

# GRANDMASTER CUTS FASTER: THE STORY OF GRANDMASTER FLASH AND THE FURIOUS FIVE

*By Chuck Miller*

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"Flash comes out first complete with rousing introduction, takes off a black cape and -- plays records. He goes to the double turntables at the back of the stage and cuts and blends bits of "Good Times" and "Another One Bites The Dust" -- not just the usual segues but real tight-to-the-beat mixes and tricks like holding the edge of the record so the beat clicks back on itself: the vinyl "talks" rap-style ... The Furious Five -- the MC's, the rappers -- come out one by one in glitzy black and white outfits, talking fast, faster, fastest. They had this choreography that reminded me of the old Temptations -- classic but knife-sharp -- and they were in constant motion even when they broke out of the routines. They would hold their mikestands out over the crowd to get the response: 'Say hooo!' 'Hooo!' 'Somebody scream!'" (Vince Aletti, "Golden Voices and Hearts of Steel," *The Village Voice*, May 6, 1981).

They entertained crowds for free, five rappers and a sixth man who used phonograph turntables as musical instruments. The Clash wanted them to be their opening act. Blondie performed a #1 song about their parties. Duran Duran covered their songs. For 20 years, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five brought hip-hop from the parks of 137th Street and Gunhill Road to radio stations across the world.

Grandmaster Flash, the disc jockey who created the group, could trace his involvement with music to the early 1960's, when a young Joseph Saddler constantly raided his father's prized record collection. "My father was big on jazz, he had a lot of jazz 78's and the big LP's," said Flash in an interview. "When he came home from work, he would say, 'Son, do not go in that closet over there, because that's where my records are. If you do, I'm gonna give you a beating.' I think him telling me that made me wonder what's in that closet, and why does he keep telling me not to go in there?"

So when his father went to work, young Saddler went to the record closet. Using a chair from the kitchen so that he could reach the closet doorknob, the boy pulled out his father's prized discs and played them on the family phonograph. And then, with the sounds of jazz and bebop blaring throughout the house, Saddler danced in the middle of the living room, oblivious to the eventual spanking he would receive that night. "My mother would say to me, 'You know your father's going to kill you if he catches you.' I thought I could still go in his closet and bother his records, and I tried to put them back before he got home. But he always knew categorically where his stuff was. At the time, I even accidentally dropped a few of his 78's. If you drop them one time, they're in pieces. Boy did I get it then. Even though I got a beating, if my booty were healed, I'd go back into the closet again."

But it wasn't just the lush sounds of his father's prized jazz records that captured Saddler's attention. "He had this stereo in the living room, and what was most intriguing was when you turned it on, it had this little red light in the bottom center of it, a power light. That light used to

fascinate me - that's how I got involved in electronics. When I got older, I used to go in my sister's room and take apart her hair dryer and whatever I could get my hands on, and I would try to put it back together, and when they came home, they said, 'Joseph was in my room, and this don't work and that don't work now.'"

But rather than give Saddler another beating, his parents enrolled him at Samuel Gompers Technical School, where he channeled his energies towards an electronics degree. He searched through junkyards for broken appliances, which he would now try to repair and reassemble. If he was lucky, he sometimes found an old phonograph, which he would study like an archeologist might investigate the Pyramids.

After technical school, he took money earned from odd jobs and purchased his first turntable, a Technics SL-20 that could take a record from zero to 45 in an eighth of a revolution. For two years, he played songs over and over on that turntable, trying to find ways to isolate the choice parts of a song - the hook, the drum beat, a blast of funky horns - creating a "Quick Mix Theory" that could turn ten-second fragments of song into a rhythm track that lasted indefinitely. "My theory was that to every good record there is a great part. Disco was the big sound on the radio, but we weren't into that too much. The records we used to collect were the ones with the short drum breaks. Unfortunately, those breaks were 15 seconds, 10 seconds long. So I had to figure out how to extend it without the listener realizing that I extended it."

