



Afrika Bambaataa flying his cut sleeves downtown.
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Soul Salvation

The Mystery and Faith of Afrika Bambaataa

I was born out of time.

—Napoleon Wilson, *Assault on Precinct 13*

Afrika Bambaataa was a teenager with a big rep. "When he walked through the projects," recalls Jazzy Jay, "he was like The Godfather walking through Little Italy." Jay had moved into the Bronx River Houses in 1971 after his family's Harlem tenement was consumed by a fire. Like hundreds of other youths at Bronx River, Jay started following Bambaataa.

"Bam used to put his speakers out the window and play music all day. He used to live right outside what you'd call the Center. The center of Bronx River was like a big oval. The community center was right in the middle and Bam used to live to the left of it. He used to play his music, and I would ride my bike around all day popping wheelies, you know?" Jay says. "He was like the Pied Piper."

As the gang days were receding, Bambaataa saw the future before anyone else. Each of the housing projects had its own gangs, sometimes turning the two-block distance between them into a no-man's land. But he was ready to take people across borders that they didn't know they could cross, into projects they weren't sure they could be in. Bambaataa—he told them his name was Zulu for "affectionate leader"—would lead them where they didn't know they were ready to go.

Still astonished at the thought of it three decades later, Jay recalls, "Bam used to say, 'Hey, they throwing a block party in Bronxdale,' and he has his box and a bagful of tapes with all the music. He grabs the box and when he starts walking to Bronxdale, he'd have like forty people walking behind him.

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"Bam was the leader. You'd roll up in—Bronx River is represented. We up in Bronxdale, we up in Soundview, we in Castle Hill—wherever they was throwing a block party, we was there. Here comes Bam, here comes the entourage, here comes the army. Wherever Bam was going, that's where some shit was gon' be, that's where you need to be. If you wasn't there even for the march up, you know the word got back real quick. 'Yol Bam and them moving, there's a party going on over there.'"

Living Twice at Once

Of the three kings, the trinity of hip-hop music—DJ Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa—the most enigmatic is Bambaataa Kahim Aasim.

It is not because he is reclusive. In fact, unlike Herc and Flash, he has never retreated far from the public eye. Through his prolific recording career and his ongoing stewardship of the Universal Zulu Nation organization, Bambaataa has lived a very generous life. He regularly crisscrosses the world, graciously giving of himself to fans, journalists, Zulu members and hip-hop heads everywhere. And yet he also remains essentially a mystery. There are things that everyone seems to know about Bambaataa, and things that no one seems to know. The philosopher Claude Levi-Strauss might have called Bambaataa someone who lives twice simultaneously—once as a man in history, and separately as a myth above temporality.

His story seems well documented. He was the Black Spade warlord who became the Master of Records. The shaman who had hundreds of hard-rockers dancing to his global musical mash-up of Kraftwerk, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, the "Pink Panther" theme, the Rolling Stones and the Magic Disco Machine. The founder of the Universal Zulu Nation, the first hip-hop institution, an organization that tried to raise consciousness like it raised the roof. The preacher of the gospel of the "four elements"—DJing, MCing, b-boying and Graffiti Writing. The missionary who took the hip-hop message to the four corners of the globe, and then beyond Planet Rock.

When hip-hop lost its way, he added a fifth element—"knowledge." Zulus, he explains, are about having "right knowledge, right wisdom, right 'overstanding' and right sound reasoning, meaning that we want our people to deal with factuality versus beliefs, factology versus beliefs." But some facts about his own life are slippery like quicksilver.

It is known, for example, that Bambaataa was born in Manhattan to parents of Jamaican and Barbadian descent. But he refuses to disclose when or under what name. Many biographies have incorrectly listed his birth name as Kevin Donovan, another man who happened to be the leader of record-label owner Paul Winley's house band, the Harlem Underground Band.¹ Perhaps he was in perpetual reinvention as a youth. He had multiple graffiti tags, including BAM-BAATAA, BAM 117 and BOM 117—the latter an acronym he once told German interviewers stood for Bambaataa Osisa Mubulu.²

Bios often list Bambaataa's birthdate as April 10, 1960. Other biographers have listed his birthdate as June 17, 1957. The month of April seems correct. Kool Herc, born in mid-April, has thrown joint birthday parties with Bam. But if Bambaataa was actually born in 1960, he would have joined the Black Spades at the age of nine, been a warlord before the age of ten, and started The Organization, the precursor to the Zulu Nation, at the age of thirteen. Most likely, Bambaataa was born in April of 1957. He won't say. "We never," he pointedly admonishes interviewers dumb enough to ask, "speak on my age."

He has good reasons for not revealing such personal information. Earlier in his career, revealing his true age might have hurt his credibility with young fans. And he has always been suspicious of surveillance from hostile authorities that have periodically—and wrongly—attacked the Universal Zulu Nation as a violent gang syndicate. So it seems as if Bambaataa is who he is because he's always been. He appears as a man outside of time and age.

For his part, Bambaataa conjures himself with good humor. The Zulu Nation's Infinity Lesson #2 explains that the original Bambaataa was a late-nineteenth-century Zululand leader who led an anti-tax revolt against the British colonial authority in South Africa. This Bambaataa was not above using mystical means to inspire his people. After calling on them to abandon the signs and objects of European culture—except for their guns—he told them a resurrected witch doctor had given him a potion that made him bulletproof. He drank it, then stood before a firing squad and commanded them to shoot. "But when the smoke cleared there stood Bambaataa, smiling and unhurt," the Infinity Lesson reads. "The explanation? Blank cartridges." Sometimes factualities and factologies matter less than the myths we want to believe. "Stopping bullets with two turntables isn't about sociology," Gary Jardim wrote in a famous 1984 *Village Voice* profile on Bambaataa, "it's about finding the spirit in the music and learning how to flash

Can't Stop Won't Stop

it."³ No one ever debated whether Bambaataa could stop the bullets. He made you believe he did.

So Bambaataa is the generative figure, the Promethean firestarter of the hip-hop generation. He transformed his environment in sonic and social structure, and in doing so, he called forth the ideas that would shape generational rebellion. So many of the archetypes of the hip-hop generation seem to rise from the body of facts and myths that represent Bambaataa Aasim's life—godfather, yes, but also original gangster, post-civil rights peacemaker, Black riot rocker, breakbeat archaeologist, interplanetary mystic, conspiracy theorist, Afrofuturist, hip-hop activist, twenty-first-century griot.

But two dates help to place the man back into his time and place. In 1971, the year of the Bronx gang truce, a young Bambaataa was first bused to Stevenson High School at the eastern, white edge of Soundview as part of a court-ordered desegregation order. Within weeks the appearance of Black students, some of whom were Black Spades, caused white gang members to organize and a racial war broke out across the borough's borderlands. School grounds became stomping grounds, integration's bloody frontline, with the gangs as the shock troops.

But by 1981 Bambaataa was in the middle of a very different kind of desegregation, a wholly voluntary one. He was taking the music and culture of the Black and brown Bronx into the white art-crowd and punk-rock clubs of lower Manhattan. The iron doors of segregation that the previous generation had started to unlock were battered down by the pioneers of the hip-hop generation. Soon hip-hop was not merely all-city, it was global—a Planet Rock.

Most old school hip-hoppers look back on those heady days—the '70s turning into the '80s—with a sense of wonder that something they had been involved in as wide-eyed youths could have become so big, so powerful. Never Bambaataa. To him, it was always supposed to be this way. "Each step was a stepping stone, the gang era and all that, that helped to bring about this formation," he says, as if he had already been to the mountaintop long ago.

Sound Destiny

Afrika Bambaataa grew up on the ground floor of one of the fifteen-story towers of the Bronx River Projects, a complex of a dozen buildings in the vicinity of two

other postwar superdevelopments, the Bronxdale Houses and the James Monroe Houses.

Bambaataa was raised by his mother, a nurse from a family immersed in international Black cultural and liberation movements. As he came of age during the turbulent late '60s, he experienced the fierce ideological debates over the Black freedom struggle—integration or separation, the ballot or the bullet—as close as the dinner table or the living room. His uncle, Bambaataa Bunchinji, was a prominent Black nationalist. Many in his family were devoted Black Muslims.

