



Season 6, Episode 11: Birthplace of Hip Hop

Tukufu Zuberi: In 1977, President Jimmy Carter surveys a landscape of burnt homes, vacant buildings, and gray slums. To an aid, he says, “see which areas can still be salvaged.” The president is in the South Bronx – a written-off area of New York City falling into urban decay. In the 1970’s, it looked like a civilization on its deathbed. But a New York City resident thinks a building that once stood against that blight gave birth to a brand new culture. I’ve come to meet Elvin Reyes and hear more of his Bronx tale.

Elvin: Hey, Tukufu how are you doing?

Tukufu: You have a lot of vinyl here.

Elvin: Actually I have been collecting for about 30 years or so, that’s my love, that’s who I am.

Tukufu: Elvin uses his turntables for part-time jobs as a disc jockey – and to satisfy a full-time passion... hip hop. He caught that fever as a teenager, watching DJ’s perform in neighborhood parks in the Bronx during the 1970’s. Elvin has a photograph of a building where he believes hip hop originated.

Elvin: This is 1520 Sedgwick Avenue. The myth is that this is where it started with this DJ named Kool Herc.

Tukufu: Elvin explains that a popular DJ from Jamaica, named Clive Campbell, also known as Kool Herc, lived at 1520 Sedgwick during the 1970’s.

Tukufu: And this is in the Bronx?

Elvin: Yeah definitely

Tukufu: According to local legend, Kool Herc threw a party at the Sedgwick building, exciting the crowd with a unique turntable style – a key part of hip hop today.

Tukufu: When?

Elvin: August 11th 1973.

Tukufu: Oh you have an exact date?



Elvin: Yeah, if you really are into hip hop, you more or less know the date!

Tukufu: Is the building still there?

Elvin: Yeah, it's still there. Definitely!

Tukufu: Elvin suggests catching a Harlem Heritage bus tour that makes a ritual pilgrimage to the Bronx.

Greg: We gonna have some fun today or what?!

Tukufu: M.C. Greg Nice, a free styling-star from hip hop's golden age, takes passengers to hip hop hot spots around New York.

Greg: We are on our way to the Boogie Down, Boogie, Boogie, Boogie down Bronx, the home of hip-hop.

Tukufu: Hip hop is an African American phenomenon, like the blues and rock 'n' roll. It's also a multi billion dollar global industry that includes not just music, but fashion, film, and electronics, creating international superstars and hip hop moguls. But, as a sociologist, I know unearthing hip hops roots, now mired in decades of oral history and urban legend, will be a challenge.

Greg: We are here at the home of Kool Herc.

Tukufu: Greg also recounts the tale of the DJ's party to tourists on the bus, but can't say for sure if this is where it all started.

Greg: I do believe it's hard to tell. As far as history is concerned, there's nobody around with a piece of paper saying this was going on this day and this was going on that day.

Tukufu: You think a lot of pieces came from a lot of different places?

Greg: I love Herc, but I believe there's just so many different areas and different things that it came from, it's so hard to say one, that's my own personal opinion.

Elvin: I'm gonna keep on with this tour.

Tukufu: I am going to stay here and check this out.



Elvin: Later.

Tukufu: Elvin and I part ways and I get my first good look at 1520. The high rise stands before an imposing expressway and the Harlem River. More high rises line the avenue to the left and right... and behind. Actually the building itself looks rather plain, the façade is brick I mean the thing that was interesting to me was what Greg Nice had to say I mean here is a guy who has been in hip hop for a couple of decades and he was raising doubt that hip hop was born at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue. First I want to find out about this party. Kool Herc wasn't available to meet, but my office has found this rare footage from the early 1980's, that shows the self-promoting DJ in the Bronx – with trademark oversized speakers.

Kool Herc: When Kool Herc give a party, everybody be there!

Tukufu: He's clearly a hip hop pioneer, but can a single party really give birth to an entire cultural style? I'm meeting with Curtis Sherrrod, the executive director of the Hip Hop Culture Center of Harlem. He explains that hip hop is a lot more than music. What is hip-hop?