Using his electronics skills, Saddler converted a microphone mixer to modulate sound from his turntables. He even created a cue system - allowing him to pre-hear the record in his headphones rather than over the loudspeakers - from spare parts at Radio Shack. For months he would practice hand movements - gently holding the record edge with one finger while the turntable spun underneath, then letting go of the album as it instantaneously jumped to full speed. And armed with the nickname Grandmaster Flash (in homage to "Grand Master" Bruce Lee), he began mixing his records at neighborhood parties. "One of the songs I loved to cut was a song by James Brown called 'Funky Drummer.' But the best part of that song was at the bitter, bitter end. And the drums used to break down by themselves at the end, but you had to keep that part going, otherwise it would get quiet at the parties. You couldn't just lift the needle off the record, there were a million grooves on the album and you wouldn't find the break that way. So I tried to spin the disc back. And in spinning it back one time, I noticed I could re-arrive at the beginning of a break section. While I was playing one disc, I could spin the other one backwards. That worked fine, but I broke lots of needles at first from doing that."

During his parties, Flash often left a microphone on the other side of the performing table. If there were any rappers or vocalists in the audience, Flash would let them use the microphone to entertain while he worked the turntables. "I thought to myself, now that I've created this Quick Mix technique, when I go in the parks, I thought the crowd would go crazy. It was the opposite. It was like a seminar, everybody just stood there and watched me. I needed somebody to take what I was doing and compliment it."

The first to take the microphone was Keith "Cowboy" Wiggins, whose deep, commanding voice drove the ladies crazy. "He was a ringleader, he had this voice that worked real well. I'd tell him what park I would be in the following week, and he would be there, and we'd just light the park up until it was time to go."

Within six months, four other rappers joined Flash's party crew - Melvin "Melle Mel" Glover, Guy Todd "Rahiem" Williams, Nathaniel "Kidd Creole" Glover, and Eddie "Mr. Ness" Morris. The group (now known as the Furious Five) passed their raps back and forth amongst

each other, like basketball players passing the ball on a fast break. And before long, "Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five" were one of the hottest rap groups in the Bronx.

For five years Flash and the Five played the B-boy circuit - a hodgepodge of Bronx parks, vacant lots and basketball courts where people could gather for free and party all night. B-boy parties were mobile outdoor discotheques, requiring only the bare essentials - two turntables, a mixing board, an amplifier and speakers, one person to spin the records, and some others to rap over the instrumental portions. Pop the electric panel on a lamp post, do some quick re-wiring, and your turntables had an unlimited power source. "DJ Breakout and the Funky 4 had the territory from Gun Hill Road up, which is way uptown. We had from 137th Street up to Gunhill Road. Afrika Bambaataa had the Bronx River area, and Kool Herc had the West Side of the Bronx. If we were going to someone's area, we had meetings, we'd set it up and make it a battle of the rappers. It was a business. We had our own security, the Casanovas, that would walk through the park and make sure things stayed intact. All the police had to do was circle the park 7-8 times, because there would be nobody around the block, everybody would be in the park. We made their job easier."

One night during a B-boy party, Flash received word that Deborah Harry, lead singer of the new wave band Blondie, was in the house. Harry stayed in the background, watching the Furious Five control the dancing crowd with their tightly-choreographed raps, watching Flash cut the records with his elbow, his toes, his knees, scratching and spinning like James Brown on the stage. Harry stayed for the entire show, marveling at the skill of the rappers and the DJ, then left. After the party shut down, the person who brought her to the party, record producer Fab 5 Freddy, told Flash that Harry was so impressed with the group's skills, she might pay tribute to the Furious Five in an upcoming Blondie album.

On occasion, people asked Flash if the group ever wanted to make a record of their own, but he declined, as he didn't think that people rapping over an instrumental track would even sell. "Somebody once came to us and said we should do a rap record," said Flash, "and we said hell no, nobody'd like it. Let's keep it underground. Nobody outside the Bronx would like this stuff anyway."

Then came "Rappers' Delight."

Sugarhill Records was a New Jersey-based independent record label owned and operated by Sylvia Robinson, a former pop singer and producer ("Love is Strange", "Pillow Talk"). Sensing that rap music could be a profitable entity for her record company, she found three local rappers and rechristened them as "The Sugarhill Gang." Their song, "Rappers' Delight" (Sugarhill 542), was an 15 minute opus about Superman, bad food, fast cars, late night parties and intricate rhymes. It was a smash hit on the soul charts, and even cracked Billboard's Top 40 pop chart. "I did research," said Flash. "I knew all my adversaries and all my friends, and this group I did not know about. And all I could think was oh my goodness, somebody did it. And it was one of my worst nightmares, because we could have been first. But then I said to myself, our chance will come."

