A black and white photograph of a vintage boombox, likely a Sony model, shown from a top-down perspective. The boombox is silver and black, with a large circular speaker on the right side and a cassette deck on the left. The frequency dial at the top shows numbers from 98 to 108 MHz and 11 to 22 kHz. The text 'THE BOOMBOM PROJECT' is overlaid in large, bold, white letters across the center of the boombox.

THE BOOMBOM PROJECT

the machines, the
music, and the urban
underground

Lyle Owerko

foreword by Spike Lee

RISE OF THE URBAN UNDERGROUND

THE EARLY YEARS



THE CLASH



RU-DMC



RICK RUBIN



THE BEASTIE BOYS



DJ KOOL HERC



JVC M90



GRANDMASTER FLASH



LL COOL J



AFRIKA BAMBAATAA

SUGAR HILL GANG
FAB5
FREDDY



KOOL MOE DEE



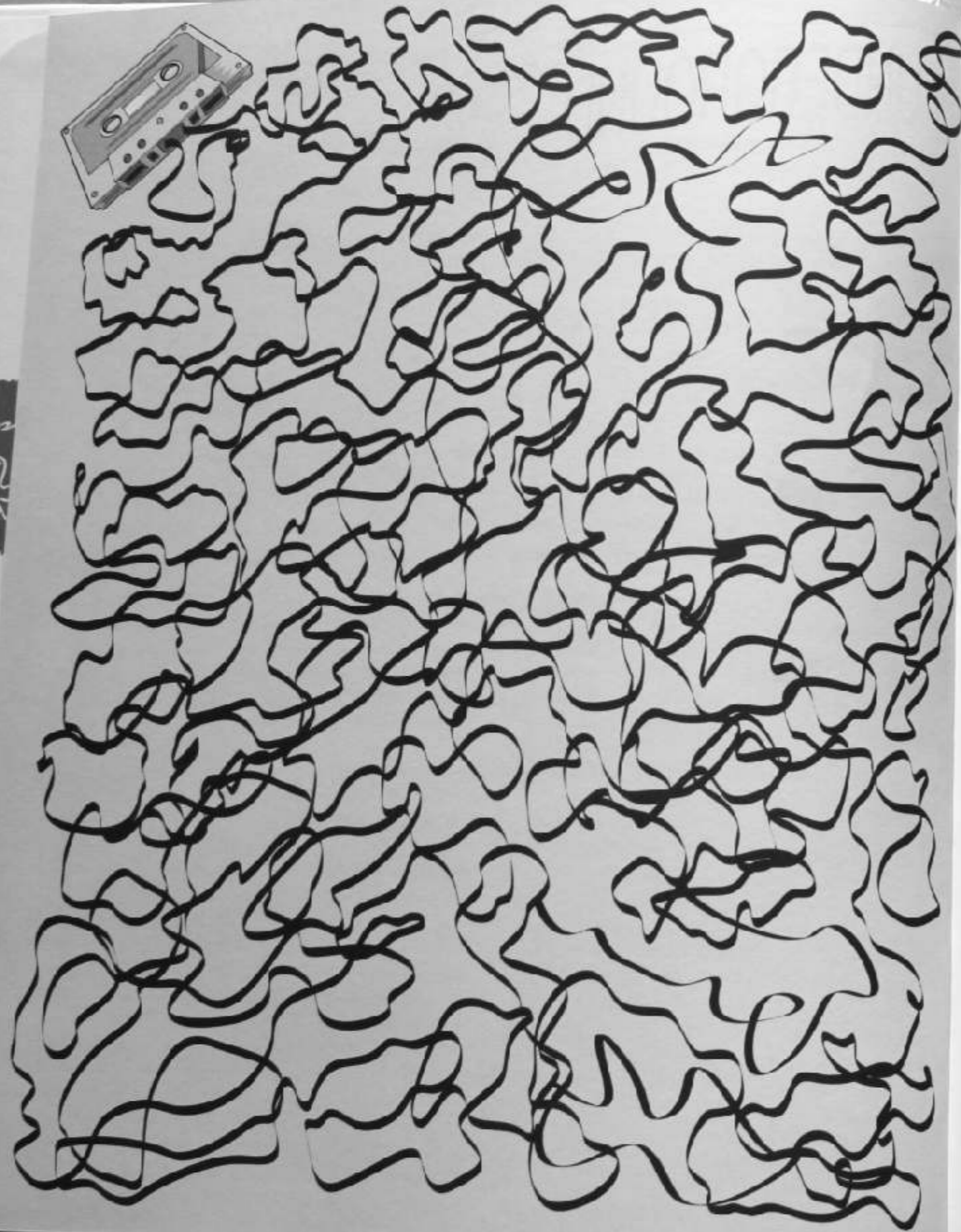
NEW WAVE
HIP-HOP
1973
PUNK



KRS-One

MALCOLM MCLARRIN
DON LETTTS

1520 SEDGEWICK AVE. BRONX NEW YORK



THE BOOMBOX PROJECT

**the machines, the
music, and the urban
underground**

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foreword by **Spike Lee**

Boombox photography by **Lyle Owerko**
Design by **Lyle Owerko** and **Jeff Streeper**

Abrams Image, New York

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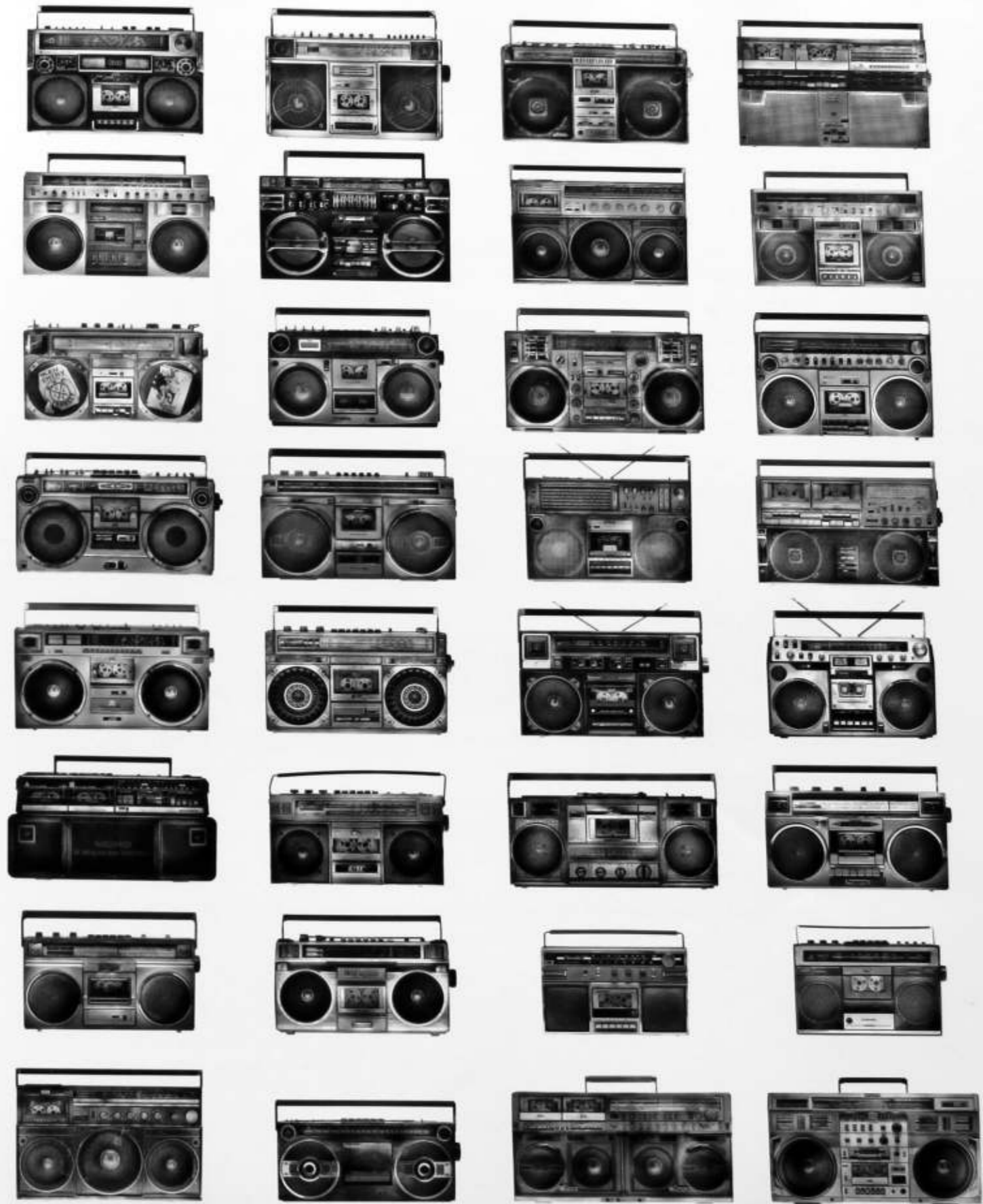
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COVER YA' EARS

Growing up in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Cobble Hill in the mid-sixties I was first introduced to the power of portable music. There was this guy everybody called Joe Radio. He got that moniker because he stood on the corner of Henry and Warren Streets with a small transistor radio on his shoulder. I should say attached, because if you saw Joe Radio, you saw that small transistor on his shoulder. He would listen to the WMCA Good Guys or WABC with Cousin Bruce night and day, day and night. Joe Radio was the only one I ever knew who did that. The image of him constantly listening to his radio was burned into my mind at the young age of eight. Many, many years later, that boyhood experience reemerged as the character Radio Raheem in my 1989 film *Do the Right Thing*. I witnessed the tiny transistor radio evolve into the boomboxes of the eighties. I never owned one; number one reason, they weighed a ton; number two, it cost a fortune in batteries. I didn't have stock in Eveready or Duracell. It was some serious work lugging that shit around, and you had to have a strong will to impose your musical taste on the world. There was no sense in having a boombox if you did not play it at eardrum-shattering levels. You also had to be ready to fight if somebody dared ask you to "turn that shit down." Radio Raheem would die for his boombox, for his music, blasting Public Enemy's anthem "Fight the Power" all throughout the film.

This fine book by photographer Lyle Cwerko superbly documents the long-gone era of the walking boombox (I never liked the racist term "ghetto briefcase") in all its loud glory. These photographs bring back many memories, but do I miss them? Hell no. Thank God for Sony's Walkman, which eventually evolved into today's Apple iPod. Although, every once in a while, when driving my New York Yankees-pinstriped Mustang in Martha's Vineyard (home to many fans of the hated Boston Red Sox), I blast Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" and Radio Raheem lives.

— Spike Lee, March 20 in the Year of Our Lord 2009, Brooklyn, New York



PORTRAIT OF SPIKE LEE
ERICA SINROSS





AVENUE OF THE AMERICAS, NEW YORK CITY, 1985
OLIVIER MARTEL

WEAPONS OF MASS DISTRACTION

I've always been fascinated with the meanings of things, more than just the visage of it. To me that's what makes long-lasting art. That's what makes long-lasting history. That's what makes anything that is culturally significant. It isn't just the visual of it. It's the meaning behind it and somehow that's how I found boomboxes (or more like boomboxes found me).

Exactly when the term *boombox* hit the streets is not known for sure. In the United States, department stores apparently began using the term in marketing and advertising as early as 1983. Street slang linguists pin the term down at 1981, and define the boombox as "a large portable radio and tape player with two attached speakers." Initially, it became identified with certain segments of urban society, hence the nicknames like "ghetto blaster" and "beatbox." And due to their size and relative portability, as the general public began to embrace these gargantuan creations of electronics, lights, and chrome-plated gadgetry, a new form of expression was born.

I was given my first box in the early eighties to listen to while I did my artwork. It was an upgrade from the one-speaker Realistic tape deck that I had been using to listen to mix tapes. Throughout college I worked in silk-screen shops, taking my boombox from gig to gig until it gradually was entirely covered with ink, paint, and caustic solvents. After college, I moved to New York and lived on Forty-first Street in an industrial building a few blocks from the center of Times Square. It wasn't long before I hit up one of the electronics shops in the area for an all black and shiny metallic-plated Lasonic box. That box stayed with me through many moves, different girlfriends, and some really odd living situations.

