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Discover Hip-Hop's History and Legacy in The Bronx This Summer

By Patrick Wall
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THE BRONX — From Little Rock to Los Angeles, Germany to Japan, if the wider world knows one thing about The Bronx, it's the musical movement that sprouted here several decades ago and then blossomed around the planet.

“From this concrete jungle, the flower of hip-hop evolved,” said Melissa Libran, a Bronx resident and CEO of Windows of Hip Hop, a group devoted to commemorating the borough’s musical heritage.



Photo credit: Patrick Wall/DNAInfo

Nelson "Chief69" Seda, a Bronx b-boy and emcee, at a Crotona Park Jam in 2012.

While The Bronx may no longer qualify as a hotbed of hip-hop innovation — its many Latin American and West African immigrants are more likely to push the boundaries of other genres — many devoted hip-hop-heads keep the tradition alive through workshops, open mic events and artwork.

“It’s still thriving here,” said Bronx b-boy and emcee Nelson “Chief69” Seda, “but you do have to seek it out.”

1. The History

If The Bronx is the birthplace of hip-hop, many consider 1520 Sedgwick Ave. to be its cradle.

It was in the community room of that high-rise just north of the Cross-Bronx Expressway, in 1973, that a teenager named Kool Herc used two turntables to prolong songs' percussion breaks — spawning the “scratching” DJ style that would soon provide the beat for hip-hop's first emcees and breakdancers.

“A lot of people feel that the parties that Kool Herc threw in 1973 were the big bang that kind of started hip-hop in motion,” said Mark Naison, a professor of African and African American Studies at Fordham University.

That building is one of several hip-hop landmarks still standing in The Bronx.

Also worth a visit is the Webster Center Police Athletic League (2255 Webster Ave.), which Naison said “had more indoor hip-hop events than anywhere in the Bronx,” and the Bronx River Houses (1605 E.174th St.), where hip-hop pioneer Afrika Bambaataa transformed a street gang into the world-famous Universal Zulu Nation.

2. The Music

Mainstream hip-hop performers may have migrated from a Sedgwick Avenue rec room to Yankee Stadium, but the movement's grassroots practitioners still gather at neighborhood spots.

The best Bronx venue to catch such hip-hop acts today may be the nonprofit WHEDco's Bronx Music Heritage Center Lab (1303 Louis Niñé Blvd.), a storefront inside an affordable-housing complex.

The hip-hop-minded Rebel Diaz Arts Collective is in residency at the center, where they have been hosting monthly open mic nights, live rap shows and workshops on hip-hop dancing, rap-lyric writing, music production and more.

Nearby, inside a nondescript brick building that used to house a bodega, sits a performance and gallery space called El Fogon (989 Home St.).

While much of the programming is devoted to Latin and Afro-Cuban music, it hosts a monthly open mic night with spoken-word poets, rappers and human beat boxers curated by Art Rapture.



Members of the Rebel Diaz Arts Collective (rear) perform with the musician Bobby Sanabria inside the collective's temporary new home at the Bronx Music Heritage Center Lab.

Seda, the hip-hop aficionado, will lead a community discussion about hip-hop at El Fogon on September 7.

Not far away, the annual Crotona Park Jams (Crotona Park Amphitheater, near Indian Lake) recreate the early outdoor dance and DJ parties that delivered hip-hop to the masses.

This year's artist lineup included the pioneers Grand Wizard Theodore, Biz Markie, Grandmaster Caz and many others.

3. The Art

From the start, hip-hop was a movement with a look as distinctive as its sound.

Next to shoulder-mounted boom boxes, the definitive hip-hop visual was the graffiti painted on subway cars, bridges and buildings in The Bronx.

"It brought color to the rubble," Libran, the hip-hop enthusiast, said of the early graffiti.

The best place to admire Bronx street art today is perhaps Hunts Point, headquarters of Tats Cru, the "Mural Kings" who graduated from tagging train cars in the '80s to creating graffiti-inspired designs for some of the world's biggest companies today.

Their epic murals, some a couple stories high, cover warehouse walls on Drake Street near Spofford Avenue.

Other eye-catching murals surround The Point (940 Garrison Ave.), a community center that also hosts occasional hip-hop events and workshops.

The Bronx Museum of the Arts (1040 Grand Concourse) has long promoted local artists, many of whose work reflects the borough's hip-hop roots.

Find a Tats Cru mural, Keith Haring etchings, paintings of graffiti-coated buildings and more at the world-class museum.

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