Suddenly record company executives, who were once afraid of getting mugged in the ghetto after dark, now combed the Bronx streets, looking for rappers that could give their fledgling labels a "Rappers' Delight" of their own. One of those executives was Bobby Robinson, president of Harlem-based Enjoy Records, and he signed Flash and the Furious Five to their first recording contract. "There was an old man that used to stand in the back from the beginning to end of our B-boy parties, and I asked security who is he - I thought he was a father looking for his daughter. But after a while, he told me he was Bobby Robinson and that he wanted to sign

the group. The Sugarhill Gang was out there, their record was all over the radio, and I said, hey we could be stars, too. So let's do it."

So in 1979, Flash and the Five released their first 12-inch disc, "Superappin" (Enjoy EN1003). The 12-minute song contained the basic framework of the group's



future recordings. Each member would introduce themselves in synchronous rap, and all would introduce Flash as the sixth member.

Then each MC did their own rap quatrain - what kind of cars they drove, what kind of women they liked - and would periodically combine their voices as a refrain. Near the end of "Superappin," Melle Mel rapped out "A Child is Born," a melancholy testament of urban life - but the record was barely heard outside of the Bronx.

"When this record came out, we thought we were going to be kings of the radio - we had great notoriety in our neighborhood. This record was going to set us straight and we were going to be millionaires, to be anything that a kid from the ghetto would dream about.

But it didn't happen - we didn't get nearly the airplay or the recognition from that disc as the Sugarhill Gang got."

So Flash and the Five went back to their B-boy parties. Meanwhile, Sylvia Robinson received word that Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five were the hot group in the Bronx. "She found out that I played at a club called 'Disco Fever' every Tuesday, and this was a meeting place for all the hip-hop stars, boxers like Macho Camacho, singers and the like. Sylvia and her son Joey Robinson came down to Disco Fever and asked if we would mind recording for her. We thought about it for a while, discussed it within the group, and we agreed that this particular label could take us to the next plateau."

With that, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five joined Sugarhill Records. Their first two singles, "Freedom" (Sugarhill 756) and "The Birthday Party" (Sugarhill 555), became urban hits. The Furious Five continued their cars-and-women raps, and added some call-and-response measures, asking a pre-recorded crowd what their zodiac sign is or what brand of jeans they wore.

At the time, all the music came from the Sugarhill house band - Doug Wimbish (bass), Skip McDonald (guitar), Reggie Griffin (synth), Keith LeBlanc (drums), Ed Fletcher (percussion), and Gary Henry and Dwain Mitchell (keyboards). "The house band was so tight," said Flash, "they were one of the very few bands that you could bring a record to them and ask them to emulate the part, and they could copy it exactly. And if the record needed any type of singing, Jiggs Chase was a real good vocal coach - he could give us each different notes so we could sing a harmony."

And while the Furious Five rapped to the house band grooves, Flash watched in the control booth as engineer Steve Jerome made sure all the red lights flashed at proper levels. "Steve Jerome must have been 600, 700 pounds, he was real big, but he knew his way around a board, and that's where I learned a lot of my tricks, watching him do things on the board. I wasn't a rapper, so while the Furious Five were on the other side of the glass, I was learning from Steve in the control booth."

Meanwhile, Blondie's ode to rap music, "Rapture" (Chrysalis 2485), was racing up the pop charts, where it would eventually hit #1. And in between the passages about Martians eating cars and eating bars, Deborah Harry remembered the night she spent at Flash's B-boy party, and kept her promise.

Fab 5 Freddy told me everybody's fly  
DJ's spinning, I'm saying my my  
Flash is fast, flash is cool...

"People came up to me and said, 'Flash, we heard your record on the radio,' and I said 'What did it say?' And they said 'Something about eating cars and eating bars.' So I started listening to the radio. Fab 5 Freddy told me that Blondie was at one of our parties. She was really there, I couldn't believe it. Then he said that someday she would do a record representing what I did on the turntables. When I heard it, I thought, hell she really did it."