Curtis: Hip hop is a culture. It comprises a bunch of elements. The first element being graffiti. Second element being DJ'ing. Third element being break dancing. Last element being the MC.

Tukufu: I am trying to find out if there is some truth to the legend, to the story that hip hop was actually born on August 11, 1973 at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in the Bronx.

Curtis: That's the home where Kool Herc invented hip-hop at.

Tukufu: Now what exactly did he do?

Curtis: He threw a party, man! His party was a little different than your typical party.

Tukufu: Curtis tells me that it was at a house party in 1973, when Kool Herc is believed to have taken his Jamaican DJ'ing style – big speakers and percussive funk music– and added his own Bronx twist.

Curtis: From what I understand, you know Herc would take just the hot part of the record and prolong it.

Tukufu: Curtis says that at the now-legendary Bronx jam on August 11th, Herc saw the crowd dance most intensely during the instrumental break – and used two turntables and copies of the same song to keep that break going.



Curtis: And you got people who are really hearing the beat and they're so inspired, they're expressing it on the floor. Boom! Explosion! Hip hop! C'mon, man, let me show you what we got cracking here.

Tukufu: The center's musical director, DJ Silva-Sirfa, offers to show me how Herc manipulated the music tracks.

Silva-Sirfa: You take a nice intro like this ... and you just tease 'em now.

Tukufu: Silva-Sirfa tells me Herc also talked over the break – called MC'ing – to engage the crowd.

Silva-Sirfa: "Now fellas, you got more than five dollars in your pocket, say make money, money! Make money, money!" And that was a big one, because everybody was supposed to be making money. And then they'd look at the girl on the side and say, that's me! I'm gonna cue you up, right there. Now count it off... You see what we saying? It's a start! It's a start! I'll see you in six months!

Tukufu: Curtis and Silva-Sirfa are convinced that Kool Herc threw a party at which a new of kind of musical performance was introduced, but neither can offer me proof that it actually happened. I'm heading to Fordham University in the Bronx, to meet the Associate Director of the Urban Studies Program, Mark Naison. He explains how the historically middle class Bronx was being transformed in the early 1970's.

Naison: The Bronx in the 1940's and 50's was a suburb where a lot of upwardly mobile Black and Latino families moved. Among these were jazz musicians, teachers and postal workers and for about 20 years the Bronx was the most integrated community in the United States. Then deterioration sets in.

Tukufu: He tells me that the expressways across from 1520 Sedgwick are part of a network of superhighways built by urban planner Robert Moses. Those roads split long-standing neighbourhoods, decreased property values, and accelerated the post war flight of many white residents for the suburbs. At the same time manufacturing jobs were moving out of the Bronx, tens of thousands of mostly poor immigrants were moving in.

Naison: The Black and Puerto Rican population who has been there for 20 or 30 years who can't get out is not the dominant population but there is a new immigration as a result of the 1965 immigration laws and great many Jamaicans were moving to the Bronx and this journal points out, in 1964 there are 2000 Jamaicans coming to the Bronx and it goes up to 17,000 in 1967 and ironically that is the year that Clive Campbell comes with his family to the Bronx.



Tukufu: He says that Kool Herc was part of this influx of new faces arriving just as the community was overrun by a heroin epidemic ...gang violence ...and arson.

Naison: The Bronx is burning. You actually started seeing landlords burning their buildings to get insurance money.

Tukufu: What did that do then to the social dynamics of what was going on in the Bronx?

Naison: It created this tremendous sense of fear that was compounded by a city fiscal crisis which led to closing of schools, closing of fire houses, closing of police stations.

Tukufu: Dr. Naison is also familiar with the story about 1520 being the birthplace of hip hop.

Naison: Herc's music fit the psychology and lived experience of young people growing up in the Bronx. And that was the big bang that started hip hop. The sound created there, that pounding rhythm, is something that's still capturing the imagination of young people all over the world. I just came back from Berlin and Barcelona where hip hop is the vehicle expression for so many young people, particularly their immigrants and their poor people.

