

SCHOOL'D BY FUNKMODE

You want to become a Hip Hop expert? Learn the info below and you're on your way, yo!

KURTIS BLOW - HIP HOP'S FIRST COMMERCIAL RAPPER

When you ask most people today what Hip Hop is, you can almost guarantee the answer will be rap music. Of course, if you've been following these SCHOOL'd lessons, you know that Hip Hop culture is far bigger than rap. Still, there is no denying that the commercial success of rap music has made it more prominent than just about any component of the culture. And the first rapper to become a real commercial success was Kurtis Blow.

Kurtis Blow was born Kurt Walker in 1959. He got involved in Hip Hop culture very early on, b-boying in grade school and even doing a little DJing at family parties. As Kurt got older, he started getting more serious about his art, enrolling at the Harlem High School of Music and DJing under the name of Kool DJ Kurt. He joined a party promotion group during this time called "The Force". Even though he didn't realize it at the time, this turned out to be possibly the most important decision of his life. You see, one of the more ambitious members of The Force was a young man that went by the nickname of "Rush", but we know him today as Russell Simmons (yes, that one!). At the time, as Hip Hop culture was taking a strong hold, most DJs were pushed to rap too. Russell convinced Kurt to change his stage name and start rapping under "Kurtis Blow". It didn't take long for Kurt to find popularity and gain a following. In fact, Russell's little brother, Joseph, really looked up to Kurt and DJ'd for him under the name, "The Son of Kurtis Blow".

As Kurt grew in skills, Russell saw the need for someone to manage him and help him get publicity. Taking on the job himself, Russell did a great job of promoting Kurt's budding career. Together, they got the attention of a reporter for Billboard Magazine named Robert "Rocky" Ford who wrote about them in the magazine. But Rocky was also looking for a group with whom to record an album, as his real job with Billboard was in producing. Even though he was looking elsewhere at the time, Russell convinced Rocky to record an album featuring Kurt. They went right to work on a song titled "Christmas Rappin". During the time they were putting this single together, "Rapper's Delight" was released by Sugar Hill Records and became an instant success. Unfortunately, this had a negative effect on Kurt's project. When Kurt, Russell and Rocky went out to try to convince record companies to pick up their single, many of them rejected it, believing that the success of "Rapper's Delight" was a fluke and it would be no more than a one-hit wonder. However, the group did not give up and eventually their determination paid off. They were able to get Mercury Records to take a chance on Kurt's song. Mercury Records signed Kurt to a two single contract on their label with the understanding that if both singles were successful, he would become the first rapper to get a record deal and have a complete rap album released by a major label.

"Christmas Rappin" was a success, selling over 400,000 copies. Kurt's second single, "The Breaks" was even more successful, going gold by selling over 500,000 copies. Kurt got his record deal and released his self-titled album "Kurtis Blow" in 1980. His success didn't stop there, nor did it for Russell Simmons. Kurt would go on to record 10 albums in 11 years. He was even the first Hip Hop artist to get a major sponsorship deal, appearing in ads for Sprite. Russell found even greater success with the group Run DMC led by none other than "The Son of Kurtis Blow", his younger brother Joseph, then (and forever more) known as DJ Run. As his rap career died down, Kurt still had more success as a producer, making albums for Hip Hop legends such as Run DMC and The Fat Boys. Today, he still tours and produces. He has hosted radio shows and advocated for important social causes like ending racism and preventing drug use.

One of the most important things we feel should be said about Kurt's career is that he was always committed to never having profanity in his music. He said, "I knew that in order for this thing to last and spread all around the world, it had to be wholesome, it had to be something that families could listen to, something people could play for their kid, something you could sing in church and I can sing all my songs in church." He even recorded a song called "Magic Words" with a youth rap group, which spoke about the important of using manners when speaking. For these reasons and more, Kurtis Blow will always be one of the most important people in the history of Hip Hop.

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HIP HOP WORDS OF THE WEEK

Spin: to play records as a DJ.

EX: "I heard Kool DJ Kurt spin back in the days at a block party. Who would have known he'd become one of the biggest names in Hip Hop!"

Keep it 100: (i.e. 100% real) to be completely honest, especially when dishonesty might be easier.

EX: "He wanted me to tell the teacher he didn't cheat but I had to keep it 100 and let her know."

Gank: to take something from someone quickly or to steal.

EX: "I can't believe my little sister ganked the TV remote from me. That little girl's so strong!"

BONUS: Create a sentence using all words of the week

EXTRA LEARNING

- 1) Name two other albums by Kurtis Blow.
- 2) Name the song Kurtis Blow wrote in honor of Martin Luther King Jr.
- 3) Is Kurtis Blow in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame?