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UNDERGROUND

THE Come Up

an ORAL HISTORY of the RISE of HIP-HOP

Bestselling author of **ALL THE PIECES MATTER**

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‘Jonathan Abrams, for the entirety of his career and regardless of the subject matter, has shown a profound ability to take the words and recollections of others and stitch them together into something big and special. Here, in maybe his most massive undertaking yet, he’s done it with the rise of hip-hop. *The Come Up* is Abrams at his sharpest, at his most observant, at his most insightful’

Shea Serrano, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Hip-Hop (And Other Things)*

‘Hip-hop is a story machine, and Jonathan Abrams is unsurpassed in capturing the best of them. What *Please Kill Me* did for punk rock, *The Come Up* has done for hip-hop – it’s something essential, profane, profound, hilarious, tragic, riveting, and real. These are the tales that made a movement’

Jeff Chang, author of *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*

‘To say this book is incredible simply doesn’t do it justice. It’s essential –a primary source. It isn’t just the fact that Abrams has collected the voices of the most seminal pioneering rap artists; he has captured their insights with the benefit of time, perspective, and reflection. Read this book. Eat this book. Steal this book’

Cheo Hodari Coker, creator of Marvel’s *Luke Cage* and author of *Unbelievable: The Life, Death, and Afterlife of The Notorious B.I.G.*

BY JONATHAN ABRAMS

All the Pieces Matter
Boys Among Men
The Come Up

THE COME UP

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For Aaron and to crafting your own life's beat

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TAKE IT AND FLIP IT

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Every hip-hop music fan has an origin story—when the music ignited those first sparks, grabbing us, shaking us, initiating a lifelong relationship.

Growing up in the suburbs of Los Angeles during the late 1980s, I was too young to appreciate the rebellious explosion of N.W.A, a group that opened millions to the possibilities of the genre. The group's lyrics did not lend themselves to frequent radio play, and my parents didn't openly invite that "hoppity hip" into our home. I was plugged in enough to applaud Dr. Dre when *The Chronic* landed, but could not yet truly appreciate the full evolution of his sonic mastery. *Doggystyle,* Snoop Doggy Dogg's debut album, painted the scenes of an elaborate party that my adolescent mind could only partly imagine.

Instead, for me, the artist who truly stoked those early embers was Tupac Amaru Shakur. As he did for so many people my age, Pac ignited in me a full devotion to hip-hop music.

This was back in the days when the music found you. Long before Spotify and iTunes, I would toggle the radio dial between 92.3 The Beat and Power 106 and record Shakur's songs onto a cassette tape so I could play them back on demand. I got my hands on *Me Against the World,*

Shakur's third album, when a teenage employee at Circuit City took pity on my pleading eleven-year-old self. My mom unearthed the cassette, took one look at the Parental Advisory sticker, and marched me back to return it. I discreetly purchased another one, vowing to find a better hiding place. Such was the power and pull of Pac on my young mind.

Pac gifted me a song or lyric for every emotion and feeling. He had a way of making it seem as though he was speaking directly to me, crystallizing thoughts and ideas that were only starting to percolate and form. "Brenda's Got a Baby" illuminated the structural inequities in the world that I sensed people like me faced, but were not being taught in school. "Dear Mama" existed for when I reflected over my mom and witnessed her trudge through setbacks. I reserved "Hit 'Em Up" for those rare and insular moments I wanted to give the world double birds.

Tupac's killing in late 1996 shattered my world. I mourned the death of an artist and poet who transcended his still-young musical genre. I had come to view hip-hop music as a foundational block in my own life and wondered if it would continue evolving, emerging, and influencing after the loss of one of its brightest stars.

The deaths of Shakur and other talented artists gunned down in their prime, like the Notorious B.I.G., were colossal losses. But hip-hop music, above almost anything else, is resilient. The genre's original bricklayers in the Bronx of the 1970s heeded their own flickers of imagination to ignite

a musical genre out of decay and neglect. The genre persevered, overcoming every obstacle imaginable—from an older generation who rejected it, to radio stations that did not want to play it, to politicians speaking out against it.

I never found another Pac. But, in the genre, I found a constant ally. I turned to hip-hop music when I needed inspiration or motivation, to zone out or home in, during times of celebration and mourning, for education and enlightenment.

Hip-hop music has now existed for almost half a century—and its origins and evolution are finally beginning to be studied and excavated with the rigor they deserve. But the voices of those who created, innovated, and persevered to propel a musical genre that would one day become the most popular in the United States are still seldom heard from—and some of their stories are at risk of being forever lost. That realization, which I had in 2017, became the catalyst for this project. After publishing my oral history of the groundbreaking TV show *The Wire,* I aimed my next oral history project at a far more ambitious subject: hip-hop's rise and the creative sparks behind its first transcendent moments.

Lyricism, after all, is a form of oral tradition.

