

THE PLANET ROCK GROOVE

Excerpt from the book *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor*
1980-1983

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Tim Lawrence is Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of East London and the author of *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970-1979* and *Hold On to Your Dreams: Arthur Russell and the Downtown Music Scene, 1973-1992*, both also published by Duke University Press. Here is an excerpt of chapter 23 from his new book: *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980-1983: The Planet Rock Groove*

Tom Silverman hired an office hand to help him build Tommy Boy and manage Dance Music Report toward the end of 1981. "I interviewed with Tom two or three times," says Monica Lynch, who got the job. "I didn't have any formal background in music but Tom provided me with an opportunity.

He was going out to Long Island City and Queens to pick up the new Tommy Boy release, which was 'Jazzy Sensation,' and he asked me if I wanted to come." Lynch was confronted with the heavy-duty currency of the dance economy: a mini-mountain of fifty-count boxes packed with twelve-inch vinyl. "These guys brought them out to the curb and I started slinging them into the back of Tom's hatchback car," she recounts. "At that point I think Tom thought it could work out. I was bright enough and would work like a mule. The money was so low I had to continue waiting tables at night for quite some time."

The boxes piled higher after Silverman teamed up with Bambaataa to map out an eight-track demo that included sections of Babe Ruth's "The Mexican," B.T. Express's "Do You Like It," Captain Sky's "Super Sporm," Rick James's "Give It to Me Baby," and Kraftwerk's "Numbers" and "Trans-Europe Express."

"Me and Tom did the demo together in a studio, upstate New York," recounts the dj. "We was going through records

to get the concept; we was trying different grooves." Kraftwerk were the major influence. "I wanted to create the first black electronic group," adds Bambaataa. "I always was into 'Trans-Europe Express' and after Kraftwerk put 'Numbers' out I said, 'I wonder if I can combine them to make something real funky with a hard bass and beat.'" Downtown sensibilities also shaped the sound of the track. "I got the idea from playing in a lot of punk rock clubs," he revealed in another interview published in the *East Village Eye*, this one conducted by Steven Hager, who got hold of the Bronx dj's phone number from Fred Brathwaite at the Beyond Words opening. "The punkers were getting off on our kind of music so I decided to make a record that would appeal to the white crowd and still keep the sound that would appeal to the hip hoppers. So I combined the two elements." Asked to work on the project, Arthur Baker was immediately drawn to the Kraftwerk elements, having considered making a record using "Numbers" and "Trans-Europe Express" himself, he claims. "From the start I was thinking, 'I want to make it so they can play it at Danceteria and they can play it at the Garage and it will also be a rap record,'" comments the producer. "I wanted it to be able to cross all those boundaries." The producer streamlined the demo by removing the B.T. Express and Rick James elements, after which he tracked down



East Village Eye front cover featuring "Planet Rock," June 1982. "The gulf between the white and black worlds was still so wide that we could get away with using a cover that had nothing directly to do with Afrika Bambaataa, but was simply a cool-looking image of a young black man that our art director, Glenn Miller, had in his portfolio," says Leonard Abrams. "In our defense, our time and resources were so limited then that we couldn't send someone to the South Bronx to take his picture. But I wish we had've."

Courtesy of Leonard Abrams.

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the equipment he needed to re- create the beats of "Numbers" by searching the ad section in the Village Voice. The "man with drum machine" turned out to be the owner of a Roland tr-808, the successor to the tr-33, tr-55, and tr-77 (which contained presets), and the cr-78 (which was programmable). "Basically, we played him 'Numbers' and we said, 'Get that beat for us,'" adds the producer. "Then Bam

played 'Super Sporm' and he said, 'I want that for the break.' " A guitarist and synthesizer player who loathed disco, John Robie added synthesizer parts. "I came from an era when artists couldn't get a record deal unless they or one of their band members had some incredible talent or quality, and disco basically put an end to that," he notes of his anti-disco position. "You had people playing to metronomes,

every one sounding the same, and lyrics that were nonsensical and generally infantile." Robie particularly resented the way the 1970s dance sound required great musicians to play below their skill level in order to create a hypnotic trance. "From the point of view of someone who had started out as a die-hard rock musician, it was a death knell," he continues. "The producer's job was to make sure everybody played like a robot. It was as if we went from Bob Dylan to 'Let's rollerskate!' " It got to the point where Robie and his friends would walk away if they went into a restaurant and heard disco playing. "It was everywhere; it was like a virus," he concludes. "And it all sounded exactly the same." Robie got to meet Bambaataa after he laid down four Moroder/Kraftwerkstyle synthesizer pieces in real time, released one of them with Capitol in Belgium, and, following a tip-off, took the others to "this guy who lives in Co-op City in the Bronx." Bambaataa's mother was watching Wheel of Fortune when Robie made his visit. "I played the tracks to Bam and he said I should choose 'Vena Cava,'" recalls the instrumentalist, "so I borrowed \$1,200 from a friend and went to a small recording studio to make the record." When the subscriber service Disconet featured the track as its record of the month, Bambaataa called Silverman to say, "I got this keyboard player who is as funky as Kraftwerk — check him out!" The publisher contacted Robie within the hour and arranged for him to meet Baker in Tommy Boy's tiny Upper East Side office. "Nobody could have seen all these disparate elements coming together," posits Robie. "The unlikely mix of talents was as much a phenomenon as the record itself. People from totally different backgrounds with completely dissimilar tastes and styles somehow came together to do this. At the time I remember it feeling pretty bizarre." Baker, Bambaataa, and Robie headed into the studio soon after the release of "Don't Make Me Wait." "I was definitely influenced by that, so 'Planet Rock' had a drop-down to the bass and then the claps," notes Baker. "I was a dance producer so I was like, 'I want it to be dance.' It had to have drama." Encouraged

