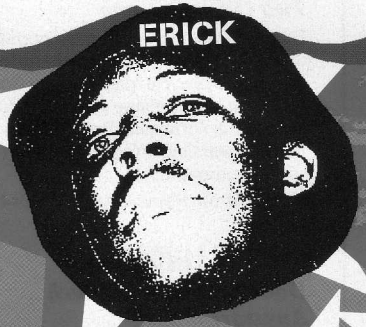


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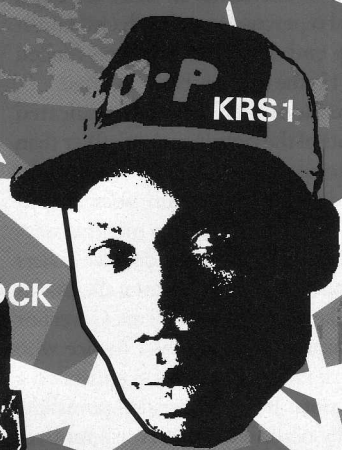
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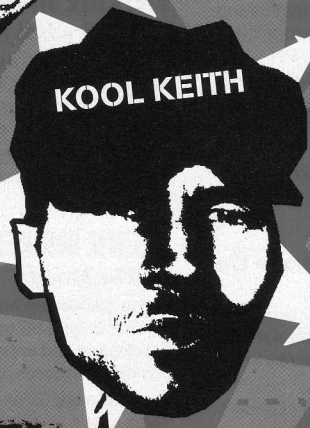
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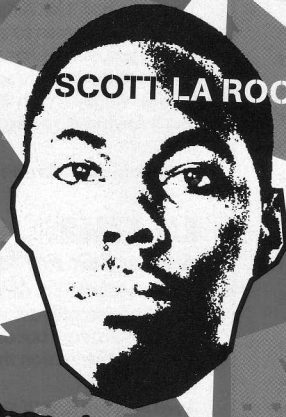
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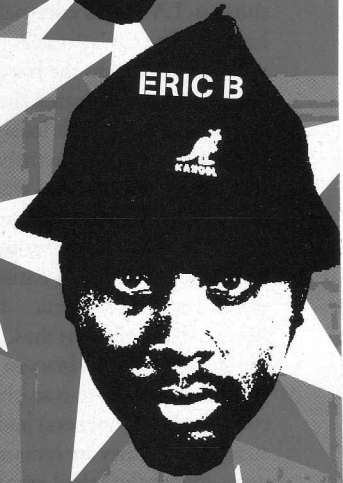
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KOOL KEITH



SCOTT LA ROCK



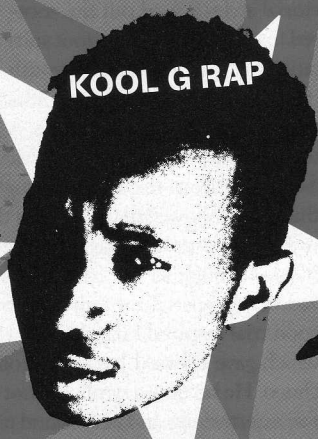
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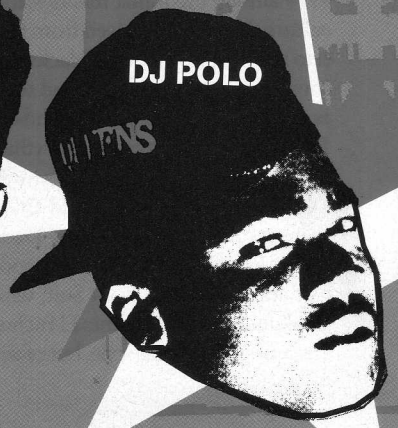
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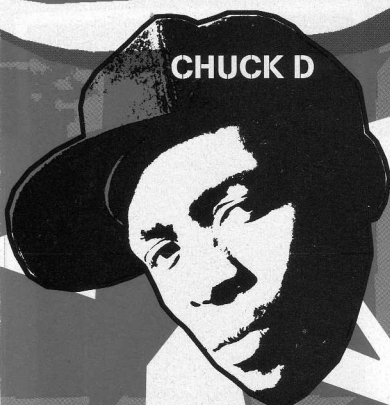
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KOOL G RAP



DJ POLO

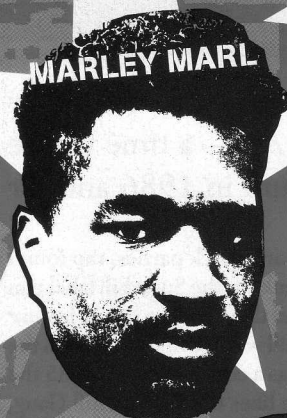


CHUCK D



MASTER ACE

Back in 1986 **hip hop** entered a golden age – lyrical revolution, sonic innovation, and individuality – that gave rise to such rap legends as **Public Enemy**, **Gang Starr** and **De La Soul**. **Angus Batey** speaks to the stars of a movement brought down by violence, litigation and Gilbert O’Sullivan.



MARLEY MARL



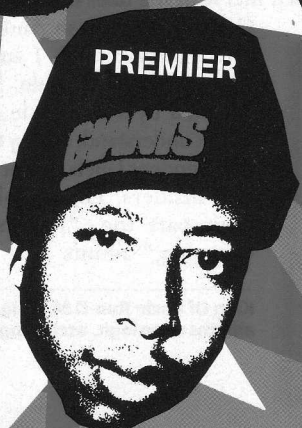
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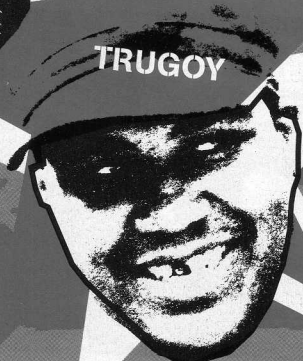
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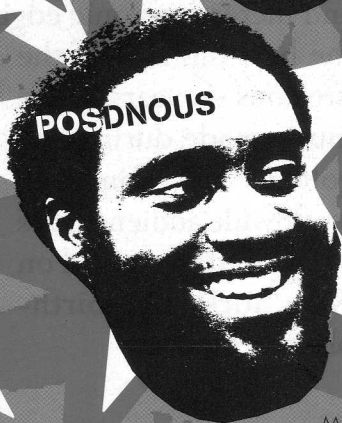
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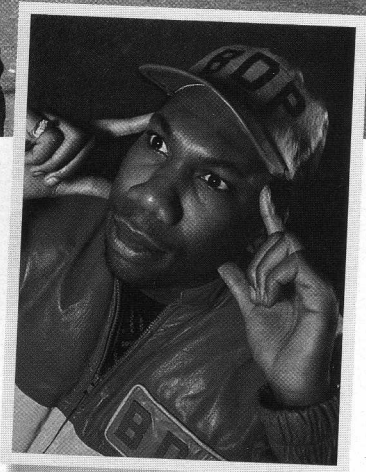
TRUGOY



POSDNUOS



The golden age's holy trinity: Eric B and Public Enemy main-man Chuck D (left and right top) in New York City, 1989, plus Boogie Down Productions' KRS-One (below).



“WHEN IT COMES TO PUBLIC ENEMY,” THE MILITANT rap group’s leader, Chuck D, begins, “people always try to figure out how we measure up against Nelly or whatever rapper is in the charts today. Fuck! We couldn’t measure up to pop groups *then!* We’re totally different.