He seemed born with a sense of destiny. David Hershkovits, a journalist who came to know Bambaataa during the early '80s in the downtown club scene, says, "At some point early on, people had kind of spotted him as somebody to educate and talk to about what's going on in the rest of the world outside of the Bronx. I think he was somehow chosen."

The late '60s were a period of irreconcilable forces locked in struggle with each other. In the community, political positions on integration, violence, and revolution could harden into matters of life and death. But through his mother's record collection—an eclectic shelf that included Miriam Makeba, Mighty Sparrow, Joe Cuba, and Aretha Franklin—Bambaataa developed a different kind of perspective. In the rhythmic pull of James Brown's "I'll get it myself" black-power turn or Sly Stone's "everyday people" integrationist dance, these positions lost all their rigidity. James Brown could sing Black pride to all-white audiences. Sly Stone could get down with the Black Panthers. Music made ideologies shed their armature, move together, find a common point of release, a powerful unity.

Bambaataa was coming of age in an accelerated popular culture, a quantum explosion in sounds and images. He began imposing his own order on the chaos of representations. As a youth he became fascinated with the 1964 movie *Zulu*, a Michael Caine vehicle recounting the 1879 siege of Rorke's Drift in Natal, South Africa. The battle remains a celebrated moment in the military history of the British Empire, an unlikely triumph of a hundred redcoats defending a lonely colonial outpost against an overwhelming onslaught of four thousand Zulus. Indeed, Rorke's Drift is remembered as something like the Queen's Fort Apache, an Alamo where the whites actually won.

Zulu is told exclusively from their point of the view. There are hundreds of

Can't Stop Won't Stop

African extras, but not a single Black role of any consequence. In the climactic scene, the red-suited soldiers stand with their bayonets arrayed silently before a pile of Black bodies, a dark tide stopped at the very lip of their boots. Had the movie been released two decades later, after civil rights and Black power, activists might have boycotted it.

But when the young Bambaataa saw it in the early '60s, he was captivated. The movie opens after the Zulus have routed the British camp at Isandhlwana, with a slow pan of hundreds of dead redcoats strewn across the African plain. It then detours to a majestic scene of a Zulu mass marriage ceremony and victory dance. The ragtag Brits are seen as individualists who tend to feud loudly amongst themselves. By contrast, the Zulus remain a primitive, undifferentiated mass. Here is the central tension of the movie: Can the divided, outnumbered defenders of white western democracy get their act together in time to prevail over the unceasing armies of ancient Dark Continent despotism?

But what Bambaataa saw in *Zulu* were powerful images of Black solidarity. Before the attack on Rorke's Drift, hundreds of Zulu warriors appear atop the ridge, leaving the imperial soldiers awestruck. They bang their spears to their shields, give a resounding war cry and storm the garrison. Although many of them fall before the British muskets, they just don't quit. Into the night, the Zulus continue their assaults and succeed in setting the outpost on fire.

"That just blew my mind," Bambaataa says. "Because at that time we was coons, coloreds, negroes, everything degrading. We was busy watching Heckyl and Jeckyl, Tarzan—a white guy who is king of the jungle. Then I see this movie come out showing Africans fighting for a land that was theirs against the British imperialists. To see these Black people fight for their freedom and their land just stuck in my mind. I said when I get older I'm gonna have me a group called the Zulu Nation."

Later he would give his followers a round Black face with white eyes and lips to wear around their necks—an emblem taken from one of New Orleans's oldest and most famous Black Mardi Gras groups, the Zulu Krewe. Civil rights groups had once pressured the Krewe to disband for what they took to be offensive blackface stereotypes. But Bambaataa approached *Zulu* and the Zulu Krewe the way he did political ideologies and his own records. He pulled out what was precious and tossed the rest. He created new mythologies.