While "Rapture" was conquering the pop charts, Flash wanted to take his "Quick Mix Theory" to vinyl, essentially verifying Blondie's testimony. "The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel" (Sugarhill 557) was, in essence, Flash's solo project. With only two turntables, a mixing board and some 12-inch discs - the same basic equipment from his B-boy parties - Flash blended samples of "Rapture", Chic's "Good Times" and Queen's "Another One Bites The Dust" with recent Sugarhill hits like "Monster Jam" and "8th Wonder" - fusing white and black dance music into a 6-minute aural symphony. He forced Debbie Harry to sing his name over and over again; he "scratched" a beat over Brian May's electric bass; he made the Furious Five boast "Grandmaster cut-cut-cuts faster." For the first time ever, music lovers could experience Flash's "Quick Mix Theory" on their very own turntables.

"When we decided to do it," said Flash, "Sylvia had to fly me and Melle Mel in, because we were on tour, we had one day to get it done and get back on the road. It had to be done live, because if I couldn't do it live, I wouldn't fake it to the people. So I might have taken three or four takes, but if I got one cut wrong, I wanted the tape rolled back from the beginning. I didn't want to punch it. I felt good about the record."

Thanks to hits like "Freedom" and "Wheels of Steel", the Clash offered an invitation to Flash and the Five to be the punk-rock band's opening act in New York. But during the first show, as Flash recreated his "Wheels of Steel" collage for the Clash-anxious crowd, the sound system broke down and the crowd stared in bewilderment at the stage. The audience, expecting a four-man, all-white British punk-rock band, suddenly saw a six-man, all-black Bronx hip-hop group instead. Immediately cups and cans were thrown at the stage, and Flash and the Five fled the stage for their lives.

The Clash quickly ran on stage, instruments in hand. "You didn't like Grandmaster Flash?" Mick Jones shouted into the microphone. "What's wrong with you? We learned this song from Grandmaster Flash!" And with that, they tore into a blistering version of "The Magnificent Seven," the Clash's new dance track.

"After we got off," said Flash, "the Clash asked us to please come back on for the next night's show. The next day we said let's just do it straight, we ain't wearing no getups, we're just going to wear our street clothes. And the fans liked it. They just wanted to see us straight up in the raw."

But disappointments like the Clash shows only whetted the group's appetite, and Flash and the Five brought down the house at the Ritz, the Audubon, and other clubs around New York City. As part of a touring package with fellow rapping labelmates Spoonie Gee, the Sugarhill

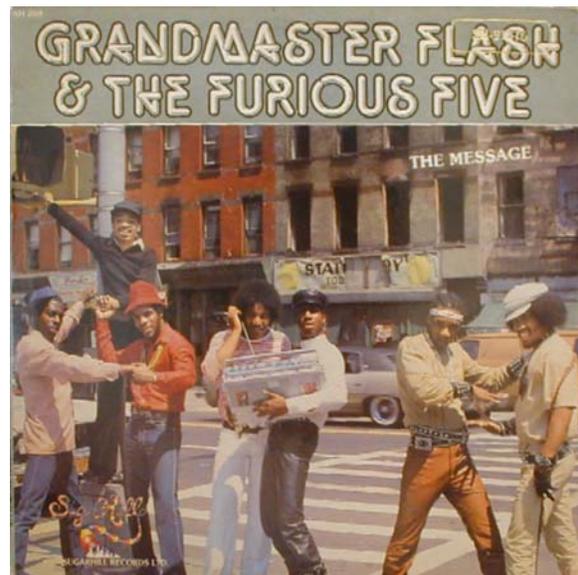


Gang, the Sequence and the Funky Four + 1, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five were the highlight of each concert.

But in 1981, they were still considered a "party rap" band - their raps were still boasts about lyrical and sexual prowess. It was time for a change, and Sylvia Robinson had an idea - which brought the group a new popularity - and may have also caused the internal struggles that broke the Furious Five apart.

On a hot July summer day in 1982, Sugarhill released "The Message," (Sugarhill 584) a new Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five track. It was different from any rap record the label had released - no "throw your hands in the air" chants, no "what's your zodiac sign" calls. This time, the lyrics told of a New York that wasn't all parties, cars and women - a dark commentary reminiscent of the soliloquies of Gil Scott-Heron and Bob Dylan.

