

arts
education
njpac



kurtis

blow

the david g. berger
master class series

about kurtis blow

As the first commercially successful rap artist, Kurtis Blow is a towering figure in hip hop history. His popularity and charisma helped prove that hip hop was more than just a momentary trend, paving the way for other early hip hop artists, including Grandmaster Flash and Run-D.M.C.

Rapper and producer Kurtis Walker, now known as Kurtis Blow, was born in Harlem, New York, on August 9, 1959. Blow received his first DJ experience while he was in grade school, mingling with guests at his mother's parties to take their music requests. By the time he was 13, Blow had a fake ID and was sneaking into New York City clubs to hear DJs spin their tracks. While he was a high school student, Blow began spinning his own tracks under the name Kool DJ Kurt. Evolving from Kool DJ Kurt to Kurtis "Sky" Walker and finally Kurtis Blow, thanks to his former partner in party promotion-turned-manager Russell Simmons. By the end of the 1970s, like many other New York DJs, he had become disenchanted with the uniformity of the music coming out of the clubs. "Everything merged into one colorless sea of sound," he recalled. "We, the DJs, had to do something to make our shows a little bit different ... a little unique." Blow started mixing his own rhymes with the beats on his turntable. "Pretty soon rap became an accepted thing, almost expected in fact, and those clubs who had rappin' deejays started to pick up [business]."

Blow was barely 20 years old when he made music history as the first rapper signed to a major label, Mercury Records. Blow was the first significant solo rapper on record and one of the first hip hop role models capturing the exuberance of an art form still in its youth.

Before Kurtis Blow's first album, hip hop was rooted as a community experience — events occurring during park jams, block parties and experiences more rooted to the Black and Brown communities of NYC, most specifically The Bronx and Harlem. His album *The Breaks* used his childhood experiences as inspiration and distilled it into musical form. In 1979, Blow had some success with a single called *Christmas Rappin'*, but his label Mercury Records needed to know it wasn't a fluke before committing to a full album. That second single "The Breaks" confirmed Blow's status as the top emcee, and the song is one of the most celebrated hip hop songs in the genre's history.

Kurtis Blow has released 17 albums over his career. Blow's music has also been revived by younger artists seeking to pay tribute; hip hop legend Nas sampled "If I Ruled the World" on his album *It Was Written* (1996), and the R&B group Next sampled "Christmas Rappin'" for their 1998 smash "Too Close." Kurtis Blow also founded the Hip Hop Church in New York and became



an ordained minister. In December 2014, Kurt was the guest emcee for the world premiere of *The Hip Hop Nutcracker* at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, an update of Tchaikovsky's holiday classic. A national tour of the show was scheduled to launch in November 2015, with Kurtis Blow reprising his role as guest emcee opening the show. In 2016 Kurtis was unanimously elected as Chairman of the Universal Hip Hop Museum. The museum opened in 2023 in the South Bronx, where hip hop originally began.

Over Blow's illustrious career, he accumulated several firsts, including:

- First gold record for rap ("The Breaks")
- First rapper to tour the U.S. and Europe (with The Commodores in 1980)
- First rapper to record a national commercial (Sprite)
- First rapper to use a drum machine, sample and sample loop
- First rap music video ("Basketball")
- First rap producer (rap's Producer of the Year in 1983 — 1985)
- First rapper featured in a soap opera (*One Life to Live*)
- First rap millionaire



the 50th anniversary of hip hop

On August 11, 1973, in the rec room of an apartment building on Sedgwick Avenue, 18-year-old Clive Campbell throws a party with his younger sister Cindy called the “Back to School Jam.” The price of admission was 25 cents for ladies and 50 cents for men. Friends and neighbors danced to the familiar sounds of artists like James Brown, Aretha Franklin and The Meters — only something changed. Behind two turntables Clive, better known as DJ Kool Herc, plays two copies of the same record, a technique known as “the merry-go-round” where one moves back and forth from one record to the next, looping the percussion portions of each track to keep the beat alive.