On the Move

Outside the political ferment of Bambaataa's household the revolution was being pre-empted. In 1968, heroin made a sudden, dramatic return to the streets of the southeast Bronx. Richie Perez, later of the Young Lords Party, was then a teacher at Monroe High School across the street from Bronx River Houses. "It came fast and there was a lot of it. It was all over the place. Students I knew were getting strung out," he says. At the same time, white gangs joined together in a loose federation to prey upon youths of color. Black and Puerto Rican gangs in the Soundview area surged in response to the junkies and the white gangs, and then they turned on each other.

Bambaataa was drawn into the gang life as inexorably as any young boy from Bronx River would have to be. The first gang that caught his attention was a group founded there called P.O.W.E.R., an acronym he says stood for "People's Organization for War and Energetic Revolutionaries." P.O.W.E.R. took up the Black Panthers' rhetoric but had the somewhat less lofty, if no less urgent, purpose of protecting Bronx River from being overrun by Bronxdale's Black Spades. Bambaataa enlisted, but when the group began a war with the white gangs, he says, escalating violence and police repression eventually drove their leaders underground. "That's when I decided to turn Spades and then flip Bronx River into Spades," he says. P.O.W.E.R.'s only remaining claim to history is to be the first gang named on the 1971 Peace Treaty.

As a Spade, Bambaataa made his rep by being unafraid to cross turfs to forge relationships with other gangs. He says, "I was a person who was always in other areas. So if I was a Spade, I still was with the Nomads. If I was with the Nomads, I was hanging with the Javelins. When I came into any group, I had the power, the backing of the other group I was with. Although I was a Spade, I still had power and control of some of the Nomads, some of the Javelins." Soon, Bambaataa's ability to move between gangs did not look like a weakness, but a strength. "I was the person that if you had problems, I could rally up three to four hundred at one time and move on you," he says.

The Spades' president, Bam Bam, made the whip-smart young Bambaataa a warlord. He was responsible for building the ranks and expanding the turf of the Spades. "I took my things of attacking areas from the history of Napoleon,

Can't Stop Won't Stop

Shaka Zulu. I used things I was reading in school to attack areas and make them join up with us," Bambaataa says. He helped consolidate Bronx River's control of the Black Spades and enable their spread to the Soundview, Castle Hill and Monroe Houses, and as far west as Patterson Houses. The Spades soon moved into the projects of Harlem, Brooklyn, and Queens and became the city's biggest gang. "Everywhere there was a police precinct, there was a Spades chapter," Bambaataa says.

When racial tensions exploded at Stevenson High School, Bambaataa led Spades in confrontations with white gangs all across Soundview and West Farms. But he also showed signs of ambivalence. "For the first week things seemed to go okay," he wrote in a class assignment. Then, in the third person, he described the escalation of racial gang tensions to a climactic shopping center rumble. "After that day Stevenson was never the same peaceful high school again."⁴

As these battles were escalating, the 1971 truce brought together Black and brown gangs in the South Bronx. The peace treaty, particularly the Spades' president Bam Bam's personal commitment to it, had a profound impact on the young warlord. Bambaataa began to search for a way out, and he found his skills in mobilizing for war could just as easily be turned to peace. As his friend Jay McGluery told journalist Steven Hager, "There were so many gangs and he knew at least five members in every one. Any time there was a conflict, he would try and straighten it out. He was into communications."⁵

Herc's New Cool offered Bambaataa a way forward, and two former Black Spades had also become DJs—Kool DJ D at Bronx River and Disco King Mario at Bronxdale. Bambaataa apprenticed with both ex-Spade DJs, then began throwing his own parties in the community center just steps from his front door. "When I did become a DJ, I already had an army with me so I already knew that my parties would automatically be packed," he says.

That year, he began the Bronx River Organization as an alternative to the Spades. In some ways, the move resembled the Ghetto Brothers' transformation.⁶ Bambaataa says, "We had a motto: 'This is an organization. We are not a gang. We are a family. Do not start trouble. Let trouble come to you, then fight like hell.'"

But some battle lines were dissolving. Partying was a new thing. Bambaataa

formed a strategic alliance with Disco King Mario's Chuck Chuck City Crew at Bronxdale, and people from other housing projects came into his fold. The Organization eventually dropped the Bronx River prefix, and evolved into a vehicle for Bambaataa's expanding gatherings and parties.