Broken glass everywhere  
People pissing on the steps you  
know they just don't care  
Can't take the smell - can't take the  
noise  
Got no money to move out I guess I  
got no choice  
Rats in the front room, roaches in  
the back  
Junkies in the alley with a baseball  
bat  
I tried to get away, but I couldn't  
get far  
Cause the man with the tow truck  
repossessed my car  
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



"The Message" became a worldwide hit, leaping across urban stations to pop and rock radio. It was a runaway smash hit in Canada, England, Germany and Australia. In America, "The Message" became Flash's first entry into Billboard's "Hot 100" pop charts, and was later certified as a gold record. It was an amazing accomplishment - despite the fact that Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five had almost *no* involvement in the song itself. And it wasn't for lack of trying, either.

Most of the raps were actually done by Duke Bootee [Sugarhill percussionist Ed Fletcher], with Melle Mel adding his "A Child is Born" stanza from the old "Superappin" disc. "I hated the fact that it was advertised as 'Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five,'" said Flash, "because the only people on the record were Mel and Duke Bootee. I did not want to allow any one particular member to be on the record alone, because I just felt that with the history of a lot of black groups who did that, the group falls apart. I was looking out for the whole entire group.

Irregardless of who had the best writing or who had the finest voice, we all made each other shine. That's what it came down to."

Still, Flash tried everything to get the rest of the members on the record. "Sylvia got angry with me because I probably was using more studio time than was required for the song. I told Rahiem, you go in and try it, I told Cowboy, you go in and try it. All of you go in and try it, let's try it as a group, let's try anyway we can possibly do it. Then everything else came to a halt - on her instructions, of course - that we not just lay down the basic foundation of 'The Message,' but we finish it - she wanted to make this song the next single coming out. So we had to finish 'The Message' in the form it was left in, as Melle Mel and Duke Bootee. After it was finished, Cowboy and I took the record down to Frankie Crocker at WBLS. He played it, and the day after that, every other station in New York received copies of 'The Message.' We could turn the dial from WBLS to WKTU to KISS and hear it right behind each other on succession. It played all day, every day. It put us on a whole new level."

Flash and the Five finally finished a companion album, also titled *The Message* (Sugarhill 268), which became the highest-charting LP in Sugarhill history. But there were problems brewing within the group. Melle Mel's studio time increased, while the rest of the band was left to minimal cameos.

"Message II (Survival)" (Sugarhill 594) was credited strictly to Melle Mel and Duke Bootee, but the next two singles - "Scorpio" (Sugarhill 790) and "New York New York" (Sugarhill 457) - were credited to "Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five," but only Melle Mel and Duke Bootee appeared on them.

But for Flash, it was like living a lie. Even on the group's second album, a greatest hits package called *Greatest Message's* (Sugarhill 9121), the entire second side of the album contained "The Message," "Survival," "Scorpio" and "New York, New York" - four tracks with Melle Mel, and three of them had Duke Bootee! "I was friends with Rick James, and Rick James used to tell us all these things about writing and publishing, writing credit, mechanical royalties and all these things. I used to ask Sylvia these questions, and she used to say, 'We can get rid of that Flash guy, he asks too many questions.'"

Meanwhile, Sugarhill Records were hotter than ever. Thanks to the success of tracks like "The Message" and "New York New York," Sugarhill inked a deal with MCA Records. Now the little label from New Jersey could use MCA's distribution network to funnel more 12-inchers into stores and radio stations than ever before.

At that point, Flash decided to test the market and see if there were any other music labels interested in hiring a DJ and his five MC's. Sugarhill countered, claiming they owned the rights to the name "Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five." If Flash left, they said, he could be forced to leave his nickname behind. A judge finally settled the dispute, allowing Flash to leave Sugarhill and continue his recording career as "Grandmaster Flash." Melle Mel remained at Sugarhill, which retained the names "Furious Five" and "Grandmaster."

As Flash was packing his equipment and leaving Sugarhill for good, the label released one more track - "White Lines (Don't Don't Do It)" (Sugarhill 465), an anti-cocaine rap with a thunderous bass track. In what may have looked like a typo on the label, Sugarhill released the 12-inch disc and credited the performers as "Grandmaster and Melle Mel." "The court said Sugarhill couldn't use 'Grandmaster' and 'Flash' in one phrasing," said Flash. "He could be 'Grandmaster' something else. I was the leader of the group, I was the selling point of the group. Whenever you saw 'Grandmaster Flash' on the record, that was what made it sell. In the average consumer's eyes, the 'White Lines' label might have looked like they made a misprint."

