout “In the Streets” (1979) by Prince Charles and the City Beat Band. The song became a hit in New England nightclubs and the band quickly followed up in 1980 with their first full length record *Gang War*. Although the record focused almost entirely on the band’s incendiary synthesizer driven funk sound, the tune “Skin Tight” contained a short rap by the band’s leader Prince Charles Alexander. According to Rose (Rose), this was the first rap ever committed to record by a Boston artist. In 1983 the label would release Boston’s first proper rap 12” -- “Sweat it Off” by Kevin Fleetwood and the Cadillacs of Sound.

Meanwhile, the Johnson brothers were also making inroads in the growing national rap market. At Sugarhill Records, Doug Wimbish, Skip McDonald and Kieth LeBlanc were members of the house band that recorded many of the label’s earliest hits. In the early 1980s, the Johnson Brothers replaced this early Sugarhill house band and wrote the backing tracks for songs like “Monster Jam” by Brother to Brother, “Funky Sound (Tear the Roof Off)” by Sequence and “Showdown” by the Furious5 and the Sugarhill Gang. Not surprisingly, the Johnson Brothers were not the only Bostonians making use of their connections in the New York market. Many of Boston’s earliest hip-hoppers also had deep roots in New York, although typically of the familial rather than industry variety.

### New York Networks

Like all family relations, the one between Boston and New York is a complex blend of brotherly love and blood feuds. Certainly, it is true that many artists found it necessary to leave Boston to pursue their careers. Guru’s late 1980’s departure to Brooklyn (along with the Gangstarr name) was the first in a long string of rap artists that left Boston in search of industry access. At the same time, the popular narrative about the loss of talent to New York overlooks an equally important story about how hip-hop culture flowed up from New York to Boston through family and friendship networks. Given Boston’s proximity to New York, it should come as no surprise that early Boston hip-hop bore a close resemblance to the practices that had emerged a few years earlier down the coast. Movements of people, ideas, music, dance and fashion all helped launch a vibrant (albeit smaller) hip-hop community in Boston almost as soon as one had appeared in New York. Flyers for shows from the early 1980s include such New York inspired titles as “The Def Jam Party”, “Wild Style” and “Breakdown New York Style”. In the early days, people who got into hip-hop were all going to New York to get closer to the source and some already had deep New York roots.

Lino Delgado, a founding member of the Boston b-boy crew The Floorlords moved to Boston with his family in the mid 1970’s, leaving a large group of cousins and relatives behind in the Bronx (Delgado). In the late 1970’s, these cousins formed a breakdancing crew called High Performance and occasionally visited their Boston kin. Meanwhile, Lino’s family moved from a shared apartment on

Dudley St. to their own place on Westville St. in Dorchester. Still stinging from the bussing crisis of the middle 1970's, Dorchester was at that time a city sharply divided along racial lines. As the only Hispanic family living on the border that separated black and white Dorchester, Lino describes fighting the white kids at school and the black kids back in the neighborhood. As a result, he and his brother spent countless hours avoiding the dangerous streets by practicing choreographed routines set to Jackson 5 songs and other popular R&B hits of the time. During visits from his New York family, Lino and his brother would be asked to perform their routines to the delight of the assembled family. More importantly for the spread of hip-hop to Boston, it was on these visits that Lino and his brother began to absorb the new breakdancing styles demonstrated by their older New York cousins. Later, in the early 1980's, these same cousins would provide a place to stay as members of the young Floorlords made frequent trips to New York City to check out the latest styles and battle other crews.

Other early innovators also had strong New York ties. DJ Rusty "the Toe Jammer" Pendleton, had family in New York which facilitated his frequent record buying trips to the city (Pendleton). Another New York transplant, MC Spice (aka Amir Shakir), began his music career at an early age promoting parties for Rick Rubin in Brooklyn (MC Spice). After moving to Boston in the late 1980s, he continued to promote for the budding Def Jam records and maintained strong ties to his NY home (MC Spice). As a kid from Brooklyn, the hip-hop scene in Boston in the late 1980's seemed small and inexperienced to Spice. Demonstrating their lack of basic block party production knowledge, a group of kids in his neighborhood had negotiated with a neighbor to run an extension cord out of her house for a party. In exchange, they had agreed to keep the volume down. Spice found this compromise as silly as it was unnecessary given that light poles sprouted everywhere and could be accessed for free power if you knew how (which he did). With missionary zeal, he began showing his friends the tricks of the hip-hop trade he had learned from his elders in New York. At least early on, New York gave much more than it got back from Boston.

### Boston Hip-hop Comes of Age

By the middle of the 1980s hip-hop was the rage in Boston's inner city neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, Jamaica Plain and the South End. Show flyers and press reports make it clear that The Floorlords were at almost every show dancing and demonstrating their growing talents. The Four Corners neighborhood in Dorchester was an important location in the community as it was home to the young Raymond "Ray Dog" Scott and the Body Rock Crew made up of Big Chuck and Antonio (Emo E) Ennis. The nearby Roxbury neighborhood around Castlegate Rd. was also an important hub that produced the PC Crew featuring Def Jeff, Tony Rhome, Kevin Means and Orangeman. These two groups would eventually coalesce to form the Boston rap group and street clique Almighty RSO (aka Rock Shit On) crew. Back then, the frequent summer block parties on Capen St., Humboldt Ave. and Castlegate Rd. and shows at the Chez Vous roller skating rink, local middle schools and community centers were largely peaceful affairs that served as a unifying force for the community. Certainly, scuffles occasionally broke out, but those that did were rare and relatively benign. As it had in New York, hip-hop in Boston emerged organically out of community block parties that had featured DJs playing funk, disco and R&B only a few years before.

At the very beginning, adults in Boston's inner city neighborhoods did not know what to make of this new art form. Lino Delgado remembers an older dancer named Popeye showing up at these early parties and demonstrating a strange jerky dance that drew laughter from a crowd still unfamiliar with hip-hop style (Delgado). Already an accomplished breaker, Lino reserved his talents for a more receptive audience. Among the kids, hip-hop was exploding and Lino would soon have a receptive audience of peers.

Between 1983 and 1985, Rusty "the Toe Jammer" Pendleton alone performed 16 documented shows. Many were self produced parties like the 1983 "Atomic Dog Night" at the Chez Vous roller skating rink that included Dwayne Omarr and the dance crew the New York Puppeteers. Other shows took place at recreation centers at the Orchard Park and Bromley Heath housing complexes. In addition to numerous community shows, Rusty and his crew also played at larger clubs in the city opening for major acts. In 1985, he and the dance crew The Unikue Dominoes opened for Doug E. Fresh at the Kenmore Square nightclub 9 Lansdowne. By 1987 he was opening for MC Shan at the Lee School in Dorchester along with the young R.S.O and Body Rock crews. A short time later, Emo E would break up The Body Rock crew to join R.S.O. after Orangeman's departure from the group due to legal troubles. In another of Boston's critical early talent migrations, Big Chuck would eventually leave the city to pursue a career with Dr. Dre at Aftermath records. Like other members of the Boston rap diaspora who had greater successes elsewhere, Big Chuck's subsequent influence on the rap music industry is rarely associated with his Boston roots.

