

**BRONX RHYMES —
AN URBAN MULTIMEDIA PROJECT
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INTRODUCTION Over 25 years ago musical pioneers including Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash helped launch one of the most influential and empowering cultural movements of our time. Bronx Rhymes, a multi-media installation by digital artists Claudia Bennett and Maria Ioveva, celebrates Hip Hop's innovative artistry, inspirational impact and community contributions. Using a guerrilla graphics campaign, Bronx Rhymes both commemorates the origins of Hip Hop and renews its cultural significance through BronxRhymes.org, a site that invites a new generation of potential artists to reinvigorate Hip Hop's rich history and join its evolution.

CONTEXT By the mid-1970s, the Bronx had slipped into an economic decline marked by poverty and violence. Youth were a particularly vulnerable segment with unemployment reaching 60-80% and gang wars becoming commonplace. Hip-hop emerged from this brutal climate out of a need for self-expression and creativity, which used the most immediate tools at hand — a simple turntable, a mic, and a steady beat.

Because hip-hop originally flourished in impoverished communities very few historical artifacts have been preserved, and those that have survived are disappearing with increased gentrification. Many of the small bars and clubs that lined Boston Road are gone and some of the apartments MCs and DJs spent hours experimenting with their music have been converted into condominiums.

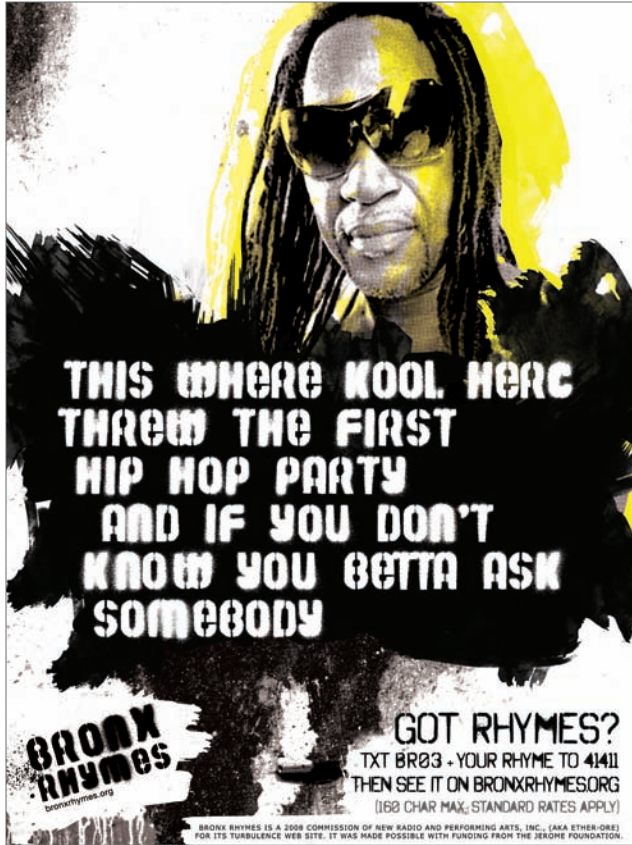
Bronx Rhymes aims to provide access points into the genre's early history by merging the physical, digital, and mobile worlds. We both relay historical information and present a game-like experience that invites participants to reflect on and contribute to an ever-growing conversation about Hip Hop and its influence on popular culture and music.

PROCESS We began by focusing on a small group of pioneers in the Bronx. We researched artists who got their start in the borough, and documented their histories. We then archived and mapped significant events in Hip Hop history related to those artists.

As part of our research, we contacted Professor Mark D. Naison, a Professor of African American Studies and History from Fordham University, Professor Naison then introduced us to local music and Hip-hop communities. We became familiar with projects such as the Urban Art Beat program, an after-school program, which teaches kids about the history of Hip Hop while and encourages them to create their own rhymes and beats. We sought to leverage digital technology to capture this interest in Hip Hop history by re-envisioning the rhyming battle in a new form and context.

We collaborated with developers and set up mobile codes with Textmarks (<http://www.textmarks.com>), and linked each poster and location to a particular rhyme. Online, we display a list of all the artists and locations, each identified with a rhyme. Each of the submitted rhymes are stored in a simple text file, and an updated count of these submissions are displayed on the site using PHP and related web technologies.





EXPERIENCE At each of the ten locations we linked to a piece of Hip Hop history (many are defunct, but a few, such as 1520 Sedgwick, still exist), posters describing the historical event were mounted. Each poster displays an early Hip Hop pioneer (DJ Kool Herc or Afrika Bambaataa, for example) an original rhyme that describes the significance of that location. Viewers are invited to text a response of their own. All rhymes and responses are archived on BronxRhymes.org, where visitors can also add rhymes. A custom execution of Google Maps was integrated to plot the locations and historical details. The result is both an exploration of Hip Hop’s foundations and a forum for creative expression and historical dialog.

SUMMARY Bronx Rhymes leverages physical, digital, and mobile communications with the aim of inviting the local community to engage with its own history, and with each other. The publicly mounted posters call attention to a fading history, and encourage passersby to engage with that history via SMS. This medium of communication was selected for its prevalence among our target demographic. BronxRhymes.org launched on November 15th, 2008, and to date has received 1,700 unique visits, with users spending an average of 2:32 minutes on the site. We have received approximately 60 submissions, along with calls from local DJs and MCs interested in the project’s expansion. Finally, we have been reviewed by the New York Times, the PSFK and PBS: Mediashift blogs.