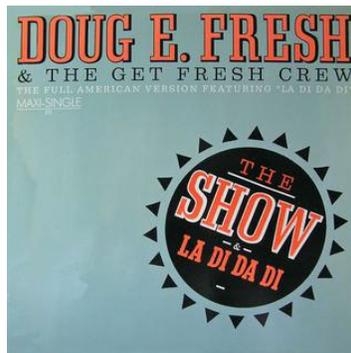


# “La Di Da Di”--Doug E. Fresh and Slick Rick (MC Ricky D) (1985)

Added to the National Registry: 2024

Essay by Dan Charnas (guest post)\*



Hip-hop as a musical culture sits atop a foundation of vinyl, the hundred or so records--like the elements in the periodic table--that comprise the building blocks of all the material that followed. Most of these records are the 1960s and '70s funk, soul, and rock songs that DJs mined for breaks and beats, melody and harmony. But a few early rap records, too, became part of that primary canon. In that class, “La-Di-Da-Di” by Doug E. Fresh & M.C. Ricky D. stands paramount.

“La-Di-Da-Di,” produced by Dennis Bell and Ollie Cotton, for City Slicker Productions, was technically the “b-side” of a 12-inch single, released in 1985 on Fantasy Records, for Doug E. Fresh & The Get Fresh Crew’s LP “The Show.” The songs together were a one-two punch: a coup for hip-hop as creative songcraft and a recorded art form, rare rap records to receive airplay on 1980s radio. “The Show” marked a new apex for ambitious, maximalist hip-hop production, a virtual rap carnival powered by the synth and drum programming of a young man named Teddy Riley who would, within a few years, invent a genre of his own called new jack swing. “La-Di-Da-Di” took the opposite, minimalist approach: just an MC and a beat-boxer, championing the simple arts of hip-hop. The two tunes thus represented a liminal moment for hip-hop culture as its humble and biodiverse street culture of breakdancing, graffiti, and beatboxing enjoyed a moment in the light before they gave way to a genre pared down to beats and rhymes.

“La-Di-Da-Di,” in simplest terms, is a ghetto fairy tale spun by hip-hop’s master storyteller, now known as Slick Rick. Richard Walters, a London native who emigrated to The Bronx at the age of 11 and attended New York City’s storied LaGuardia High School of the Performing Arts, always tried to hide the British accent that many took for a humorous, cosmopolitan affectation. But he embraced rap’s potential for colorful and absurd narrative. Rick introduces himself to the world as a dandy gazing in the mirror lovingly before bathing, powdering, anointing, and clothing himself for the day ahead, which entails a chance meeting with a heartbroken former lover and her pugnacious, jealous mother. Rick, of course, is too good for either of them.

The tale was puerile enough to make an entire generation of hip-hop fans guffaw, and clever, too, especially in Rick’s relentless referencing of pop culture from Snow White, to brands like Gucci,

Polo, and Kangol, to a verse from A Taste of Honey's "Sukiyaki," itself an interpolation of an earlier Japanese pop record. It makes sense, then, that the enduring power of this song is that it, itself, became a fountain of references for hip-hop, R&B, pop, and more. It may not be an exaggeration to say that Rick's lyrics, essentially acapella and thus great fodder for DJs with turntables and producers with digital samplers, are the most recycled and repurposed in hip-hop history.

His exclamations--"Yo, peep this!"; "Oh no!"; "On and on!"--function as punctuation in hip-hop; they are the commas, colons and exclamation points in our shared rap vernacular. His offhand turns of phrase--"Tick tock you don't stop"; "Ricky, Ricky, Ricky, can't you see?"; "Just the men that's on the mic"--have become refrains for many other hits, and sometimes titles... for songs and many other things. "Fresh Dressed" is the name of a documentary on hip-hop fashion. There's even a Hollywood TV and film production company called Fly Green Socks.

"La-Di-Da-Di" is a postmodern giving tree, a rap Rosetta Stone, a primer on comedic narrative, and the debut of two incredible hip-hop icons, all in one. The b-side, as Chuck D once said, wins again.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.