by Baker to break with the habit of playing the synthesizer like a conventional instrument, Robie used a Multimoog to re- create the melodic lines from "Trans-Europe Express" and "The Mexican" plus orchestra hits, and he employed a Fairlight to generate a quivering orchestral string-line for the break (on the condition he receive a co writer's credit). Engineer Jay Burnett "contributed greatly to the record" through his inventive use of signal processing, which resulted in the 808 sounding "quite different than it would have in its unprocessed, 'natural' state," maintains the instrumentalist. Later that night Baker played the result to his wife and declared, "We've made musical history." "This was before the rap was on," adds the producer. "The track was so fucking different."

For the vocals, Bambaataa spoke through an electronic mic because vocoder technology failed to provide the precise robotic effect the production team wanted. Globe, Mr. Biggs, and Pow Wow of the Soul Sonic Force fashioned a new, conversational mode of rapping because the track's 130-beat-per-minute tempo ran significantly faster than most funk and rap recordings, making the ubiquitous hippy-hop rhyming style difficult to deliver. Baker claims he came up with the idea to introduce the crowd cheering and chanting that accompanies Bambaataa's opening lines as well as the ensuing "Rock, rock to the planet rock, don't stop," which he grabbed from the "Rock, rock, to the disco rock/Give it all you got" intro of "Body Music" by the Strikers, although Bambaataa went on to tell Hager that those lines came about because the studio gathering started talking about every planet having its own way of rocking. Burnett suggested the rappers shout out the places where the planetary party was about to unfold, just like James Brown would call out to audience members from different cities while onstage. In the final contribution, David Azarch and the band members of Animal Luxury recorded the "Rock it don't stop it" line when Bambaataa hauled them in from the studio's waiting room. "Bam comes out, we recognize each other, exchange high-fives and handshakes, and

he says, 'I need more voices — you just have to shout 'Planet Rock,' " recounts the Peppermint Lounge dj. "We all just casually got up, went in, and did it in two or three takes. That was the beginning and end of my career as a backup vocalist." The result heralded the breakthrough of a new form of synthetic funk. "I took the techno- pop sound of the Yellow Magic Orchestra and Kraftwerk and Gary Numan, and I flipped it to the funk sound of James Brown, Sly and the Family Stone, and George Parliament- Funkadelic Clinton," explains Bambaataa. "Arthur Baker and John Robie put in sounds and noises. They really took it there. It was the birth of the electro- funk sound." Concerned with complexity and virtuosity, Robie was left unmoved. "Coming from a rock background and being a 'legit songwriter,' I thought 'Planet Rock' was silly," he reasons. "I was playing one- note lines and creating sound effects on a monophonic synthesizer, there was a repetitive drum machine sequence, and people were spouting stuff about saving the universe. Honestly, to me it was an embarrassment." But Baker had no reservations when he took acetates to the idrc record pool as well as a Brooklyn record store called the Music Factory. "At the pool it was one of those 'What the fuck is this?' records," he remembers. "Then a guy at the record store offered me a hundred dollars for the acetate." Released under the artist name of Afrika Bambaataa & the Soul Sonic Force in the spring, the record tore through the city as its first print run of fifty thousand sold out in a week. 'Planet Rock' was the one record that blew everything open," recalls François Kevorkian. "It was just this wild animal, a cyborg let loose. It was just the most astounding, bass- drum- heavy, in your face, mother- fucking deadly record we'd ever heard. It was a phenomenon— a tidal wave." In June Steven Hager referred to the twelve- inch as the "monster dance hit of the spring" before Malcolm McLaren lauded it during his keynote address at the third New Music Seminar in July.3 " 'Planet Rock' is the most rootsy folk music around, the only music that's coming out of New York City which (is) directly related to that guy in the streets with his ghetto blaster," declared the impresario. "The record is like an

adventure story; it's like that guy walking down the street. And, if Elvis Presley was that in the '50s, then Afrika Bambaataa is that for the '80s. Steve Knutson, a musician, actor, and friend of Lynch's, remembers hearing "Planet Rock" whenever he walked down the street. "It was the day of boom boxes and you'd hear it on wbls," he reminisces. "It was like there was a big sound system right over the city." When the track played repeatedly on his car radio, Robie "definitely got it at that point," while Bambaataa remembers being amazed when he "started seeing all different types getting into the 'Planet Rock' groove. Sales eventually totaled 650,000 to 700,000 copies — or a solid 13,000 to 14,000 boxes for Silverman and Lynch ■



For more information about the book: <https://www.dukeupress.edu/life-and-death-on-the-new-york-dance-floor-1980-1983>



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