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# Jam Master Jay, 1965–2002

by Harry Allen

As both a technician and craftsman, DJ Jam Master Jay (aka Jason William Mizell), who was murdered last Wednesday night at the age of 37 by an assassin's single bullet, will probably be remembered less for the showy innovations and poly-hyphenated tricks that mark the modern "turntablist" arsenal than he will be for a personal style marked by deference and selflessness.

His was a manner uniquely suited to the era that, as a part of the hip-hop supergroup Run-D.M.C., he dominated culturally. The supporting role he performed—making his vocalists look their absolute best, just as hip-hop, in pursuit of wider audiences, shifted its focus increasingly from the DJ to the MC—also enabled him to act as a global ambassador for the music. He did so in a manner absent of ego, absent of the typical "ugly Americanisms" that frequently mar such contacts. He and rappers Joseph "Run" Simmons and Darryl "D.M.C." McDaniels were the first to perform hip-hop in countless locales across the planet. His was a position that Jam Master Jay served with what many who knew him note as a characteristic form of kindness.

Of course Run-D.M.C. are the most influential crew in hip-hop history, and one of the most influential in the history of popular music. Jay was their instrumental and musical backbone, their melodic voice and rhythmic heart. Like markers dividing time into B.C. and A.D., they literally stand at the nexus of hip-hop's old and new schools: the first artists in the genre to enjoy a career in the style most widely emulated today. Here's the formula: sell African American music by the multimillions to validating Black buyers, but predominantly to relatively empathetic, liquidity-providing white ones—the so-called mainstream. Do so in a manner accentuated by product merchandising, endorsements, radio and music video marketing, and wide national and international touring. Run-D.M.C.'s progeny, thus, are every hip-hop act that has since partaken

in any aspect or effect of the above—and any white musical group that, at the very least, has taken hold of rock and hip-hop's concubinage.

Mizell was killed in the lounge of his Queens studio by one shot to the head from a .40 caliber weapon. News reports said that the large, powerful round left both an entry and an exit wound, and that the killer shot him behind his left ear so close that ignited powder from the blast burned Jay's shirt. In other words, he was not just killed, but slaughtered. Brutally.

In the subsequent investigation, NYPD attention has mainly focused on a revenge motive: possibly for unpaid debts, possibly for Jay's association with hip-hop rabble-rouser 50 Cent, a/k/a Curtis Jackson, whose "gangsta rap"-mocking single, "Wanksta," Jay produced, and who has previously been the victim of gun violence. Though newspaper columnists continue to beat the glue out of the notion, and though a federal probe of rumored organized crime ties within the hip-hop industry is said to be underway, detectives have scoffed at suggestions that the murder is connected to an "East Coast-West Coast rap war." They have also deemed the weekend killing in White Plains of Kenneth Walker, a hip-hop promoter with a criminal record, as having no connection to Jay's murder.

Born in Brooklyn on January 21, 1965, the youngest of three children, to the late Jesse Mizell and Connie Thompson Mizell, Jason was playing drums and singing in the Universal Baptist Church's Young Adult Choir at the age of five. After moving with his family to Hollis in 1975, he discovered DJ'ing at age 13, and began to practice under the name Jazzy Jase. It was while in Hollis—attending Jackson High School, playing drums and bass in local bands, and learning to disc-jockey—that he would meet future partners Darryl and Joe. The crew officially joined forces in their late teens, then signed with Profile Records, under the management of Joe's

older brother, Russell Simmons, who would later have enormous success of his own as head of Def Jam Recordings. Their first single, “It’s Like That/Sucker M.C.’s,” came out in 1983.

At the peak of their powers, Run-D.M.C. were like the leading technological edge of an advanced missile program. The sound of their beats alone, compared to what had come before—Sugarhill Records’ horn-berserk bridges and choruses, for example—were the audio equivalent of low-kiloton-yield bunker busting. The titles of their flinty tracks read like chapter headings for an impending apocalypse: “Hard Times.” “30 Days.” “It’s Like That.” Even their own name was odd—in 1983, amid crews with fluorescent, superhero-style monikers like the Funky Four, the Furious Five, and the Treacherous Three, “Run-D.M.C.” sounded less like the name of a group than that of a metallurgical solvent.

How fitting. Because, with the release of their eponymous debut album in 1984, followed by 1985’s *King of Rock*, Run-D.M.C would more surely dissolve and dispense with the previous musical age than any hip-hop artists before or since.