Over the years, I worked as a photographer in some pretty hairy situations, both in Africa and New York. After the events of 9/11 ripped apart my downtown neighborhood, I took every assignment I could to travel. In December of '01, I was in Japan on tour with the band American Hi-Fi, directing their tour documentary. During a few hours off in Tokyo, I lucked out in picking up an absolutely mint late-seventies Victor (JVC) at an outdoor market—I was stoked. It went everywhere with us. The band insisted on having it onstage with them, placed next to the drum kit at each night's gig. The box saw so much fun on that trip. On the last night of the tour, the band headlined at a huge venue in Tokyo with MTV Japan on hand to film the gig. Hi-Fi pulled out all the stops. The crowd went ballistic as the band rocked the joint. Stacy Jones, the lead singer, destroyed his Fender during the last encore, then turned and grabbed whatever he could get his hands on next... my boombox! It was sitting comfortably in front of the bass drum. He snatched it and in one quick swoop pummeled it into the stage like Godzilla swatting down a tiny fighter jet. I watched as my beautiful, mint-condition box was obliterated in a rock star crash test. Pieces were everywhere... a fractured rut was left in the stage. After the lights went up, I found my box and dragged its eviscerated remains backstage for one final photograph. Meanwhile, the venue's bewildered road crew stood in a circle staring at the gaping hole in the stage that looked as if an asteroid had knifed through the ceiling and left a small impact crater.

The picture I took of the ruined remains of the box became the front of their live-in-Japan album called *Rock n' Roll Noodle Shop*—it made a great cover. After that I was determined to find another one like it. Fervid searches expanded my collection through flea markets and thrift stores, eventually leading me online to eBay, which gradually built the remainder of the collection that I have today.

This book grew out of a portrait series of my boombox collection that I began working on some years ago. I wanted to capture the physicality of nostalgia, of what had been a cohesive element between so many genres of music. Initially, I intended to create a photobook so other people could have a set of my work, a version of their own boombox collection. But as I spoke to friends

about the project, the conversations we had made me realize that there was a much bigger story here. In documentary-style photos of boomboxes from the seventies and eighties, you always see groups of people hanging out around boxes on the street, in parks, and on subways, sharing their music. I kept hearing talk about a connection between the box and the ideals of empowerment and community.

Determined to find a deeper story, I reached out to musicians and DJs from the late seventies and eighties (as well as present-day artists and personalities) to find out if they had recollections they might want to share with me. Soon I was hearing from DJ and musician Don Letts about how the box connected like-minded people, and how the mobility of the boombox influenced New York street culture and facilitated a defining sound at the crossroads of punk and early hip-hop. In a conversation with Fab 5 Freddy the idea sparked to life that the boombox phenomenon was like a sonic campfire, with people gathering around to generate dialogue, debate, heat. Before long Spike Lee reached out and expressed an interest in being involved—and what could be more appropriate? His character Radio Raheem crystallizes the power of the boombox as an urban culture icon reflecting the determination to be seen and heard.

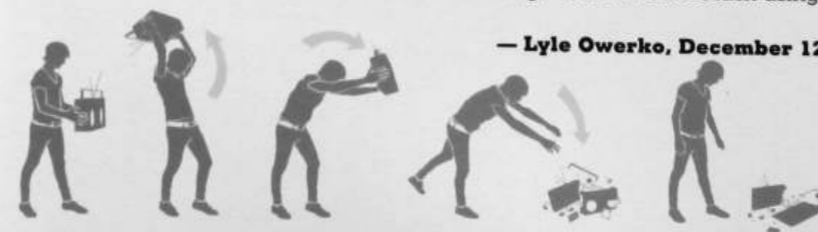
I began to arrange all of this material together, juxtaposing my own photos of boxes with other people's perspectives: DJ Spooky's sentiment that the boombox represents a democratization of sound, next to memories from Rosie Perez of the boombox's influence on dance culture. Ed Burns, the director, even called the box "one generation's weapon of choice," a phrase that seems to encompass all the different ways that communities and subcultures latched onto the box as a vessel of expression. Kool Moe Dee illuminated that the Boombox was the sole force for communicating the early voices of Hip-hop.

The groups I heard from who were influenced and connected to the boombox seemed to grow exponentially. I found myself interviewing graffiti artists and skaters, people from the business side of the music industry, and the designers of iconic album covers. As a result, there are names you'll know immediately (who hasn't heard of LL Cool J?) while other names may not elicit immediate recognition. All these people are profound commentators on the subject not necessarily because they became (or were) famous during that time period, but for the reason that they were participating and observing the lifestyle as it was developing. My hope is that their stories will bring to light the great contributors behind the scenes as well as those in the spotlight. If you find yourself wondering how various people quoted in the book are connected to boombox culture, flip to the back pages of the book (which I think of as the liner notes), where you'll locate a list containing mini-biographies of these fascinating people.

And truly, this book project has turned into its own sort of gigantic mix tape, with all of these different perspectives and subcultures razor-bladed together, bonded in unity by their shared experience of boombox culture. In the end, putting this material together illuminated for me that my passion for boomboxes is about more than an obsession with a collection of electronics, lights, and plastic. It's about remembering what it felt like to be part of something bigger—a community of voices—across a range of varied youth cultures that embraced the boombox as their weapon of mass distraction.

Today the boombox has evolved into an icon of popular culture. It has been referenced by rockers, poppers, hip-hoppers, and graffers alike. It is a symbol of rebellion and a way to shout your message at the system. Turn up the volume on your boombox, whatever the size, and let the capstan wheels of the tape deck drive a favorite mix tape to life. As the defiant voice of punk-rock legend Joe Strummer sang, "This is Radio Clash using audio ammunition..."

— Lyle Owerko, December 12, 2009, New York



PLAY



1. **PLAY** ▶ Growing up in the late 1970s through the mid-1980s meant that a boombox in some way, shape, or form had to have been a major part of your life. ▶ It was certainly a part of mine. ▶ I distinctly remember the act of pressing play on a tape deck, activating the mechanical jaw of the audio head to grasp the magnetic strand of cassette tape ribbon held inside its mouth. ▶ This simple act of engineering wizardry conjured to life the anthems of my youth. ▶ Once alive and whirling out an audio assault, a boombox became the sonic campfire in any environment. ▶ It was the place that people would gather around to exchange thoughts, mellow out to, or start the party. ▶ The boombox left an indelible and lasting impression on many lives; igniting a generation of innovation by facilitating bonding over music, sports matches, romances and news events. *LO*



FM	92	96	100	104	108	MHz			
LW	540	600	700	800	1000	1200	1400	1600	KHz
MW	150	170	200	240	280	320	360		KHz
SW1	15.5	17	20	24	28	32	36	40	MHz
SW2	5.0	6.0	7.0	8.0	10	12			MHz
SW3	12.5	14	16	18	20	22	24	25.5	MHz

STEREO LEVEL

L 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 L

R 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 R

LEVEL

COUNTER

0 1 2

STEREO RADIO CASSETTE RECORDER

CANDLE

FULL AUTO STOP EJECT SYSTEM

SUPRA PLYMO

ORIGINAL

⏪ ⏩ ⏸ ⏹

REVERSE

NEXT 6 PAGES OF IMAGES
WERE TAKEN BY RICKY FLORES
ON FOX STREET, SOUTH BRONX,
NEW YORK, MID-'80S





FROM LEFT: DANNY, CHICKY, GEORGIE, PIMP, BOODIE, AND CARLOS



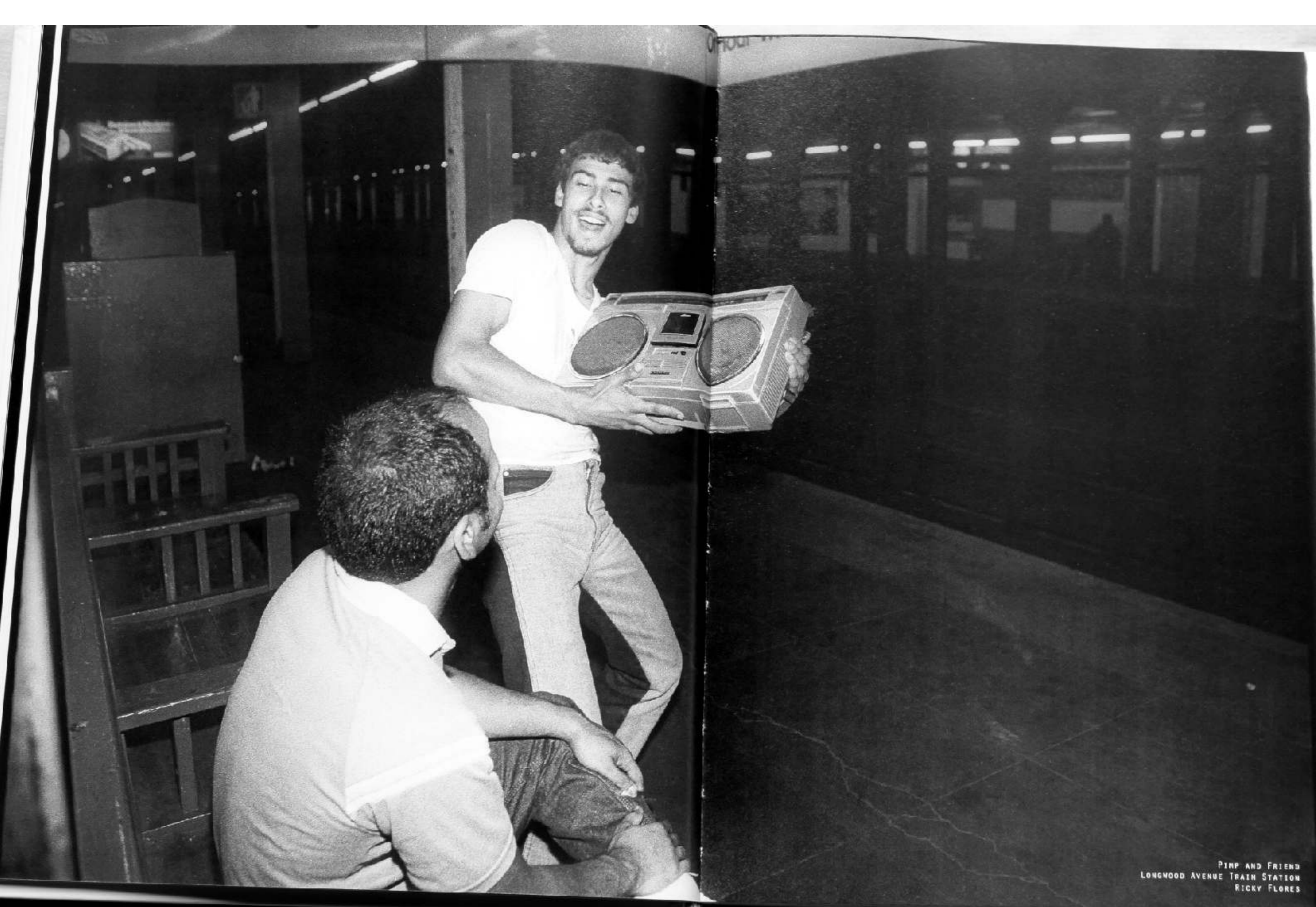
GEORGIE AND CHICKY



PIMP, CARLOS, AND CHICKY



YOLANDA, DEANA, AND CHICKY



PIMP AND FRIEND
LONGMOOD AVENUE TRAIN STATION
RICKY FLORES

PLAY

During the postwar years of the fifties through the late sixties, the radio as a home stereo went through a rapid downsizing. Innovations in solid-state technologies such as transistors and integrated circuits reduced the size of radios, allowing for even greater portability. What was once literally tethered to the living room floor of most families' homes could now be carried around by hand. In Japan, where living space is at a premium, it was very apparent that there was a public need to create small but excellent-sounding stereos. What began initially as a device to facilitate the movement of Japan's youth from their parents' homes to small urban dwellings ended up birthing an entirely new genre of electronic contraptions. The rapidly spreading need (and somewhat of a rage) for quality sounding portable stereos in Japan took on an audible stature of sorts in America (and the rest of the world), and the "boombox" gained notoriety.