Hip hop has defined American culture for the last 50 years. Beginning in the 1970’s, hip hop’s brilliance transformed our society, opening countless pathways to opportunity and sparking inspiration across business, fashion, technology, politics and sports. As a social movement, the foundation of hip hop was birthed due to policies of “urban renewal” pioneered by NYC city planner Robert Moses and the “benign neglect” of President Richard Nixon’s administration. The building of New York’s Cross Bronx Expressway razed many of the City’s ethnic neighborhoods — destroying homes, jobs and displacing poor Black and Hispanic communities into wastelands like East Brooklyn and the South Bronx, while the government turned a blind eye to those affected. Rather than taking direct political action, a new generation expressed itself through DJing, emceeing, B-boying/B-girling (breakdancing), graffiti and knowledge of self: the five elements of hip hop.

In New York City’s impoverished neighborhoods, hip hop was a creative outlet. Hip hop was rooted in a love of community. And while racism was still prevalent, hip hop was a way for young Black and Latino Americans to celebrate their identity. Hip hop has not only provided the soundtrack for our lives, it has also transfigured how we move through the world and the way the world moves through us.

seed questions to consider

1. What means do you think people growing up in difficult circumstances would have to express themselves artistically?
2. How is the reuse and re-purposing of existing music at the heart of hip hop?
3. What are some unique characteristics of hip hop compared to other music forms (i.e., rock ‘n’ roll, jazz, R&B, gospel, etc.?)



“I’m not runnin’ for Congress or the President ... I’m just here to tell the world how my story went.”

— Kurtis Blow

vocabulary

Breakbeat

A beat that is found in a song’s drum break, a section in which other instruments fall silent to leave the drums and percussion playing on their own. For hip hop producers and DJs in the ’70s, the discovery of these breaks on vinyl records presented an opportunity to repurpose existing rhythms to their own musical ends.

Cypher

Open forum, mock exhibitions. Similar to battles, but with less emphasis on competition.

DJing

Also known as disc jockeying, is the practice of mixing and manipulating recorded music tracks to create a seamless and entertaining musical experience. It involves selecting and playing songs from various genres, artfully blending them together with the help of specialized equipment such as turntables, mixers and software.

Emceeing

A style of rapping that uses pre-written or freestyled rhyming verses to introduce the DJ or excite the crowd.

Hip hop

A genre of music most often characterized by a strong, rhythmic beat and a rapping vocal track. The genre originated in New York City in the 1970s as a cultural exchange among Black, Latino and Caribbean youth and has grown into one of the most consumed genres of music in the United States. As a culture, hip hop is built on four main pillars: DJing, rapping (also called emceeing), breakdancing (usually called breaking or B-boying) and graffiti.

Sampling

Reusing a portion of a sound recording in another recording. Samples may comprise elements such as rhythm, melody, speech, sound effects or longer portions of music, and may be layered, equalized, sped up or slowed down, re-pitched, looped or otherwise manipulated. They are usually integrated using electronic music instruments (samplers) or software such as digital audio workstations.

Turntable

An old-fashioned device for listening to music — the part of a record player that revolves, turning the record as a needle rests on it.

Merry-Go-Round Technique

Created by hip hop pioneer DJ Kool Herc, this technique took the instrumental breaks out of popular songs blending together drum break sections from the same track or similar tracks into one long danceable breakbeat.

resources

Websites

Kurtis Blow Website
kurtisblow.org

NPR | *The History of Hip Hop: Kurtis Blow Breaks Hip Hop Nationally With His 1980 Debut*
npr.org/2023/07/25/1189060953/kurtis-blow-1980-album-hip-hop-game-changers

Wikipedia | Kurtis Blow
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurtis_Blow

Hip Hop Golden Age: Kurtis Blow
hiphopgoldenage.com/artists/kurtis-blow/

UDiscoverMusic.com | Kurtis Blow: The Prototype
udiscovermusic.com/stories/kurtis-blow-feature

The 50th Anniversary of Hip Hop
thegothanniversaryofhip-hop.com/history

Google Arts & Culture: Celebrating 50 Years of Hip Hop
blog.google/outreach-initiatives/arts-culture/google-arts-culture-hip-hop

Hip Hop 50: The Party That Started Hip Hop
bbc.co.uk/culture/article/20130809-the-party-where-hip-hop-was-born

Masterclass: Hip Hop Music Guide:
History of Hip Hop and Notable Artists
masterclass.com/articles/hip-hop-guide