### Hip-hop Reaches the Suburbs

By 1985, hip-hop culture had spread across Boston's Black and Hispanic neighborhoods and was beginning to reach white kids in the suburbs. Though the converts were smaller in number, they were no less committed than youth in Boston's inner cities. In Dedham, a suburb West of Boston, DJ Koo Koo was preaching the hip-hop lifestyle to young Matt Reyes. He and Matt would go on to form White Magic (Boston's first white rap group) which was followed almost immediately by The White Boy Crew (a Boston and Cambridge duo made up of Mc Popeye and the beatboxing Spinach). In Malden, young John Preziosa (aka Jawn P) formed the Double Def crew which would eventually become Top Choice Clique (Reyes). With DJ Gemini and MC/DJ Force, this seminal Boston group had an interracial makeup at a time when that was still exceedingly rare.

Even suburbs as distant as Lowell, MA were spawning vibrant scenes. Donny Maker (aka DJ Def Rock) was schooled early on in the hip-hop lifestyle having grown up near Lowell's Julian D. Steele Housing Development (aka The Shaugnessy Projects). Like many kids of that age, he first encountered rap in 1979 when he heard "Rappers Delight" on the radio (Maker). By the early 1980's he was already an accomplished graffiti artist and was honing his growing MC and DJ skills in local battles and parties at the Shaugnessy projects. Several encounters with Dr. Freshh helped him learn the "human metronome" technique and by the middle of the 1980's Donny was performing regularly as an MC in a group called the Fresh Beat Force that featured a white female beatboxer named Bizzy Bee. By 1985, Donny had formed the EMC3 Crew that (at various times) included himself Bizzy Bee, Frost Bee, Cool

Will, Steve Nyce and DJs Jerry Jay and Active. Until 1990, the group battled and performed in the Boston area at shows like the summer Kite Festival and eventually opened for national artists like Run DMC and Intelligent Hoodlum at the Lowell Memorial Auditorium.

During these early years, Boston's art world also became aware of the cultural phenomenon that was sweeping the country. In December 1983, two of Boston's premier art movie houses (The Coolidge Corner Theater and Orson Wells Cinemas) screened the recently released hip-hop documentary *Wild Style*. Two of its graffiti writing stars, Pink (Sandra Fabara) and Heart (Gloria Williams) came to town to promote the film and were featured in an article in the *Boston Globe* that week (Temin). The Institute of Contemporary Art also participated by hosting a famously informal hip-hop cultural event that included a MC battle between regular attendees of the Leccos Lemma radio show. As it had in New York, some segments of the art world in Boston embraced hip-hop style as the newest trend in pop art.

### Boston's Early Rap Releases

By any measure, 1986 was a huge year for Boston rap music. Before that time, Kevin Fleetwood's records and Rusty the Toejammer's 1985 "Breakdown New York Style" (which he released with his group The Sure Shot 4) represented the bulk of local rap releases. Between 1986 and 1987 there were suddenly several new singles released by local artists. Leveraging a relationship with Maurice Starr's cousin, Lawrence "Wu" Wedgeworth, MC Spice negotiated a contract with Atlantic records and in 1986 released his first single "Don't Treat Your Girl Like a Dog". Although a full record never came out, Spice was the first Boston rapper signed to Atlantic (to be followed closely by MC Lyte) and his was the first release on a major label for a Boston rapper. In the same year, the RSO Crew released "The Greatest Show on Earth" on Boston's Boot Records which they followed in 1987 with "We'll Remember You". Not to be outdone, Dwayne Omarr, another Boston pioneer released the single "Holy Rock" on the Reading label Critique.

Amid all this local activity, perhaps the most important of the 1986 releases was the *Boston Goes Def* compilation. Produced by Steve "Mr. Beautiful" Barry, this collection presented a veritable who's who of Boston's earliest rap artists including Disco P and the Fresh MC, FTI (Fresh to Impress) Crew (which included rapper Ed "Edo G" Anderson), the White Boy Crew, MC Capers, Rusty the Toejammer and Larry D, and The Body Rock Crew among others. While it was a watershed moment for the community, the music represents a compromise between the do-it-yourself rap aesthetic of the artists and the professional rock production sensibilities of the producers. At the same time, the national airwaves were awash with Run DMC's pioneering rock-rap remake of Aerosmith's classic rock anthem "Walk this Way" (See Aerosmith sidebar). Given Boston's legacy as a rock-and-roll town, it seems oddly appropriate that the song that paved the way for rock-rap was co-written by its toxic twins Stephen Tyler and Joe Perry.

These releases dramatically increased the availability of locally recorded rap music. However, they only represented a fraction of the recording activity that was going on at the time in Boston. Because most young crews lacked the financial resources to press a 12" record, they relied on whatever technology was at hand to document their creativity. Aspiring artists all over the city made pause tapes (e.g., mixtapes recorded using the pause button on a tape deck) and simple live recordings of

beatboxing, rhyming and DJing on rudimentary home recording systems. Very early demo tapes from such accomplished artists as The Almighty RSO and Guru are clearly recorded live with minimal engineering and simple recording technology (MC Keithy E).

As technology improved and local producers began to accumulate more gear and engineering skills, the sound of local productions improved as well. Dense 4 track turntable compositions were being created as early as 1986 by Carver's DJ Prime, and as soon as drum machines became available at local music stores, they began to appear on recordings in Boston. A 1986 Keithy E demo tape includes tracks featuring the young Guru rhyming and flexing his singing voice over a bare drum machine track. As samplers became widely available and began gracing Marly Marl productions, kids in Boston were busy trying to replicate and advance the sounds they were hearing on major releases.

Although local hip-hop proliferated during the late 1980's, several factors made it hard for Boston artists to translate local talent into recording contracts and national recognition. Boston's reputation as a rock-and-roll town that had spawned bands like the Cars, Boston, Aerosmith and The J. Geils Band meant that the local music industry was less oriented toward urban audiences and tastes. Because rock music dominated the nightclubs in greater Boston, rap performances usually occurred at community events like the annual Kite Festival and privately organized concerts like Maurice Starr's Talent Night showcases. Later, the perceived (and often realized) potential for violence at rap concerts would make it even harder to get shows at Boston nightclubs. However, among all of the factors that limited exposure for local artists, the absence of a commercial radio station devoted to local rap music is one of the most important. Strangely, as rap crossed over and achieved mainstream popularity across the country in the middle 1980's, commercial radio in Boston sat on the sidelines.

#### The College Radio Nexus: Preserving the Underground

Unlike in other cities where commercial radio stations began to include rap music programming in the late 1980s, commercial radio stations in Boston maintained an ambivalent (if not mildly hostile) relationship with rap music well into the 1990's. As late as 1993, *The Boston Globe* was reporting about how little rap music had penetrated commercial radio in Boston (Bickelhaupt). At that time, only WJMN (94.5 FM), WILD (1090-AM) and WXKS (107.9-FM) included rap programming regularly. Even these stations had fairly strict limitations on what they would play. WJMN (94.5-FM) played a wider variety of rap music than either of the other two other stations (which tended toward Top 40 hits at WXKS and popular R&B with occasional rap hits at WILD). Given the commercial success of Boston artists like New Edition, New Kids on the Block, Marky Mark, Bell Biv Devoe and Bobby Brown, perhaps it is no accident that Boston's urban stations tended to emphasize top 40 R&B and New Jack Swing over harder rap. From very early on, college and community radio stations provided the harder urban and underground material that was not being played on Boston's commercial stations. Among the earliest and most important of these college radio rap shows was Magnus Johnstone's Lecco's Lemma show on MIT's WMBR (88.1-FM) (Foster).