The early models of these portable stereos, first introduced in the 1970s, were dual-speaker monoliths of sound that came from a number of different manufacturers, such as Sharp, IVC, AIWA, Sanyo,

and Sony. Immediately upon their arrival to stores they were a hit with the general public. Initially the goal was to try to replace the homebound hi-fi system. The first models to be unleashed on consumers were small and heavy, with somewhat rudimentary features. However, the true birth of the really large beasts of sound (the hallmark of the boombox) occurred when stereo capabilities were added to the portable radio cassette player. Soon after the launch of these first models, advances in speaker design and cassette fidelity met together with an explosion of industrial design creativity

and audio ingenuity that peaked during the golden era of models rolled out during the mid-eighties.

Music went from home collective to public collective. Around '77, '78, I noticed music took a step from being in somebody's apartment to sets literally taking their speakers and turning them outside their windows. These were people who were out DJs, who were just sharing music. This was not like an opportunity to dance. This was just "I love music, and I'm sharing it with my peers." So once that public form of sharing was introduced with the speakers in the windows, then the next sort of public forum was those speakers becoming mobile . . .

— **Bobbito Garcia** (DJ / WRITER)

Based on their sonic power, boomboxes played a seminal role in the development of modern music tastes and pop culture both on a visual and auditory level. The golden era of the boombox did not last long, but it definitely made a major impact on society at large. Before they topped out in size (then disappeared from sight to take up residence in our collective memory) what defined a boombox was the presence of two or more loudspeakers, an amplifier, a radio tuner, and a cassette deck housed in a boxlike shape that could be carried around with an oversize lunch bucket-type handle. The main feature was that this device was transportable, making it easy to take your musical taste with you and share it with others. As consumer demand grew, more powerful and more sophisticated models were introduced to customers (over a roughly ten-year period, literally thousands of models flooded the market). The larger and louder they became, the more they gained a deeper foothold within youth culture—which led to the era of breakdancing and the incubation of hip-hop. As urban culture grew and expanded from the inner city outward, the major manufacturers tried to outdo one another, each attempting to produce a louder, bigger, flashier, more bass-pumping, and totally unique-looking boombox (with flickering LEDs, flashing equalizer lights, and VU meters as icing on the cake). They've changed a lot over the years, but their undeniable sonic footprint is indelibly tied to the good memories and creative output of a distinctive generation. *LO*

Recording changed the way we listened to music. By popularizing the phonograph, Thomas Edison set the tone for the rest of the twentieth century. And the boombox is the inheritor of what he was going for with portability in sound—the early phonographs were meant for recording and playback. That had never happened in human history before. If you wanted to see something and hear it, you had to be there physically. Recording changed that and, like the phonograph, the boombox embodies a sense of portable experience.

— **Paul Miller / DJ Spooky** (MUSICIAN / ARTIST)

and audio ingenuity that peaked during the golden era of models rolled out during the mid-eighties.

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The boombox became a means of how to listen. And then you could move around with it, flex your street style and your whole persona. Having a boombox and a bigger box, it was almost like a car in a way, if you think about how essential a thing that can be for someone's image.

— **Feb 5 Freddy** (PROMPT GRAPHIC ARTIST)

When I closed my door and turned on my boombox, the world around me disappeared! My room became my bomb shelter, my escape, my cave. Music was my first love, and my boombox created my sanctuary to the chaotic world surrounding me. Losing a family and mother, being shipped around from house to house, relative to relative, and school to school didn't matter any more. When my boombox turned on, my world opened and "their" world closed.

— **Billy Graziadei** (CHORAZARD / SUICIDE CITY)

The boombox reflects a more public use of the radio that harkens back to radio's first years, when speakers and amplification were part of the technological package, particularly in the '30s and '40s when radio was a people magnet, and it was a much more public sort of thing.

— **Mike Schiffer** (WRITER / THE PORTABLE RADIO IN AMERICA)

The beat box was just so much more than a transistor radio; it was like bringing your entire living room stereo out in the open with you—on the street, on the beach, in the park. Before that, portable radios were very small—basically had a two- to three-inch speaker. It was a tinny little sound . . . They made certain types of portable record players, but that was a little suitcase that you could set up maybe at a party or bring to college with you, and even then, records were large and heavy. But the combination of the cassette tape and the quality player that was totally portable—that made the music so much more available everywhere. It wasn't until the boombox that people even had the concept of traveling with their music.

— **Bob Gruen** (ROCK 'N' ROLL PHOTOGRAPHER)

It wasn't long before they became status symbols, with guys wanting the biggest one with the most lights and the most chrome. I was never really into that.

— **Don Letts** (DJ / MUSICIAN / DIRECTOR)

The boombox was an essential part of the hip-hop culture, like that was your PA system, that was your concert device, you know, that was your MPC, that was your ASR. That was the outlet to broadcast your music.

— **Rahzel** (HUMAN BEATBOX / THE ROOTS)

When I would travel, the music had to come with me. I remember riding the bus and it could be, like, during a rush hour. And for whatever reason, I'll have some really nice mellow music and I would play it and it would just set a certain type of tone. The boombox allowed me to share it. The Walkman was cool, but I wanted people to hear what I had.

— **Jamel Shabazz** (PHOTO DOCUMENTARIAN)

The loudest boombox was the one that got the respect.

—J-Zone (HIP-HOP ARTIST)

I was addicted to my boombox. If it was raining and my friends wanted to hang out, I would take a GLAD Bag and wrap my boombox in it and walk around, still playing my boombox. I couldn't be without it. Back then, the black man wasn't being heard in American society. His ideas, his thoughts, his passions,

The boombox was a hip-hop staple, and if you had one in a photo, you didn't have to tell people where you came from and what you were into. The radio kind of said it all, along with things like shell-toe Adidas and Kangol and a lot of the other clothes that we were wearing... and it translated amazingly well visually. You know, you just had those two cylinders on the left and the right, and the little cassette deck.

—Cey Adams (GRAFFITI ARTIST / ART DIRECTOR)

his fears, his hate, his love were just swept under the rug. And so when he's got his boombox in his hand, he forced you to hear him; when he's sitting in that car with twenty speakers blaring out of his backseat, playing "Fuck tha Police," playing "Rebel Without a Pause," playing "Teachers," play-

ing "Too Short," only then can he make sure that you hear him unobstructed.

—Adisa Banjoko (HIP-HOP HISTORIAN)

In the absence of computers and the absence of the Internet, the boombox was the actual conduit to how we communicated the music.

—Kool Moe Dee (PIONEER HIP-HOP MC)

I had a boombox when I became a choreographer. Because you couldn't rely on the sound system. Like, you'd go into a certain studio, and they didn't necessarily have the right sound that you needed. I had to make my dancers the beat and the bass. If they couldn't feel it, they couldn't boogie. And if you can't boogie, you can't dance. So if they couldn't nod their head to it and feel it, I was like, "This is going to be a lost cause." And that's when I started using a boombox. But them shits were heavy—really, really heavy.

—Rosie Perez (CHOREOGRAPHER / ACTRESS)

It was sort of like a throwback piece of art. Kind of like the Nipper RCA dog with the Victrola; it's just such a great-looking thing and it looks like this vision of the future, right? Everything in the eighties was futuristic. And then when the future comes, it doesn't necessarily look like what the vision of the future is... It always felt very Japanese to me because it's like this Blade Runner meets, you know, samurai warrior. And it's this, like, insane mix of, like, completely different time periods.

—Jonathan Daniel (MUSIC HISTORIAN / BAND MANAGER)



The box is a commitment. Like when it started getting into the mid-eighties, that was when the box really was the commitment. They were so big—basically like half your size if you're a kid.

—Adam Yauch (MC / BEASTIE BOYS)





METAL
soft-touch operation

METAL
soft-touch operation

APLD
eject play stop rewind cut fast fwd pause edit pause record play stop rewind cut fast fwd eject

battery tuning FM SW: 88 | 92 | 96 | 100 | 104 | 108 MHz
7.3 | 8.5 | 10.0 | 12.0 | 15.0 | 18.0 | 22.0 MHz
SW: 2.3 | 2.6 | 3.2 | 4.0 | 5.0 | 6.0 | 7.3 MHz
AM: 540 | 600 | 700 | 800 | 1000 | 1200 | 1400 | 1600 MHz

radio echo auto on off FM stereo
SNRS meter light FM mode mono
VU left VU right
mixing echo mic fader tape fader bass treble balance volume loudness

SHARP
GF-777
4 band stereo radio cassette recorder

W Double Cassette

W Double Cassette

tape monitor phones



PROTESTOR AT FREEDOM TO PARTY DEMONSTRATION
TRAFALGAR SQUARE, LONDON, 1990
DAVID SWINDELLS

SIZE DOES MATTER

"MY RADIO, BELIEVE ME, I LIKE IT LOUD
I'M THE MAN WITH A BOX THAT CAN ROCK THE CROWD"

— LL Cool J (RAPPER / ACTOR)

Back in 1985 when LL Cool J released his debut album, *Radio*, and the hit single "I Can't Live Without My Radio," street culture in the U.S. was alive with the sound of what was colloquially termed the boombox or the ghetto blaster, depending on where you were from. The cover of LL's album reiterated the prominence of his hit single by depicting a close-up of a JVC RC-M90, one of the biggest and best-performing radio cassette players of the day. I collect boomboxes and have found a hobby bordering on obsession, learning as much as I can about them as well as playing with them and using them in my everyday life. I have a personal bias toward JVC, but this is simply because in my youth JVC was the best brand available in my community, and I still feel a strong connection to many of their products. But please do not misunderstand; there are many radios and many brands that are excellent.

JVC, or the Victor Company of Japan, launched itself into the portable radio cassette player/recorder market in the late seventies when it released the amazing RC-550. Dubbed "El Diablo"

When I was in high school, I had a small boombox. It was a Panasonic. And I used that thing so much that the casing started chipping, pieces of it started coming off, some of the detailing started coming off. And then, rather than stop using it or trying to get it fixed, I just decided I would see how much of it I could take off, how much of this machine I could actually remove, how much of the material I could actually take off and have it still work. And I got it down to a pretty bare skeleton. Of course, it didn't sound too good without the actual body of it to amplify the sound. But that was a boombox experiment of mine.

— Stretch Armstrong
(DJ / RADIO HOST)

by the Latino community, this giant monobox was devilish. It had a single 10-inch woofer, a 4-inch midrange, and a 2-inch tweeter, separate bass and treble controls, and a big strong handle as well as a shoulder strap. It had roll bars on the sides that extended forward to protect the speakers, and even had shortwave bands as well. This unit was built for the streets and signaled a change in the mindset of portable design. Although not a stereo player, this unit was BIG!

JVC followed up the success of the RC-550 with another great radio destined to become the classic model for most designs: the RC-M70. This radio was a stereo player, with four speakers, two 6-inch woofers, and two 2-inch horn tweeters. All the slide controls and buttons were on top, including a click-down music search function and a loudness button. A great sounding (40 watts of power), cool-looking unit, it had tremendous build construction (a JVC trait) and great bass response at a time when base-

heavy music, funk, and R & B were merging their flavors to begin the rap/hip-hop movement. This radio also had a special seat belt-styled click-in shoulder strap and a special carry bag as well.

JVC was not done yet, as they introduced their top of the line RC-M90, the radio that inspired the LL Cool J song. This was it: 8-inch woofers, 3-inch tweeters, a full-logic two-motor cassette deck (meaning computer chip-controlled as opposed to mechanical buttons), eight radio bands, a more sophisticated LED-lit music search, and huge dimensions, 26-inch x 14-inch. This was perhaps the best-performing, loudest radio of its time. It also had Super ARNS (Dolby B) noise reduction to further refine its sound, as Dolby was all the rage. The unit also had an optional wired remote control with a 16-foot cord to enable long-distance (somewhat anyway) manipulation of the cassette deck.

While JVC made some great boomboxes, they were certainly not alone. Panasonic, Sharp, Fisher, Aiwa, and Toshiba also made valuable contributions both stylistically and technologically as these portable players flooded the market.

In terms of design innovation, one needs to look no further than the Panasonic RX-7200, a beautiful single-decked, logic-controlled player that boasted both a stylistic variant (the upside-down design whereby the radio tuner was located along the bottom portion of the unit) and a technological innovation (a digital tuner for the radio with a green LED readout). Sized between the M70 and the M90, it also had wood-paneled sides and could be purchased with a matching record stand that the 7200 could be mounted on to create an unbroken wood panel—this was not a radio for the streets, but a radio for a posh study or library, a beautiful combination of high technology and organic warmth.