This oral history weaves together the sweeping origin, spread, and impact of hip-hop music across generation after generation as it made its dominant march across the country. It starts with the inventiveness of neglected kids

amid the Bronx ruins before stretching to New York's other boroughs like the veins on a subway map. It encompasses hip-hop's path from parks onto vinyl, its travels to the West Coast through the rise of gangster rap and G-funk, the Southern surge in cities like Atlanta, Memphis, and New Orleans, and many places and moments beyond and in between. The chapters focus on the artistry, creativeness, and courage of those who made significant impacts, and seek to illuminate the roots of careers that influenced generations of others.

I began this project in the summer of 2018, and over the next four years I would conduct over three hundred interviews. The stories captured on these pages were provided by DJs, artists, producers, label executives, and journalists who lent their time and memories to deliver firsthand accounts. There are people whom I had hoped to talk to for this book and couldn't get to; I hope that these pages still manage to capture their contributions to the music. I also know that there are bricklayers whose influence is *not* documented in this book—but any omissions here are not a judgment on their inroads. Those legacies are eternal. A book dedicated just to listing the names of those who have made positive impacts on hip-hop music could never contain enough space.

People, like hip-hop music, move along on their own schedules, which sometimes didn't align with my reporting timeline. One individual replied to a direct message for an interview more than two years after I first sent the request.

Some people whose thoughts I hoped to include in these pages declined requests, preferring to allow a lifetime of work to speak for itself. But many others, including some who have rarely granted interviews, were willing to sit down with me. These conversations—like the late Edward "Duke Bootee" Fletcher describing the origins of "The Message," DMC passionately detailing his groundbreaking efforts, Kool Moe Dee elaborating on his Grammys boycott, and executives like Ann Carli and Monica Lynch detailing their pioneering moves—resulted in a manuscript that, in its initial form, was nearly three times longer than the one you are reading.

In the interest of streamlining and including as many essential viewpoints and anecdotes as possible, the reflections here have been occasionally edited for length and clarity. The minor hitches that arise in natural conversation have been removed. The spirit and intent of every conversation remains. Occasionally, anecdotes conflict. Perspectives of the same event can differ, and memories change and morph over time. I regard all of them as personal and valid.

One challenge of compiling an oral history of a complex subject, one with overlapping chronologies and settings, is how to organize the material. I have sought to tell the story roughly in chronological order, beginning in the Bronx in the early 1970s. As you will see, however, some chapters do backtrack to explore certain figures and events relevant to their theme. Another challenge is how to fairly document

complex individuals. It's important to acknowledge that, over the course of decades in the public eye, a few figures have, either in the past or recently, been subject to allegations of wrongdoing, some quite serious. I felt it was nonetheless important to the historical record to include recollections from several such people—Russell Simmons, for example, who made crucial creative and business contributions to the genre—while remaining mindful of and acknowledging their alleged inappropriate conduct.

Each quote is accompanied by that person's professional identity (artist, DJ, producer, etc.); affiliation with musical groups or significant record labels; and sometimes where they are from. Like the chapter introductions and narrative interstitials, this information is meant to provide readers with context. Occasionally a person's title changes as the book progresses, in order to reflect the relevant information for that section. For example, Faith Newman was one of Def Jam's early employees before she later signed Nas to Columbia Records.

Hip-hop music's rise to permeate every strand of popular culture is a winding, tangled, massive story.

And it's one that continues to expand and evolve.

Here's to those next sparks catching fire.

THE COME UP

01 LEMONADE FROM LEMONS

Bronx, New York 1973–1979

Clive Campbell migrated as a child with his family from Jamaica to the United States in the late 1960s, leaving one country roiled by political instability for another. In Kingston, Campbell had become infatuated with the reggae and dub music that blared from giant portable sound systems, and DJs who toasted or talked over instrumental tracks. Campbell arrived in the Bronx during the reign of feel-good disco music, which intersected with the civil rights era and the dire financial straits of a New York City that was facing a declining population and labor unrest. Campbell involved himself in the city's emerging graffiti scene—which had arrived after originating in Philadelphia—and assumed the tag name Kool Herc.

On August 11, 1973, Campbell hosted a back-to-school fundraising party for his sister, Cindy, at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in the West Bronx—and he

is widely credited with birthing hip-hop on that day. By then, the teenage Campbell had assembled his own massive sound system, along with an eclectic record collection that included selections from James Brown and the Incredible Bongo Band. At the party, before an appreciative audience of neighborhood teenagers, DJ Kool Herc performed his “Merry-Go-Round” technique of isolating and prolonging the breakbeat sections of songs (the drum patterns used in interludes—breaks—between sections of melody) by switching between two record players.

DJ Kool Herc became a folk hero in the Bronx as his parties attracted larger and larger crowds. He hosted popular block parties and created Kool Herc & the Herculoids with Clark Kent. Acrobatic dancers known as b-boys, b-girls, and breakers (the media eventually labeled them as breakdancers, a term still in wide circulation today) flocked to DJ Kool Herc’s parties to compete in dance circles—no longer having to wait out lengthy songs for a brief moment to get down. DJ Kool Herc enlisted the help of his friend Coke La Rock, regarded as hip-hop’s first MC, as La Rock adapted toasting by shouting out the names of friends and encouraging partygoers to dance.