We come from a time where really we don’t give a fuck what you think.”

The period Chuck’s referring to is the era during which his group helped lead a genuine hip hop revolution through which modern African-American music found a new voice, a sharper focus and a global audience. To many it’s the genre’s Golden Age – a time whose parameters are book-ended by the release of Run-D.M.C.’s *Raising Hell* album in 1986 and Dr

Dre’s *The Chronic* in 1992. The former was pivotal in bringing rap to a mass audience, while the latter’s nihilism effectively ended the parallel themes of activism, playful experimentation and increasing sonic edginess that ran through the best hip hop of the previous six years. If the music made during this golden age found a worldwide audience, the story itself is centred on New York, the birthplace of hip hop.

From its roots as the soundtrack to Bronx block parties, rap found its way onto to record in ’79 largely thanks to the Sugarhill label run by Sylvia Robinson, her husband Joe and their son Joe Jr (see feature in MOJO Collections 5). While Sugarhill was the first to harness the streetwise appeal of rap and market it as a commodity, by 1985 the label – that had spawned hits with the likes of the Sugarhill Gang, Grandmaster Flash And The Furious Five, Funky Four + 1 and West Street Mob – was in trouble. Sugarhill was derailed by a new style of hip hop it didn’t understand, and by the rise of rival independent labels run or staffed by hip hop insiders. Legal problems played their part too. “Rap music started changing,” admits Joey Robinson Jr.



King Of Rock: Run-D.M.C. signified that rap albums were legit, according to Mister D.

Normski, Eber/Roberts/Redferns, Lawrence Waston/Retna

"Run-D.M.C. came out and it went to another dimension. And while hip hop was changing, we were in the midst of litigation."

Tom Silverman's Tommy Boy released Afrika Bambaataa's seminal mid-'80s hits and enticed Sugarhill's all-important house band – that included Keith Leblanc, Skip McDonald and Doug Wimbish (all later of Tackhead fame) – away from the Robinsons' New Jersey operation. Def Jam, an imprint initially run from a New York University dormitory by neophyte rap producer Rick Rubin and his hip hop entrepreneurial cohort Russell Simmons, was the last nail in Sugarhill's coffin. Initially independent, Def Jam hitched their colours to Columbia's corporate mast in 1985, adding major label clout to already sophisticated marketing and streetwise promotion.

Creatively, too, Rubin and Def Jam changed the rules of the game, creating a sound that was stripped down and harder. The Beastie Boys rhymed over AC/DC on Rock Hard while LL Cool J's 1985 album, *Radio*, found Rubin chopping tiny stabs of guitars and horns and scattering them across drum machine-led tracks. But Run-D.M.C.'s *Raising Hell* had the biggest impact, samples looped from Aerosmith and Bob James proving that block party beats could be turned into cutting-edge, successful hip hop records. All of a sudden Def Jam and Run-D.M.C. weren't just making hit singles, they were selling albums too – something that gave the music greater visibility and underlined the fact that rap was more than the passing fad many critics had taken it to be.

"*Raising Hell* signified that rap albums were legit," Chuck D emphasises. "The majors said, 'Wow, we can actually sell more than one track by some of these groups'."

"Guys like Run-D.M.C. made it possible for us to come along," agrees Chuck's fellow golden age MC Kool G Rap. "They're the ones responsible for there being deals on the table for myself, Rakim and Chuck."

This new-found commercial viability allowed for further musical evolution and vocal innovations. While old school rappers tended to chant or declaim, Run and DMC transformed the rapper into the rock star, shouting to increase the music's visceral power. Run-D.M.C.'s first steps were seized upon by a new generation of artists intent on exploring new avenues and adding more shades to the genre. In fact the golden age would be typified by a determination to say something beyond the simple boasting of the rapper's prowess, the likes of Public Enemy and Boogie Down Productions in particular helping bring rap's lyrics to a level every bit as revolutionary as the music they were making.

In effect, the story of New York hip hop's golden age is that of a third wave of innovators. Kids when the genre began, they were inspired by the instigators, liberated by Def Jam and Run-D.M.C., and happy to ransack their parents' record collections in a bid to extend hip hop's sonic vocabulary. They did so while remaining true to the aesthetic of the block party, where expression and originality were paramount.

"I come from the era in hip hop where Public Enemy made a Public Enemy record, Eric B & Rakim made an Eric B & Rakim record," shrugs EPMD's Erick Sermon. "EPMD didn't make a Run-D.M.C. record – everybody had their own identity."

"The thing that exemplified the golden era was that artists had to find their own niche," Chuck agrees. "The only thing that made you have your stake in it was that you had to find your own little piece of turf, plant your flag down and say, This is us."

And this is the story of the hip hop revolutionaries who did just that, taking the genre to a new level, charting its course for world domination...

ERIC B & RAKIM, PUBLIC ENEMY AND BOOGIE DOWN Productions are generally acknowledged as the "holy trinity" of acts that inaugurated the golden age. Their 1987 debuts, *Paid In Full*, *Yo! Bum Rush The Show* and *Criminal Minded* respectively, became the cornerstones of the new sound.

MAJOR PLAYAS

A roll call of interviewees – then and now



CHUCK D

Then: The leader of Public Enemy, Chuck made music that was as revolutionary in content as in sound.

Now: PE have just completed their 48th world tour. Chuck's on-line empire starts at www.publickenemy.com



DE LA SOUL

Then: Three schoolmates from Long Island changed hip hop forever with their sample-heavy debut album, *3 Feet High & Rising*.

Now: Presently unsigned, De La plan to release their seventh album in the autumn on their own label. Visit www.spitkicker.com for more info.



GURU

Then: Bostonian Keith Elam formed Gang Starr in New York with DJ Premier. They accidentally invented "jazz-rap" with their second LP, *Step In The Arena*.

Now: The sixth Gang Starr LP, *The Ownerz*, was released this summer (see review in MOJO 117).



KOOL G RAP

Then: Nathaniel 'Kool' Wilson formed a duo with DJ Polo and rapped over beats culled from Billy Joel and Gary Numan.

Now: G Rap's third solo LP, *The Giancana Saga*, was released this year and was reviewed in MOJO 113. More info: www.grapgiancana.com



JUNGLE BROTHERS

Then: Mike G and Afrika 'Baby' Bam made two of the golden age's greatest LPs, *Straight Out The Jungle* (1988) and *Done By The Forces Of Nature* (1989).

Now: A stuttering career has borne five more albums.



KOOL KEITH

Then: Bronx native Keith Thornton helped bring a new level of verbal experimentation to hip hop as

part of the Ultramagnetic MCs.

Now: Keith has released umpteen albums (including one under the alias of Dr Octagon) and has worked with The Prodigy.



KRS-ONE

Then: Teenage Kris Parker formed a group with Scott 'La Rock' Sterling, and their 1987 debut *Criminal Minded* was a benchmark in rap's new school.

Now: Kris has alternated recording, touring and lecturing with running the Temple Of Hip Hop Kulture (www.templeofhiphop.org).



MASTER ACE

Then: Derek Duval Clear won studio time with Marley Marl in a talent contest in 1986. He joined the Juice Crew just as Marl's team began to break big.

Now: The Brooklynite – now going by the name of Masta Ace – remains a firm favourite with alternative hip hop audiences.