How? Simple: By basically inventing the modern hip-hop music business. It’s probably difficult for those born in the age of Run-D.M.C.’s revolution—pretty much anyone under the age of 25—to clearly see its effects, so fundamental are they to what we consider popular music today. They possessed the aura that would make the hip-hop industry’s growth spurts possible. Much has been made of their long list of firsts: hip-hop’s first gold album (*Run-D.M.C.*); hip-hop’s first platinum album (*King of Rock*); first hip-hop artists to be nominated for a Grammy; first rappers to appear on *American Bandstand* and on the cover of *Rolling Stone*.

But these were merely outgrowths of their real innovations:

• *Their blending of rock with hip-hop:* This hybrid gave Run-D.M.C.’s music a supple, rhythmic density that rock had never enjoyed, and hip-hop a tonic brazenness that perfectly

complemented that of the scratch. Their subtle blend attracted fans who might have found this chocolate-in-my-peanut-butter mix anathema, at least initially.

• *The breadth of their touring and the depth of their touring lineup:* By traveling widely in the early ’80s, on the first Fresh Fest tours, then on their own Together Forever tour, and by maintaining a roster of acts who were all distinct from one another, the crew assured wide exposure, both geographically and demographically, for their ideas, and the growth of a relatively broad fan base.

• *The compactness of their ensemble:* Run-D.M.C., compared to earlier crews, were a relatively small combo; two vocalists, one DJ. Basically, they scaled back the workforce, a trend later accelerated as technology and production styles increasingly worked to make the DJ superfluous. Not until the rise of the Wu-Tang Clan on the East Coast and Jurassic 5 on the West would hip-hop see much opposition to the downsizing they initiated.

• *The extreme dynamism of their live shows:* Run-D.M.C. were the first hip-hop artists to yell on their records, to jump from hip-hop’s smoothly conspiratorial, r&b-speckled timbres to pounding amplitudes of rage. This enabled them to readily duplicate the volume of their recorded performances in the live setting. (Try and imagine, say, Rakim or Fabolous doing the same thing.) It also helped them make records that a rock audience could embrace. This connected them to an enormous, previously untapped white ethos.

• *Careful selection and arrangement of graphical elements into a unified whole:* The first time I saw the *King of Rock* LP, over at Rock & Soul on Seventh Avenue, I stared at the cover for what seemed like two hours. I remember thinking that it looked “real,” as if Run-D.M.C. were real recording artists, as opposed to “just” rappers. They were also probably the first hip-hop act with a logo.

• *The austerity of their visual aesthetic:* They rejected the polychromatic, Rick James-influenced full-body leathers of the Furious Five in favor of a minimalist, all-black, urban hard-rock

look that youthful crowds found reasonable and accessible; whether you were a B-boy or a skatepunk, a black T-shirt, black Lee jeans, and Adidas made sense. (And can anyone forget the first time they saw Run-D.M.C. in those big, dookie-rope chains?) The pared-down look extended to their stage set. Jam Master Jay, for instance, was probably the first DJ ever to use Anvil Cases—as opposed to crudely cut, makeshift squares of foam—to support turntables during concerts. This gave his instrument a cool, machine-finished look.

Over the course of seven studio album releases with the group and after Run-D.M.C.'s heyday, Jay kept busy and visible with public appearances, live shows, production (his 1993 JMJ Records release by Onyx, *Bacdafucup*, a prime example), and running the studio in the heart of his old neighborhood, about a mile from the home in which he grew up—the studio in which, sadly, his life would violently end.

Aside from the millions of fans, friends, and colleagues he leaves behind, he'll be most dearly remembered by his wife of 11 years, Terri, 32; his sons, Jason, 15, Terry, 11, and Jesse, 7; his mother Connie (Mizell) Perry; his brother, Marvin L. Thompson, and his sister, Bonita Jones.

Jam Master Jay's pivotal role in the history of hip-hop culture is singular, his shoes impossible to fill—a point inevitably made, maybe, by the piles of empty Adidas left at a makeshift memorial outside his murder site.

However, this outpouring of love and fond memories, though enough for some, won't be for one.

"I don't want people to just mourn Jay for a month, and then we go back to doing the same things we've been doing," says his longtime friend and recording partner D.M.C., in a voice weary with loss. "We need to add something, in order to make change.

“After we give him his tribute, and bury him with dignity, his legacy’s gonna live on. But as long as that legacy lives on, simultaneously, there has to be an idea that goes along with it.”