Magnus Johnstone (a local painter and college radio DJ) encountered rap music almost as soon as it began to be released. A musical omnivore with tastes leaning strongly toward Caribbean and African music, he had also been a long time fan of German electronic bands like Kraftwerk and had a

weekly reggae show on MIT's radio station WMBR (88.1 FM). Never a fan of the slick production of early 1980s R&B and club music, the raw aesthetic and hard electronic beats of rap music appealed to his do-it-yourself, groove-loving sensibilities. By 1984 he was occasionally getting to play his growing collection of rap and electronic records on guest spots on WMBR's urban music show "The Ghetto".

In the spring of 1985, Magnus was growing tired of his reggae show and increasingly unsatisfied with the rare opportunity to play rap and electronic music on "The Ghetto". He planned to leave the station that summer. In an effort to keep Magnus at the station, his friend and fellow WMBR DJ Thomas Uebel convinced him to pitch the station director on a new rap and electronic music show called Lecco's Lemma. In the fall of 1985, Magnus was given the 4-6 PM slot on Saturdays and began the show which was to become a central force in catalyzing the hip-hop community in Boston.

It was not until the appearance of Magnus's Lecco's Lemma show that the local rap music community had a true home on the airwaves. Fans credit the show with exposing people to this new music and providing an outlet and meeting place for fledgling artists (Foster). For young people who were hungry for this emerging art form, the Lecco's Lemma was both an education in the newest releases and an inspiration for their own creations because Magnus solicited and regularly played tapes from local groups. In his hypnotizing and strangely accented hipster drawl, Magnus would introduce his favorite new rap releases, announce shows and most importantly, play almost any local artist at least once.

On his weekly reggae show, Magnus had often invited MC's to toast live on the air over versions. In December 1985 he adopted the same practice for the Lecco's Lemma show and began inviting local rap artists come into the station to perform live on the air. While it seemed a natural evolution to Magnus, this decision marked a turning point in the show and after several glorious months, would lead to its death and eventual rebirth on the Boston College station WZBC (90.3-FM). From this point on, the show became a lively physical as well as a virtual meeting place for the community. One of Magnus's most famous early guests was MC Keithy E (aka Keith Elam) who appeared with DJ Mikey D to discuss a recently completed demo tape containing rough versions of "Cold Cold World" and "The Lesson". Other early regulars included Disco P & The Fresh MC, Bodyrock (Chuck & Emo E), MC Capers, The Almighty RSO and FTI crews, Rusty The Toejammer, The Tuff Crew, MC Fantasy, MC Spice and RCC. Magnus was fulfilling his mission of exposing the world to the incredible music being made by inner city youth.

As early as 1986, teens in white working class suburbs like Malden and Carver had been bitten by the hip-hop bug and began sending their tapes to Magnus and appearing on the show. For young artists like Carver's DJ Prime, Malden's Double Def Crew and the Boston/Cambridge duo the White Boy Crew (whose takeoff of "La Di Da Di" became a minor hit on the show), having your tape played on Lecco's Lemma translated into immediate neighborhood credibility. Although the radio shows generally went off without incident, there were occasional scuffles and it was not unusual for profanities to slip out during exuberant on air performances. When the latter generated calls from local parents and teachers concerned about the negative influence the show might be having on young people, station management began taking note of this controversial new development on Saturday afternoons.

Finally, in the spring of 1986, a crew that was scheduled to appear on the show handed out flyers announcing an MC battle at the station. Magnus arrived that afternoon to find over 100 unsupervised youngsters bustling around basement halls of MIT. Whether it was the unsupervised youth roaming the halls, the occasional profanity that slipped out over the air, the calls from parents or some combination of these factors, the show was not invited back for a fall season in 1986. With help from a friend, Magnus was able to move the show to Boston College's WZBC-FM (90.3) in Newton where it continued until the spring of 1988.

During Magnus's unlikely reign as Boston's rap radio pioneer, he watched as artists that had once sent him homemade tapes went on to sign record deals with major labels. He also watched as a new generation of artists emerged -- more and more of whom seemed to be coming from Boston's largely white suburbs. Now receiving a regular supply of new (and increasingly professional sounding) tapes from suburban groups like COD, Top Choice Clique, Out Of Town Posse, DJ Spin, MCDJ Force and Paris Toon, Magnus's original goal of exposing the world to music being made at home by inner city youth was fading (Reyes).

In the meantime, other college stations had also developed rap shows (most of which were more professional sounding than Magnus' notoriously informal productions). Harvard's WHRB (95.3 FM) had "Street Beat" which was run by Harvard students David Mays and Jon Schechter (the eventual founders of The Source) with DJ Def Jeff from The RSO Crew. An equally professional sounding effort could be heard on Emerson College's WERS (88.9 FM) "Rap Explosion". This show featured short-lived DJ wunderkind Jesse McKie and his mixmaster successor Mark Morrow.

By the late 1980's a second generation of Boston rap groups had released influential golden age records and were regularly appearing at Boston's music industry showcase, The Boston Music Awards. In 1988, TDS Mob released their underground classic "Dope for the Folks" which was built around a sample from the similarly titled Soul Searchers track "Funk for the Folks" and would go on to become a one of the most sought after of Boston's rare rap releases. The racially integrated Malden group Top Choice Clique had released a demo of "Push It Past Red" on Colorblind Records and "The Powers in the Words" (1988) on Waltz Records. Edo G was regularly performing as Edo Rock with the FTI (Fresh to Impress Crew) and The Almighty RSO was also rapidly becoming a major force in Boston's rap scene.

Despite all this activity, hip-hop in Boston remained a youth and art world phenomena well into the 1990s. It may be true that hip-hop reached mainstream popularity later in Boston than it had in New York, but press reports from the time also overlooked the vibrant underground scene that had existed from very early on. For example, a 1990 Globe article titled "Rap Invasion Tapping on Boston's Door" (Morse) makes it seem as if rap music was virtually unknown in Boston. In fact, as Boston's mainstream papers began to announce the arrival of rap music in 1990, hip-hop in Boston was already entering its adolescence.

Maurice Starr's wildly popular Hollywood Talent Nights were a thing of the past. Boston pioneer MC Spice had already left his career in Boston and been summoned back to help produce Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch's debut album in 1990. After his early career as a teen DJ phenomenon who scratched with his feet, Rusty Pendleton had become the regular DJ at the popular Hollywood Talent Night series, recorded with Peter Wolf, dropped his youthful nickname and gone on to found Spin City

Records/Funky Fresh Records. The early princes of Boston Dance, Funk Effects and their farm team Boston Poppers and Lockers had disbanded and gone their separate ways while younger upstarts, The New York Puppeteers had joined members of the Mass Break Team to become the legendary b-boy crew The Floorlords who ruled regional battles throughout the 1980's.

As Boston hip-hop began to be recognized by mainstream local media, it entered a new and violent period as growing commercial interests met the tidal wave of gang violence that swept through Boston's inner city in the early 1990's. Back in the early days, before the money got into it, hip-hop in Boston began just like it had in New York – as a style, art form and way of life for a small group of youth that expressed itself musically, socially, artistically, and only later professionally.