While Kool DJ D, Disco King Mario, and other Bronx River DJs like DJ Tex played uptempo disco music popular on the radio, Bambaataa was taken more by DJ Kool Herc's break-centered—as opposed to song-centered—style. Bam's sound became a rhythmic analogue to his peace-making philosophy; his set-lists had the same kind of inclusiveness and broad-mindedness he was aspiring to build through The Organization. He mixed up breaks from Grand Funk Railroad and the Monkees with Sly and James and Malcolm X speeches. He played salsa, rock, and soca with the same enthusiasm as soul and funk. He was making himself open to the good in everything. He eclipsed the other DJs as the most renowned programmer in the borough.

Each weekend Bambaataa would preside over a ritual of motion and fun. Jazzy Jay says, "Block parties was a way to do your thing, plugging into the lamppost. Sometimes we used to play till two in the morning. And we had the support of the whole community. It's like, we'd rather see them doing that, doing something constructive than to be down the block beating each other upside the head like they used to do in the gang days."

Soulski

He had found something that was powerful, creative, something that signaled life. But it was a death that reversed Bambaataa's course for good. On January 6, 1975, police killed his cousin Soulski—he will not divulge Soulski's real name—in a bloody shootout.

Deep in Section B of the January 11 edition of the *Amsterdam News* was this police-blotter clip:

TWO SHOT DEAD IN BRONX DUEL

Two young men were shot to death during a gunfight with the Bronx police Monday night on Pelham Parkway off White Plains Road, and another was taken to the hospital suffering with injuries. The dead men were identified as Ronald Brown, 20, who lived at 2187 Washington Ave., and

Can't Stop Won't Stop

Ronald Bethel, 17, who lived at 2100 Tiebout Ave. Taken into police custody was James Wilder, 20, of 2507 Washington Ave.

Disobey

Police said Officers Jeffrey Matlin and Robert Visconti were on patrol on Pelham Parkway when they observed three men in a car who were acting suspiciously.

The police motioned to the car to pull over. The car stopped and the three men got out but instead of walking toward the police car the three walked to the rear of the car.

Police said one of the men had a shotgun and the other two were also armed. The officers reportedly ordered the men to drop their guns but were fired on instead. The police returned the fire and the three ran into the wooded area of Pelham Park.

Shootout

The three suspects ran East on Pelham Parkway with the police chasing them. The two officers were later joined by Officers Charles Iacovone, Donald Powers and John B. Kelly who aided the two officers in the shootout.

Police said the 1968 Mercury, in which the three were riding, is owned by Brown's mother, Mrs. Sarah Williams. Det. Edward Heck of the Ninth Homicide zone is assigned to the case.

Bambaataa, who still keeps a copy of Soulski's death certificate, does not speak much on the incident. But he clearly believes something else was going on. His voice lowers to a whisper as he says, "They shot him all in the lungs and the chest, a whole bunch of spots. They tore him up."

A month after Soulski's killing, Bronx cops shot dead a fourteen-year-old who had been joyriding in a stolen car. A police spokesperson claimed the officers fired after the boy had lunged at them with a knife, but autopsies showed he had been shot through the back. Both these incidents precipitated a different kind of crisis than Cornell Benjamin's had for the Ghetto Brothers; they directed the gangs' rage outward against the authorities.

Representatives from the Amsterdam News joined community leaders in a

grassroots effort to reduce tensions in the neighborhoods. They urged Bambaataa and the Spades not to retaliate, to let the justice system do its work. But the Peacemakers gang had already declared open season on police and fire-fighters. Other gang leaders called Bambaataa to offer their support should he choose to declare war on the cops.

Many years later, he would do a song that he called "Bambaataa's Theme," an electro version of the score from John Carpenter's 1976 movie, *Assault on Precinct 13*. That movie had ushered in a new genre—the urban horror flick—which would come to include films like Daniel Petrie's 1981 remake of the 1948 John Wayne vehicle *Fort Apache*, called *Fort Apache: The Bronx*. Instead of Indian braves, Zulu warriors or graveyard zombies, *Assault on Precinct 13*'s heroes defended themselves in a desolate police station against marauding waves of dark, heavily armed gang members seeking revenge for their cop-killed brothers. Bambaataa's attachment to the movie raises intriguing questions: Did he sympathize with the attackers or the attacked? What kinds of emotions could that filmic assault have fired in him?

