



RUN DMC

BY ALAN LIGHT



I'm the King of Rock
There is none higher
Sucker MCs
Should call me sire
To burn my kingdom
You must use fire
I won't stop rocking
Till I retire

—RUN DMC, "King of Rock"

In 1985, when the first group of Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductees was selected, RUN DMC, the biggest rap act on the planet, decided to make its opinion known. The video for "King of Rock," the title track to their 1985 album, shows Run and DMC bum-rushing the "Museum of Rock 'n' Roll," shoving aside a security guard played by hapless David Letterman mascot Larry "Bud" Melman so they can check out the displays for themselves. As the song's brontosaurus beat stomps behind them, they proceed to step on Michael Jackson's glove, smash Elton John's glasses, and ridicule videos spotlighting Buddy Holly, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Little Richard.

By song's end, the MCs (and a black fedora-topped Melman) are nodding in approval as a RUN DMC clip plays on the museum's screen. The idea was ridiculous: Back then, rap was almost universally marginalized by the mainstream pop and rock community, and no one in the genre had yet been around long enough to have a respected career. The very idea of a hip-hop act being embraced by the gatekeepers of rock history could only be played as a joke.

And so, here we are, with RUN DMC elected to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in its first year of eligibility, and hip-hop firmly entrenched as the dominant pop music of the era. What's most shocking is that now it seems like a no-brainer — it's hard to even think of another act from the 1980s that had an impact as widespread as the Kings from Queens.

"RUN DMC is the chief architect of hip-hop," Public Enemy's Chuck D has said. Run (Joseph Simmons), DMC (Darryl McDaniels), and Jam Master Jay (Jason Mizell) transformed the sound, the look, the audience, and the possibilities for hip-hop around the world. They were pioneers creatively and commercially, simultaneously the Chuck Berry and the Elvis of their genre.

Just to get it out of the way, here are some of the ways RUN DMC made history:

- First rap album to go Number One on the R&B chart
- First rap album to reach Top Ten on the pop chart
- First gold, platinum, and multiplatinum rap albums
- First rappers on the cover of *Rolling Stone*
- First rappers to get a Grammy nomination
- First rappers with a video on MTV
- Only rappers to perform at Live Aid

"RUN DMC broke down the barriers," Eminem said. "Everyone in the game today owes something to them." They were even the first non-athletes to get a sneaker endorsement deal (with Adidas, of course) — without them, would Jay-Z or Sean Combs be able to hawk everything from vodka to eveningwear?

Even if they hadn't accomplished these feats, however, RUN DMC's influence on hip-hop would have been immense. The earliest rap records — mostly the classic 12-inch singles on the Sugar Hill label — featured

Jam Master Jay (Jason Mizell), Run (Joseph Simmons), and DMC (Darryl McDaniels) (from left), 1985



DMC, Jay, and Run (from left) on home turf, 1983

MCs rhyming over a live band. The tracks created a groove over which the Treacherous Three or the Furious Five would spin dozens and dozens of rhymes until the disc faded out. Though the rappers were keeping alive the spirit of hip-hop born in New York City parks and basements, the music was really an extension of R&B, even disco, with an assumption that nothing as raw as the first-generation DJs were inventing could ever get on the radio.

Enter three kids from middle-class Hollis, Queens – notable in itself, since the Bronx, Harlem, and Brooklyn were the major players in the rap game. Joseph Simmons had started performing (with an assist from his brother, an ambitious young promoter/manager/hustler named Russell) as a DJ, beat-boxer, and all-purpose sidekick for the first rap solo star, Kurtis Blow; he was, in fact, billed as “DJ Run, the son of Kurtis Blow.” Joseph and his friend Darryl started messing around writing rhymes together, hanging out in their native borough’s Two Fifths Park, where the ruling DJ was “Jazzy Jase” Mizell. After the duo started college, they eventually convinced Mizell to join forces with them manning the turntables and persuaded Russell to manage the nascent trio.

Now known as RUN DMC (a name they initially hated), the group released its first single, “It’s Like That”/“Sucker MCs,” on Profile Records in 1983. Like “I Want to Hold Your Hand” or “Smells Like Teen Spirit,” it was truly a shot heard round the world. The delivery was clipped, aggressive, sometimes almost straight-up yelling, with rhymes tossed back and forth between Run and DMC. The lyrics were, on one hand, an unblinking look at street reality and, on the other, a straight-up dis rhyme.

And the music – well, there almost wasn’t any. Just a head-cracking, funky beat-box, plus some scratching from Jay for a little dose of flavor. “RUN DMC, rocking without a band,” they would later declaim. It was like the sounds of the park jams, but even more raw and sparse. And the five hit singles that followed – gathered up into the landmark *RUN DMC* album in 1984 – were just as uncompromising.