### **THE GOLDEN AGE AND THE DARKEST DAYS: 1988-1995**

By the late 1980s, hip-hop in Boston had entered a new phase. The early days of community shows at the Lee School, open mics at the 4 Corners hot spots Ben's Lounge and Cortees's and countless undocumented (and largely peaceful) block parties gave way to a new era of growing competition (Staton). As the commercial potential of hip-hop became obvious, more and more artists saw it as a ticket to fame and fortune (or at least out of the hardscrabble life of the inner city). Crews began to hustle for scarce industry resources like access to recording studios, paid gigs and elusive recording contracts with national labels. The halcyon days of impromptu on air battles at Lecco's Lemma were long gone. Hip-hop had entered its adolescence, which brought with it a new level of braggadocio, energy and violence.

Movies like the 1988 film *Colors* heralded this new era. Hollywood images glorifying the gangster lifestyle arrived along with a real world crack and gang epidemic that swept through Boston's inner city neighborhoods (Pendleton). To young people in the inner city, this early media depiction of the gangster lifestyle provided a model for their own growing real world turf battles. As inner city neighborhoods became engulfed in a rising tide of youth violence in the early 1990s, young people began to distinguish themselves and their powerful neighborhood affiliations using sports team caps and jerseys.

Inner city youth took these geographic and brand identifications more and more seriously as they were deeply connected to powerful neighborhood (and sometimes gang) identities. In Dorchester's 4 Corners neighborhood, Adidas sneakers reigned supreme as evidenced by the Adidas Tree (a tree festooned with dozens of pairs of sneakers) that served as public notice of the local brand identity (See Sidebar on Adidas). The complex intersection of neighborhood turf wars, drugs and gang activity generated an explosion of violence in the early 1990's which would take many lives in Boston's young hip-hop community and alienate the local entertainment industry just as rap was demonstrating its enormous commercial potential.

For most of the 1980s, the murder rate in Boston had fluctuated between 82 and 105 people per year. It had been a relatively peaceful decade in a city still recovering from the racial violence of the bussing crisis in the 1970's. In a shocking end to this relative tranquility, 143 people (most of them inner

city youth) were murdered in Boston in 1990. This violence had a profound and lasting impact on the hip-hop community as beefs that began in the neighborhood often showed up at events and vice versa. Increasingly, fights (and sometimes deaths) became common at rap shows. In the summer of 1992, a free concert at City Hall Plaza featuring a Tribe Called Quest and Arrested Development drew 20,000 young people. The show was cancelled after only three acts when the crowd surged forward, knocking over several police barricades. 15 people were hurt and 24 arrested in what was described as a “rampage” by the Boston Globe, as frustrated young fans threw bottles at police, engaged in fights and trashed several local businesses (Murphy). Despite the mixed color of the crowd at the event, in the eyes of a wary public, hip-hop in Boston seemed to be increasingly associated with violence, gangs and problems with inner city youth. Violence at shows made nightclub owners and promoters reluctant to book rap music which reduced the already limited number of outlets for shows in Boston during the early 1990’s. Just as the music was demonstrating its massive commercial potential across the country, outlets were drying up in Boston. Rap shows occasionally appeared at Boston rock venues like the Channel Nightclub and Kenmore Square’s famous Rathskeller, but during this period, regular hip-hop events were rare and usually short lived due to fights (or the fear of them).

Despite the lack of outlets for local talent and the long shadows cast by Boston R&B groups like New Edition, New Kids on the Block, Bobby Brown, Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch and Bel Biv Devoe, in the late 1980s local Boston rap groups slowly began to get more media attention. In 1987, the first Boston Music Awards included a category for “Outstanding Rap Act” and the first several years of the awards included a veritable who’s who of late 1980s Boston groups.

**Table 1. Outstanding rap Act Category: Boston Music Awards (1987-1990)**

1987	1988	1989	1990
FTI Crew	A Train	Disco P. & Orangeman	GangStarr Posse
Oreo Crew	Disco P. & Fresh MC	GangStarr	MC Spider
RSO Crew	Fat Girls	RSO Crew	RSO Crew
Wack Attack	Gang Starr	T.D.S. Mob	T.D.S. Mob
White Boy Crew	Rusty the Toe Jammer	Top Choice Clique	Top Choice Clique

This local exposure notwithstanding, in the early 1990’s, Boston rap groups still struggled to get national recording contracts and some began to leave Boston to pursue careers in New York. MC Keithy E of the Gangstarr Crew’s departure for Brooklyn, NY (along with Gangstarr name) was a formative story for the Boston hip-hop community. His subsequent success with DJ Premier is the stuff of hip-hop legend. However, because Guru did not regularly refer to his Boston roots in those early days, some folks back home felt the city had lost an opportunity for national recognition that it deserved. Perhaps contradicting this popular narrative, on a 1986 radio appearance on WZBC (90.9 FM) in Newton, Guru talks about a recent move to Brooklyn where he hoped to get his own record on the market and then “reach out to all the fly rappers, and beatboxers and DJs in Boston” (MC Keithy E). While he clearly had the intention of using his success to pave the way for local artists, in the end Guru made New York his permanent home and most early fans associated his success with Brooklyn rather than Boston.

The harder hitting Boston group The Almighty RSO had translated their two independent Boot releases into a deal with Tommy Boy records in 1992. Their goal seemed to be to leverage their local street credibility to build national exposure and a name for themselves as Boston's bad boys of rap. Their release on Tommy Boy, "One in the Chamba" (1992) was an angry, hard hitting track describing the police harassment and brutality members had witnessed growing up in Roxbury. According to Raymond "Ray Dog" Scott, the leader of the group, the song "vented frustration with police" and described the police shooting of two friends, Christopher Rogers and Nethaniel Lackland (Grant).

Echoing the feeling shared by many gangsta rappers of the time, RSO felt they had the right to report about the violence they were witnessing in America's inner cities. "One in the Chamba" pulled no punches in advocating armed resistance to violent police tactics and was swept up -- along with Ice T's recently released "Cop Killer" (1992) -- in a national controversy about the messages in gangsta rap songs. To the Boston Police Patrolman's Association, the song apparently seemed like a taunt from a group that had a long history of encounters with the law. With the backing of Oliver North and Jack Thompson (the Florida attorney who sued 2 Live Crew for profanity), The Boston Police Patrolman Association announced their intention to sue Tommy Boy records. Shortly thereafter, RSO was dropped from the label which claimed the decision was due to low sales. Members of the group felt the label had succumbed to public pressure (Grant).

By the late 1980's, another Boston rap creation with ties to The Almighty RSO, The Source magazine, was appearing as a photocopied sheet in local record stores like Skippy Whites, Nubian Notions and Spin City. Founded by Harvard rap fans David Mays and John Schecter (and with a little early advertising support from Skippy White) the publication rapidly grew in popularity and seemed destined to become a vehicle for exposing Boston artists to a national audience. In 1990, when the young Source relocated to New York, Boston lost its second rising star in just a few years. The sense of playing second fiddle to the larger city down the coast was gradually rising among Boston fans.

The controversial relationship between The Source and RSO's Raymond "Ray Dog" Scott (later known as Benzino), is widely known and well reported elsewhere (Chang). In a now famous event in hip-hop journalism, Mays' battle with the editorial staff over a review of a RSO record led to a staff walkout in 1994. However, this did not end the struggles at the magazine. After a decade filled with charges of sexual harassment, staff intimidation and financial mismanagement, The Source finally removed Mays and Benzino in 2006. Perhaps because The Source story included so many controversies and public battles, its more positive elements (and their Boston roots) are not as salient in the public memory. Putting all the controversies aside, the seminal role that The Source has played in providing a voice for the hip-hop nation can not be denied. The fact that it emerged out of the vibrant underground hip-hop scene in Boston in the late 1980's should not be forgotten.

Other late 1980's Boston rap pioneers also fared well in the early 1990's. Chief among them was Edward Anderson from the Fresh to Impress Crew. Now calling himself Ed O. G. and appearing as Ed O. G. & Da Bulldogs, his Boston bona fides were reinforced with the commercial success of his 1991 single "I got to have it/Life of a kid in the ghetto" on PWL records. In 1991 the single reached number 1 on Billboard's Hot Rap Singles charts and the video was receiving heavy rotation on Yo! MTV Raps and Vibe. For folks in Boston, seeing scenes of Dudley Square rolling by on TV proved that fame was

indeed possible for Boston artists (Boston Beats and Rhymes). Boston hip-hop seemed just about to get its day on the national stage.

Unfortunately, several factors stymied the careers of Boston's rap artists during this period. Despite having several sources for rap music on the commercial airwaves, the format still leaned heavily toward top 40 rap and R&B hits on WXKS (KISS 108 FM) and WILD (1090 AM). The rap airwaves in Boston took on a slightly harder edge in 1993, when after a decade long battle with WXKS, WZOU (94.5 FM) changed its call letters to WJMN and as "Jam'n 94.5" billed itself as "Boston's home for blazing hip-hop and the hottest R&B" and began to play edgier fare. Although this change increased the amount of harder rap being played in Boston (and provided a launching pad for local DJs like Gee Spin), none of the commercial stations featured local artists regularly.

In addition, the exposure that Boston artists did receive was often curtailed by clashes between performers and members of the local music industry. At a mid-1990's concert sponsored by Jam'n 94.5, Edo G was having trouble with an engineer who seemed unable to get a good vocal sound on stage. In the language he was accustomed to using at the time, Edo boastfully threatened the soundman. Whether merely youthful braggadocio or actual threat, this interaction did not help him win friends with station management and illustrated the tensions that sometimes flared as teenage musicians with street corner attitudes encountered an unfamiliar and already wary local music industry.

It also remained difficult to get rap music nights started and sustaining themselves in Boston nightclubs in the early 1990s. Because the community was plagued by infighting, violence at shows became more common which in turn made nightclub owners reluctant to book rap acts (Diggs). The high level of internecine fighting in those days led some to describe the Boston scene as being "like crabs in a barrel". At the same time, from inside the community, this exclusion took on a racial overtone as most of the same clubs seemed willing to book occasionally violent (and predominantly white) punk and heavy metal shows.

Throughout the early 1990's, Boston still lacked an organized rap music industry to help artists navigate their careers and interact effectively with the local and national music industry. In the 1970's and 1980's, Boston had had a strong rock-and-roll scene and its music industry continued to reflect that bias in the 1990s. During a period when Boston produced nationally recognized rock acts like The Pixies, The Throwing Muses, Morphine, The Mighty Mighty Bosstones, The Breeders and many others, it remained hard to book a local rap show in town. Although the Boston Music Awards continued to include an "outstanding rap act" category (Table 2), these nominations reflected a small slice of the local scene. Boston veterans like Edo G, Gangstarr, The Almighty RSO and Top Choice Clique remained regular recipients and in the early 1990's, Marky Mark (Mark Wahlberg) began to appear regularly. However, with the 1994 inclusion of G. Love & Special Sauce, the nominations increasingly started to reflect top 40 radio and college tastes.

**Table 2. Nominations for Outstanding Rap Act Category: Boston Music Awards (1991-1995)**

1991	1992	1993	1994	1995
Gangstarr Posse	Ed O.G. & Da Bulldogs	The Almighty RSO Crew	Ed O.G. & Da Bulldogs	The Almighty RSO
Marky Mark	GangStarr	Ed O.G. & Da Bulldogs	GangStarr	Ed O.G. & Da Bulldogs
RSO Crew	Marky Mark & The Funky Bunch	GangStarr	Guru	GangStarr
T.D.S. Mob	Posse NFX	Marky Mark & The Funky Bunch	Marky Mark & The Funky Bunch	G. Love & Special Sauce
Top Choice Clique	Tam Tam	Top Choice Clique	Top Choice Clique	Top Choice Clique
Young Nation	Top Choice Clique			

Stylistic differences did not help bridge the significant cultural divides between urban artists and the local music industry. Even those artists that *had* achieved national success were still having trouble with bad luck and industry politics. After being dropped by Tommy Boy, RSO was picked up by Ruthless Records but their progress was again curtailed when their mentor and producer, Eazy E died in 1995. With a few notable exceptions (Edo G, RSO/Made Men/Benzino, Guru), it would take the explosion of underground rap in the late 1990's before Boston artists began to reach national audiences on a regular basis.

### **REGIONAL SCENES AND THE (RE)BIRTH OF THE UNDERGROUND: 1995-2006**

As a long time hip-hop fan and community activist, Cindy Diggs had been observing the challenges faced by Boston's hip-hop community for many years. In 1995, she decided something needed to be done. Cindy formed a hip-hop advocacy group called Us Making Moves Forever (UMMF) to help unify the hip-hop community while building connections with members of the national music industry. Under this banner, Cindy rallied the community and eventually built a 500-person membership organization that published a newsletter, arranged industry networking events for local artists and most importantly, began to organize successful local shows. Given the difficulty (and dangers) of booking nighttime shows at places that served alcohol, Cindy scheduled shows in the evening, on off nights, or at places with no alcohol.

This strategy proved successful and one of her most influential regular events was a weekly open mic at a soul food restaurant on Columbus Ave named Bob the Chef's. This event became an incubator for mid 1990's rappers and groups like Mr. Lif, Akrobatik, K.T., Concrete Clique, Lo-Kee, S.N.I.P.E.R., Domestik Soulgerz, Mikst Nutz, Rip Shop, M-Slash, Imperial G. Smooth, Punch Spiked Wit Poison, T. Max, God Complex (aka. 7L and Esoteric) and many others who would go on to have successful careers as performers and recording artists. In addition to helping forge allegiances among a new generation of underground artists, these open mics also served as a training ground for the larger industry networking events hosted by UMMF. Their Can We Talk 2 U? Entertainment Convention was held annually between 1995 and 1998 and exposed young Boston artists to industry professionals (and vice versa). The

inclusion of nationally recognized speakers like Wendy Day of the Rap Coalition and Jam Master Jay drew national attention for Boston's rap scene through write-ups in the Source, Rap Pages and Blaze magazines (Diggs).

UMMF played a critical role in unifying Boston's hip-hop community, opening nightclubs to the idea of doing shows and helping artists connect with industry professionals. However, in the late 1990's, Cindy was spending more and more of her own money and time on the organization and needed to find a way to make it self sustaining. When an attempt to collect a small yearly membership was not successful, she returned to doing paid community work and spent less and less time on the organization. In recognition of her many years of service to Boston's hip-hop community, in 2006 Cindy received a lifetime achievement award from the Mass Industry Commission's (M.I.C) at their second annual Boston Hip-Hop Awards. Her Akrobatik coined moniker, "Mother Hip-Hop" succinctly summarizes her enduring place in the local community.