PRINCE PAUL

Then: Long Islander Paul Huston joined Brooklyn rap band Stetsasonic but found his ambitions constrained, so started working with De La Soul.

Since: *Politics Of The Business*, Paul's latest solo LP, was reviewed in MOJO 116.



RAKIM

Then: Long Island teenager William 'Rakim' Griffin, discovered by DJ Eric 'Eric B' Barrier, became one of the most respected rappers of all time.

Now: Rakim's much delayed third solo LP has been postponed following his split in July with Dr Dre's Aftermath.



ERICK SERMON

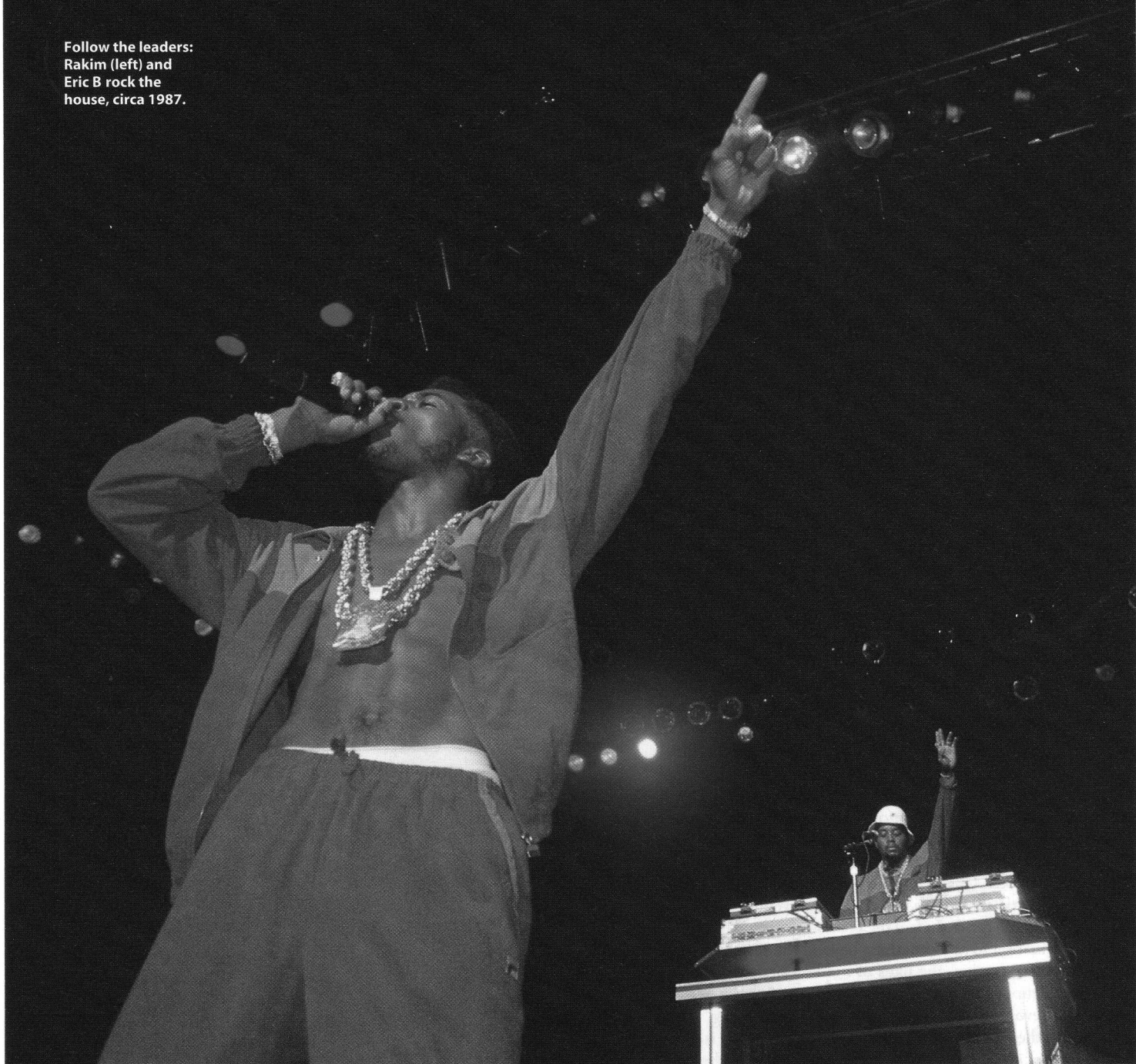
Then: With EPMD partner Parrish Smith, Sermon added P-Funk to hip hop on albums *Strictly Business* and *Unfinished Business*.

Now: Sermon had his first ever UK Top 40 hit in January this year with the single React.

In 1986 DJ and rapper duo Eric B & Rakim released Eric B Is President and My Melody on the tiny Zakia label. The record's startling blend of dirty sampling and Rakim's almost sleepy-eyed raps had an immediate impact. Both tracks were produced by Marley Marl, a DJ who had a studio set up in his flat in the Queensbridge housing estate, and had recorded with artists including MC Shan, Biz Markie and Roxanne Shante. BDP's first single, South Bronx, was a direct response to Shan's The Bridge, BDP's KRS-ONE having interpreted Shan's record as claiming that hip hop had begun in Queensbridge – something which he clearly disagreed with.

Meanwhile, Long Islanders Public Enemy had signed to Def Jam after a long pursuit by Rubin. Led by Chuck D, a graphic designer a little older than Rakim and KRS brought up in the black power era, the ➤

Follow the leaders:
Rakim (left) and
Eric B rock the
house, circa 1987.



group believed that hip hop could be a tool for the dissemination of revolutionary thought, but only if the music was cutting edge.

Rakim: “I met Eric B in ’85 – he was out in Long Island lookin’ for an MC. I had a little tape I put together, Eric took it to Marley Marl and they were both diggin’ it. We went to Marley’s house and used his studio and did a two-cut demo, which was Eric B Is President and My Melody.”

Chuck D: “Really, Eric B & Rakim introduced that [golden age] sound, with Eric B For President. Marley Marl is really the beginning of the classic era almost single-handedly, he was the man who took those original sounds and revamped them in his own way. When The Rolling Stones wanted to get the dirt in their sound they went to the Chess studio: in hip hop, guys like Marley Marl wanted that dirt too, they wanted the records crisp and crackling to give it that real band feel.”

Rakim: “I used to think that the computer sound was like a plastic sound, and the real bands you couldn’t get no realer. My mother had a whole wall of records stacked up to the ceiling: Eric came over one day and we found James Brown’s Funky President, and Over Like A Fat Rat by Fonda Rae for the bass line. We took them to Marley, and he took our ideas and enhanced them.”

Chuck D: “Eric B Is President sampled James Brown. Now, you ain’t gonna get no funkier than James Brown. I don’t care what anybody else says – period!”

Rakim: “At that time the style of rap was different. The brothers that was gettin’ paid off it was like Run, who was screamin’ from the top of his lungs. But the way I wrote my rhymes was to fit me. I’ve always been a laid-back person, so my style was a little more laid-back.”

Chuck D: “Rakim and KRS-ONE ushered in a golden era by their phrasing of rap. Rakim was able to look at a fast tempo and slow it down to his poetic pace. KRS-ONE was the same. They slowed the music down to fit them.”

