

Elements of Hip-Hop

Elements Glossary

1. The break: Short for “break down,” the break is the part of a song that highlights its rhythmic underpinning. This became the foundation of Kool Herc’s DJing style as he blended two breaks together in an extended loop.

2. Breaking: The dance element of hip-hop, performed by dancers called B-Girls or B-Boys. Birted in the late 1970s in New York, breaking blended movement styles such as jazz and martial arts with dance styles from the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa. B-Girls and B-Boys got their name because they danced over the DJ’s “breaks” at hip-hop parties in the Bronx.

3. DJ: The DJ existed before hip-hop. It’s an acronym for the word disc jockey. Originally, the DJ’s job was to play recorded music for an audience either on radio or live for an audience. But the hip-hop DJ took it to the next level by making record spinning into an art form called turntabalism.

4. Emcee: an acronym for the Master of Ceremonies. Emcees began as hosts at hip-hop parties who would prompt the breakers to dance. Influenced by original spoken-word artists, emcees began to do rhythmic call-and-response with the audience, a technique that eventually morphed into the poetic form of rapping that we know now.

5. Freestyle: the improvisational wing of emceeing. Originally found as a written verse that has no specific topic, the hip-hop definition of freestyle emerged with Myka 9 of Freestyle Fellowship as a rap or rhyme created in the moment or “off the top of the head.”

6. Flow: poetic delivery; how you communicate your rhymes or poems; the rhythm and command with which you rap or speak.

7. Bars: another word for lines or verses, derived from the musical word “bar” which is a counted measure of music.

8. Beatboxing: also known as the “Fifth Element,;” the ability to make a beat with one’s mouth instead of drums or drum machines. Beatboxing became a staple sound of hip-hop and modern dance music.

9. Graffiti: hip-hop’s visual element. The modern form of graffiti or “graff” actually began before hip-hop music and dance, but it quickly became a part of the culture as many graffiti artists grew up in the same area as other hip-hop artists. Many graffiti artists are emcees, deejays, and/or breakers.

10. The Five Elements of Hip-Hop: emceeing, deejaying, breakin’, graff and beatboxing.