

“Raising Hell”—Run-DMC (1986)

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Essay by Bill Adler (guest post)*



Album cover



Label



Run-DMC

Released in May of 1986, “Raising Hell” is to Run-DMC what “Sgt. Pepper’s” is to the Beatles--the pinnacle of their recorded achievements. The trio--Run, DMC, and Jam Master Jay--had entered the album arena just two years earlier with an eponymous effort that was likewise earth-shakingly Beatlesque. Just as “Meet the Beatles” had introduced a new group, a new sound, a new language, a new look, and a new attitude all at once, so “Run-DMC” divided the history of hip-hop into Before-Run-DMC and After-Run-DMC.

Of course, the only pressure on Run-DMC at the very beginning was self-imposed. They were the young guns then, nothing to lose and the world to gain. By the time of “Raising Hell,” they were monarchs, having anointed themselves the Kings of Rock in the title of their second album. And no one was more keenly aware of the challenge facing them in ’86 than the guys themselves. Just a year earlier, LL Cool J, another rapper from Queens, younger than his role models, had released his debut album to great acclaim. Run couldn’t help but notice. “All I saw on TV and all I heard on the radio was LL Cool J,” he recalls, “Oh my god! It was like I was Richard Pryor and he was Eddie Murphy!”

Happily, the crew was girded for battle. Run-DMC’s first two albums had succeeded *as albums*, not just a collection of singles--a plan put into effect by Larry Smith, who produced those recordings with Russell Simmons, the group’s manager. Likewise, it was Smith--the driving force behind the seminal tracks “Rock Box” and “King of Rock”--who encouraged Run-DMC to blur the line between rap and rock.

“Raising Hell” would be produced by Rick Rubin and Russell, who had first paired up to launch Def Jam Recordings in 1984. A student of the Beatles recordings, Rubin, like Smith, was album-oriented. And, as a son of Long Island, Rubin was an even bigger fan of rock than Smith.

Rick Rubin also favored a newly-emerging production technique known as sampling, in which selected snippets of older recordings were built into new recordings--a preference that nudged aside the then-standard drum machine, which had been new when Smith began using it in 1983. It was Rubin who’d produced “Radio,” LL’s 1985 debut album

(the one that generated so much agita in Run). And it was Rubin who was producing the Beastie Boys' "Licensed to Ill"--which would be released in October of '86--even as he worked on "Raising Hell." The team was filled out by Run and Jam Master Jay, who are listed as the album's co-producers--a token of the crew's increasingly hands-on approach to their own recordings. Texturally, "Raising Hell" is raw or polished according to the track, although the dominant mood throughout is pure exuberance. Cory Robbins, one of the two co-owners of Profile Records, the label for which Run-DMC recorded, sequenced the album. It is briskly paced, its 12 tracks clocking in at just under 40 minutes.

Appropriately enough, the album's highlights begin at the beginning. "Peter Piper" is Run-DMC's X-rated rewrite of the venerable, tongue-twisting nursery rhyme with the same title. Arguably the greatest ever showcase of Run and D's virtuosic ability to trade off lines, it also squeezes maximum value out of a sample of Bob James's "Take Me to Mardi Gras," a staple of hip-hop's well-worn library of break-beats. One measure of "Peter Piper's" enduring lovability is that it had been, by 2018, sampled 229 times. A sampling of these samplers includes the Beastie Boys, Rakim, Public Enemy, Slick Rick, De La Soul, Missy Elliot, 50 Cent, Drake, and Jimmy Fallon with Justin Timberlake.

"It's Tricky," a rocker that combines the pounding guitar riff from The Knack's "My Sharona" with the rappish rhythms of Toni Basil's "Mickey," doubles as a showcase of Run-DMC's wide-ranging musical tastes. Lyrically, its final verse contains an anti-drug message which, Run says, he wrote "*consciously*, because I know kids are listening." It was the fourth and last single released from "Raising Hell."

"My Adidas" is a pure love song to the crew's favorite footwear. It was only *after* Run-DMC released the track that the German manufacturer of the shoes offered them an endorsement deal--the first ever struck with non-athletes, and as such, a very early marker of what would become hip-hop's huge influence on global fashion.

"Perfection" is one of the album's great standouts. A very relaxed, stark, and funny ode to Run-DMC's own rhyme skills, driven hard by live drums, it was recorded live in one take at Chung King Studios in Manhattan. The drummer was a 15-year-old nicknamed Sticks. Born Courtney Williams and now known professionally as C. Wills 121, Sticks then was "a young kid with a drum set who played in his basement, and I remembered he was awesome," says Run.

Run raps his rhymes in a cartoonish falsetto as he and DMC take their patented teamwork to new heights:

D: I got bass

Run: Tone!

D: I use

Run: Cologne!

D: And then I rock a funky rhyme on the micro-

Run: phone!

D: I got a funky fresh

Run: car!
D: With a funky fresh
Run: bar!
D: I'm a funky fresh
Run: star!
D: And I'm up to
Run: par!
D: My name is DM
Run: C!
D: Down with Run and
Run: Jay!
D: Is everything copasetic, y'all?
Run: A-Okay!
Both: Perfection!