Afrika ‘Baby’ Bam (Jungle Brothers): “When I heard Eric B Is President, I thought, This record is going to change a lot of things for hip hop. He was being poetic. He’d say things like, ‘My unusual style will confuse you awhile/If I was water, I’d flow in the Nile’. He tried to make words not just rhyme at the end, but even in earlier syllables: ‘My unusual, will confuse you all’. His thing was more scientific. To hear Rakim as a rap scientist inspired us in the lab as rap scientists, not just as rap vocalists. It changed the game.”

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“ERIC B & RAKIM INTRODUCED THAT GOLDEN AGE SOUND. THEY SAMPLED JAMES BROWN. YOU AIN'T GONNA GET NO FUNKIER THAN JAMES BROWN!”

CHUCK D – PUBLIC ENEMY

KRS-ONE and Scott La Rock followed debut single South Bronx with their album, *Criminal Minded* – an instantly controversial record thematically, conceptually and musically.

KRS-ONE: “People said, ‘Why is he rhyiming in a hip hop-reggae style? Why is he posing on the cover with a gun? Why?’ And that’s the greatest blessing that a philosopher can have – for the people to ask why, so I can explain. If I have nothing to explain then I’m dead.”

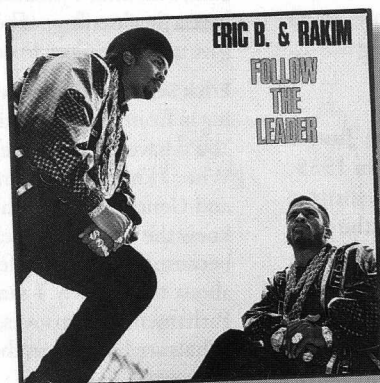
Afrika: “Kris had a song called We’ve Got To Advance, and Marley Marl and [radio DJ] Chuck Chillout were fronting on it, ’cos at that point, a song like that was corny. I remember Scott La Rock said, ‘You know what? We got to do something different. This positive stuff isn’t working, they want some criminal shit’. They got smart about it, and it drove the streets crazy. Like, ‘Yo! This is *realer* than Run-D.M.C.!’ Kris wasn’t saying, ‘I’m a drug dealer with a beeper on my hip’. He was like a newscast. And even on that album he had a song called Poetry, that showed he was in the lab too, that he was a rap scientist. We were all rap chemists in that golden era.”

A SECOND ERIC B & Rakim single, I Know You Got Soul, arrived in the spring of 1987, just ahead of their *Paid In Full* album. Sampling from James Brown sideman Bobby Byrd, it again had an indelible and immediate impact. Public Enemy, unreleased because Def Jam’s records had to fit into Columbia’s schedule, needed a major rethink, and recorded their first signature song, Rebel Without A Pause, which they released as a B-side. Rebel... loops a piercing sax sample from The Grunt, a 1969 single from James Brown’s backing band, The JB’s, upping hip hop’s noise ante and obliterating the competition at a stroke. But Eric and Rakim were already crafting their second LP, *Follow The Leader*...

Chuck D: “Our first single was supposed to come out in the summer of ’86, but it got pushed back. Springsteen came out, which pushed out the Beastie Boys, which pushed us back. Back then you couldn’t have records that were stale. You had to be now, be cutting edge. And Eric B’s camp, especially Ant Barrier, Eric B’s brother, used to give us hell! ‘Chuck sounds old!’ We was like, Damn! It’s only because the shit is outdated!”

Rakim: “At that time we was definitely havin’ a ball. Money was flowin’, the vibe was lovely, but for me it was really a case of more work to do. Before that it was a hobby. I’d go home, feel like writin’, get to the park, come on and rhyme. But when we got paid it was more of a job.”

Chuck D: “Our album finally comes out in April. Then I Know You Got Soul comes out the same month. And it’s the best fuckin’ record I have ever heard in my fuckin’ life, and it comes from Eric B who is givin’ us hell! We both have the same management, and we’re getting ready to go out on tour with them and LL Cool J, and we’ve got no records that fit this new style of music, just an album that shoulda come out last year. And we’re gonna have to look at the guys every day on the road who’ve made this fuckin’ record! So me and Hank [Shocklee, PE co-producer] made it our mission to



outdo I Know You Got Soul. We thought, Why can’t we release a new B-side? So, right before we rolled out on tour, we recorded Rebel Without A Pause at the PE HQ in Long Island.”

Rakim: “For the first album, we’d go to the studio and lay the beat, and I’d write the rhyme right there. For *Paid In Full*, every joint was done in about an hour in the studio.”

Chuck D: “To write the lyrics to Rebel, I spent a day, locked myself in my mom’s house, with the number one mission in my head that it has to be better, it has to be faster, it has to be harder than I Know You Got Soul. I was writing to a tape with the Grunt sample, and my mom’s thought it was a tea kettle going off. She was, ‘You got some tea on the stove?’”

Rakim: “I got a couple of different processes for writing. Most times I let the beat put me where I need to be. I sit there and listen to the beat, and I’ll say, Damn! That shit sounds like Brooklyn! Or, That beat sounds like war. I try to see the beat, to visualise the beat, ’cos music speaks. When I was young I used to try to figure jazz records out. I learned how to listen to a record that I’m about to write to, and picture it, and make it put me in the mood.”

Chuck D: “I wish I could find the tape of the first take that I did. I had no soul. I just couldn’t land the timing or the feeling of it. It’s like dancing: once you start counting the steps, dancing becomes something else. The next day, for the second take, I just thought about wanting to come from my diaphragm and really feeling strong about doing it, and not have the track do me.”

Rakim: “*Paid In Full* – I used to rhyme offa that Dennis Edwards record [Don’t Look Any Further] in the park years before I met Eric, so we sampled it up. I fell in the rhymes, then boom! I did that in half an hour.”

Chuck D: “I can’t even name another situation where I made a record and just *knew*... I said, I could die tomorrow, and this muthafucker’s got a life of its own. This was the next shit that went past I Know You Got Soul. It might not have been better, but it did things, it said things, and it had the right phrasing in it.”

Rakim: “Sometimes before I do a new album I go back and listen to everything because I’m a perfectionist, and I always want to do better than the last time. But if I’m not in a good mood, I won’t even want to hear it because I know it could have been better.”

Chuck D: “Russell wouldn’t put Rebel on the single because he said he didn’t want to fuck up the flow of the album by releasing a new song. He was on his way to the UK, so me and Hank chased him all the way to JFK. On the runway before he was getting on the plane he was still sayin’ ‘No’. Run was behind him, with [Run-D.M.C. DJ] Jam Master Jay. So we asked Run and Jay, How’s this gonna hurt the album? And Run just said, ‘Yo, do it’. And that was good enough for us. We took the tape to Columbia and put it on the B-side. By the time Russell came back there was nothing he could do – Rebel was on the single.”

Rakim: “To me, *Paid In Full* is just old, because that’s the way I am. I dig *Follow The Leader* ’cos that was one record where we put a lot into the sounds, the orchestration of the whole thing. We melted down ➤

◀ the studio – the whole system cut down while we were recording it! We had it so loud it sounded like the bass was coming up from under the floor.”

Chuck D: “Did I get a response from my peers to Rebel? Hell yeah! Eric B & Rakim did a fuckin’ brilliant record called Follow The Leader! Follow The Leader’s Rakim going *Ultra!* and just silencing everybody! I was like, Aww, shit! We had to go with Don’t Believe The Hype [a slower, less piercing single] to just calm it back down again!”