At the conclusion of *Zulu*, the South African warriors appeared on the mountaintop above Rorke's Drift once again. But instead of attacking, they raised their assegais and their voices in praise-song and tribute to the bravery of the British soldiers. Then they withdrew quietly back to KwaZululand. In 1964, a year after Kenya gained its independence from Great Britain, it may have seemed the perfect ending for the nostalgic audiences of the fading Empire—the natives retreating, despite their overwhelming numbers, before the bloodied but unbowed exemplars of imperial virtue. But in 1975, Bambaataa, thinking not of the past but the future, may have seen that ending much differently:

At the request of community leaders, Bambaataa and his followers had agreed to watch the white cops go to trial in both the police shooting incidents. But the cops were acquitted and the Bronx gangs were ready to roll. Bambaataa had finally reached his turning point. The gangs never launched a final do-or-die attack on the police precincts. Instead, like the chanting Zulu warriors, Bambaataa and his followers withdrew, to live.

Closing the Loop

The alienated youth of the Bronx needed something to believe in. While Bambaataa had been in the Spades, he says, "a lot of the organizations came to

Can't Stop Won't Stop

speak to us. You had some Christian groups that came around from different churches, radical reverends that came out and spoke to a lot of the street gangs. Some of us just pushed it aside."

After Malcolm X, who would hear of a heaven for the meek? Only controversial prophets of the Garveyite tradition like the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam and Dr. Malachi Z. York (also called Imam Isa, or As Sayyid Issa Al Haadi Al Mahdi), the leader of the Ansaaru Allah community, could speak to alienated youth. Bambaataa says, "They held the teachings of 'You're not a 'nigga.' You're not colored. Wake up Black man and Black woman and love yourself. Respect your own. Turn back to Africa.' That started sticking with a lot of the brothers and sisters."

Racialized calls to redemption gave Bambaataa's anger a focus: "I wasn't agreeing with what white people was saying. You start questioning all that and you start traveling and meeting other people and seeing the struggles everybody had. Everybody is talking about what the white man did from country to country. You start believing strongly what the Honorable Elijah Muhammad was saying, that the white man is the devil. But as you get older and wiser, you see why he did that—to clear off Black people's thinking that they was inferior and whites are superior and start saying they are of gods.

"What the Nation was saying was, 'When you're ready to come, we'll be waiting for you.' And that always stuck in my mind and heart. I said I have to do some type of change to get the mindset of the masses that was following me to lead them to another way," he says.

Months before Soulski's passing, Bambaataa won a Housing Authority essay-writing contest. The prize was a trip to India. "You had to write an essay on why you would want to go to India. So I won, but when it was time for me to meet up with the people that send you off to go, I was outside giving out flyers for the next party I was giving and forgot all about it. So I lost the trip, which was great, because the following year I won the trip to go to Africa and Europe," he says.

For a youth who had known nothing but the streets of the Bronx, the trip was life-changing. "I saw all the Black people waking up in the early morning, opening their stores, doing the agriculture, doing whatever they have to do to keep

the country happening," he says. "Compared to what you hear in America about, 'Black people can't do this and that,' that really just changed my mind."

His head bursting with ideas, Bambaataa came back to the Bronx ready to transform The Organization. "My vision was to try to organize as many as I could to stop the violence. So I went around different areas, telling them to join us and stop your fighting," Bambaataa says.

As the summer of 1975 drew closer, the word began getting out. Jazzy Jay says, "I remember my friend came up and said, 'Yeah you heard that cat Bambaataa? He's calling himself Afrika Bambaataa and the Zulu Nation now. He got some movement called the Zulu Nation.'"

Movement was literally at the heart of the organization, in the form of the Zulu King dancers. "The Zulu Kings started with five main guys: Zambu Lanier, Kusa Stokes, Ahmad Henderson, Shaka Reed, Aziz Jackson. Then came the Shaka Kings and Queens. And it was just as many women that could tear guys up on the dancefloor as there was men," Bambaataa says. Then the rappers came in. "We had Queen Lisa Lee and Sha-Rock, who was the first two females that was blowing it up, then Pebblee Poo."