With that release, the divorce was complete. Melle Mel, Cowboy and Mr. Ness stayed with Sugarhill, adding some more members and continuing on as "Grandmaster Melle Mel and the Furious Five." Meanwhile, Flash, Rahiem and Creole added some members of their own, signed a deal with Elektra Records and released material under the name "Grandmaster Flash."

"The breakup was traumatic. From a business standpoint, although we were all business-minded, I was the most capable of going to another label and continue to record. I said to Mel, 'Warner Bros. is interested in us. If we stay out of the limelight too long trying to fight Sylvia, we might be forgotten. We just made one of the biggest records of all time. Let's go take care of this real quick and go to a major label and make some money.' When Rahiem, Creole and I signed with Elektra Records, Bob Krasnow, who was the head of Elektra, gave us all the things we were supposed to get at Sugarhill - publishing money, writing credit, publishing shares, mechanical royalties and all that. We received cars and all these things. The things that should have been customary on contracts at Sugarhill weren't there, and we only learned about it when we left there and joined Elektra."

The Sugarhill group, now known as "Grandmaster Melle Mel and the Furious Five" released a self-titled album on Sugarhill (Sugarhill 9205), and rapped the main theme from the movie *Beat Street* ("Beat Street Breakdown," Atlantic 89659). Mel recorded the opening rap on Chaka Khan's "I Feel For You," single, and appeared on the "Sun City" anti-apartheid dance track. He even did solo projects for Sugarhill, including "Jesse," (Sugarhill 32016), a tribute record to Jesse Jackson; contributed a rap to Steve Van Zandt's "Artists United Against Apartheid" project, and snared an Emmy award for appearing in New York City anti-crack commercials. But Mel and his crew left Sugarhill a few years later, and the label folded soon thereafter. "I finally saw we were being exploited," said Melle Mel in a *Billboard* interview.

Meanwhile, "Grandmaster Flash" took off on a European tour to promote their new Elektra album, *They Said It Couldn't Be Done* (Elektra 60389). They made videos with avant-garde director Zbigniew Rybchinski [The Art of Noise]. Nancy Reagan watched them perform during a "Just Say No" anti-drug benefit concert.

Although their album spawned two urban hits, "Sign of the Times" (Elektra 66922) and "Girls Love The Way He Spins" (Elektra 66908), *They Said It Couldn't Be Done* barely cracked the album charts. Two follow-up albums bombed. And despite touring the world and playing in front of capacity crowds, Flash felt that something was missing. It wasn't the same without Ness, Cowboy and Melle Mel.

Then in 1987, Flash and Mel finally sat down and ironed out their differences. Sugarhill Records had folded, and Mel was without a contract. "I went to Bob Krasnow," said Flash, "and told him I might be able to get the other half of the group to join us. He said, do the best you can do, but if you can, we'll give you more money to record another album - plus signing bonuses. I went back to Mel, and said let's do this. He thought about it, he went back to the other half, and we signed another deal with Elektra - with more money. We bought BMW's, Mercedes, we drove through the Bronx and Manhattan, it was like we never broke up."

And for the first time since the early 1980's, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five performed as one unit, at an all-star homeless relief concert at Madison Square Garden. "There was Bill Cosby, Billy Joel, Paul Simon - we asked ourselves, have we finally arrived?"

*On The Strength* (Elektra 60759) was the group's reunion album, and they pulled out all the stops. The raps were as tight as ever, with tributes to the groups that followed them out of the Boogie-Down Bronx ("Back in the Old Days of Hip-Hop"), as well as excursions into mellow rap ("Fly Girl," with guests Ray, Goodman and Brown) and social commentary ("Gold").

They even rapped a remake of "Magic Carpet Ride" (Elektra 66749), and convinced lead singer John Kay, guitarist Michael Wilk and keyboardist Rocket Richotte - all original Steppenwolf members - to join them on the track.

