“Rapper's Delight”-- Sugarhill Gang (1979)

Added to the National Registry: 2011
Essay by Eric Reese (guest post)*


Sugarhill Gang

Original disc


Sylvia Robinson

Introduction
To those who were alive in the late 1970s, the song “Rapper’s Delight” was, upon its release, a sensational, soul-gripping, well-celebrated and well-applauded song. “Rapper's Delight” by the Sugarhill Gang, like every other great song, has enjoyed its fair share of appreciation, recognition and criticisms and indured a few scandals and lawsuits and other disputes typical of many hit songs of that era.

The 1970s was an age of continual development in rap music which had begun no less than seven years before. Rap artists struggled to find voice, or even producers, to support their talents or provide a covering for their gifts. That era sank more rap ships than any in history and few nascent rappers had the guts to keep on living through the genre which was slowly coming to be known as hip-hop.

The song “Rapper's Delight” itself was termed the pioneer upon which the wide-scale influx of hip-hop to the larger market was built. Not that it was the first rap song released, but it was one of a kind, considering the overall reception to hip-hop music back in the day. Upon its release in 1979, the Sugarhill Gang’s song, produced by Sylvia Robinson, brought the never-heard before freshness of rap with the oddity of blending different rap styles and content into one big blend: hip-hop.

Components of “Rapper’s Delight” included dance, sexuality, charisma, buoyance and other themes which went as far as including the spirit and obsessive nature of such singers as James Brown.

Backstory on the Song
Varying conspiracy theories have been aired over the ages about how the song “Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugarhill Gang (Mike Wright, “Master Gee” O’Brien and “Big Bank” Hank Jackson) was put together. But one has stuck.

The song first came to be known after being played on the dance floor of a New York club named Leviticus. There, it was wildly accepted but also unknowingly heard by one man who claimed to be the originator of the song, which he claimed he made just a few weeks back. That man was music mega-producer Nile Rodgers. And the song opened with Bernard Edward's distinctive bass line from Chic's "Good Times," Rodgers's band. Rodgers confronted the DJ and demanded to know where he had gotten the song.

Apparently, the song had been bought from Harlem, where a compilation of Sugarhill Gang's album had been played. That compilation had included a title known as "Rapper's Delight."

Later, theft and illegal use of the track was claimed against the band by producer Nile Rodgers.

Pain and Gain

"Rapper's Delight" grew famous and attracted a wide range of praises thanks to its outstanding mesh of varying rap ethics and styles, but it also opened the group itself to more critics and lawsuits. Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards threatened to sue Sugarhill Gang for stealing their lyrics and bass lines, respectively. The lawsuits threatened to derail the group's breakout success. Later, Sugarhill admitted that they had indeed copied contents from a concert they attended with Chic, a teenage musical group that Bernard Edwards and Nile Rodgers had founded. It was also discovered that all parties involved were on stage together a few weeks before the official release of the original version of "Rapper's Delight."

Months passed by and the two parties eventually settled out of court resulting in giving writing co-credits to "Rapper's Delight" to Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards. They also received a substantial undisclosed amount of money made off of album sales and performances.

Regardless of the property and intellectual thefts attributed to the song, its worldwide acceptance only seemed to increase as its popularity. It soared further than the group ever anticipated. In countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States, they sold over two million copies and sales totals exceeded $3.5 million. The song also charted at varying heights across billboards all over the world.

"Rapper's Delight" peaked at number one on the Dutch Top 40; number three on the UK Singles chart; and hit number four on the Hot Singles Chart in the US in December 1979. The song also enjoyed considerable success for several consecutive months at number 36 on the US "Billboard Hot 100" chart.

The lasting influence of "Rapper's Delight" date as far back as 2004 when it was ranked at #251 on "Rolling Stone" magazine's list of "Greatest Songs of All Time." "Rapper's Delight" was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 2014.

Noteworthy Mentions Over the Years

Among other uses, in 2016, "Rapper's Delight" was used at Apple's 2016 WWDC Conference during the demonstration of the revamped Apple Music Application by Bozoma Saint John.

On the Fox comedy series, “The Simpsons,” the song’s lyrics have been used to teach safety; encouraging children to use crosswalks when crossing the street.

Honda incorporated the song into an advertisement titled “The Cog,” where it came into play after the completion of a Rube Goldberg effect.

Conclusion

“Rapper’s Delight” came as the tear in the veil and the standard upon which struggling hip-hop rode into success in an era and time where companies were too scared to finance record labels or artists or even dream to push them onward. It broke the bank and became an eye opener to various rappers who could tap into its success and build their own style and not limit themselves to a theme in rap music.

Although, it became famous on the back of serious claims of intellectual theft, “Rapper's Delight” has stood its ground and never crumbled over time. It is an invaluable requirement in the world of hip-hop, propelling rap music into what it is today.

Eric Reese was born and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He is a full-time author and recipient of the first Mayoral Scholarship of Philadelphia (1993) and the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers Human Relations Award (1989). He is author of the 2017 book “The History of Hip Hop.”