Zulu Nation was returning the Bronx to an era of style, celebration and optimism. "It was no more where you had the Hell's Angels looking type jackets or you rolling around in dirt-stank shit just to show you were an outlaw and you could be the most dirtiest bastard out there," he says. "It almost flipped back to the fifties gangs where they was wearing the nice satin jackets and the nice names. As you got into the graffiti artists, then you had the aerosol paintings on the jackets. People was getting more cool. It just started switching the whole culture around into this whole 'party and get down' atmosphere."

At the same time, Bambaataa recast the Organization's credo. "What is the job of a Zulu?" his Infinity Lessons would later ask. "The job of a Zulu is to survive in life. To be open-minded dealing with all walks of life upon this planet Earth and to teach [each] other truth (Knowledge, Wisdom, and Understanding). To respect those who respect them, to never be the aggressor or oppressor. To be at peace with self and others, but if or when attacked by others who don't wish peace with the Zulus, then the Zulus are ordered in the name of AL-LAH, Jehovah to fight those who fight against you."

Can't Stop Won't Stop

A few blocks away, the 174th Street Bridge connected East Tremont with the Bronx River Houses, but this was no-man's land, a no-crossing zone. Abrahante was a reckless kid. One day he wandered onto the bridge on his bike. A burly Black tagger was spraypainting BAM 117, WRITERS INC. Abrahante, who was the Baby Skulls' tagger, took the spraycan, and wrote his own tag, SPIDER. He wasn't wearing his colors, and by the size of this guy, he knew not to write SKULLS next to his name. He handed the spraycan back to the tagger, and they gave each other an unspoken recognition. Then they went back their separate ways.

A few days later when Abrahante went across the bridge again, he had it in his head to try to tag the Skulls name deep in Spades territory. He headed across the Bridge in full colors, and cruised into the Bronx River Houses. A group of Spades came out from the basketball courts, hurled bottles at him and chased him back across the bridge. He noticed that the tagger he had met on the bridge was with them, simply watching.

By the time the summer ended, things had changed. The Savage Skulls were falling apart, turning on each other, snitching out each other to the cops. The leadership wasn't stable. Abrahante was ready to take on more responsibility in the gang. But his cousin had made up his mind and told him, "Fuck that, that shit ain't no good for you. That shit ain't good for me." Abrahante says, "He told the Skulls, 'I'll fight whoever to get me and my cousin out.' He pushed me out by beating me up."

In September, Abrahante received a flyer for a party in the Bronx River Houses. The promoters had been going through the neighborhoods, shouting, "Free jam! Come one come all, leave your colors at home! Come in peace and unity." His cousin didn't believe it. "Don't go," he said, "it's a set-up. The Spades will pound you."

It was a warm afternoon when he and some Skulls and Nomads walked across the bridge. They joined the crowd heading toward the Community Center. Abrahante noticed a lot of gang members, maybe even the ones who had bottled him, but he was surprised to see a lot of Puerto Ricans as well. At the door, they lined up to be searched by a pair of big bouncers. But the mood was one of anticipation, not tension as he had expected.

The music was blasting. Onstage, a DJ worked two turntables. He recog-

nized the music and the dances from the gang parties and the park jams, but it was like he was experiencing it again for the first time. When the room filled, the DJ stopped the music. Then that guy from the bridge got on the microphone.

"Bambaataa talked," Abrahante recalls. "He was saying how happy he was that people came out. That this gang thing, the cops put us up to this stuff. Society put us all in here to fight against each other and kill us off, and we're not getting nowhere."

Abrahante was impressed. "A week later, I was meeting more and more kids, and he was trying to open Bronx River to everybody. I mean it was inspiring." With the Zulu Nation, Bambaataa was integrating a new generation in the Bronx.

