

Rock and Roll Hall of Fame finally lets hip-hop into the tent

by George_Varga

Perfect timing? Or too little, too late?

That's the question surrounding Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five, which Monday night will become the first hip-hop act ever to be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. The group made the ballot for the first time in 2004 and again in 2005, but failed to earn enough votes until the 2006 ballot was mailed out last fall.

Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five The pioneering rap ensemble's belated induction comes on the heels of a corporate shake-up at the rock hall, which wants to achieve higher year-round visibility and a younger, fresher vibe. The group's induction also comes at a time when sales for hip-hop albums are plummeting, with a dizzying 21 percent decline between 2005 and 2006.

Last year was the first time in 12 years that the 10 top-selling albums did not include a single rap release. Perhaps coincidentally, criticism of the music's rote emphasis on sex, violence and bling is growing, even within the hip-hop community.

"Most of hip-hop now is not good music, it's not healthy music," said Melle Mel, 45, the principal composer of Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five's socially charged 1982 breakthrough hit "The Message," and the group's lead rapper on that song. "So us being in the Hall of Fame is a positive thing, because hip-hop has been so dumbed down."

Positive, perhaps, but also long overdue.

Artists become eligible for induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame 25 years after the release of their first recording. However, some past nominees - such as The Stooges and John Mellencamp - have failed to get in despite appearing on the ballot several times. (Votes are cast by 600 music industry professionals, including this writer.)

It took Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five three consecutive times on the ballot to muster enough votes for induction. But with its first album, "The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash On the Wheels of Steel," having been released in 1981, the group could have been inducted as early as 1997 - if it had been nominated then.

"If you had asked me five years ago, I would have said that being inducted doesn't mean much because hip-hop doesn't have a whole lot to do with rock," said Mel (real name: Melvin Glover), speaking by phone from Los Angeles. "But from a musical and historical perspective, it means a lot. Because they're acknowledging us as a group and acknowledging hip-hop and its influence."

"And it comes at a good time. Because, even for me on the inside looking out, most hip-hop now is just image-driven. They have to re-teach people what true hip-hop is, so that they can have a realistic vision of what the music is about. Because now it's not about the music. It's about the cars and girls and everything the music isn't about."

It is unclear whether this year's induction of Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five is the result of the rock hall's recent drive to achieve a more youthful focus - or of a lessening resistance by voters to hip-hop at a time when the music is in a commercial free-fall.

But the hall's nominating committee was trimmed by more than half last year to around 30 members. Younger committee members were added, with the hope they would bring greater appreciation for music from the 1980s.

"We made the committee smaller, but it's still representative of a variety of tastes and eras, and it's a little more nimble and can move quicker," said former concert promoter Joe Peresman, 50, the new president and CEO of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Foundation.

"I think everybody thought there was a need to take it up a level. A lot of bands we grew up with, like The Beatles and the Stones, have already been inducted. Now, we're coming up on a new generation of artists, so what can we do to make things more vibrant?"

Honoring hip-hop, however long after the fact, may be one answer. And honoring the critically acclaimed Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five first seems like an obvious move.

The group traces its roots to 1976. That's when 18-year-old Joseph Saddler, the future Grandmaster Flash, moved with his parents to New York from Haiti in the early 1960s, began experimenting and expanding the innovative turntable scratching style introduced by Bronx-based DJ Kool Herc.

"Even the records we played all came from Kool Herc, he was the main guy," Mel said. "And, of course, James Brown, Sly Stone and guys like that."

With the addition of Mel and two other fledgling rappers, Keith "Cowboy" Wiggins and Mel's brother, Nathaniel "Kidd Creole" Glover, Grandmaster Flash & The 3 MCs was born. Flash distinguished himself by manipulating turntable speeds, cutting from one track to another exactly on the beat, and "back-spinning" (repeating parts of a song's groove by precisely turning a record back with his hands).

"We were years ahead of our time," Mel said, sounding more matter-of-fact than boastful. "If we had the right support structure, we could be just as relevant now as we've ever been."

But Mel readily acknowledges that, left to its own devices, the group would have just churned out upbeat party jams. Instead, it made an indelible mark with such stirring songs as "The Message" (which chronicled the bleak challenges of urban life) and the anti-cocaine "White Lines (Don't Don't Do It)," which was later covered by Duran Duran.

Mel credits Sylvia Robinson, who founded Sugar Hill Records (the first rap label of note), for pushing Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five to use its music to chronicle social and political issues. Robinson, who also played a key role in the 1979 release of "Rapper's Delight" by the Sugar Hill Gang, was instrumental in hip-hop's growth, but has rarely received the recognition she deserves.