> **In time, Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash joined DJ Kool Herc as Bronx DJs who forged groundbreaking contributions and laid the foundation for hip-hop to flourish, spread, and evolve.**

DJ Charlie Chase (Cold Crush Brothers): The Bronx [in the late 1960s and ’70s] was the epicenter for poverty, the epicenter for kids who were full of energy, who didn’t know what to do with it, didn’t have a lot of activities, didn’t have role models.

MC Debbie D (artist): The backdrop to the South Bronx is poverty-stricken—crime, gangs, slumlords, abandoned buildings everywhere. So they had coined the Bronx “The Bronx Is Burning.” And they wasn’t putting money into safe havens for young people. So, with the music outside, you went to a jam, there’s a thousand kids standing there. We ain’t got nothing else to do.

Easy A.D. (Cold Crush Brothers): We were creating something that took up our time and made us feel good and brought us together. You have to imagine walking out your house every day and seeing abandoned cars burnt up, empty buildings, and you’re going to elementary school.

Michael Holman (journalist): A lot of young people are going downtown to see major live acts like [Patti] LaBelle, James Brown, Funkadelic, as well as going to the famous discos, wearing their best clothes, doing the latest dances,

and leaving those young punks and all the troubles in the neighborhood behind. What's left behind is an audience of younger people, teenagers who can do all the dances—hell, sometimes they're the originators and are the best dancers.

Kurtis Blow (artist, producer): A big part of hip-hop is breakdancing, b-boying. The dance was around before hip-hop, the actual dance style was developed from playing soul music and that playlist that [Kool Herc used].

Grandmaster Caz (Cold Crush Brothers): Herc was a mythical figure in the neighborhood. You heard about him before you saw him.

Sadat X (artist, Brand Nubian): I remember Herc being this larger-than-life figure, just muscles, with the glasses on. Herc was the commander, putting people in place.

MC Debbie D (artist): When Kool Herc comes out and he starts playing music and then other notable DJs get involved—[Afrika] Bambaataa, [Grandmaster] Flash, L Brothers—and they start playing their music. We're all going to the jams.

Kurtis Blow (artist, producer): He played the music that we wanted to hear. There was a special playlist of b-boy songs, breakdance songs—I can rename right now about ten of them: "Give It Up or Turnit a Loose" by James Brown, "Get Into Something" by the Isley Brothers, "Listen to Me" by Baby Huey, "Melting Pot" by Booker T. & the M.G.'s. You got "Scorpio" by Dennis Coffey and the Detroit

Guitar Band. “Shaft in Africa.” “Apache” by Michael Viner’s Incredible Bongo Band. A couple more James Brown songs you can put in there like “Soul Power” and “Sex Machine” and “Escap-ism,” “Make It Funky”—songs like that.

When you playing these songs, this is the time for the b-boys to do their thing, to create circles of people around them. People were competing inside that circle, they were doing acrobatics and flips and twists and all kinds of routines, and going down to the floor doing the splits like James Brown, doing footwork, like the best dancers I’ve ever seen.

So that was a typical Kool Herc party, and the music was incredible. And of course, he was on the microphone with an echo chamber, “Young ladies, don’t hurt nobody-body-body. It’s Kool Herc-Herc-Herc. Herculoids-loids-loids. Going down to the last stop-stop-stop-stop.” It was mystical and magical at the same time. It was disco, but it was ghetto disco.

Rahiem (Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five): It was his playlist that all of the other DJs who aspired to reach his level at the time in the Bronx played. That was Kool Herc’s contribution to hip-hop, his playlist.

> **WHAT WOULD BECOME known as hip-hop sprang from a foundation of DJs with powerful sound systems who operated around the same time as DJ Kool Herc in the early 1970s. Disco King Mario, who lived one floor above Paradise Gray, who**

Jay-Z, shown here performing at New Jersey's Continental Airlines Arena, released his debut, *Reasonable Doubt*, in 1996. The album kickstarted the career of hip-hop's first billionaire.

(MITCHELL GERBER/CORBIS/VCG VIA GETTY IMAGES)

Goodie Mob's *Soul Food* arrived mere months after the divisive 1995 Source Awards. Backed by Organized Noize's stellar production, CeeLo, Big Gipp, Khujo, and T-Mo simultaneously defined and broadened Southern hip-hop music throughout their debut.

(TAYLOR HILL/GETTY IMAGES)

Al Kapone (left) had established himself as an underground Memphis hip-hop legend before writing tracks that the actor Terrence Howard (right) performed in the 2005 film *Hustle & Flow*.

(JOHN SHEARER/WIREIMAGE)

Three 6 Mafia's Juicy J, DJ Paul, and Frayser Boy became the first hip-hop group to win an Oscar for Best Original Song, in 2006 for *Hustle & Flow*'s "It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp."

(JEFF KRAVITZ/FILMMAGIC)