“Hit It Run” is likewise a super-stark and driving production. D raps with his trademark aggression and high energy; Run runs his mouth in the style of hip-hop’s pioneering “human beat boxes,” and Jay scratches and slashes a vinyl copy of “I Can’t Stop” by John Davis and the Monster Orchestra. And, as “Son of Byford” attests, the guys clearly had a ton of fun making it. A documentary snippet of a rehearsal, only 27 seconds long, “Son of Byford” is the shortest track on “Raising Hell” and features Run beatboxing as D grandly busts out the last verse of “Hit It Run” at a slower and more deliberate tempo than in the final version. Jay, taking it all in from the sidelines, gets the last word.

“You Be Illin’” might be the funniest song on a very funny album. With its vignettes of weirdos ordering burgers at a chicken spot and shouting “Touchdown!” at basketball games--complemented by some one-fingered piano and a chuckling sax--it is reminiscent of great fifties-era novelty records like The Coasters’s “Charlie Brown.” The song was co-written by Run-DMC and Raymond “Runny Ray” White, one of the crew’s oldest pals from the neighborhood.

The album’s most serious song is “Proud to Be Black,” a whirlwind salute to some of the greatest achievers in African-American history--including Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, George Washington Carver, and Jesse Owens--that ends with the guys adding their own name to the honor roll. The anthem was conceived and largely written by Andre “Doctor Dre” Brown (the DJ who would begin co-hosting “Yo! MTV Raps” a couple of years later) and Daniel Simmons (Run’s father).

“Walk This Way” was “Raising Hell’s” wall-busting second single. A Top Ten hit for Aerosmith when it was first released in 1975, “Walk This Way”--or at least its opening two measures--was quickly adopted by hip-hop deejays as a breakbeat favorite in the era before rap records even existed. Run-DMC would have been content to write new rhymes over the classic beat, but Rubin--whose favorite band as a teenager was Aerosmith--suggested recording and updating the song itself. It was also Rubin’s idea to invite Steven Tyler and Joe Perry, the band’s lead singer and lead guitarist, respectively, to join Run-DMC on the new recording.

Aided by its music video, “Walk This Way” became an across-the-board smash. It not only went to number eight on the Black Singles chart, it went to number four on the Hot 100, the first rap record ever to crack into “Billboard’s” Top Five. It also leapt into the top ten in Australia, Belgium, Canada, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, and Switzerland.

This being the eighties, when recordings made by African-Americans and those made by European-Americans were still largely segregated in the mass media, the cross-racial collaboration of Run-DMC and Aerosmith created some backlash. “I’ve had a couple people come up to me and say, ‘Don’t you think this is gonna do something to your heavy-metal image?’” Joe Perry recalled, “I had to say, ‘*What* heavy-metal image? We’re an R&B band.” In fact, not only are Steven Tyler’s original vocals distinctly rap-like, but “Walk This Way” first came to life following Perry’s request to Aerosmith’s drummer to lay down a funky groove in the style of The Meters. Finally, its value to Run-DMC aside, the new version of “Walk This Way” helped to revive *Aerosmith’s* career, which had been declining in the years prior to the song’s release. In 2009, more than 30 years after it was recorded, Run-DMC’s “Walk This Way” was ranked number eight in VH1’s list of the “100 Greatest Hard Rock Songs.”

And what of the title track? A rocker not unlike “Walk This Way,” “Raising Hell,” is, for the most part, five-and-a-half minutes of heavy-metal guitar strangling, much of it courtesy of Rick Rubin. Hysterical adults, however, focused on the song’s title and its lyrics--“evidence,” they said, that Run-DMC were not merely evil, but Satanists...as if “raising hell” hadn’t always meant having high-spirited fun, plain and simple. Indeed, the crew’s critics had it completely backwards: the lyrics describe Run-DMC “*dissing* all devils” and “causing havoc in hell.” It is, in sum, the closest they ever came to writing a gospel song.

Though “Raising Hell” is hardly the most remarkable recording on the album that bears its name, it nonetheless somehow found a place on an ambitious two-CD compilation called “Music From The American Century” that was issued in 1999 by the Whitney Museum of American Art. It is the very last track on the playlist, capping off a run that begins with Scott Joplin and speeds ahead with music from The Mills Brothers, Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong, Charley Patton, Paul Robeson, the Carter Family, Fred Astaire, Woody Guthrie, Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Hank Williams, Miles Davis, James Brown, Marvin Gaye, the Velvet Underground... and ends, just before Run-DMC, with Patti Smith.

But “Raising Hell” was a popular smash and a critical icon from the moment of its release. It was the first rap album to achieve triple-platinum status (for sales of over three million copies) and the first rap album to reach number one on “Billboard’s” Top R&B Albums chart. Robert Christgau, who was then the highly influential music editor of “The Village Voice,” quickly awarded the album an A-. Public Enemy’s Chuck D considers “Raising Hell” the greatest hip-hop album of all-time, citing it as the reason he

chose to sign with the Def Jam label. And now, more than 30 years after the album's release, the Library of Congress has sanctified it for the ages.

Bill Adler was the director of publicity for Rush Artist Management/Def Jam Recordings between 1984 and 1990. He is the author of "Tougher Than Leather: The Rise of Run-DMC" which was published by New American Library in 1987 and republished by Consafos Books in 2002.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.