Tukufu: But Dr. Naison can't prove the party at 1520 Sedgwick did happen. And, like Curtis, he knows that hip hop culture is more than just DJ'ing. Tats Cru is a collective of graffiti artists in the Bronx who have their own account of hip hop's roots.

Bio/Tats Cru: From here to here that's all you.

Tukufu: They explain how graffiti was a vital way young people expressed themselves as the Bronx withered away in the 1970s.

Bio: It got included in that whole formula of what hip hop is.

Nicer: It was a subculture within New York City. It was just about getting fame. And about getting your name out there and about expressing yourself.

Tukufu: Graffiti artists tagged subway trains and stations ... from Brooklyn to the Bronx until the authorities wiped it clean. Bio says the graffiti artists and the DJ's at the parties, or jams, worked together – each promoting the other's art.



Bio: The graffiti writers were the one painting the MC's jackets for the shows. One guy, this guy's going to be the DJ. This guy's going to be the dancer. I'm the graffiti artist, whatever. I'm going to do the flier for his party.

Tukufu: So did Kool Herc really start hip hop at a dance party in the Bronx?

Bio: I don't think so. Kool Herc was one of the founding fathers of hip-hop. But just like any other movement or any other thing, you can't go back and trace it to one individual. Kool Herc wasn't the only party in town.

Tukufu: I'm leaving the Bronx ... for Harvard University to meet African American Studies Professor Marcyliena Morgan, who is the founding curator of a newly constructed hip hop archive.

Dr. Morgan: The area we are most interested in is how the hip hop community grew and why it continues to grow.

Tukufu: So, why is it complicated to say that 1520 Sedgwick Avenue is the birthplace of hip hop?

Dr. Morgan: Because the birth is a process, it is not just one moment.

Tukufu: She's not surprised I'm having a hard time excavating the roots of hip hop. The art of hip hop was disappearing as fast as it was happening. Graffiti wiped clean, recordings lost or never made, buildings razed, and party flyers blown away. Part of the mission of the new archive is to preserve what's left of this extraordinary moment of cultural genesis.

Dr. Morgan: It's important to our understanding of this particular art form, genre, experience, that's really has had a profound affect on the world. "Fresh" is such an important word in hip hop. "Maintaining," "representing," You end up opening up things like politics, like looking at society, being a critic of the world, being a participant. Hip hop generates that natural interest.

Tukufu: What Dr. Morgan pulls from her archive's collection may finally put Elvin's questions to rest. That's it! Time to head back to the Bronx. You know, I, like you, grew up listening, loving and partying to hip hop and but you know, when I started this investigation we were thinking about this could or could not be the place. So I was almost at a loss. But among the faded posters and handwritten party invitations in the Harvard archive, Dr. Morgan had recovered a crucial piece of evidence. "A DJ Kool Herc party, back to school jam, 1520 Sedgwick Avenue, in the rec room August 11, 1973" and look at this, from 9pm to 4am, they planned to party all night long.

Dr. Morgan: That's right. New York style.



Tukufu: 25 cents for the ladies, 50 cents for the guys. Although the flyer is a copy, Dr. Morgan says the party almost certainly happened. But was it the birth of hip hop? That's probably too big a statement – the legend of 1520 Sedgwick has grown so popular partly because it still stands, while so much of what existed back then has been destroyed.

Dr Morgan: 1520 Sedgwick: this is the place that you respect, this is the place that has meant something to everyone in the world that it began, this is the symbol of that. A very strong statement saying people lived there.

Tukufu: 1520 Sedgwick Avenue became a signpost for the birth of one of the musical evolutions of the 20th and 21st Century.

Elvin: I mean hip hop has come a long way, you know everything just started here, 1520 Sedgwick.

Tukufu: It's been a pleasure.

Elvin: Yeah, likewise.

Tukufu: While parts of the South Bronx are still struggling, tax credits and new thinking brought back banks, hope, and former residents. The once desolate street walked by President Carter is now dotted with trees and six figure homes. But throughout the changing times, the Bronx supported many hip hop artists who laid the foundation for the now-global culture... One that continues to evolve because its appeal remains one of individual creative expression.