Rakim: “At that time I just wanted to reach the next level. When people met me they explained how they felt when they were listening, or what the records do to them. So that gave me a little insight into what I had to do on the second album.”

Chuck D: “It was just great, friendly competition. You all toured together, you mutually respected each other, and in the golden era it was strictly your music against our music, your beliefs, our beliefs, but we’re all gonna ride on the same bus. We’re all carrying around the flag of hip hop and rap – that’s what the golden era represented. I miss that competitive togetherness.”

AT THE same time as PE were recording Rebel, Ultramagnetic MCs, a Bronx group whose members included rapper Kool Keith and vocalist/producer Ced Gee, who had worked on BDP’s *Criminal Minded*, were laying down the tracks that would become their 1988 debut album, *Critical Beatdown*. And the race was on to find things to sample that weren’t from the James Brown stable. A chance rummage in a pal’s racks helped Ultramagnetic hit paydirt when Kool Keith uncovered a copy of the still extremely obscure B-side Synthetic Substitution by Melvin Bliss. The song begins with a snarling drum break that has now been used on around 100 other records.

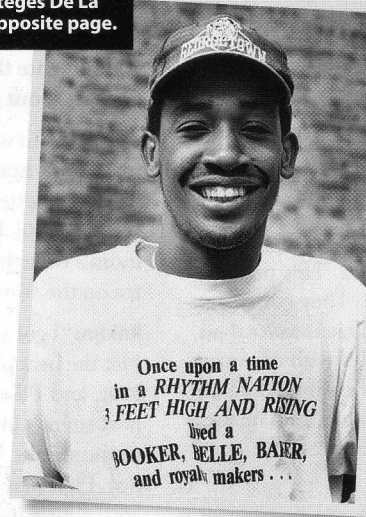
Kool Keith: “I found Substitution in my friend’s records in his house in Parkchester, New York. So I borrowed it. We’d been listening to I Know You Got Soul and I said to Ced, You know, we should just do a rap over a breakbeat like they did. We took it to the studio and we looped it, put a bass line on there. After we used Substitution, a lot of people went into sampling from the middle of the record. There were lots of parts you could use. You ain’t gonna find too many records no more with that character to it.”

Guru: “Oh my God! Ego Trippin’ is one of my favourite records. Ultramagnetic was one of my favourite groups. They were dissing Run-D.M.C. back then, when Keith was saying, ‘With your nursery rhymes a baby can pick up’.”

Kool Keith: “People thought we were dissin’ Run-D.M.C. We wasn’t! We was on a mission to change up to big words. ‘Construction!’ ‘Destruction!’ ‘Corruption!’ Those were the words to rhyme with back then. Everybody was still using ‘...ation’. ‘Concentration! Dedication! Frustration! Imitation!’ We were the first guys to go more into words that wasn’t ‘...ation’, but they were still big words. ‘Circulatory’. ‘Attitude’. We took it to that level.”

ULTRA’S *CRITICAL Beatdown* and the debut by the Jungle Brothers, *Straight Out The Jungle*, were both released in 1988. Both looked at their similar environments yet created two distinct takes on what hip hop could do, while staying true to the new sample-based aesthetic. EPMD, a duo comprised of Erick Sermon and Parrish Smith (the moniker stood for Erick and Parrish Makin’ Dollars), also took a different tack. Erick’s slurred vocals and a sample base that ran the gamut of P-Funk sounds and even looped

EPMD (right) with Parrish Smith (left) and Erick Sermon; below, “beat collector” Prince Paul and his protégés De La Soul, opposite page.



Eric Clapton on the title track helped their ’88 debut, *Strictly Business*, stand out.

Kool Keith: “When we made those songs we didn’t have any boundaries. We took words out of magazines. I was reading a lot of UFO books, satellite books. Documentary stuff. Popular Mechanics – I would read that. Me and Ced would just read books that had big words and watch programmes that were elevated. Like Star Trek. We was on a bugged-out, spaced-out high.”

Mike G (Jungle Brothers): “Hip hop spoke about our environment, and even though some of the artists who were making records at that time were a bit older, it all seemed like we came from the same community. It was like our folk music, the music that was telling our story of where we lived at and the things that we were going through.”

Kool Keith: “*Critical Beatdown* was more like a dust record – an album for people who smoked angel dust. Mentally, it was like embalming fluid. Maybe it sounded like we was on drugs, but we weren’t. We recorded *Critical Beatdown* through a time where we were walking past crackheads every day, walking past stick-up kids, police cars. Back then people were getting killed in my projects. People were throwing other people off the roof. We could have wrote about what we saw in the street: that’s the bugged out thing. We grew up in the projects, but we didn’t write about that stuff.”

Afrika: “I remember the one deciding thing we said was that we wanted to come up with a name that fits today but works tomorrow. Mike suggested Jungle Posse, or Jungle Brother. ‘Posse’ fit the whole thing of being the slang of today that won’t be around tomorrow. So we decided to keep Jungle Brothers, and that’s what led to the concept of the album.”

Mike G: “The jungle’s where we grew up; the city’s a jungle, and we’re the brothers.”

Afrika: “It was like, Yeah, the jungle! We can bug out! We can use Fela Kuti, Mandrill, Cymande, Sly And The Family Stone! Mix it all up and have a jungle collage of beats. There were no limits to it, and that name gave us the freedom to do an album like *Done By The Forces Of Nature*.”

Erick Sermon: “I grew up, like every other black hopeful, performing in front of your relatives. I did Stevie, I did Marvin; I did Blondie! You’d have to be diverse, and I did it all. I knew AC/DC, I knew The Who, I knew Van Halen, I knew Twisted Sister. I knew Phil Collins and Genesis. I knew those records like I knew hip hop records. I knew the Charlie Daniels Band! So I sampled some of these records because my ear was different. It wasn’t about James Brown, it wasn’t about the melody. I sampled stuff that was soulful and grooveful. Parliament had grooves, Roger Troutman, BT Express, The O’Jays. Whatever had that in the music, we sampled it.”

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Afrika: "Mike's uncle knew a guy who owned a studio in Coney Island, so we went there. They just had an 8-track in the basement, no elaborate equipment or samplers. It took a while to make the album, because we were still at school."

Mike G: "I had an after-school job. And after I graduated I got a job in Macy's or somewhere. So the studio was mostly on weekends."

Afrika: "Sometimes the routines were already rehearsed, so we'd just go down there with the records and set up the turntables. No SMPTE codes, no drum machines, no locking, just tape it. The track Straight Out The Jungle, the main loop is from Mandrill, but the drums are from Bill Withers. They came from my father's collection of records. We just had one copy of the Bill Withers and one Mandrill. So I put six minutes of the Bill Withers beat down on tape from the turntable, eight bars at a time, then the same with Mandrill."