"Sylvia is one of the greatest producers ever, and she started rap," Mel said. "After we did 'The Message,' it was a good focal point to put out those kind of songs. It wasn't a conscious effort on the group's part to do that kind of material; it was Sylvia's. She should definitely be in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Whether she'll make it there is another story."

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Up on stage, it just might turn into a soap operaExpect drama galore at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame's 22nd annual induction ceremony Monday at New York's plush Waldorf Astoria hotel. The event will stream

live as a Web-cast on AOL and be telecast live for the first time in its entirety on VH1 Classic (an edited two-hour version will air on VH1 March 17).

But even if it wasn't going out live on TV and the Web, it's unlikely any screenwriter could script some of the real-life drama that could fuel parts of Monday's ceremony. How real? Let us count the ways.

Van Halen:The Los Angeles band's planned summer reunion concert tour with its four original members imploded last month, not long after guitarist Eddie Van Halen fired original group bassist Michael Anthony and replaced him with Van Halen's 15-year-old son, Wolfgang.

The band is not expected to perform, and there is some doubt about whether its temperamental guitarist will bother to show up. It also remains to be seen which of the other feuding Van Halen alums will actually be there, and whether former lead singers David Lee Roth and Sammy Hagar (both of whom are expected to attend) will talk or even acknowledge each other's presence. "I used to think Dave was phony and contrived," Hagar said after being ousted from Van Halen in 1996. "And the scary thing is, he's not."

Singer Gary Cherone, who appeared only on the stillborn 1998 album, "Van Halen III," is not being inducted with the band.

The Ronettes:Even more drama could ensue if controversial producer Phil Spector, whose trial on murder charges in Los Angeles is set for April 16 attends Monday's ceremony. The bewigged Spector, himself a 1989 inductee, has attended past ceremonies at the Waldorf (most memorably in 2003, when he was accompanied by his date, Nancy Sinatra, and former O.J. Simpson attorney Robert Shapiro). Spector was married to Ronnie Spector, the lead singer of The Ronettes, from 1966 to 1974. She has since charged that he kept her imprisoned for much of their marriage.

Patti Smith:This outspoken punk-rock avatar is a staunch foe of the Bush administration and the war in Iraq. She's also a veteran critic of the unabashed greed that fuels much of the entertainment world in general - and the dying record industry specifically. Smith is highly unlikely to pass up the opportunity to address a crowd of

music industry bigwigs, and millions of TV viewers, without pointedly speaking her mind for as long as she feels like it. Her longtime fans expect nothing less.

Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five: It appears this pioneering rap group's former members will bury the hatchet, at least for a night. But given the previous litigation between some members and the protracted legal battles over rights to the Furious Five monicker, it's possible that sparks could fly during the group's acceptance speeches.

Who's inducting who? Jay-Z will induct Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five (whose members include Melvin "Melle Mel" Glover; Nathaniel "Kidd Creole" Glover; Eddie "Mr. Ness" Morris, who was later known as "Scorpio"; Joseph "Grandmaster Flash" Saddler; and Guy Todd "Raheim" Williams). Former group member Keith "Cowboy" Wiggins, who died in 1989 from causes related to crack addiction, will be honored posthumously.

Eddie Vedder will induct R.E.M. (Bill Berry, Peter Buck, Mike Mills, Michael Stipe). Keith Richards will induct The Ronettes (Estelle Bennett, Ronnie Spector, Nedra Talley).

Zach De La Rocha will induct Patti Smith.

The members of Velvet Revolver will induct Van Halen (Michael Anthony, Sammy Hagar, Alex Van Halen, Eddie Van Halen, David Lee Roth).

For R.E.M.'s Mills, induction is a 'double-edged sword' With Van Halen seemingly imploding anew on a weekly basis, Mike Mills has a novel solution for how to salute the veteran Los Angeles band when it is inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Monday night in New York.

"Maybe we'll have to play a Van Halen medley," quipped Mills, the bassist in R.E.M. who will be inducted and perform Monday with R.E.M.'s three other founding members.

"But I think it's pretty cool that we're being inducted with Patti Smith and The Ronettes, and that it's in the same year the first hip-hop band is going in. We used to listen to Grandmaster Flash all the time."

In contrast with fellow inductees Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five, The Ronettes and Smith - all of whom were eligible for induction years earlier but failed to make the cut - R.E.M. and Van Halen were both voted in during their first year of eligibility.

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