

“The Message”-- Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five (1982)

Added to the National Registry: 2002

Essay by Rich Bunnell (guest post)*



Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five (c. 1982)

“With ‘The Message’--which Flash didn't have a lot to do with, he didn't even want it released! --[Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five] moved rapping into a far richer field, away from the nonsense ‘good-time-and-get-down’ lyrics, into pungent social observation with more than a touch of desperation.”--Paolo Hewitt, “Melody Maker,” October 1982

Born Joseph Sadler in Barbados, Grandmaster Flash was a key figure in the formative years of hip-hop, spinning records at crowded block parties and disco clubs in New York’s Bronx, pioneering many of the techniques DJs use today. These parties reflected the tone of early 1980s hip-hop, which featured busy, brassy arrangements and rhythmically dense but meaningless lyrics like “bubba to the bang bang boogie, boobie to the boogie” (from the Sugar Hill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight”). With its spare rhythm track, shimmering synthesizer riff, and nakedly direct vocals from rapper Melle Mel, Flash’s 1982’s “The Message” instantly charted a musically rich, socially conscious new path for the genre.

Grandmaster Flash began working with the Furious Five after 1977, a pairing that quickly attracted attention throughout New York City and moderate chart success with singles like 1980’s “Freedom.” But though “The Message” is credited to Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Flash himself actually had nothing to do with the track. Rather, it was conceived, written, produced, and largely performed by Ed “Duke Bootee” Fletcher, with Skip McDonald on guitar, Jiggs Chase as co-writer and co-producer, and most famously, Furious Five rapper Melle Mel as co-writer and vocalist.

Flash and the rest of the Furious Five objected to the song’s demo, worried that club-goers would resist the slowed-down beat and serious subject matter. “He didn't think people wanted to hear that s***,” Fletcher later remarked to “The Guardian.” It saw its release only at the insistence of Sugarhill Records head Sylvia Robinson, who saw an opportunity to take the genre somewhere

new. And “The Message” was both musically audacious and lyrically in-your-face: much of the sonic palette consists of empty space, letting Mel dominate the mix with stark lyrics relating stories from the black experience in the American ghetto.

The first imagery in the song is bleak and unpleasant: Mel describes broken glass and urine-soaked stairs, and remarks to the listener, “I can't take the smell, can't take the noise,” forcing them to imagine the smell alongside him. He goes on to open the third verse with a memorable and layered scene:

*My brother's doing bad, stole my mother's TV
Says she watches too much, it's just not healthy
“All My Children” in the daytime, “Dallas” at night
Can't even see the game or the Sugar Ray fight*

Hard up for cash, the narrator’s brother steals his mother’s television--which she was using to watch soap operas all day and night because she doesn’t have a job. Mel and Fletcher’s painterly lyrics *show* instead of *tell*, making it clear to the listener that poverty is both systemic and cyclical.

“The Message” is also formally ambitious, its verses gradually increasing in length and sonic intensity as the song progresses. The first verse lasts eight measures, the second 11, the third 13, the fourth 16, and its final verse lasts a breathless 28 measures. Mel’s delivery is suddenly aggressive in this climactic verse as he opens with the couplet “*A child is born with no state of mind / Blind to the ways of mankind.*” He then relates the harrowing story of a child who grows up without positive role models and dies in prison, a reflection of the isolating, nihilistic experience of growing up poor and black in the ghetto.

Between each verse, Mel delivers the track’s iconic hook:

*Don't push me, 'cause I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head
It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from going under*

If there is a single message that unites “The Message,” it’s that living this life day in, day out comes at an enormous psychological cost that adds up. To hammer this home, the song ends with a brief skit where the group is arrested for no reason--a postscript that still reflects headlines at the time of this writing.

Though it reached only #62 on “Billboard’s” Hot 100 upon release, “The Message” has been massively influential on the hip-hop genre. According to the sampling database whosampled.com, its synthesizer riff and rhythm track has been sampled literally hundreds of times, most famously in a remix of Ice Cube’s 1992 hit single “Check Yo Self,” but also in songs by Tupac Shakur, Atmosphere, Usher, Mos Def, Pharrell Williams, Immortal Technique, and countless other acts.

Even stray fragments of the song have become part of the shared language of hip-hop. “Chapter 13 (Rich Man vs. Poor Man)” by Oscar-winning rapper Common interpolates the line “*Cause it's all about money; ain't a damn thing funny*” as “*Without the money; ain't a damn thing funny.*” Even the hit Tony- and Pulitzer-winning Broadway hip-hop musical “Hamilton” nods to the song with the line, “*Such a blunder, sometimes it makes me wonder why I even bring the thunder.*”

But most influential of all is the song’s searing, personal social commentary, which expanded the frontiers of hip-hop and paved the way for acts as diverse as Public Enemy, Boogie-Down Productions, NWA, Kendrick Lamar, Lauryn Hill, The Coup, and Janelle Monae. “‘The Message’ was a total knock out of the park,” Public Enemy MC Chuck D told “Rolling Stone.” “It was the first dominant rap group with the most dominant MC saying something that meant something.”

Rich Bunnell is a freelance editor, writer, and designer, and is the co-creator and co-host of popular music podcast “Discord & Rhyme” (<https://www.discordpod.com>).

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