AS THIS surge of new music was rolling across New York, others were getting caught up in the mix, even as the first wave of golden age artists released second LPs. In Brooklyn, Master Ace had joined Marley Marl's Juice Crew, secured a deal with the Cold Chillin' label and spent 1988 and 1989 preparing his debut album. An Amityville, Long Island, resident, 'Prince' Paul Huston, had spent school holidays with relatives in Brooklyn, and was asked to join hip hop group Stetsasonic as their DJ. The band signed to Tommy Boy and later toured with PE and Run-D.M.C. Back in Amityville, three of Huston's schoolmates had formed a band called De La Soul and

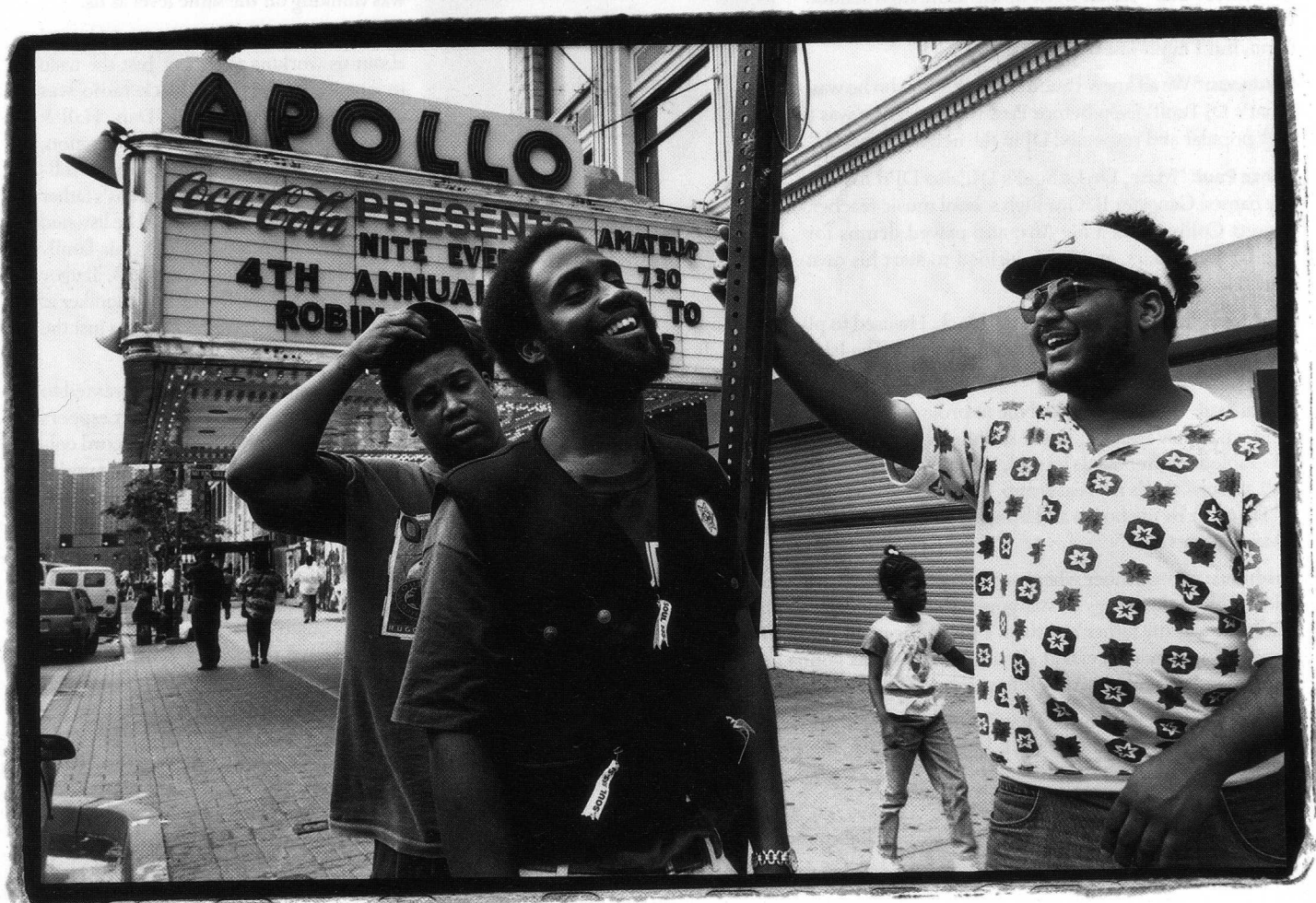
were on their way to making an album that would be pivotal to hip hop history. Meanwhile, Gang Starr, a duo formed by out-of-towners Keith 'Guru' Elam and Chris 'DJ Premier' Martin, had worked on their earliest tracks by post. By the time they moved to New York, they had begun work on their second album, *Step In The Arena*, which added many more jazz textures to hip hop's sound.

Chuck D: "Lord, let us not forget among the great innovations of the classic era, the guys who were *totally* over somewhere else: De La Soul and Prince Paul. Prince Paul also comes from the most underrated group of the classic era, and possibly of all time – Stetsasonic. The first hip hop band. The group that put live instruments back into hip hop and made The Roots understand the way they could go in the '90s."

Prince Paul: "When the second PE album came out, I had an advance tape of it and I put it on in my friend Guy Smiley's car. He had a BMW 320i, and he was driving when I think Louder Than A Bomb came on. He was pressing on the gas pedal, harder, and harder, and harder... We were on the highway, hit a pole, the car spun out, crashed into another car and spun onto the side of the road. I saw my life flash in front of me. Luckily nobody got hurt, but the car was pretty wrecked up. And that was all thanks to Public Enemy!"

Posdnous (De La Soul): "We were the same kids who had every Kool G Rap album, every Rakim song, all the early Juice Crew stuff. We loved Run-D.M.C., knew every lyric to *Criminally Minded*. We were just fans of the music." ➤

"I GREW UP, LIKE EVERY OTHER BLACK HOPEFUL, PERFORMING IN FRONT OF YOUR RELATIVES. I DID STEVIE, I DID MARVIN, I DID BLONDIE!" ERICK SERMON - EPMD





◀ **Prince Paul:** “We all went to the same high school. I’d see ‘em in class, or walking to school. So I knew of them, but I never knew they MC’d.”

Posdnous: “We all knew Paul. You just knew who he was. ‘That’s DJ Paul!’ Even before Paul was in Stet he was a very popular and respected DJ in the neighbourhood.”

Prince Paul: “Mase, De La Soul’s DJ, also DJ’d for this guy named Gangster B. Our high school music teacher, Everett Collins, had a big Afro and played drums for The Isley Brothers, and he’d decided to start his own label. He signed Gangster B.”

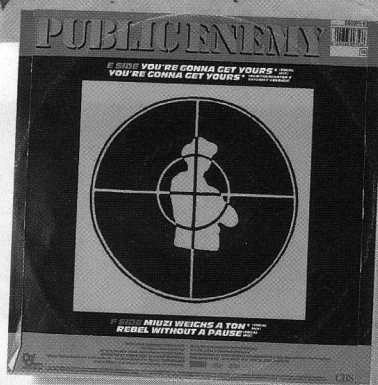
Posdnous: “Mr Collins lived on my block. He used to play drums for a group named Surface as well as touring with The Isley Brothers. It was through him that Mase met Paul.”

Prince Paul: “Mr Collins asked me to program a beat for Gangster B. I did what they wanted, but it sounded horrible. Mase saw me all miserable and afterwards he said, ‘Look, I got a group, they’re called De La Soul – that’s my real group. Whatever you wanna do, we’ll do it.’ He came by my house and brought a rough demo of Plug Tunin’. I was, Oh my God!”