Aiwa released several beautiful units, but perhaps the best one was the CS-880. Medium-sized (22-inch long), it had its single cassette deck thrust up in the left-hand corner, and in the middle had a 7-inch passive radiator designed to enhance the sound coming from the twin 5-inch woofers and 2-inch tweeters. The Aiwa had an amazing tape deck: This unit boasted wow and flutter on par with high-end home cassette players, which resulted in amazingly clear sound. Great build quality, elegant, compact design, and amazing sonic performance, Aiwa made a name for themselves as smaller, high-quality players. This was again a unit that seemed more at home in a home, portable yes, but not for the street.

Getting back to the street, we have to include one of the biggest and most famous radios of the early eighties, the Conion C-100F from Coney-Onkyo. This was a beast! Thirty-one inches long and 16-inches tall, it had all the street cred one could imagine, as well as some design innovations. It had two cassette decks, but instead of making them tandem, they were stacked on top of each other with the top deck a horizontal slot for the tape to slide in through a spring-loaded door. It had three pairs of speakers: two 8-inch woofers, two 4-inch midranges, and two 2-inch tweeters—a full range of sound production. With two analog VU meters, and LED meters as well, it was designed not just to catch eyes, but to hold them hostage! As if this were not enough, in case its size, loudness, and killer "bling" looks overcame your morals, it had an incredibly loud

It's kind of like how men, how boys and men are: We just like to have big, bulky things, like the way we are with cars now. The radio was the same thing. It's just like, the bigger your boombox was, like, just the cooler it was. And it was hard finding the big ones. There was this one brand, Lasonic, used to make the big, big, really big ones.

— Joseph Abajian (PRODUCER)

motion-alarm feature that, when set, went off if someone moved the radio. Despite the political incorrectness of the term, this was a ghetto blaster, a consummate example of its time, and was featured in several films, including *Beat Street* and *Breakin'*. Fisher also got into the game, but a bit late. Their contribution was the massive PH-492, over 30 inches long and 15 inches tall. This unit had two very significant innovations: One, it had detachable speakers so they could be placed farther apart to get true stereophonic sound. The speakers had individual cases so they could resonate with better acoustics, having their own cabinets. The other important feature that Fisher brought to the industry was a 5-band equalizer to further refine sound to the individual taste. With an EQ, it essentially had a pre-amp and enclosed speakers, so the Fishers were great-sounding, large, heavy units that reeked of quality.

Fisher also made a very unusual unit called the SK-300, a cassette deck with detachable speakers and a removable synthesizer keyboard! You could adjust all aspects of your synth sound—pitch, tone, and length of notes. You could change the sound so it could emulate almost any instrument as well. You could also use the onboard beats to provide a backdrop while you play the keyboard over top, and record the whole arrangement using the cassette deck! Other companies made keyboard synthesizers as well. Not surprisingly, Casio made the KX-101, and Sharp made the GF-990 with a double deck and a pop-out "music processor."

Sharp was again a leader in both design and innovation with the VZ-2000, a massive, heavy, unique player that had a single cassette deck, radio, and a dual-stylus linear tracking turntable. This unit allowed one to play BOTH sides of the record without turning the record over, essentially an auto reverse feature, but with a record! Sharp also had the famous GF-777, a giant 4-inch woofer and 2-inch tweeter monster with twin decks in the upper left corner and removable speaker grilles. The other innovation was that the main woofers had individual bass controls as well as a general bass control and a loudness button. The GF-9696 was a beautiful looking that had individual bass controls as well, but also had pitch control to adjust for different tapes.

Toshiba also produced a monster very similar to the GF-777 called the WX-1 Bambeat RT-S983. This unit had a very unusual configuration for detachable speakers, dual decks, woofers, tweeters, and passive radiators similar to the one in the Airwa. This is perhaps the heaviest radio in existence, also with pitch control and a bass booster system, great looks, and a great name: Bambeat! Toshiba again showed their innovation with another model, the RT-S933, which had one of the most significant technical and design innovations: a built-in wireless remote control that ejected from the unit with the push of a button.

Other companies also weighed in, and perhaps the most famous boombox of its time was made so by director Spike Lee. *Do the Right Thing* was a seminal film about the boiling cauldron of race issues in the U.S. embodied by the microcosm of Bed-Stuy, a Brooklyn neighborhood. The object that sparked the riot on the hottest day of the summer was the giant boombox belonging to Radio Raheem. He strutted the streets, conquering all those he met with his ultimate weapon—a volume button. The radio he used to play all corners was a Promax J-1 Super Jumbo, a monster with a ten-band EQ and three pairs of speakers including 8-inch woofers. In reality, the cheaper build quality of this radio was less than impressive, but its black case and crazy light display certainly won it points for style.



As portable radio tastes changed, so did their design. IVC was back in the driver's seat with the multipiece PC, or portable component, systems. The PC-5 divided into five pieces with a separate radio, tape deck, and amplifier. This radio was promoted by the Harlem Globetrotters. IVC followed up with another superb "executive" component system, the PC-55/550. These units were portable, but in actuality they were meant to be separated and used at home as high-quality mini stereos. The PC-55/550 had many special features: Dolby B and C,

a five-band EQ, speakers with ceramic woofers, wooden speaker cases for better quality sound, and, most innovatively, an illuminated LCD panel display that showed the many functions and options of the unit. Although ever so slightly bass-shy, this multicomponent unit sounded wonderful for all sorts of music, and had one of the best tape decks ever constructed in a portable.

ADROCK (BEASTIE BOYS),
WEST LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA, SPRING 1985
GLEN E. FRIEDMAN, COURTESY BURNING FLAGS PRESS

The first time I saw a boombox was in Knickerbocker Park in Bushwick. There was a bunch of cute boys with a boombox. We were all scared to, like, go over there, and then they were looking at us, and we were looking at them. We thought they were so cool.

— Rosie Perez (CHOREOGRAPHER / ACTRESS)

When you consider the eighties and portable radio culture, I realize how different the world is today. The world of sharing music in parks and on city streets now resides in cyberspace as we share in anonymity online. The boombox that marked this change from public music "broadcasting" to private consumption was the JVC PC-100, a mini unit with a detachable headset. Now you could share your music in the public sphere, or keep it private by ejecting the cassette deck and plugging headphones into it. In many ways it is the ancestor of the Walkman of today, the consummate MP3 player: the iPod. Indeed, all the radios I have mentioned here were built with the ability to plug a portable media player into them, so you can easily plug your iPod into these radios and mix the digital age with the warmth of analogue amplification and sound. Today, when you think that the iPhone is the best thing to happen to music and communication ever, remember that twenty-five years ago playing your music was a public phenomenon. We blasted our favorite jams and drowned out the competition, or went to a party and rocked it with a few tapes, a big radio, and maybe even decks plugged into it. That was how we injected the public sphere with music and soul, back in the day.

— James Phillips, June 12, 2007, Vancouver, B.C.

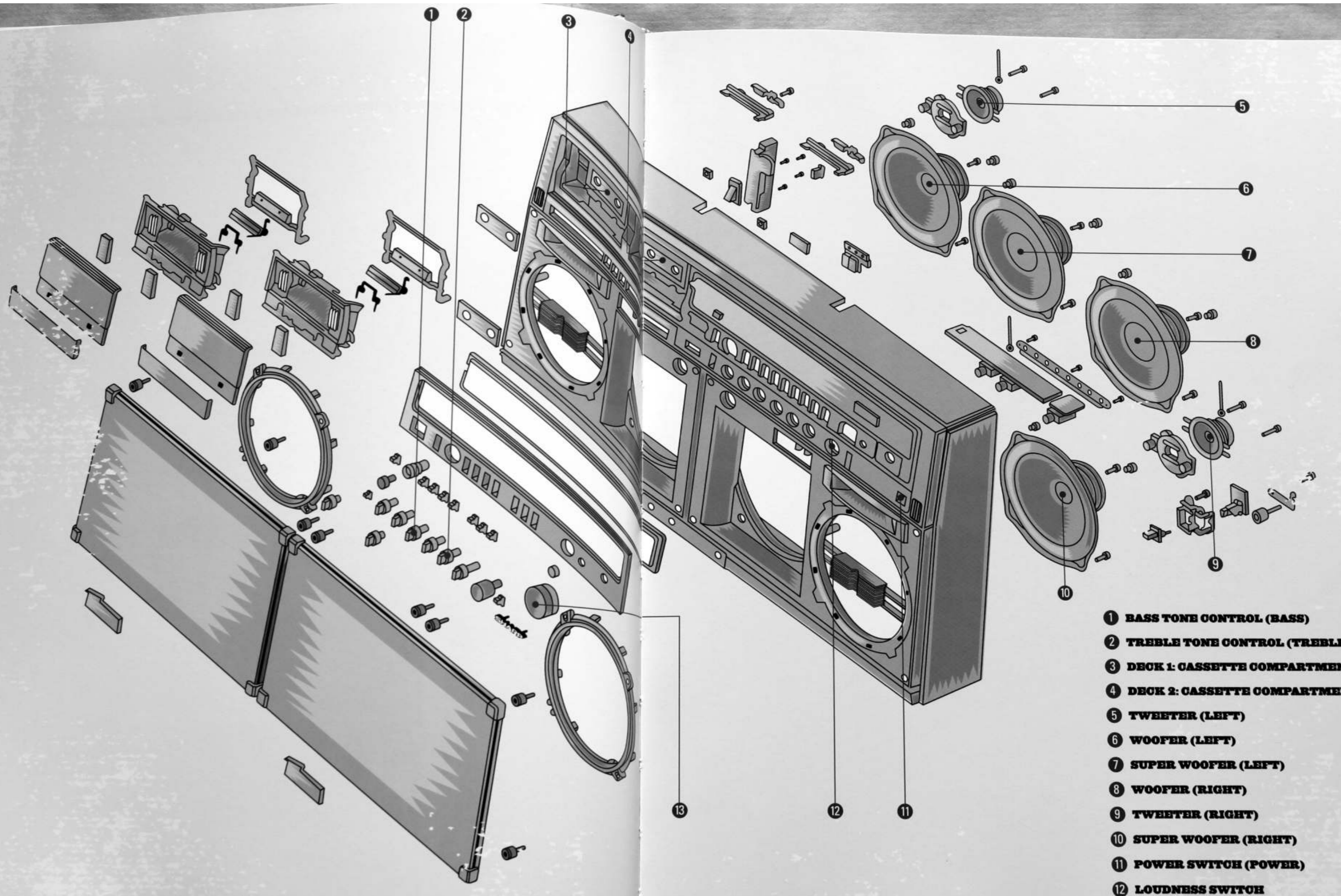
I always lusted after the expensive Hitachi triple-whatever . . . the ones from Fourteenth Street with the lights and the speakers; you put that in a trailer, it became like a party no matter who you were—even if you were just warming up for the biggest band, everyone would seem to gravitate towards your trailer because you had this kind of instant, you know, kind of like discotheque in a briefcase.

— Josh Chouse (PHOTOGRAPHER / ART DIRECTOR)

I have the ones that have the actual record player in it — It opens like a tape cassette, but instead of putting in the tape, you actually put the record in there. And keyboard ones. You know, the ones that have the keyboards that are built into them, where you can, like, jam along with the music.

— Chad Muska (PRO SKATEBOARDER)





- ① **BASS TONE CONTROL (BASS)**
- ② **TREBLE TONE CONTROL (TREBLE)**
- ③ **DECK 1: CASSETTE COMPARTMENT**
- ④ **DECK 2: CASSETTE COMPARTMENT**
- ⑤ **TWEETER (LEFT)**
- ⑥ **WOOFER (LEFT)**
- ⑦ **SUPER WOOFER (LEFT)**
- ⑧ **WOOFER (RIGHT)**
- ⑨ **TWEETER (RIGHT)**
- ⑩ **SUPER WOOFER (RIGHT)**
- ⑪ **POWER SWITCH (POWER)**
- ⑫ **LOUDNESS SWITCH**
- ⑬ **TUNING CONTROL**



NEW YORK CITY, 1981
LARRY FAYNE

There wasn't a lot of choice when they first came out, so you just grabbed any old thing that was around. It was probably an Akai.