“No one had ever made a black or R&B record sound as loud and abrasive as [the DJ instrumental] ‘Jam Master Jay,’ ever,” Russell Simmons told me in 1990. “There were four records on *RUN DMC*, if you played them for an A&R direc-



RUN DMC with its ‘Raising Hell’ tour openers the Beastie Boys: Ad-Rock (Adam Horovitz), Jam Master Jay, DMC, MCA (Adam Yauch), Mike D (Michael Diamond), and Run (from left), 1987



Back in the 'hood: RUN DMC in Hollis, Queens, 1985

tor, whose job is to hear hits, they would have been offended: "Where's the music? Why is there a beat and no music?"

Jam Master Jay put it more directly. "Before us, rap records were corny," he once said. "Everything was soft, nobody made no hard beat records . . . Before RUN DMC came along, rap could have been a fad."

Just as significant as its effect on hip-hop's sound, though, was what RUN DMC did to urban style. Rappers before

them took their stage dress from the Parliament-Funkadelic playbook – all-blue leather suits or astronaut gear. Run, D, and Jay instead made it look like they stepped straight out of the crowd and into the spotlight. Fedoras, Lee jeans, unlaced Adidas, and DMC's Cazal eyeglasses made up their signature iconography. They swept in a new generation, a new attitude, a commitment to "keeping it real" in their words and their appearance that defines hip-hop to this day.



Walk this way again: RUN DMC and Aerosmith reprise their 1986 smash on tour together in 2002.





Men in hats: In Los Angeles, 1999

The nine songs on *RUN DMC* (which reached the mid-fifties on the pop chart) established the genre as a viable album format – with a viable touring base, too, since RUN DMC were possibly the hardest-working road act hip-hop has ever known. They expanded the music’s territory with the heavy-metal guitar on “Rock Box” and with “Roots, Rap, Reggae,” a collaboration with dancehall star Yellowman on their sophomore album, *King of Rock*. During those first few years, though, RUN DMC was still essentially an urban phenomenon.

The floodgates opened in 1986 with the *Raising Hell* album. “The greatest rap album ever recorded,” Chuck D said. “It raised the bar for all of hip-hop.” *Raising Hell* was a pop sensation, the first multiplatinum rap album, and it was all kick-started by one brilliant decision by producer Rick Rubin, who teamed the guys with Steven Tyler and Joe Perry of Aerosmith for a remake of “Walk This Way,” the 1976 dirtbag anthem by the Boston Bad Boys.

“A lot of people thought of rap as so completely alien to music at the time,” Rubin later said. “And here they were doing a cover that I knew would sound like a RUN DMC song, but people could say, ‘Wow, I understand this!’” The video – which literally depicted an onstage wall being knocked down between the MCs and the rockers – became an MTV staple, with three singles from the album hitting the pop chart.

RUN DMC kicked open the door, its tour mates the Beastie Boys soon ran through it, and hip-hop’s takeover of middle America was in full effect. Not that *Raising Hell* represented any kind of dumbing-down of RUN DMC’s skills; in fact, as they tossed lines back and forth in “Peter Piper” like Michael Jordan and Scottie Pippen on a fast break, it was clear that the group was at the top of its game.

When the dust finally cleared in 1988, *Tougher Than Leather* was released, a misguided attempt to make the trio into action-movie stars. The film’s disappointing performance overshadowed a strong, hard-edged album with such sure shots as “Run’s House” and “Beats to the Rhyme”; Chris Rock later cited it as one of his favorite albums. But troubles started after that, with lawsuits, substance abuse, and business squabbles. After turning to religion, a rejuvenated RUN DMC returned to the top of the charts with 1993’s *Down With the King*, but that success couldn’t be sustained.

In the years since, Run embraced his faith even deeper, becoming the Reverend Run and then a reality show star. DMC went through a period of intense soul-searching, releasing a solo album influenced by his favorite singer-songwriters. Jam Master Jay found some of the biggest commercial success of the three, issuing a huge hit on his own JMJ label by Onyx, a group he discovered, and then producing and developing young rappers, including Queens-born future superstar 50 Cent. But in late 2002, Jay was shot and killed in the lounge of his recording studio. His murder remains unsolved.

RUN DMC was the most hardcore group of its time – practically inventing the idea of hardcore hip-hop – yet its two MCs rhymed about wearing glasses and going to college. They gave rap its own unique identity; they made hits by making records that sounded nothing like hits; they took the beat from the street and put it on TV.

So, with all due respect to our other esteemed inductees, this evening the last word belongs to the crew that can never be beat:

“We have a whole lot of superstars on this stage here tonight,” shouted Run, two full decades ago. “But I want you all to know one thing – this is my house! And when I say, ‘Whose house?’ you all know what time it is.”

The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Run’s House, indeed. ♪



ABOVE: Honoring the fallen: Run and DMC, 2002.
OPPOSITE: Hip-hop pioneers live in 1988.