Posdnous: “I remember when we first got together with Paul and he told me all of the things he was gonna put to Plug Tunin’. I did Plug Tunin’: it was my father’s record, I put it together, put it into song form. I was very concerned about what Paul was gonna do to the music that I was trying my best to produce. This was my first stuff!”

Prince Paul: “Their demo of Plug Tunin’ was very stripped down. It wasn’t really arranged that well, but just to hear the potential! I added a whole bunch of little things to it. Then the next day they came over and I played it for them.”

Posdnous: “We heard it, and we were, Damn! That sounds incredible! Right from there he made me feel at ease. He was a person who



was thinking on the same level as us.”

Prince Paul: “You know what was so cool about us working together? Just the taste in music. In the ‘70s, black radio was everything – it was Steely Dan, Hall & Oates, James Brown, Brass Construction, Captain & Tennille – it was really well-rounded. I was a beat collector, Pos’s father had all these crazy records, and he listened to black radio. Mase was a DJ, his family listened to a whole lot of old R&B, Trugoy [De La Soul’s Dave The Dove’s moniker at

that time] is Haitian and listened to country & western! It was just the best combination that could ever happen at that given time.”

Master Ace: “I felt that this was my one and only shot, and I wanted to show people all sides of me, and at the same time show other rappers that I had skills. Musically, I just went through my mom’s record collection. She had a big collection of dusty 45s that were sitting under the record player not being used, so I went through those. A lot of the samples on that album were from my mother’s collection.”

DE LA and Paul made a demo, comprising Plug Tunin’ and Freedom Of Speak, and began to shop it to labels. After Tommy Boy staffer Rod Houston (“He brought it to Tommy Boy, and he never got credit!” laments Paul) heard the tracks while Paul was working on them in the studio, he took the demo to the label who decided to release it as a single.

Prince Paul: “Tommy Boy gave us maybe \$3,000 to make the single, if that. We released Plug Tunin’, then Jenifer and Potholes In My Lawn. And because we did a little cheap video for Potholes there was enough buzz for them to say, ‘Let’s make an album’. *3 Feet High And Rising* was a very quick record. We did that in two, two and a half

months, and it only took that long 'cos I had to go on tour with Stet. I think we got about \$25,000 in total to make the album. Everything came out of that: the recording, and what we all got paid."

Posdnous: "Every single day we took the Long Island railroad in to Grand Central Station, then walked to Calliope studio with all these records and started creating. Calliope was such a great studio: it was like being in somebody's beautiful loft home, only there was all this musical equipment in there. You could look outside and see the landscape of New York City."

Prince Paul: "Acoustically, Calliope was horrible but it had so much space, it was so comfortable. We'd just all be sitting around listening to stuff. They had a turntable set up, and we all brought stacks of records."

Posdnous: "We were learning everything from Paul, and he helped upgrade us to where we needed to be. Even if he thought what we were doing was stupid or crazy, he didn't tell us. He'd be like, 'Yeah, try it — you never know!' So we would just do it."

Prince Paul: "Things like the Steely Dan loop [a sample from Peg used on De La's Eye Know]. Pos said he always wanted to use that, so I said, Go for it, man — I always liked that record too!"

Posdnous: "We always had a great system. Paul really helped us to understand how it's great to be very spontaneous, but you should also have a plan to fall back on. So we would sit down and write out what we think we should add to the song. We'd have it all mapped out on paper."

Dave (De La Soul): "We were putting together an album, but at the same time this was three kids from a small town in Long Island having fun. This was what we were doing in our basements, but we were doing it on better equipment."

Prince Paul: "I think it almost made me a madman because I had so much control — I wasn't used to that. Every little idea, every little fantasy of wanting to do stuff, I was able to do. And those guys are very artistic. I learned a lot from them during that time."

Dave: "We were definitely doing something different, I just didn't think it would impact as it did. If anything, there might have been a little bit of a doubt that people would get it or even like it."

Prince Paul: "I remember at the end just saying, Man, we got a good record. We're gonna go gold. (*Laughs*) Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think I had a Number 1 album. This record changed everything. And I had no clue."

Posdnous: "At the end, when we listened to the album, we got a little bit concerned. Like, Wow, this is *really* different! I think the only people that we looked to for a blueprint were the Ultramagnetic MCs, but they still had more harder-edged beats than what we were presenting."

Prince Paul: "My inspiration at the time was *Nation Of Millions*, Beastie Boys' *Licensed To Ill*, Eazy E's album, and, more than anything else, George Clinton. Not necessarily for the funk aspects, but because he conceptualised all his records. They're underwater, or they're in space, or in the White House. I wanted to get Pedro Bell to do the illustrations but Tommy Boy said it would have been too much like Parliament-Funkadelic. I wanted to be George Clinton, man! *3 Feet High And Rising* was my opportunity to make my Parliament-Funkadelic record."

Chuck D: "When you see a record like that, you go, What the fuck? These guys is crazier than we are! And that's the beauty of the golden era, everybody had to carve out their own private Idaho."

HIP HOP still had some work to do to establish itself as a good evening out. Despite its roots in block parties, live rap was fraught with problems. The MC battle, where two or more rappers would trade verses against one another, was still the accepted proving ground, but the atmosphere changed as hip hop moved from parks into nightclubs. Robbery and violence were endemic. In tunes like Master Ace's Brooklyn Battles or Gang Starr's Just To Get A Rep, the reportage of street life and crime would help alter hip hop's direction.

Rakim: "At that time it was clubs, not the parks. You'd go to a party and get up on the mike and represent. To me, that's what it was all about: grabbin' the mike and tearin' down whatever's in front of you. Ego trippin'. Anybody that felt they had skills had to go rhyme for rhyme. And I used to hurt 'em."

Master Ace: "There was a show every week at the Latin Quarter. That was the place to hear the music and dance with girls. But I'll tell you the truth — it was extremely violent. People were constantly getting robbed. There would be all-out brawls, then security would shuffle out whoever they could shuffle out, and the party would carry on."

Kool Keith: "The '80s were harder times than now. People were snatching chains, cutting people's faces with razor blades, taking people's sneakers."

Master Ace: "Those were the big chain-snatching years. Some guys from Jersey would come to the LQ for the first time, wearing jewellery, thinking it was all good, then guys would sneak up behind and all hell would break loose. They'd snatch somebody's chains, and each week come back to the club wearing more and more chains, and more and more jewellery. It got to the point where it became almost like a spectator sport. We would find a place to sit and try to determine who we thought was gonna get robbed this week."

Guru: "Just To Get A Rep was about Brooklyn, and some of the illest cats that I run with still. It was important for us to know who were the illest motherfuckers, so we could avoid them! That song finally earned me enough money to buy a car, and then somebody jacked me for it. It was ill! The lyrics ended up happening to me."

"I was on Kingston and Fulton in Brooklyn. I went to the weed spot, and as soon as I came out, motherfucker pulled a .357 on me. I gave him \$20 — it was all I had — and he asked me for the car keys, and he drove off in my car. We ended up chasing, but we lost him. Then the police started chasing him and he drove into a milk truck and died. The car was a write-off, obviously. I took before-and-after pictures — that thing looked like an accordion. The policeman said, 'All we know is that he had a gold tooth.'"