But as soon as I started to embrace the whole thing, we were constantly trying to find the new and the best one. I'd keep changing them every, like, three or four months. I've got an Aiwa (is it 990?) that I had that was my main piece back in New York in '80, '81. It's even got George Clinton's signature scribbled all over it as well. But I've still got that and that was a solid, heavy motherfucker. It's got two crash bars on the front and it's mono—one big fuckin' 10-inch speaker, a woofer. It's the daddy; it's definitely the daddy.

A classic hip-hop one is the Sharp Searcher. It was really popular because you could—you could press play and search at the same time and it would skip to the next track, which was revolutionary. Before you had to keep winding, stopping, winding to find your tracks—that's assuming you had a gap between the track because obviously when you're playing the mix tapes from WBLS or KTU there were no gaps.

—Don Letts (DJ / MUSICIAN / DIRECTOR)

I had several different boxes. The most famous box for me—besides my box that now sits in the Smithsonian in Washington—is a Sharp box. Then there was a Sanyo that I had earlier on. And I had a JVC box or two.

—Fab 5 Freddy (PIONEER GRAFFITI ARTIST)

I had that double cassette, pink, long Panasonic. I was in, like, sixth grade, and I begged for it. I really wanted the aqua one, but I got the pink one . . . Remember the boombox with the keyboard? Different ones had different effects and stuff . . .

Some say bigger is better—personally, I liked the small, slim ones so I could put it on my shoulder and roller-skate.

—Claw Money (GRAFFITI ARTIST / FASHION DESIGNER)

I remember getting this sort of strange, square-shaped Panasonic boombox—the speakers were actually pretty small on it, but for whatever reason it just had a really great bass sound.

—Jonathan Daniel (MUSIC HISTORIAN / BAND MANAGER)



SUBWAY RIDER, NEW YORK CITY, 1981
EYE ARNOLD



FM FREQUENCY WAVE & MW 88 92 96 100 104 108 MHz
SWS SHORT WAVE 1 1 12 14 16 18 20 22 24 26 MHz
SW2 SHORT WAVE 2 4.3 5.0 6.0 7.0 8.0 9.0 10 11 MHz
SW1 SHORT WAVE 1 1.8 1.9 2.0 MHz
MW MEDIUM WAVE 540 500 600 kHz

HULL AUTO STOP

MEMORY — ON — COUNTER
0 0 0
OFF

JVC



We never used to call them boomboxes. For us, they were ghetto blasters. I think the first one I ever had was the JVC.

— Earle Sebastian (DIRECTOR)

Carrying around the box and then going on tour around the world with the thing was crazy. And that's why I swore off boxes with detachable speakers . . . In the late eighties, I had a Fisher. And that's when I really got my pause-tape work in. That's when I really honed my skill, because this particular box had really good action on the pause button, the record button.

The box I carried around on tour, I didn't put any artwork on that. That was my, like—that was my classy box. Do you know what I mean? I wouldn't put stickers on it. It was too nice.

But then my box set was like my studio box. So I had my record player plugged into it, and my drum machine, and so I would do all these mixes on there. (For our record *Hello Nasty*, I did all of my demos on cassette.) That was my home one. It was just us living together. Me and the box. So that one had all kinds of stickers and drawings.

— Adam Yauch (MC / RAYALTY BOYS)

I remember around my block—I can't remember his name, but it was a cool guy, you'd always see him. He'd just be walking along with his box and we'd hang out with him. And the real funniest thing about it is batteries. Batteries is like the biggest shit with boxes because it takes a case of batteries. And nobody wants to give up money, so he'd be like, "Yo, give me some money for batteries; give me money for batteries." Nobody

Some of the boomboxes even had little spaces where you could carry a few tapes in the beatbox itself. It was a home stereo with a handle. A lot of people used them at home because they were so much more affordable than buying a component stereo. And the sound was so good for so many of them—like, inexpensive, really good sound.

— Bob Gruen (ROCK 'N' ROLL PHOTOGRAPHER)

would give him money so he'd just go out it off and be like, "Yo, peace out," and start walkin' away. And it would be like, "No-no-no-fuck that! Come back! Come back!" It was like pullin' teeth tryin' to get money for batteries. I just remember that. I just remembered huge arguments: "Fuck that! Yo, you muthafuckas gotta give me some money for batteries. Yo, fuck you. I'm goin' home, man, fuck this." It would be an hour of fuckin' negotiation to get batteries.

— Trevor Clark (HIP-HOP CLOTHING DESIGNER)

The boombox would be the only way you would actually hear hip-hop. So, for anyone that loved hip-hop—especially in the mid- to late '70s—that was your conduit.

— Kool Moe Dee (PIONEER HIP-HOP MC)

PAUSE ||

2. PAUSE || The pause button on a boombox was the magical gateway to creative power. || This simple little switch truly sprouted an artform. || The impact of the pause button was that it allowed you to think about things for a second, to freeze the action and reflect, or to position things before leaping forward again. || If you hit pause, you could cue up a recording before adding the next song on a mix tape, or you could use it as an intermission agent to leave the room for a minute and come back to that song you were grooving to, or on an even more complicated scale, use it to make a rudimentary looped beat for unleashing rhymes over the top of. || Whatever a person's employment of the pause button was used for, its main purpose was to hold the flow of time. || In this chapter we pause the flow of time to observe the presence and impact of the boombox around the globe. LO

HOMETOWN

PAUSE

New York was the place that the boombox truly made its indelible mark. It also happened that in the late seventies and early eighties New York was breaking down at the seams and falling apart—not only socially but literally. While the urban scene was crumbling, the audio sound track of the boombox cut through the crime and the grime, calling out for change. Recognition of that call's urgency echoed around the world. The streets, the sentiments, and the stories all lacked in solid step with one another to create a bass laden rhythm paving a path into new frontiers for creativity and expression. *LO*

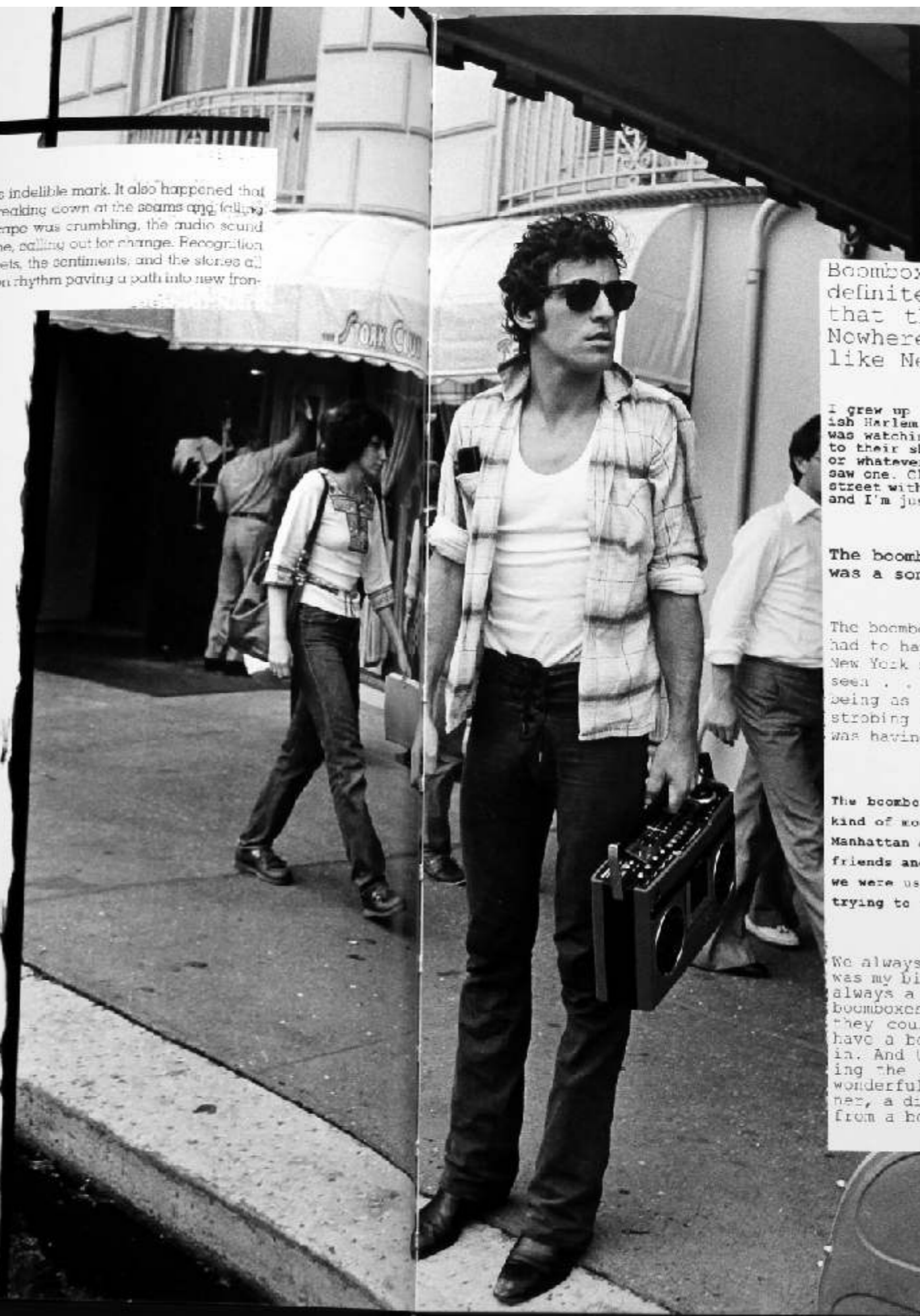


You could really see New York street culture in the seventies—the swagger of individuals on the street who probably, compared to now, had a lot less but made less work more.

— **Fab 5 Freddy** (PIONEER GRAFFITI ARTIST)

I first started collecting boomboxes because I'm a stylist and they're a great prop to bring on a shoot, to visually explain the kind of picture or the kind of story that you want to tell. It's about music and it's probably about urban music. And, being from New York, it was very New York culture—boombox culture.

— **Claw Money** (GRAFFITI ARTIST / FASHION DESIGNER)



Boomboxes had a town; that town was definitely New York City. That's where that thing really came into its own. Nowhere did it really rock the joint like New York City.

— **Don Letts** (DJ / MUSICIAN / DIRECTOR)

I grew up on the Upper East Side, right on the edge of Spanish Harlem. And I think the first time I ever really heard bass was watching guys walking around with their boomboxes strapped to their shoulders, playing hip-hop or maybe even, like, salsa or whatever. I could never get my eyes off of a boombox if I saw one. Classic case of rubbernecking. I'd be walking down the street with my mom, holding her hand, and my feet would just stop and I'm just staring at this guy walking by with a boombox.

— **Stretch Armstrong** (DJ / RADIO HOST)

The boombox was a theater of sound; the city itself was a sonic collage.

— **Paul Miller / DJ Spooky** (MUSICIAN / ARTIST)

The boombox was like a major, major piece of art that you had to have. When I first saw a boombox, it looked like a New York skyline. It was bigger than any music system I'd seen . . . The boombox spoke so New York—and New York being as loud as we still hear it today. Even the lights strobing on the thing, its shape, its design, its sound was having your own piece of New York.

— **Earle Sebastian** (DIRECTOR)

The boombox was everywhere when I was growing up, and it was a kind of modern lyric; people from all races and classes united in Manhattan against the backdrop of its hip-hop beats . . . Plus my friends and I thought carrying one made us a little cooler, since we were usually embarrassing ourselves—writing bad graffiti and trying to talk to girls.

— **Nicholas Jarecki** (DIRECTOR / PRODUCER)

We always saw a boombox on my street corner. Central Park was my biggest hangout when I was young. There was always always a boombox. The kids used to walk around with the boomboxes and their own piece of linoleum floor so that they could break-dance. So it was huge. If you didn't have a boombox, you just were not in . . . You were not in. And the music. To be in the streets, especially during the summer, in Hell's Kitchen, in the city, it was wonderful because you always heard, on every street corner, a different style of music. And it was always coming from a boombox.

— **Lisa Lisa** (STARR, LISA LISA AND CULI JAN)

DON LETTS, NEW YORK CITY, 1981
LISA BECK

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN
CENTRAL PARK WEST, NEW YORK CITY, 1978
LYNN GOLDSMITH

A GLOBAL PHENOMENON

Growing up in Germany, everything in America seemed bigger and better (the beats, the bass drums, the butts, sneakers that seemed to give you instant game, right from the very second you strapped them on). They had the best sound systems, a totally different dancing culture, and, of course, the latest import records. To get hold of a magnetic audiotape distilling these experiences would cause greater rushes than stumbling across any random grail in some Saharan oasis.