Partly due to Cindy's efforts with U.M.M.F., the freeze on rap in nightclubs started to thaw in the late 1990s and Boston was well poised to ride the wave of underground hip-hop that was about to sweep college campuses. By the late 1990s a new generation of Boston artists was turning underground credibility and intelligent rhymes into regular gigs and recording deals. Late in the 1990's, members of UMMF began their own night under the moniker Main Ingredient Productions (aka. Metro Concepts) at the Cambridge reggae club The Western Front. This weekly open mic became a regular stop for Boston's growing community of underground MCs and allowed emerging artists to hone their skills in front of (largely) supportive audiences (Boston Beats and Rhymes).

During the middle 1990s, Rusty Pendleton dropped his youthful nickname and was focusing more on his record store business than on DJ gigs. While he still occasionally played out, most of his time was spent managing the store, promoting events, holding in-store appearances and serving as a vinyl oasis for the urban hip-hop community. Illustrating the geographic and racial lines that have historically divided the city, few of the legions of new "backpacker" rap fans (e.g., white college students) who began turning out at local rap shows were willing to venture over to Funky Fresh Records (which sat in the heart of the very non-white Dudley Square neighborhood) to get schooled on the latest urban beats. This new community was more likely to find its vinyl at Boston's many used record stores or at one of several Newbury Comics stores, none of which were located in Boston's inner city neighborhoods (See Record Stores sidebar). By the mid 1990's, Boston had its first store catering specifically to the growing market for underground hip-hop. Located on Massachusetts Avenue right near the top of Newbury Street, Biscuithead was a nexus for the underground rap scene. Its location within blocks of many other record stores (e.g., Spin City/Nuggets, Tower Records, Newbury Comics, Boston Beat, etc.) made it a regular stop for eclectic diggers on their rounds and hip-hop heads alike. Back in those days, Biscuithead was the downtown outlet for underground hip-hop while Rusty's Funky Fresh Records catered to inner city tastes. This cultural and geographic division would persist in the local hip-hop community well into the new millennium (and continues to rear its head occasionally to this day).

During this period, rap music production was booming in Boston. Two Berklee College of music graduates, Dow Brain and Brad Young, formed Underground Productions and were getting regular

production work by the middle 1990s. A veteran of Newbury Studios, Brad had already made a name for himself working with artists like RSO. In the mid-1990's, Dow and Brad met MC Casey "Polecat" Staton through Brad's contacts at Newbury Studios. In 1995, this team would produce the Punch/Polecat split 12" LP on DBK Records featuring the classic Boston underground tracks "Mindless" and "Out Ta Flip." Brad and Dow would also work with Dorchester rapper Todd "T-Max" Keith Maxwell, on the blunted urban classic 12" single "Relax your mind/Execution style" (1996). The more popular track, "Execution style" sold 11,000 units and reached the top 10 on the CMJ charts. "Relax your mind" was also a popular Boston rap track (eventually selling 6,000 units) and received play on local college radio stations. Perhaps most interesting is Dow and Brad's collaboration with local dancehall producer Junior Rodigan as it reflects the extent to which Boston hip-hop had absorbed Jamaican influences by the middle of the 1990s (See Jamaican influences sidebar).

Meanwhile, local scenes in some of Boston's surrounding suburbs had been developing for ten years and were beginning to bear fruit. Lawrence MA had produced the gritty beats and blunted rhymes of MC Scientifik. His 1994 single "Jungles of Da East", which was co-produced by DJ Shame, remains one of the classic underground tracks of the mid 1990s along with the Edo G produced "Lawtown". Having moved to southern New Hampshire from Lowell, MA, Donny "Def Rock" Maker founded Monstamind Records and released a 12" under the name Magabug that received favorable reactions and local radio play from college DJs like Brian Coleman. Def Rock also began working with younger artists like Lowell's Peter "Lyrical Lord Plourde" Plourde who began appearing in and often winning Boston MC battles in the mid late 1990's. Eventually forming the group X-Caliber with his partner Fee, their 1998 "Butta Messenga" was a college radio hit and launched Lyrical's career.

By the late 1990's, violence prevention initiatives had created a dramatic drop in violence among inner city youth. Between 1995 and 1997, no one under the age of 18 had been killed by a gun in Boston. Even legendary Boston gangsta rapper Raymond Scott of RSO, had gotten in on the peace game. Working at the Canton studio he shared with RSO publisher and long time collaborator David Mays, Ray began releasing tracks with a collection of former rival gang members called the Wiseguys. Made up of Anthony "Cool Gzus" Grant (formerly of TDS mob), Demaine "the Master Criminal" Thomas, James Marsh, Cordell Jones, Antonio "Tangg the Juice" Altamarino, Orvell "Big Man the Terror" Hairston and Kevin "1-MP" Thurston, the group used their street credibility to spread a message of peace and unity among Boston's inner city youth (Morse). Despite these positive initiatives, controversy would haunt former members of RSO well into the new millennium.

As underground hip-hop began to take off in the late 1990's, Boston was well positioned to catch the wave. In the late 1990's, rock nightclubs like the Middle East in Cambridge and Bill's Bar in Boston's Fenway neighborhood began hosting semi-regular rap nights featuring national acts (See Rock Clubs sidebar). Often local acts would open for larger national acts, thereby increasing their exposure. The location of these clubs near Harvard University, MIT, Boston University and Northeastern meant that college students could easily access the shows (Boston Beats and Rhymes). As the grimy, sample-heavy beats and clever lyricism of underground hip-hop gained popularity across college campuses nationwide, Boston's new generation of artists had been honing the formula for years.

While the increasing popularity of local artists among college students helped fuel local careers, it also paradoxically reinforced a racial cleavage that had existed in the community for many years. Increasingly, African American artists like Akrobatik, Mr. Lif, T-Max and Insight found themselves performing to largely white college audiences (Boston Beats and Rhymes). Adding to the complexity, since white artists like 7L and Esoteric, Edan and the Porn Theater Ushers were also regularly appearing before these audiences, there was often more racial diversity on stage than in the audience. Performances like Edan and Insight rocking doubles together on one set of turntables certainly represented a degree of integration among artists that was not as widely shared among audiences (Boston Beats and Rhymes).

If local underground artists were not very well known in Boston's inner city, Boston's urban rap artists were totally unknown to the college crowds that attended shows at the Middle East and Bill's Bar. As Boston's underground hip-hop scene grew throughout the late 1990's and turn of the century it was largely disconnected from inner city fans that favored grittier material and Top 40 fare. Nonetheless, artists who had honed their talents at UMMF shows in the mid-1990's now had full-fledged careers. The arrival of two new local labels in the late 1990's and early 2000's helped many of these local artists reach national audiences.

In 1995, Emmerson DJ Papa D (aka Adam Defalco) and his friend Truth Elemental (aka Josh Gagne) founded Brick Records with the express purpose of promoting Boston's new generation of underground and independent hip-hop artists (Boston Beats and Rhymes). Their 1995 *Rebel Alliance* compilation gained critical acclaim and spawned a successful 10-year run which has helped catapult artists like Mr. Lif, Insight, D-Tension, Akrobatic, 7L and Esoteric and many others into the national spotlight. Adding fuel to an already burning local underground hip-hop scene, Boston production veteran Joe Mansfield founded Traffic Entertainment in 2002 to satisfy the growing hunger for rare rap reissues and golden age classics. Their 2006 re-release of material from Scientifik's mid 1990's classic *Criminal* is just one of many local releases that helped to resurrect interest in Boston's golden age artists.