Flash now had a new instrument to play - the "Flashformer," an electrically operated gizmo that created a new form of electronic scratching. He even scribbled it as graffiti in the dead wax runoff areas ("Flashformer In Effect" and "Message to a Fly Girl - Flashform On"). "You hooked your turntables up to it," said Flash, "and from it you went to the mixer. When you pressed down on two contact switches, the sound would come through, but if you picked up your fingers, the sound would cut off. So while you were moving the disc back and forth, you could get a percussive sound from the Flashformer."

With the album complete, Flash and the Five set up time for an album cover photo shoot. "We had a place in Lower Manhattan where they had vintage cars, and we were renting this place by the hour, and Cowboy didn't show up. We had to do something, there had to be six people on the cover. At the last minute, we told one of our valets to put this hat on, turn your head, cover your face and pretend to be Cowboy."

But despite all their efforts, *On The Strength* didn't sell, and Flash and the Five were dropped from the Elektra roster. "I still say the album was put together brilliantly, but for some reason, something didn't work somewhere. A lot of the majors didn't understand the animal of hip-hop. The offsprings of the majors make more noise for their artists as opposed to the mother company. You can't promote the artist that comes straight off Columbia that's rap, they wouldn't get the same notoriety as an artist from Def Jam. Small labels like Def Jam and Sugarhill created their own formula on how to get a hit record heard around the world."

A few months later, Flash received a phone call. Someone passed him the message that Cowboy was extremely sick. A few days later, on September 8, 1989, Keith "Cowboy" Wiggins died of complications from the AIDS virus. He was only two weeks shy of his 39th birthday.

Flash was devastated at the loss of his bandmate and friend. "That was probably the last time we were all together - was at his funeral. That was rough, it was way rough on me, he was my first baby, my first MC. I still miss him today. When Cowboy died, some of my fire just wasn't there any more. Although he wasn't a primary writer in the group, he had the best voice, he had such commanding stage presence. We couldn't even think of replacing him."

In 1989, Melle Mel and the other rappers signed with New Day Records and recorded *Piano* (New Day 222). Flash did not join them on this disc; Kid Capri, the house DJ on the "Def Comedy Jam" TV show, replaced Flash on the scratches and cuts. "He was the DJ and producer of this record. He did a good job. The Sugarhill people were involved in it; I didn't want to go back there."

After *Piano*, Melle Mel remade "The Message," this time with Scorpio and Danish disc jockey Nikolaj Steen. The Furious Five also added two tracks to the *Raiders of the Lost Art* hip-hop compilation album ("Sun Don't Shine in the Hood" and "Mic Slayer").

Meanwhile, Flash took the lessons he learned from Steve Jerome and began producing other hip-hop artists, like Just-Ice and Essence, at small independent labels. He also joined RPM Management, Russell Simmons' production company, and became a spokesperson for Kangol headgear. He even performed once a week at Bentley's, a Manhattan club, to keep his "Quick Mix Theory" as sharp as a razor.

Today, interest in Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's music has reached a new high. The surviving members reunited for a 1994 package tour with hip-hop veterans Whodini, Run-D.M.C. and Kurtis Blow. One year later, Duran Duran asked Flash and the Five to appear

in a video for their remake of "White Lines." Rhino Records released a greatest hits compilation in 1994, *Message from Beat Street: The Best of Grandmaster Flash, Melle Mel and the Furious Five*, and released a second volume of Flash hits this year.

Today, Grandmaster Flash hosts a twice-weekly radio show on New York's urban superstation WBLS, doing what he does best - spinning and scratching and cutting. "After a few years away from the recording business, I said to myself, I watched the parade go by long enough, I wanted to get back out on the streets again. So I took a job in radio - first with Hot 97 (WQHT, New York), and then with WBLS."

Each weekend, Flash returns to the days of the old-school B-boy party - only now his audience is no longer confined to a Bronx park, but instead covers the entire New York City broadcasting area. The little red light still glows when he turns on the microphone to start his radio shows - a beacon that led him from his father's phonograph through a long hip-hop odyssey.

#### *FURTHER NOTES, 2003:*

*After the publication of this article, Grandmaster Flash worked as the musical director / bandleader of the Chris Rock show (and yes, his "band" consisted of two turntables and a mixer). For more information on the legendary turntable expert, take the time to visit Grandmaster Flash's website.*