Boomboxes, and their smaller cousins, the Walkmen, weren't biased toward hip-hop only. In fact, many a tape would feature the latest Def Jam album on one side, some fast-paced thrash metal or distant planet-searching Chicago house on the other. If you ever rode a skateboard in the Dead Kennedys' heydays, you know what I'm talking about. No matter what music one was listening to in the end, long before rechargeables would become affordable, it was the secret stash of NATO-supply batteries in stylish olive green that kept us rockin' in the free world. BTW, that blue box is still here, next to my desk, now filled to the rim with tapes from all corners of our planet, each of them highlighting musical universes galore.

— Torsten Schmidt (CO-CREATOR, RED BULL MUSIC ACADEMY)

My boombox really was sort of an initiation into manhood. It really gave me my independence and the ability to have my music with me when I wanted it. I could have it in my room and play it . . . I wasn't forced to hear what my father may have been playing. I could take it outside and play it. I could put the linoleum down and we could all b-boy to whatever mix tapes I may have been able to get third generation from a friend or family member in New York that'd been dubbed a countless number of times and made its way down to Florida.

I vividly remember being at the beach, up on the deck where they had concrete, and throwing down some cardboard and b-boying to—it was 1983 at this point—some early Run-DMC that was pretty much blowing everybody's minds at the time. These tapes were very difficult to come by and it was kind of the only way that you'd be able to experience this stuff: through a boombox and through someone having a copy that they'd eventually been able to procure. That enabled us, as kids down in Florida, to sort of experience this music and then spread it even wider to a group of people down here that may not have been aware.

— Andre Torres (EDITOR, MAX PROTECS)

What would growing up in Sweden have been without a boombox? . . . To not be able to headbang whenever and wherever you may feel like it? It was a bitch to carry it around, and as a matter of fact I think my left arm is a bit longer than the right, and my hearing on the left side is a bit screwed up, but it was totally worth it. I encourage this behavior among our younger citizens today . . .

— Jonas Åkerlund (DIRECTOR)



TOP: TEDDY BOYS, HARA YAKU PARK, TOKYO, 1980, BY JOSH CHEVSE
 BOTTOM: JANE PETTE, LONDON, 1985, BY DON LETTS



DAVID BYRNE, YUCATAN, 1980
LYNN GOLDSMITH



ELECTRET-MICRO S U1FM U1 U2 U3

MUTING 0 Q.D K MONO AFC

U/FM	MHz	88	89	90	92	94	98	99
LW	kHz	150			175			200
MW	kHz	520	550	600	700			
K/SW 1	MHz	5.35	5.0					
K/SW 2	MHz	5.2	5.0	7.0	7.2	8.8	8.5	
K/SW 3	MHz	12.0	12.5	13.0	14.5	15.0	15.5	

U4 U5 U6 U7 U8 ELECTRET-MICRO

LW MW K/SW1 K/SW2 K/SW3

10	12	50	55					
102		104		106		108		
225		250				275		
1000		1200		1400		1600		
6.75				6.2				
18.0	18.5	19.0	19.5	20.0	20.5	21.0	21.5	
19.0	19.5	20.0	20.5	21.0	21.5	22.0	22.5	

RR 1140 SL
PROFESSIONAL

GRUNDIG

STEREO

STEREO REVERSE RECORD

STEREO SUPER STEREO

MPX

VAT

C-SET TAPE COUNTER

AUTOMATIC REVERSE

REC./VKT PAUSE START REVERSE STOP/CASE

TUNING

BLOW FAST

WIND COUNTER BATE AUTOM.

当時の若者の自己表現のツールであり、情報の源であり、
 人とのコミュニケーションのツールでもあったboomboxは
 文化や生活と切り離せない物として位置付けされていたと思う。
 フィールドレコーディングの道具として、
 コンパクトなホームオーディオとして、
 野外パーティーのサウンドシステムとして、
 また、ラジオのエアチェックをし、翌日には友人と録音したTAPEの交換を。
 現在のPCと同じ役割を果たしていると思う。
 まさに『夢の箱』であった。

At that time, the boombox was used to connect culture and living because it was a tool of self expression and communication and resource of information among the youth.

It was used as a tool of field recording, handy home audio system, or sound system for outdoor parties. Also even to record the radio and exchange the tapes with friends the next day.

I think the boombox was used as PC is nowadays.

It was just like a "Dream Box".

— Shogo Tsuruoka (BOOMBOX COLLECTOR / OWNER / MUSICIAN)

In Africa or in Jamaica where it's, like, 96 degrees in the shade, if a bit of sun catches a record, it's all over. So when the beatboxes came in, everybody ditched their vinyl. I mean, the sound systems still used vinyl. But on the streets and in people's homes, it was always a boombox. And that was really because vinyl... you can't deal with vinyl in those kinds of temperatures.

— Don Letts (DJ / MUSICIAN / DIRECTOR)

For a kid growing up in a coastal town in Australia in the late seventies and early eighties, the break dancing and ghetto blaster culture from the U.S. seemed like eons away. From seeing this urban culture for the first time I was captivated. It was the music that was the spark for me. This incredible new sound, unlike anything I'd heard previously—it just blew my mind, and this part of the culture became my passion. For the first time the machine playing the music was in a perfect symbiotic relationship with the music itself. A big radio for even bigger beats. The power of the music with the power of it being broadcast. On a personal level, this concept was the real essence of what appealed to me.

— Rick Thorpe (BOOMBOX COLLECTOR)

I can assure that the boombox has changed my life. It was the key to a mysterious portal that showed me a world way different from mine (but inexplicably making much more sense to me). Besides creating the sound track to some of the most important parts of my history, it taught me more about language and American culture than all the hours of tuition and all the books I ever read. On a curious note, when I saw *Do the Right Thing* for the first time and realized that I WAS Radio Raheem.

— André Czarnobai, a.k.a. Cardoso (DJ / MUSICIAN)



England, or London, is so much smaller than New York, and it's not as separate as America is and was. So there'd be punks with boomboxes. You'd be in Notting Hill Gate and there would be a bunch of punks on a corner drinking beers with a boombox—with this punk shirt just blazin' out of a boombox. And then you had your rare groove-heads that were playing incredible soul music—then your reggae posse, the Caribbean community, like, just b astin' Jon Shaka out of a boombox in the middle of the night. To hear all those different genres of music coming out of a boombox back then was a complete trip.

— Earle Sebastian (DIRECTOR)



UK FRESH HOP EVENT, LK, 1986
PAUL HARMETT

NEW YORK CITY, 1988
STEVE MCCURRY

STREET SINGER IN QUITO, ECUADOR, 2008
KURT HOERBET

SOCIETAL CONTEXT

I grew up in the South Bronx on Fox Hill and Longwood Avenue. So it was very natural for me to start photographing the things that I saw every day and to document what was happening in the South Bronx. A lot of elements of my early work has people just hanging out, chilling out on the corner, chilling out on the roof . . .

Having music in the background was always part of that experience, and getting high. Everybody always had some weed during that period of

time, so everybody got smashed in one shape or another. You didn't have to have money to walk down the block and get high because either you would have it or your friend would have it or somebody else would have it. And everybody had a boombox. It didn't matter whether it was the big traditional ones or smaller versions. Always somebody had a radio, and a radio with a tape deck in it.

Over time, I became more and more aware that there were profound changes taking place. Building after building went vacant: Landlords didn't want to make the tax payments or they didn't want to pay the insurance on

it. Some landlords actually began to burn down buildings just to make some insurance money until they started arresting people doing that type of thing.

In a sense, the hip-hop and dance and break dancing and stuff was one way of, you know, kind of verbalizing at least for us what was going down in our neighborhood. The nation had pretty much turned their backs on the residents of the South Bronx during that period of time. They had cut back services, cops rarely showed up. You know, the only people—the only government agency you could actually rely on to show up—was the firefighters, and that was about it. We knew that always when you were in trouble, you called them and they would show up.

There's almost a romanticized vision of what actually took place during that time. But basically we were just fighting to survive, trying to figure out a way out of the place. The music was part of that drive, and by extension, the boombox was the natural prop for that. There's something about jamming that box in the middle of an abandoned street, you know, where block after block is, like, completely abandoned, and that music is bouncing off those walls. And you know, you have Sugar Hill Gang playing, or you have Kool & the Gang playing, and they're playing that theme from Rocky in the background.

We couldn't vocalize what was happening to us. Why was the city turning its back on us? Why was building after building being systematically abandoned? Why was building after building being burned down?

That was the context in which music, and by extension, the boombox, was a source of beginning to figure out what was taking place there . . . The boombox was as necessary as the air we were breathing, growing up.

—Ricky Flores (PHOTOJOURNALIST)



JOHN AND THE BOOMBOX, FOX STREET
SOUTH BRONX, NEW YORK CITY, MID-'80s
RICKY FLORES

The boombox democratized sound. It made sound available wherever you were and made the street a theater of whatever soundscape you wanted it to be. Anybody could set up and just press play. But democracy is noisy, loud, chaotic—and opinions have consequences. If people like one style and don't like another style, it's gonna get blasted out

—Paul Miller / DJ Spooky (MUSICIAN / ARTIST)

In almost every ancient society, but definitely in the ancient African tribes and clans, there was always the keeper of the drum. And the drums were used to signify so much: harvest, war, life, and death. Celebration.

And I always felt that Radio Raheem—and I don't know whether Spike Lee did this deliberately or not—was to represent the keepers of the drum in our communities: They carry boomboxes. So when he died, it was so tragic, not just because of the usual things that were already happening in New York with blacks and whites, the racism, violence from the police department. They hadn't killed anybody from the community. They had killed the keeper of the drum. The keeper of the drum is the one that always reminds you what time it is, whether you want to hear it or not. You may disregard him at certain times, but you know you need him.

The boombox subculture was—still is—a huge rebellion against society and everything that it represents. And I was proud to walk down the street with my ghetto blaster. I was representing my tribe.

—Earle Sebastian (INTRODUCER)

So even his intrusion was something we looked forward to. "Radio, will you turn that damn music down!" But you like that, you know what I mean? That's part of your day, hearing what Radio Raheem was giving to the people. He symbolized a lot to me. When I go down the street and I see anybody with a boombox, I still see the keeper of the drum.

—Adisa Benjoko (HIP HOP HISTORIAN)

You had to have enough juice, so to speak, enough courage, enough heart, enough reputation to even walk around with a boombox, otherwise you were risking getting robbed if you walked out of your neighborhood with it or you were on the train with it or whatever. So it was also a statement of tough—adolescent toughness.

—Kool Mcc Dee (PIONEER HIP-HOP MC)

The boombox defined my teens. It helped shape an important era in music, fashion and culture. It was our sonic reply to the invention of the color TV.

—Dzine (ARTIST)



JUNIOR AND DORIS OUTSIDE THE HOLLAND HOTEL
NEW YORK CITY, 1984
SOPHIE ELBAZ



In the neighborhood, everybody has their role. So-and-so is the bug-out; so-and-so is the tough guy; so-and-so is, you know, a good dancer or whatever. And then there's the boombox guy. And you hang around with him because he has a boombox.

— Trevor Clark (HIP-HOP CLOTHING DESIGNER)

Hip-hop in the seventies developed into this wild force in the streets of New York City in the deepest, deepest, like, inner city hoods. A whole tribal communal thing going on in the parks. Gathering around DJ setups with a massive altar of speakers. It was really like worshipping.

Why was this phenomenon so hardcore at that time? It was the rebellious nature of those times—taking over campuses all over the place; people picketing, demonstrating, fighting; people growing their hair long, picking their afros out, throwing their fists in the air.

And there was a lot of uplifting and significant music, like "Ain't No Stoppin' Us Now." Records that kind of uplifted you. We needed to hear those records.

— Fab 5 Freddy (PIONEER GRAPHIC ARTIST)

I remember if a good song came on, and you were on the train or if you were on the beach, everybody was like, "Oh! That's my shit! Turn it up!" I never saw girls my age carrying boomboxes. But my older cousins, my female cousins, they always would carry boomboxes. They'd bring the boomboxes to the park. Not Knickerbocker because then you'd blow up your spot. They would take it to a small park, like a handball park. Go to the park, put the boombox down, roll your shit up, spark it up, and then we would dance in the park. We would dance in the park, and being Puerto Rican, we would, like, hustle, you know, and just do it all.