As the late 1990's gave way to the new millennium, Boston veterans RSO (now calling themselves Made Men) and Edo G had achieved legendary status in the community. Benzino achieved notoriety through his association with The Source magazine, widely publicized beef with Eminem and active career as a solo artist. Edo G was once again a regular nominee in the Boston Music Awards along with new favorites Mr. Lif, Akrobatik, 7L and Esoteric, the Porn Theater Ushers, The Skitzophreniks, D-Tension, Virtuoso, Insight, Krumb Snatcha and Smoke Bulga. Meanwhile, two local DJ's began to translate their mixtapes and frequent club appearances into regular spots on Boston's commercial rap stations.

Clinton Sparks emerged on the Boston music scene in 1998 as a writer for the popular morning radio show on WJMN (94.5 FM) with Baltazar and Pebbles. In the early years of the new millennium, he began appearing on Boston's new urban station 97.7 FM (WILD) and began to make a regional name as a prolific mixtape producer. By 2006, Sparks had leveraged his growing reputation into a position as P Diddy's DJ. During the same period, DJ Geespin became a regular feature in Boston's nightclubs and was eventually recognized by Jam'n 94.5 DJ Roy Barboza and offered a late night spot on the show. His

Launch Pad show was so popular that he was eventually offered a prime time slot on the station and has gone on to become one of its regular DJs.

This period also found Boston veterans making new names for themselves and shedding old allegiances. Big Chuck, formerly a member of the Body Rock Crew with Antonio Ennis had been frustrated by his dealings with Dr. Dre at Aftermath and resigned in 2003 to start his own label, the Drama Entertainment Family. His roster included Punch who received local acclaim in Boston for his work with the Street Poets in 1995. Like Big Chuck, former members of RSO had by this time become established business men. However, some were still dogged by their youthful images.

In 2000, members of Made Men received unwelcome local press coverage for their alleged involvement in a backstage brawl at a Rough Ryders/Cash Money show at the Fleet Center and the September stabbing of Celtics star Paul Pierce at Boston's Buzz nightclub (Graham). Meanwhile, the Antonio Ansaldi clothing company received local publicity for its "Stop Snitching" T-shirts, which were designed in 1999 by former RSO member Antonio Ennis as a novelty item but were widely criticized by police and city officials.

In 2005, Boston experienced a new wave of youth violence and recorded its highest murder rate in a decade with 75 killings in the city. Several high profile murders, including the murder of four young musicians in a home studio in Dorchester, once again directed public attention to the violence that persisted in Boston's inner city. In response to this escalating violence and the "Stop Snitching" controversy, local veterans Cindy Diggs and Antonio Ennis formed the "Start Peace" movement. Their first effort was a t-shirt that used the old "Stop Snitching" logo but replaced the old phrase with their new "Start Peace" message. As part of the campaign, Ennis also formed a group called 4Peace made up of local legends Edo G, Wyatt Jackson (formerly of the Unikue Dominoes) and Deric Quest. Their summer 2007 release "Start Peace" included a video of the same name and an appearance with Boston's Mayor Menino at the third annual hip-hop Unity Festival at City Hall Plaza. The fact that this was the same outdoor location of the 1992 concert that was described by The Boston Globe as a "rampage" was not lost on older members of the peaceful and diverse crowd. While Boston rap veterans 4Peace engaged the audience in a peace-promoting call and response, a group of kids decked out in "Boston Got Next" tee-shirts represented the undying belief that Boston's banner year is just around the corner.

Indeed, evidence of a rap renaissance in Boston seems to be growing. In addition to the socially motivated group 4 Peace, in 2005 Edo G began working with another Boston super group called Special Teamz that includes Jaysaun (formerly of the Kreators) and Slaine (of La Coka Nostra). Boston veteran MC Lyrical also reemerged in the local press in 2005 with the release of his full length CD *iNFiNiTi* which included the popular college single "The focus is back." With members of the Mass Industry Commission, Lyrical began organizing an annual hop-hop award show in 2006. A cross section of 2007 winners includes both Boston veterans (Floorlords, Akrobatik, The Almighty RSO) and local up and comers (e.g., DJs On & On and Jayceoh, MC Frankie Wrainwright and the Foundation Movement). Meanwhile, local veterans MC Spice, Cindy Diggs and Rusty "Mr. Funky Fresh" Pendleton have joined forces to gain local control the urban airwaves and raise the consciousness of inner city residents at Touch 106.1 FM (WTCH) a small community station located in the Grove Hall neighborhood of Dorchester. Representing their commitment to building a hip-hop industry with deep roots in the inner

city, the station recently shifted its format to feature Boston artists exclusively from 10 PM to 3 AM on Friday and Saturday nights. Perhaps it took the widely publicized “death of hip-hop” in 2006 for it to be finally (re)born in Boston.

## **SIDEBARS**

### **Adidas**

In Boston, Adidas sneakers were so popular they seemed to grow on the trees. Although Adidas has been a staple in the fashion diet of hip-hoppers everywhere, Boston clung to its identification with the brand longer and more tightly than other towns. Local rappers Almighty RSO provide an illustration of the power of the Adidas brand on the cover of their 1988 “Notorious” single. Appearing decked out in matching Adidas track suits and sneakers, this cover pays homage to the brand as gangster icon as members of the band reach for the pistols tucked into their the waistbands of their shiny tracksuits. Long before they appeared in matching Bruins gear, RSO were rocking their Adidas.

There was no more prominent (and controversial) demonstration of the power of the Adidas brand than the Adidas Tree in the Grove Hall neighborhood of Dorchester. Adorned with dozens of pairs of sneakers, the Adidas tree sat in wooded lot on Intervale road that had been taken over by the notorious Intervale Road Posse who ran the local crack trade and were known for their brutality (as well as their love of Adidas). The group had outfitted the park with couches, a barbeque, and even televisions powered from local homes that had been abandoned. This neighborhood was both a hotbed of gang activity as well as hip-hop talent.

Illustrating the multi-layered nature of hip-hop icons, the Adidas tree held many meanings for local residents. To those inside the community, the tree symbolized acceptance as young MCs who were deemed good enough were allowed to throw their sneakers into the branches. For rivals and outsiders, it served as a reminder that anyone caught wearing any other brand could expect trouble. For local adults and authority figures, it represented youth street culture gone wild. The presence of frequent gunfire and rampant gang activity served to reinforce this latter image. Eventually, the Adidas tree was cut down by the authorities who came in to clean up the lot after 23 members of the Intervale Road gang were arrested in a raid by the Boston Police.

### **Jamaican Influences**

Jamaican influences in rap music have become the subject of scholarly study of late (Marshall). In Boston, these influences run long and deep. As early as 1986, The Almighty RSO was featuring reggae melodies and Jamaican turns of phrase like “we come fi nice up de show” on demo tapes sent to the Leccos Lemma radio show. Their 1993 classic “Bad Boyz” (Epic) includes a strong Jamaican influence with Junior Rodigan’s uniquely accented patois introduction and second verse. Bobby Brown was also obviously influenced by Jamaican vocal style as he included four raggamuffin hip-hop tracks on his 1993 *B-Brown Posse* record.