Videos

Kurtis Blow Explains How the First Emcees Were From Early DJ Culture
youtu.be/kwN7mk6WNjc?si=g7mzo-R2gdeaMdhm

Kurtis Blow – The Breaks Video HQ
youtu.be/heXICbrVzcc?si=_vyAhNaiTnvH1qX2

The Breaks: Building the Hip Hop Generation
Kurtis Walker | TEDxCUNY
youtube.com/watch?v=hKGQCg9MLuA

Hot 97: Kurtis Blow & Rocky Bucano Give an Update on The Universal Hip Hop Museum & Hip Hop Nutcracker
youtu.be/ZW1XWM7yWhs?si=xzKntkSWsszwwZro



The Breaks (1980) album cover



If I Ruled the World (1985) album cover

njpac staff

Charles F. Lowrey & Carmen S. Villar
Co-Chairs, NJPAC Board of Directors

John Schreiber
President & CEO

Jennifer Tsukayama
Vice President, Arts Education

Shannon Pulusan
Assistant to Vice President, Arts Education

Mark Gross
Director, Jazz Instruction
Artistic Director, Jazz, City Verses

Rosa Hyde
Senior Director, Performances &
Special Events Operations

Victoria Revesz
Senior Director, Arts Education Operations

Natalie Dreyer
Director of Arts Integration

Roe Bell
Director of Program Operations
& Advancement

Kristine Marrone
Director, CRM & Business Operation

Ashley Mandaglio
Assoc. Director, Professional Learning
& Programs

Treasure Borde
Senior Manager, Performances
& Programming

Daniel Silverstein
Senior Manager, Onsite Programs

Randal Croudy
Manager, Youth & Emerging
Artist Development

Steven Hayet
Manager, CRM and Business Operations

Alonzo Blalock
Manager, In-School Programs

Angela Peletier
Manager, Professional Learning
& Training

Demetria Hart
Coordinator of Faculty Relations

Antonella Sanchez
Senior Coordinator, Program Operations

Kendall Lipham
Coordinator, Performances

Josef Woodson
Creative Lead, On-Site Programs

NJPAC Arts Education performances team:

Rosa Hyde, Treasure Borde, and Kendall Lipham.

NJPAC is located in Essex County, New Jersey, situated on the traditional territory of the Leni Lenape people.

the arts in your school

In-School Residencies: NJPAC teaching artists come right to your school to teach the performing arts to your students. Our super-flexible in-person residencies are designed to meet your needs and you'll have a dedicated program manager to help you every step of the way. It's the perfect program to keep your students creating, connecting and expressing themselves through the magic of the arts.

Professional Development: Calling all educators! Expand your teaching skills, deepen your curriculum and give yourself a creative boost in NJPAC's forward-thinking professional development workshops. Our virtual PD programs are for teachers all the way from pre-K to high school and include hip hop, dance, storytelling, theater, music and more. Not only will you learn something... you'll also have fun and be inspired.

For more information or to schedule an appointment, please email our education sales team at artseducation@njpac.org. Or visit njpac.org/education

Generous support for SchoolTime provided, in part, by



Turrell Fund



Generous support provided by The Joan and Allen Bildner Family Fund, Broadridge Financial Solutions, Inc., The Arts Education Endowment Fund in honor of Raymond C. Chambers, Jennifer A. Chalsty, Toby and Leon Cooperman, Mimi and Edwin Feliciano, The Izzo Family, Don Katz & Leslie Larson, McCrane Foundation, Inc., care of Margrit McCrane, The MCJ Amelior Foundation, Albert+ and Katharine Merck+, NJ Advance Media, David & Marian Rocker, The Sagner Companies/The Sagner Family Foundation and an anonymous donor.

+ deceased

study the arts at njpac

Saturday Programs: NJPAC's Saturday programs are geared towards students at every level — from those who dream of starring on Broadway to those who are still learning their scales. Students work with professional artists to build technique and develop their own creative style in hip hop, jazz, theater, musical theater and symphonic band.

Summer Programs: Want to begin to explore the arts? Or immerse yourself in the study of one genre? Then join us at NJPAC next summer in one of seven programs that spark the creativity in every child through the study of music, dance and theater.