— Rosie Perez (CHOREOGRAPHER / ACTRESS)

One of the things that the boombox meant for me was that if anyone came to school with one, that was our cue to cut class. [LAUGHS] It was wonderful. It meant at lunchtime we would leave the school and run to Central Park. That was our cue: One of us will come in with a boombox. Sadly to say that we cut class. Yeah, but, we went to Central Park to dance. To learn, you know, all the different moves. Somebody always had something new, and that's what I remember. That's what I mostly remember. Oh, boy, was it—it was great. It was great.

— Lisa Lisa (SINGER, LISA LISA AND CULT JAM)



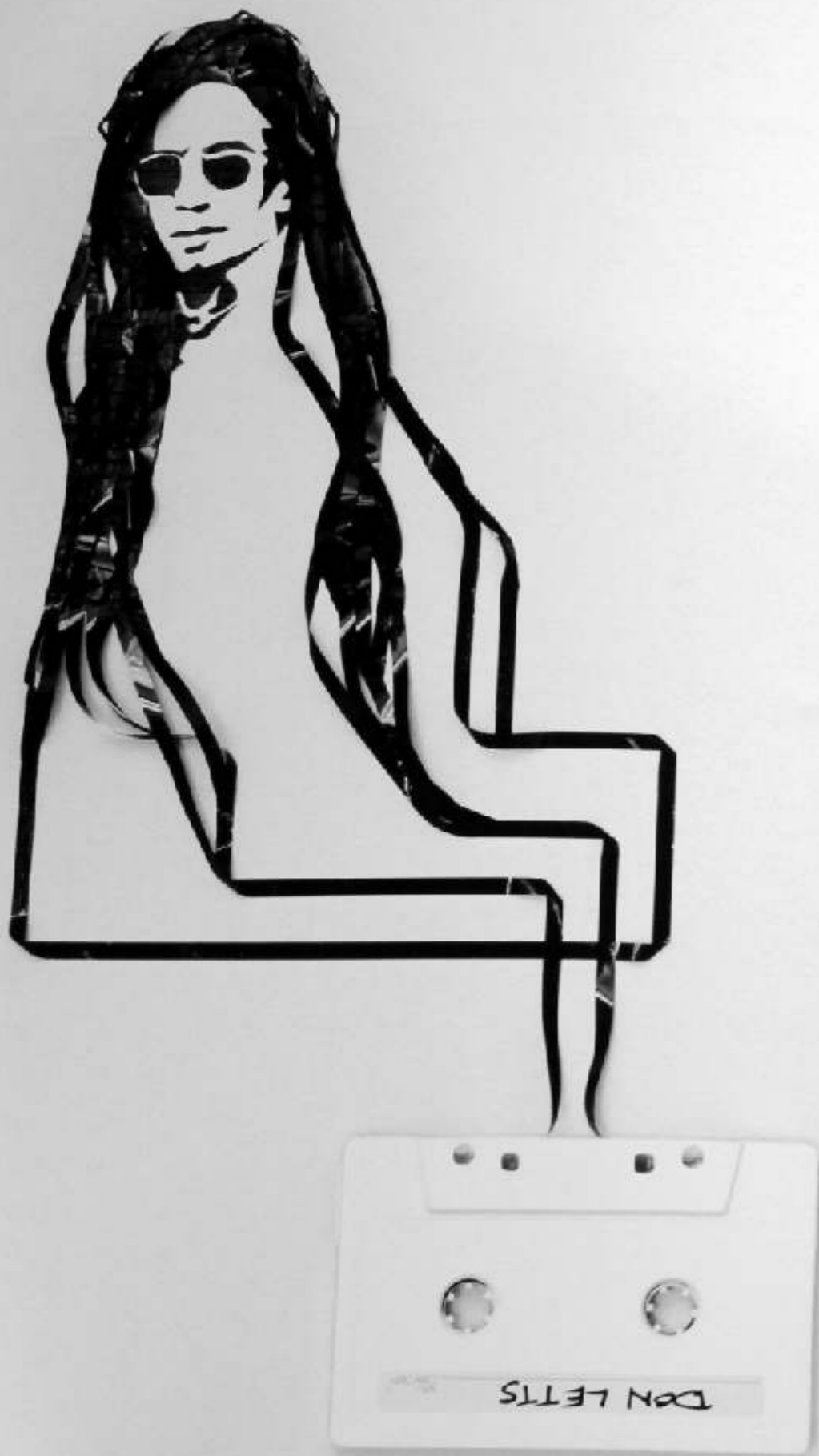
The boombox was a way of claiming some territory—even if you, as I say, pissed off a couple of people on the way, well, that would bring a smile to your face as well. We spend a lot of time—whether we realize it or not—trying to claim some space; stake a territory and say, "Yeah, we're here." And the boombox was the ultimate expression of that. It was empowering.

— Don Letts (DJ / MUSICIAN / DIRECTOR)

RECORD



3. RECORD ● One of the most liberating parts of a boombox is the record button. ● This single mechanical attribute was the ignition button for many aspiring rock stars, rappers, and guitar heroes. ● Countless teenage anthems were first recorded by an upstart musician unleashing a thundering gallop of three-chord angst into the built-in condenser microphone of a boombox. ● Some of these anthems ended up on a dusty tape forgotten in the back of a closet; others fought their way out of obscurity to blare out of radios around the world. ● The empowerment of simple and fast recording allowed many aspiring rappers, punks, rockers, and poets to have their first stab at immortality. ● They became a major part of a creative process. ● Without a boombox recording the thoughts, chord progressions, and word flow of a generation, many songs might not have made it out of the small corners of the world and on to the global stage. LO



RECORD

Over the years they've been given many names—boombox, ghetto blaster, beatbox, Bronx briefcase—but whatever you call them, they've provided a soundtrack to a major part of my life, whether sitting on a beach in Jamaica with Johnny Notten and Lee Perry in the late seventies or watching break dancers with the Clash in early-eighties New York. In my world they represent a time when reggae, punk, and hip-hop met and music was about changing minds and not just your sneakers.

They came on to the scene in 1977, a crucial year in many respects, and would go on to become the icon of urban culture during the eighties. Before the beatbox, your personal sound was tied to your bedroom, with your parents constantly telling you to "turn it down." The advent of the beatbox gave you a sonic freedom previously unheard of as you and sound track were now mobile. You could share your sound and create an instant party!

They spawned a subculture of mix tapes (serious currency back in the day) and cassette cover art. My thing was the Jamaican and UK reggae sound system C-9Cs. Indeed, it was a mix tape of Mikey Dread's *Dread at the Controls* radio show out in Jamaica that I gave Paul Simonon, which led to him tracking Mikey down to work on their triple album *Sandinista!* And the commercial free master mixes courtesy of WBLS, KISS, and KTU out of NYC were the bomb.

In the early eighties, many of the music videos I directed would feature a boombox somewhere in the frame (e.g., Freeze's "L.O.U.," the Clash's "This Is Radio Clash," Bob Marley's "Waiting in Vain").

The Clash was never without one (actually, make that four). Indeed, the blaster became a major motif for the band by the time they hit the States. For a while, Mick Jones's guitar roodie lound himself responsible for an additional piece of "kit" as Mick couldn't carry his! Joe Strummer would be rocking old-school R & B on his while Paul Simonon would be pumping dub reggae, and on Mick's the emerging hip-hop sounds that were coming out of the Bronx. You'd go into their dressing room and it was like walking into Carnival. Those brothers would be cranking their individually chosen sound track—all at the same time. While they were in NYC in 1981 for their legendary run at Bond's, we became friends with the up-and-coming graffiti artists (such as Futura), and it wasn't long before their art covered our machines. Futura did a mean series of customized blasters for the Clash and Big Audio Dynamite.

During my time in NYC, we'd spend a lot of time looking, searching for the perfect boombox in Times Square and Forty-second Street, or if you were looking for a bargain, down on Delancey. Finding the perfect machine became a holy grail, looking for the classic aesthetic shape, radio preset, line in and line out to connect to your turntables / microphone, and most importantly, bass response. We even got into market research to find out which batteries were best, which was important as some of these suckers would need up to ten D-size batteries (oh yeah, it's Duracell). I remember Topper Hoaden found a JVC RC-350 on Forty-second Street. Built to last (it even had crash bars) and one of a select few equipped with a 10-inch woofer. I recently picked one up in Turbosonic in Tokyo. By the way, if you're lucky enough to find yourself in Japan, a trip to Turbosonic is an absolute must, as to my knowledge it's the only store in the world that specializes in old-school boomboxes (sale and repairs).



In the mid-eighties as a member of Big Audio Dynamite, I was inspired to even write a song about them ("Com'on Every Beatbox") and they would continue to feature heavily in our music videos and artwork (check "Just Play Music"). I remember when we got Schoolly D to support us on a tour of the UK and we had to buy him an extra plane ticket for his blaster 'cause it was so big. The bloodclot beatbox had its own seat.

Over the years I've had mini-discs, DAT machines, and of course the proverbial iPod, but nothing can touch the aesthetic beauty and sound of my beatbox. The boombox facilitated a sound. The design of them seemed to speak volumes about the kind of technology and the aspirations of the time... My first test for a beatbox was always how it held the bass—especially on low level. Bass is fundamental, like your heartbeat. And the emphasis on bass is a black thing. No getting around that...

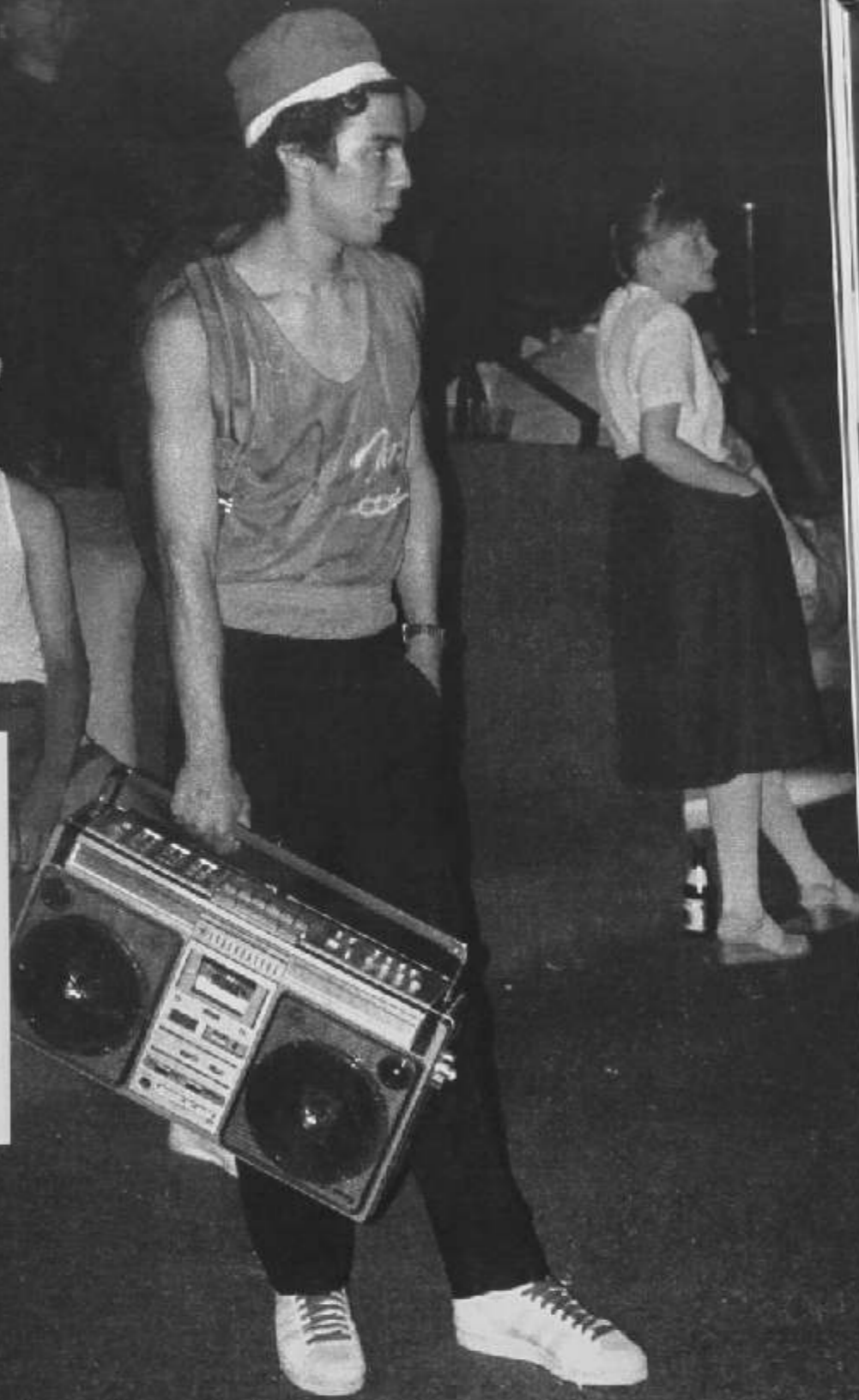
The digital thing is definitely too clean, too crisp. I mean, you're actually losing a lot of frequencies there—a lot of the mid-range frequencies... You're missing the organic part, whether you realize it or not. The digital age has taken out all the mistakes of technology and, in fact, that's the stuff that I got off on.

