

you happened to be watching the premiere episode of "Yo! MTV Raps" on Aug. 6, 1988, you would see one thing clearly: [Will Smith](#) exploded off the screen. The guy was a star.

Will teamed up with the virtuosic [DJ Jazzy Jeff](#), and the group's beatboxer Ready Rock C, back in 1985. By the time of the "Yo!" appearance, they already had two albums under their belt, including *He's the DJ, I'm the Rapper* (1988). That record, hip-hop's first-ever double album, ensured the group's place in history. Jeff's innovative DJ skills were front and center on songs like "Jazzy's In The House" and "DJ On Wheels," while Will brought his storytelling charm to "Parents Just Don't Understand" and "A Nightmare on My Street." Will's lyrics were funny and universal — you didn't have to be from the Bronx, or even West Philly, to relate to being scared of Freddy Kreuger. Plus, as Ann Carli, then a Jive Records exec, recalls during the "Parents..." video shoot, as quoted in Brian Coleman's indispensable tome, *Check the Technique, Vol. 2*, "The camera loves him."

From there, it was off to the races. More hit songs, TV and movie stardom, jumping out of planes, and all the rest. But it all started with a rap group that combined two world-class talents into a [GRAMMY-winning package](#) that all the world could love. — *Shawn Setaro*

Watch: [GRAMMY Rewind: DJ Jazzy Jeff & The Fresh Prince Win For 1991 Bop "Summertime"](#)

DJ Kool Herc

Clive "DJ Kool Herc" Campbell is an essential part of hip-hop's origin story. His younger sister, Cindy Campbell, asked him to play at a "Back to School Jam" she organized for Aug. 11, 1973, much like the ones she organized within the 1520 Sedgwick Avenue recreation room. At the party, today considered the day when hip-hop was born, Campbell introduced his "merry-go-round" turntable method in which he isolated the instrumental breakdowns in funk records for the "beat boys" in attendance. Over the next few years, as the legend of the party grew, Campbell established himself as a top DJ in the area, thanks in no small part to a massive sound system he built and the presence of helpers — dancers, fledging MCs and DJs, security — called the Herculoids, named after the Hanna-Barbera cartoon. In 1977, Herc was the victim of a stabbing at a local nightclub, an incident Bronx pioneers believe marked the end of his dominance and allowed rivals to surpass him. However, DJ Kool Herc remains a Promethean figure who sparked the beginning of what would later be known as hip-hop. He's the ultimate reason we're all celebrating 50 Years of Hip-Hop this year. In November, he will be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. — *Mosi Reeves*

Explore More: [Founding Father DJ Kool Herc & First Lady Cindy Campbell Celebrate Hip-Hop's 50th Anniversary](#)

DJ Screw

Less than 20 years after the 1977 New York City blackout, where Black youth across the boroughs of New York City came upon DJ equipment and found ways to use technology to achieve their dreams, a man named Robert Earl Davis Jr., also known as DJ Screw, used two turntables to fulfill

his artistic dreams, while simultaneously establishing Houston a rap capital. When DJ Screw emerged in the 1990s, the predominant rap sound and DJ technique were East- and West Coast-focused. But when DJ Screw introduced his "chopped and screwed" style, his signature DJ technique that slowed records to create pockets for the beats to flow, windows of opportunity opened for rappers across Houston to join the fold.

He created a kaleidoscope, a purple-tinted portal where Southern rappers traveled through region and time to tell their stories. There was not a street or avenue in Houston or the South where chopped and screwed could not be heard from a nearby car or window. He gave Houston and the South an opportunity to be heard within the boisterous noise of bicoastal hip-hop. In the 23 years since his passing, his chopped and screwed sound has been used by the world's greatest entertainers — horror auteur Jordan Peele has used chopped and screwed sounds in scenes and trailers for hit films like *Nope* and *Us* — and created an entry point for Houston to achieve worldwide cultural and musical success. All because of one man and his turntables. — *Taylor Crumpton*

Explore More: [Learn From Texas: How A New Generation Of Artists And Creatives Is Blazing Trails In Today's Texas Rap Scene](#)

Doug E. Fresh & Slick Rick

Throughout the early 80s, [Douglas "Doug E. Fresh" Davis](#) built a reputation for vocal percussion, or "beatboxing," and recorded a few 12-inch singles while collaborating with the likes of Kurtis Blow and others. In 1984, he recruited a teenage MC, Ricky "Slick Rick" Walters, to join Doug E. Fresh & the Get Fresh Crew. In 1985, the group released "The Show / La-Di-Da-Di," a gold-certified 12-inch that highlighted both Fresh's talents as a Master of Ceremonies and Rick's unforgettably British-inflected voice and sly, witty lyrics.

Listen: [Essential Hip-Hop Releases From The 1980s: Slick Rick, RUN-D.M.C., De La Soul & More](#)

After going their separate ways, the two continued to have a major impact during the early years of rap's golden age. One of hip-hop's great entertainers, Doug E. Fresh scored several hits over the next few years like the spiritually inspired "All the Way to Heaven" (1986), the anti-drug protest "Nuthin'," and "I-Ight (Alright)" (1993). Slick Rick's storytelling prowess and use of off-key vocal harmonies, as showcased on his platinum solo album *The Great Adventures of Slick Rick*, made him a major influence on subsequent generations of rappers. This year, he [received a Recording Academy Lifetime Achievement Award](#). — *Mosi Reeves*

Explore More: [Slick Rick Receives the Lifetime Achievement Award at the 2023 GRAMMYS](#)

Dr. Dre

success. Wallace's own vocals — heavy and lush, with the ability to glide like butter via a cascade of internal rhyme schemes — still sound as fresh today as they did when the project initially released to critical acclaim on March 25. And despite the tragic coda that cut short the life of this king from Kings County, the Notorious B.I.G.'s narrative prowess remains eternal. — *Shamira Ibrahim*

Explore More: [Hip-Hop By The Borough: Unpacking The Sound Of Rap's Birthplace From The Bronx To Staten Island](#)

OutKast



When [OutKast's André 3000 proudly proclaimed](#) "the South got something to say" at the 1995 Source Awards, the Atlanta rapper and his creative partner, [Big Boi](#), had no idea of the significance those words would have on rap music today. At the time of their 1994 debut, [Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik](#), the South was regarded as country, "backwards," and behind the times. Those words, a whistleblower, could've been misinterpreted by white and rural communities that these artists and their regions were not deemed "hip-hop." Hip-hop was cool, coastal, and cosmopolitan — not country. Yet, André 3000 and Big Boi did not mind being regarded as country; in fact, they embraced it.

Their music and Southern hip-hop overall incorporated the stylings of blues and gospel. Their delivery had a twang to it. They were not here to duplicate East Coast or West Coast hip-hop. They were on a mission to give young, Black, working-class people in the South something to say. Although based in Atlanta, their perspectives and reflections on Black life in the South took root in states across the region. Eventually, they became the leaders of the Southern hip-hop scene. So, when the duo won the [GRAMMY for Album Of The Year](#), for *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below*, at the 2004 GRAMMYS — almost 10 years after their declaration at the Source Awards — the South was not only respected in hip-hop, but it became a contender for its rightful title. — *Taylor Crumpton*