The Lessons

Zulu chapters proliferated throughout the tri-state area as quickly as had the Black Spades. To be down with the Zulus conferred street power and respect, but perhaps just as important, the promise of good times. While gang legacies remained, Bambaataa steadfastly pushed the organization in the direction of his new motto: "Peace, Love, Unity and Having Fun." By the early '80s, he had largely succeeded. But without the military hierarchy of the gang structure, the Zulu name was still prone to being tarnished by knuckleheads.

Bambaataa says, "We had to come up with something to get the order back. That's when I started thinking, and it was coming back to me, all the teachings and everything I experienced. I started sitting down and writing things from my head. Other people started saying, 'Well, this is a belief that I've had.' So then I started taking from all people of knowledge to make up our lessons. And it started catching on and keeping people in check."

In place of a set of beliefs or a ten-point platform, the Universal Zulu Nation offered Seven Infinity Lessons, which formed the basic foundation of principles for a member. The lessons established a fundamental code of conduct and gave broad directives to the Zulu "way of life."

Like a Bambaataa DJ set, the Infinity Lessons followed a ranging eclecticism, mixed a bit of the familiar with a lot of the arcane. They touched on the origins of Universal Zulu Nation and its South African antecedents, and offered a Bronx River view of the origins of hip-hop. They highlighted esoterica like Elijah Muhammad's dietary pronouncements and Dr. Malachi Z. York's racial inter-

Can't Stop Won't Stop

pretations of Biblical history. They were presented in the same question-and-answer studies and keyword glossary forms used by the Nation of Islam and the Nation of Gods and Earths, better known as the Five Percenters.

The Infinity Lessons drew on the Black Muslims' evocation of a glorious, original African past, but not their impulse to racial separation. And although the Lessons leaned hard on the language of the Nation of Islam, they disdained dogma and orthodoxy. "The religion of the Universal Zulu Nation is truth wherever it is," reads Infinity Lesson #4. "So our way of life is knowledge, wisdom and understanding of everything, freedom, justice and equality."

The Lessons picked up the Black Panthers' call for self-defense, but they dropped the programmatic demands for housing and employment. Formed at a time when the arc of Black Power was dropping precipitously, the Universal Zulu Nation was not about politics. As Elijah Muhammad had preached, Zulus first had to come to know themselves, attain knowledge of self. Consciousness did not come from the unmasking of social forces, but from having a true reckoning with one's god within. The revolution did not emanate from mass organizations struggling against systems and institutions, but in one's personal transformation. Only then could one "overstand," that is, comprehend and confront the injustice of the world by manifesting one's power.

Most important, the Lessons were an evolving document. They would expand and change as more members came into the fold. By definition, they were open-ended, infinite.

To the ministers and ideologues moving in the Bronx, the Zulus presented a question mark: they were agnostic devotees, skeptical true-believers, noncommittal revolutionaries. The Infinity Lessons seemed a quasi-theological mess, an autodidactic crazy-quilt, a political road map to a nowhere. But to Bambaataa the ideas were less important than the process.

If you are of gods, Bambaataa seemed to say, then it follows that you are just as capable as I am to make this new world. Zulus celebrated the instinct for survival and creation. Living young and free in the Bronx was a revolutionary act of art. To unleash on a social level these vital urges was the surest way to ward off mass death. Bambaataa's message was: We're moving. There's room for you if you get yourself right. Perhaps this is why, of all the utopias proffered to the teeming rabble of outcast youth, Bambaataa's spread through the streets of the Bronx and then out into the world like a flaming wick.

Soul Salvation

So here they were, Bambaataa's army—the MCs, the DJs, the graffiti writers, the b-boys and b-girls, the crews they brought and the crowds they moved. They were elemental in their creative power—four, after all, was “the foundation number,” representing air, water, earth and fire, and in another sense, the rhythm itself. What they were doing was yet to be named. But in the cooling sunlight of a park jam or the mercury-bursting intensity of an indoor one—from everywhere a crowd rising, the DJ excising and extending the groove, ciphers and crews burning, distinctions and discriminations dissolving, the lifeblood pulsing and spirit growing—Bambaataa took Herc's party and turned it into the ceremony of a new faith, like he knew that this was exactly how their world was supposed to look, sound and flow.