But a kickin' bass line will still move the crowd—whether it be hip-hop or reggae. And I don't think it will ever go away, because bass is fundamental. And when I'm talkin' about bass, I'm really talkin' about frequencies. These days a lot of those bass frequencies are actually provided by a bass drum or a kick drum or a keyboard or a sequencer. But when real bass isn't there—mm, do you miss it.

—Don Letts, Summer 2009, London



PHOTOS ABOVE BY BOB GRUEN



FUTURA 2000 AT THE ROXY,
NEW YORK CITY, 1984
JOSH CHEESE

This is my boombox. There are many like it, but this one is mine.

When you're holding a boombox, it's vibrating. It was almost like having a speaker that vibrates. [Similar to] the actual Jamaican bass bins that make you want to move your bowels because the bass is so heavy.

— **Josh Cheuse** (PHOTOGRAPHER/ART DIRECTOR)

I have the ghetto blaster that I had when I was a kid... It's a Hitachi, and it was one of the first ones with a graphic equalizer on it... When we're mixing, we have these great big walls of speakers... But then I go to the ghetto blaster and say, "Yeah, but what does the record sound like on this?" When it sounds all right on that, then I know it sounds good.

— **Noel Gallagher** (OASIS)

When BLS came on, this is what they would do that made you want to hear this shit correctly: It would go: "W-B-L-S." When you were able to hear that, the alternate letters coming out of the left and right speaker clearly, yo, B, that was the equivalent of having HDTV right now, or Blu-ray. This speaker to that speaker? We used to be like, "Yo, the W's over there and the B, yo, this shit is crazy!"

— **Fab 5 Freddy** (PIONEER GRAFFITI ARTIST)

The week before I flew to L.A. [to produce *Nevermind*], Kurt [Cobain] sent a cassette, which was done on a boombox. It was really terrible sounding, really distorted. You could barely make out anything. But I could hear the start to "Teen Spirit" before the band kicked in, and I knew it was an amazing song.

— **Butch Vig** (MUSICIAN / RECORD PRODUCER)

Orchard Beach was in the north section of the Bronx, a beach where everybody would just come down and hang out. There were particular sections: Most of the younger blacks and Latinos hung out around section four. That's where all the music would be at. Everybody would have a radio and people would be break dancing, listening to salsa music, jamming on that. Fifteen, twenty people would have a radio, and they would all be on BLS, they'd all listen to salsa, and you could just walk the entire section and not miss a beat at all because everybody was jamming on the same thing, on the same station.

— **Ricky Flores** (PHOTOJOURNALIST)

We was making tapes off the radio, pressing record. That was when 98.7 KISS played all the rap. When WBLS was poppin'. There wasn't no HOT 97 at all. Hot 97 was a Spanish station, do your history. You think I'm lying? That's how long ago the boombox was poppin'.

— **Jim Jones** (RAP ARTIST)

Career: Punk Rock

1. Make up some songs.
2. Get instruments.
3. Remove cassette from answering machine, insert into boombox.
4. Depress record buttons on boombox; play instruments until you stop.
5. Borrow five dollars.
6. Buy blank cassettes down at the store.
7. Duplicate cassettes using dual cassette on boombox.
8. (Simultaneous with step #7) Draw tape cover art. Use pen.
9. Go photocopy cover art (this will be free—someone in your band works in a copy shop, invariably) and insert into cassette cases.
10. Distribute cassettes. Repeat until you sell out and get a four-track.

— **Michael Ruffino**
(MUSICIAN / WRITER)

I used to really just walk down the street with my radio and really had my boombox and, you know, had the nerve to be walking around with it because it was like a stick-up kid's dream back then. I would just be walking around with my radio, skinny. Walking with my radio, not caring (and you know I can't live without my radio). I used to listen to all my rap music on it. If I wanted to hear Mr. Magic, if I wanted to hear Marley Marl, if I wanted to, you know, listen to HBI I think it was, Original Concept and all of them. Bill Stephany's crew out in Long Island and Hank Shocklee and them and Chuck D and Flavor Flav and all them on the station, you know I used to listen to it on my boombox.

— **LL Cool J** (RAPPER / ACTOR)

Any kind of music was a conversation. A style of dance was an expression, so it was always something that the boombox helped us with. We expressed being minorities in Hell's Kitchen, having to deal with all the fights, left and right, in the schools. Dealing with our parents, either we had both parents or just one or we were living with an aunt and an uncle because of our poverty. And the music coming from the boombox; it was an expression for us. It was a way of getting all that shit out.

— **Lisa Lisa** (SINGER, LISA LISA AND CULT JAM)

Scratch Master Bucket, he was the local town hero, and he was doing, like, all the events at the USA Skating Rink and the clubs. And he also was guest deejaying on some of those radio stations. But as a guest DJ, so he wasn't the person you'd hear all the time. The other dude, the one that was on URI, was Vaughn Johnson. He was more like the host of the show. As far as great radio personalities, I would say Vaughn, and then regarding actual official DJs to mixing, I would have to give that to Bucket.

— **DJ Eclipse** (DJ)

At first hip-hop was really a New York thing. So you had to be in the tristate area to get a taste. And they weren't playing hip-hop on the radio in the daytime. They only played it on Friday nights and Saturday nights: Longee More, Mr. Mack Jig, the Cooks, Red Alert. BLS would play it at night and KISS FM. So we'd tape the mix shows and play it for the whole week. That's how the whole Roxanne Shanté battles started, U.T.F.O., Slick Rick—and we used to play it on our boombox. That's how you taped it, and then we would replay them, replay the mixes. That's how we fell in love with hip-hop. And we couldn't wait till Friday and Saturday.

— **Pras** (HIP-HOP ARTIST / MUSICIAN / THE FUGEES)



SUBWAY, NEW YORK CITY, 1980
BRUCE DAVIDSON



LED INDICATOR
BATTERY FM-STEREO TUNING

FM	FREQUENCY MODULATION	87.5	90	95	100	102	104	106	108	110	112	114	116	118	120	MHz
SW1	SHORT WAVE 1	120	140	160	180	200	220	240	260	280						MHz
SW2	SHORT WAVE 2	45	50	60	70	80	90	100	110	120						MHz
SW3	SHORT WAVE 3	1.6	1.8	2.0	2.5	3.0	3.5	4.0	4.5						MHz	
MW	MEDIUM WAVE	530	600	700	800	1000	1200	1400	1600						KHz	

PHONES BASS TREBLE BALANCE VOLUME LOUDNESS MODE FUNCTION EDITOR BAND [AM] BAND FINE TUNING

BOMB BEAT 40

3 way speaker

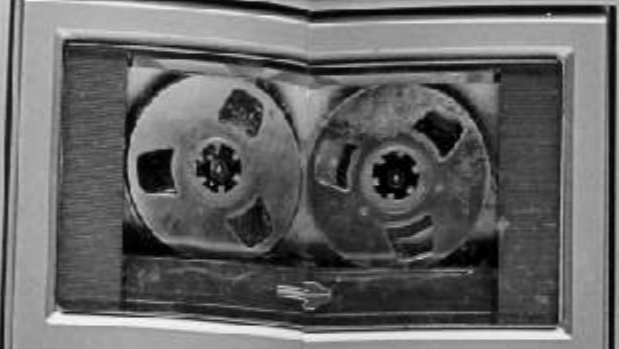
3 way speaker

LEFT RIGHT

POSITION INDICATOR

SET PAUSE REWIND STOP PLAY F.F. RESET

TOSHIBA 000



OPEN LAMP TOUCH REVIEW CLE

STOP RECORD REW PLAY F.F. PAUSE

CASSETTE CULTURE

Mix tapes, pause tapes, recorded radio shows, and compilations were all tiny weapons of change and expression—once music could be broadcast ("while on the move" from a boombox), a sonic revolution began in the hands of the people. This wave of sound was not so loud at first, but once the sonic barrier of personal taste and self-expression was broken, hip-hop, punk, garage rock, and new wave leapt up to be noticed and forever heard from... LO

The boombox was the home recording studio. It was where the demos were made... The ease of use was great because you could just, you know, bring the boombox to rehearsal, set it up in the corner, hope that you got a good balance, and then you could just listen back to it or give it to girls or whatever, you know? That instant gratification is important, especially when you're young.

— Jonathan Daniel (MUSIC-BUSINESS / BAND MANAGER)

DJ Hollywood, Kool Herc, Barbastaa, all those great DJs from the early seventies are the architects of hip-hop. And the boombox is basically where we would be able to hear what was going on in those other neighborhoods because guys would make cassette tapes, and cassette tapes would travel around. It was two steps away from the pigeon taking a note from one town to another back in the days when there was no telephone. It's the same kind of thing, you know, listening to hip-hop music. And unless you were old enough to go to the party, you'd have to wait until the summertime, till they came out in the park and you could sneak out to hear it for free.

— Kool Moe Dee (PIONEER HIP-HOP MC)



TINA WEYMOUTH AND GRANDMASTER FLASH
LOWER EAST SIDE, 1982
LAURA LEVINE



For pause tapes I was looking for raw music I guess. The crazier sounding, the better the pause tape. It's just like edits, just tons and tons of edits with as much crazy stuff as possible. But then the mix tapes differ because then you have to have a sort of flow to a mix tape... it wasn't just a collection of songs, it was a collection of ideas through the songs and the music itself, and through the artwork, even how you put the titles on the cassette. It was curating a whole sort of experience.

— Adam Yauch (MC / BEASTIE BOYS)

There was, like, an organic feel with the reel-to-reel and tapes and boomboxes... the confidence of putting the music onto the tape, even the physicality of when your favorite tape would break (since you'd play it over and over again). Then you'd try and repair it... a lot of the early recordings would be the tape-to-tape dub-over, where you'd record on one side, and then you'd record it to the other side, and then record again...

— Tyler Gibney (ARTIST)

Back then, whether it was a custom-made tape you'd made yourself or albums that you bought in the store, they were playable all the way through. Whatever your new tape was at the time, you would just put it in and let it play... to the world. And that was kind of what that era was about, you know, with cassettes. An album is basically peaks and valleys, so if you're walking around with it, you can just be in the zone of that artist, whether it's an LL Cool J album, a Run-DMC album, an EPMD album, whatever it was, you were locked in with that artist for an hour. Like you don't really see that kind of continuity with listening to albums these days. It wasn't like iTunes, where there's two good songs on the album and you just download those.

— J-Zone (HIP-HOP ARTIST)

My stereo was big and silver with EQ and detachable speakers. It was the center of all my activity growing up in the foothills of the Canadian Rockies with nothing around for miles. While fixing motorcycles, waxing skis, or doing whatever it was that we did then, it was always around, omnipresent and tuned to the one vaguely received AM radio station in the area, CKXL. Mix tapes were the holy grail from a dungeon of top 40 radio monotony; when a new song came on, someone would race over, hit the record button (which then involved holding down both the "record" and "play" buttons simultaneously) and make a copy of the song. Due to the minuteman-type dash to hit the record button, all "mix tapes" of that era were missing a portion of the beginning of the song (which wasn't necessarily a bad thing, because the DJs tended to talk over the track all the way up to the first vocal). Long live the boombox.

— Custom (MUSICIAN / FILMMAKER)