The most prolific of Boston’s mid-1990’s hip-hop/dancehall producers were certainly Dow Brain and Brad Young. Having played in Reggae bands like the I-Tones and worked on tracks with Junior

Rodigan, Brain and Young served as an important conduit connecting the hip-hop and Reggae communities in Boston. One of their most popular crossover productions was the 1996 “Gangsta” by the band Motion which featured Ruffa toasting about ghetto lifestyle over a version of the classic Craig Mack track “Flava in Your Ear”. Their collaborations with Jr. Rodigan were usually released on the Mastermind label and sometimes refer to them using aliases (perhaps due to legal questions over sample clearances). While ragamuffin vocals began appearing in Boston hip-hop as early as the 1986 RSO demo tape, it was not until Dow and Brad teamed up with local dancehall producer Jr. Rodigan that Jamaican vocals became a regular sound in Boston hip-hop productions. These efforts hold up very well next to the more widely known releases on Bobby Konders’s Massive B label and represent an relatively unknown reservoir for fans of the mid 1990’s Raggamuffin hip-hop sound.

### **Aerosmith**

Aerosmith’s collaboration with Run DMC represented a tectonic shift in rap music and helped to rescue the careers of Boston’s toxic twins Stephen Tyler and Joe Perry. By 1986, Joe Perry and Stephen Tyler were beginning to grapple with the heroin addictions that had helped fuel the band’s decline. Aerosmith’s 1985 comeback album *Done With Mirrors* had not done well and the band was foundering when they received a call from Run DMC producer Rick Rubin about working on a rap remake of their 1975 classic, “Walk this Way.” Having sampled Joey Kramer’s drum introduction to the song, Rubin asked Tyler and Perry to come to New York to record new bass, guitar and vocal tracks and record a video. During the session, Perry borrowed a bass guitar from one of the Beastie Boys to recreate the bass track for the song. With new vocals, bass and guitar tracks to go over the sample-based drum production, a legendary song was born.

The resulting remake has widely been credited with exposing rap music to mainstream white audiences and breaking down the boundary separating the two genres. Eventually reaching #5 on the Billboard 100, the song not only broke barriers between musical genres, it also provided critical energy and cultural cache (not to mention income) to the flagging Aerosmith organization. The video for the song represents the genre-bending nature of the collaboration and opens with the two bands in adjacent rehearsal rooms engaged in a war of volume and style. Trying to sing along with the Run DMC version of the song coming through the walls, Tyler is annoyed when rap vocals come in on the first verse. Eventually breaking down the wall between the rehearsal spaces to sing over the second chorus through a hole in the wall, Tyler dramatically enacts the racial and musical boundary spanning represented by the song itself. The video ends with Tyler and Perry performing with Joseph "DJ Run" Simmons and Darryl "D.M.C." McDaniels in front of a largely white audience (an irony which was perhaps missed by the producers). As the first rap video to receive heavy rotation on MTV, the video exposed rap music and style to a new audience of suburban white youth. At the same time, as the first mass market merger of rap and rock idioms, the song established a sound that would propel contemporary artists like Linkin Park, Korn and Kid Rock among others.

### **Record stores**

Rap was the first musical form to use LP records as an instrument. While records had been used in musical performances by modern classical innovators like John Cage, in the late 1970's, old funk and soul records found new life under the hands of young innovators who used their contents as a palate for the construction of new dance grooves. In the now familiar origin story, New York DJs like Kool Herc used duplicate copies of records to extend the breakdown sections of hard funk tracks. Because they provide raw materials for DJs, an outlet for artists and a meeting place for fans, record stores play a critical role as anchors in hip hop communities.

In Boston, the role of record stores as hubs in local music networks has been no less important. Among the earliest and longest lasting nodes in Boston's urban music network is Skippy Whites Records. Skippy opened his store in 1961 on Washington St. in Boston and from early on specialized in music favored by urban audiences. While he always preferred R&B, blues, gospel and jazz to the repetitive beats and harsh language of rap, he was nevertheless a participant in the birth of the rap music scene in Boston. Because of his massive collection of soul, funk and R&B records, Skippy's has long been an oasis for DJs and producers seeking breaks and samples in addition the new rap releases he carried. Skippy White's was also among the first stores to feature copies of The Source magazine when it was still a photocopied fanzine being produced out of a Harvard dorm room. By supporting David Mays and John Schecter with advertising revenue when they were still Harvard undergraduates, Skippy played an important role in launching The Source. Skippy even dabbled briefly in rap music production releasing Top Choice Clique's "Peace of Mind" (1994) on his own Sample Records.

While Skippy White's contained rap as just part of a much larger collection of R&B, soul, funk and jazz, other stores have focused even more specifically on rap music. Among them, Rusty "the Toejammer" Pendleton's Funky Fresh records is the oldest and most familiar to folks in Boston's inner city. The store, located in Boston's Dudley Square, has been an important outlet for Boston's urban artists and DJ's for more than a decade. In 2007, Rusty consolidated his store, selling an entire basement full of back stock to a single buyer after local DJs had a chance to pick through the stacks for a dollar a record. Now operating a smaller shop with a Tattoo parlor downstairs, Rusty continues his role as a local tastemaker on his Friday and Saturday night radio show, Funky Fresh Radio on Touch 106.1 FM. In the spring of 2008 his 10 PM – 3 AM show shifted to an "All Boston" format. To this day, Rusty remains an active promoter of local talent.

More recent arrivals on Boston's record store scene included the Massachusetts Ave. underground hip-hop oasis Buiscuithead Records. Located in a third floor office, the store was never easy to access, but its tasteful selection of the latest underground hip-hop singles lined the walls next to descriptive tags like "illest beats!!". While its reign was short, during the late 1990's, it was a critical stop on record circuit in Boston. Even more recently, Underground Hip-Hop opened its doors and launched an equally strong online retail outlet. Founded by Northeastern students, this has become the new oasis for independent rap releases in Boston.

## **Rock clubs**

In Boston, rap music found an unlikely home in nightclubs catering to rock-and-roll bands. Perhaps the sheer number and dominance of such clubs in Boston's entertainment industry made it

unlikely that rap would find any other home. Whatever the cause, rap music in Boston was paradoxically presented in the very same rooms that spawned bands like Morphine and the Mighty Mighty Bosstones. In the 1980's, rap acts occasionally played at the Kenmore Square nightclubs 9 Lansdowne and The Rat as well as Boston's Fort Point nightclub The Channel. Certainly, shows were also taking place at inner city venues like Dorchester's Strand Theater and Roxbury's Chez Vous roller skating rink. However, rock clubs played an important role in presenting rap music to local audiences as early as the mid-1980's in Boston. In the late 1990's, rock nightclubs played a critical role in helping fuel an explosion of underground artists who appealed to young white college artists. Cambridge rock clubs like the Middle East and T.T. The Bears began to present underground artists like Mr. Lif, 7L and Esoteric, Insight, D-Tension paired with nationally touring headlining acts. At Kenmore Square's Bill's Bar, the Macka Monday's night became a regular spot for Boston's emerging rap artists and small national acts alike. The relative dearth of nightclubs in Boston's black and Hispanic neighborhoods and the proximity of Boston's nightclubs to large populations of young (primarily white) suburban college students reinforced racial divides which had long separated the city. Rock clubs played a critical role in ensuring that the die hard fans in Boston had somewhere to go to see live rap music and helped launch the careers of many internationally known underground artists.

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