WHAT KILLED off the golden age wasn't the crime in New York, the depiction of that crime in some of the records, or changing public tastes. Instead, the golden age reached its conclusion when sample clearance problems led to a number of high-profile court cases that in turn made records like *Done By The Forces Of Nature*, *3 Feet High And Rising* or the Beastie Boys' 1989 masterpiece *Paul's Boutique* all but unreleasable. De La were sued by The Turtles, whose version of You Showed Me was sampled on *3 Feet High...*'s *Transmitting Live From Mars*, and Juice Crewman Biz Markie was hauled into court by Gilbert O'Sullivan for sampling *Alone Again Naturally* even after he'd been told not to. ➤

"THE '80S WERE HARDER TIMES THAN NOW. PEOPLE WERE SNATCHING CHAINS, CUTTING PEOPLE'S FACES WITH RAZOR BLADES, TAKING PEOPLE'S SNEAKERS!"

KOOL KEITH - ULTRAMAGNETIC MCS

TEN CLASSIC ALBUMS FROM THE GOLDEN AGE

BOOGIE DOWN PRODUCTIONS

Criminal Minded B-Boy 1987



While later deemed to have kick-started 'gangsta' or reality rap, this debut from KRS-ONE remains a bombastic, fantastic affair.

PUBLIC ENEMY

It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back DEF/JAM 1988



The Rolling Stones Of Rap? Nope, make that The Clash Of Hip Hop! This second album took their

squealing sample-based sound and Chuck's revolutionary rhetoric around the world. And the world has never been the same place since...

ERIC B & RAKIM

Follow The Leader MCA 1988



Not as lauded as their debut, this second LP is superior in every way. Rakim's lyrics were already on a

totally different plane.

ULTRAMAGNETIC MCs

Critical Beatdown NEXT/PLATEAU 1988



Marrying a street-savvy sound to eclectic sampling and unconventional, innovative wordplay, *Critical Beatdown* was an instant classic.

STETSASONIC

In Full Gear TOMMY BOY 1988



Stet's second LP, featuring live drums and keyboards as well as samples and dextrous raps, was the fruit of the band's touring; everything is here, from Miami bass, Sly Stone funk and jazzy samples to Walk This Way-style rock-rap.

EPMD

Strictly Business SLEEPING BAG 1988



While everyone else was speeding up their beats, Erick and Parrish let the funk flow slow them down.

An invigoratingly sleazy listen.

DE LA SOUL

3 Feet High And Rising TOMMY BOY 1989



It took four "nerds", in Prince Paul's parlance, to graft inner city attitudes to suburban themes and influences. It sounded like nothing else before, and still thrills today.

JUNGLE BROTHERS

Done By The Forces Of Nature WARNER BROS. 1989



As good as *Paul's Boutique* or *3 Feet High*, the JBros' second album turned hip hop in a bohemian, Afro-centric direction, spraying delicious samples over butter-smooth beats.

MASTER ACE

Take A Look Around COLD CHILLIN' 1990



Far from the Juice Crew's biggest star, Ace may have been their most thoughtful MC. Though he now feels this album was "too preachy", *Take A Look Around* is a fine distillation of all that was great about the golden age.

GANG STARR

Step In The Arena CHRYSALIS 1991



While sampling The Band, Marlena Shaw or Jean Jacques Perrey, DJ Premier made a different kind of hip hop, and Guru's languid, post-Rakim flow helped listeners link rap to pop.

...and 10 essential singles

BIG DADDY KANE

Raw P-RISM 1987

JVC FORCE

Strong Island B-Boy 1987

JUST ICE

Goin' Way Back SLEEPING BAG 1987

ROB BASE & DJ E-Z ROK

It Takes Two PROFILE 1988

SUGAR BEAR

Don't Scandalize Mine COSMET 1988

SEEBORN & PUMA

They Call Me Puma SELECT 1988

CHUBB ROCK & HITMAN

Howie Tee DJ Innovator SELECT 1988

AUDIO TWO

Top Billin' FIRST PRIORITY 1988

DJ MARK THE 45 KING

The 900 Number TUFF CITY 1988

KOOL G RAP & DJ POLO

Streets Of New York COLD CHILLIN' 1990

Boy didn't clear *all* the samples prior to release: they just released it anyway, and then we found ourselves in a lot of trouble. But it's important to us that we clear samples, from day one to today. We definitely want people to be acknowledged and paid for what they've done."

Prince Paul: "Our case was known because it was the first. But if you wanna blame somebody, put the blame on Biz! I tell him that all the time. He was the one who blew it *totally* out of the box. It's different when somebody says, 'Hey, don't use my record', and you still use it. *That's wrong.*"

Afrika: "When sampling became a legal issue, that messed it up, because a lot of our style and songwriting is coming from the history of the records. It pulled an important element out of it."

Dave: "Sampling was very important. It was the method by which we made our music and I think it allowed us to become a little bit more creative. Nowadays you don't have that same crack and pop in records. I think if you want to identify with the golden age of hip hop, sampling was first and foremost. It's the sound that made hip hop what it was."

PERHAPS ULTIMATELY IT was hip hop's success that scuppered the golden age. As rap became one of the music business's most profitable 'lines', artists' focuses shifted.

"In the '90s, most artists were forced to be similar as opposed to different," Chuck D analyses. "Similarity brought them the sense that they would hold on to their recording contracts and continue to be paid."

The problems caused by sample clearance, where the creator of a sampled track may expect 50 per cent of a song's publishing royalties, effectively limited samples to one or two per track, meaning densely layered collages became less profitable. And with rap's popularity came the acquiescence to lowest common denominator lyrics: if gun talk and machismo is leading to multi-platinum sales, why bother crafting anything more thoughtful?

And yet, the spirit of the golden age still lives on. Jay-Z's 2001 album *The Blueprint* relied on those organic sounds of '60s and '70s soul. His battle with Nas, conducted over a series of singles, album tracks and MP3s, showed that there was still room for pugnacious, competitive MCing.

Best of all, the legends of the golden age continue to make great records, to tour, and to remind the world of rap's boundless possibilities. In a genre where, traditionally, the new and forward-looking has always taken precedence over the music's history, perhaps at last the time has come to view this music in its proper context.

"The sad aspect is that the respect level given to hip hop and rap classics is not being given to the same extent that it has been to, say, Bob Dylan," Chuck concludes. "I would like to see Public Enemy be given the term of 'The Rolling Stones Of Rap' and for that to actually mean something. The Rolling Stones still get respect, The Grateful Dead's leading member's dead and they're still doing it, so why can't we?"

◀ **Prince Paul:** "Paul's *Boutique* was incredible. But later, when I met the Beasties, they were mad! They were like, 'Man, we *hated* you guys when you made *3 Feet High And Rising* That's what we were doing! Putting all these samples together – that was our concept! And that was funny, because *Licensed To Ill* was a *big* inspiration to *3 Feet High And Rising*, in terms of the fun behind it. Isn't that weird?"

Dave: "One of the things that I think will always tie in with the name De La Soul is sampling and sample clearance issues. I guess we had a part in making this great business called sample clearance, but it was one of those things I think needed to happen."

Prince Paul: "There was a law suit with The Turtles, but that was Tommy Boy's fault. They decided not to clear the sample. I remember clearly them saying, 'Oh, this is obscure. Hall & Oates we have to clear. This? Don't worry about it.' We wrote down everything, we gave them every lick. They *knew* it was their fault."

Dave: "Unfortunately, the record was so much in demand that Tommy