

Welcome to Part 5 of 5



A Special Introduction to Building a New Chicago? (1980s to 2013)

Chicago, the Hood, 1980: Hip Hop is on the rise as breakdancers would soon pull in the cardboard “stages” to battle it out peacefully, on a street corner near you. A new dance with deep roots and a James Brown influence, its artists mesmerize onlookers at first glance. “In Chicago, most breakers took to the Streets in ’84,” says Bravemonk, an old school Chicago breakdancer. “There were a few select groups that started earlier, in 1982. Phaze II and Crosstown Crew started because they learned directly from a guy who moved here named ‘Tony,’ from the Bronx – the birth place of Hip Hop.”

Smells of BBQ and lechon would fill the humid air while the sounds of block parties rocked the new “break beats,” along with the vibes of Funk, Disco, Cumbia, Blues, Reggae and soon, Chicago’s very own - House music. Ice cream trucks rolled past playing that familiar tune luring you towards your favorite flavor. If you had the radio on, you may be tuned in to Herb Kent, the Cool Gent, playing his classic “dusties” – something many Chicagoans still do today. If you were really lucky, the fire-hydrant would be uncapped as water jetted everywhere, drenching streets and people – instantly turning a hot and dusty street into your very own water park. Chi-town!

Children play in an uncapped fire hydrant in Uptown, 1970s



With these sites, sounds, and aromas, parents and elders sat on their front stoops, ice tea in hand, and watched neighborhood children play jump rope, four square, freeze tag, football and other games. Life wasn’t anywhere near perfect with people steadily losing their jobs, police harassment and abuse, more drugs appearing, Vietnam veterans with serious needs, and the occasional fist-a-cuffs or knife fight, but, for the most part, people say it was more of a community back then.

Kids still played outside everywhere. They knew each other. Parents knew each other. The Elders knew everyone. We called each other “brother” and “sister” or “mija” and “mijo.” It was community.

This scene from the late 1970s and early 80s usually took place in four-block by four-block areas in communities across Chicago. Some might refer to these as “the hood” or “el barrio.” Mostly though, “Kids knew each other by the school we attended,” says Terrence Haymer, born and raised in Chicago, and a resident of seven different communities from the South, West, and North Sides.

Maybe less individualistic in these days, for the most part, there were more widespread community structures, networks, and programs in place for urban youth. Problems often occurred, but there was still that fabric, an extended family for most people to fall back on. The Civil Rights movement was still fresh in people’s minds – some painful memories and some hopeful ones. Black and Latino political independence and cultural self-determination were on the rise. Instead of guns and video games, the local church, school team, park district, community organization, PTO, local business, summer job program, and/or block club seemed to support most young people’s needs – everywhere except in public housing and the most neglected “ghetto” hoods, even in these hardened spaces, a stronger sense of community was more evident than it is today. It doesn’t mean communities

aren't strong or can't build stronger bonds today – they are and they can.

Life certainly was not easy in the neighborhoods of Chicago during the 1960s and 70s, especially in regards to slum housing, arsons, racism, segregation, and poor city services; but many will tell you life was simpler back then. Large scale arrests/convictions, violence, disease, homelessness, poverty, and screen technology had not yet overwhelmed some families.

It just so happens the 1980s is when, according to many historians, sociologists, and firsthand observers, including the authors of this chapter, that 'life in big cities escalated to another level of craziness.' In other words, "the *%#* hit the fan" in places like Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York City, and many other cities during the 1980s - especially with law authorities. Both the historical record and resident accounts in Chicago present a sobering (and sad) clarity to these statements. Things seemed to shift away from community in the 1980s.

Although life always brings about change, there was nothing to prepare millions of Chicagoans, especially Blacks, Latina/os, and poor Whites in numerous communities to face the coming onslaught. There has been so much change in the past thirty years that some folks can't even believe their eyes. You've probably heard an older person mumble one of these phrases, "things were simpler back in the day," or "man, things have really changed," or "life is so much more complicated now!"

We can look to the crates of Hip Hop and rap music to examine the complexities of life in these times. One song of tremendous impact was simply called *The Message*. It came out of New York City in 1982 by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. Here's an excerpt:

*Broken glass everywhere
People pissing on the stairs, you know they just
don't care
I can't take the smell, I can't take the noise*

*Got no money to move out, I guess I got no
choice
Rats in the front room, roaches in the back
Junkies in the alley with the baseball bat
I tried to get away, but I couldn't get far
'Cause a man with a tow-truck repossessed
my car*

*Chorus:
Don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head, ah
huh-huh-huh...*

After three more blazing verses, the song continues....

*...A child is born with no state of mind
Blind to the ways of mankind
God is smiling on you, but he's frowning too
Because only God knows what you'll go
through
You'll grow in the ghetto living second rate
And your eyes will sing a song of deep hate
The places you're playin', where you stay
Looks like one great big alley way
You'll admire all the number book takers
Thugs, pimps, pushers, and the big money makers
Driving big cars, spending twenties and tens
And you wanna grow up to be just like them, huh,
Smugglers, scrambles, burglars, gamblers
Pickpockets, peddlers, even panhandlers
You say: "I'm cool, I'm no fool!"
But then you wind up dropping out of high school
Now you're unemployed, all non-void
Walking 'round like you're Pretty Boy Floyd
Turned stickup kid, look what you've done did
Got sent up for a eight year bid
Now your manhood is took and you're a may tag
Spend the next two years as a undercover fag
Being used and abused to serve like hell
Till one day you was found hung dead in a cell
It was plain to see that your life was lost
You was cold and your body swung back and forth
But now your eyes sing the sad, sad song
Of how you lived so fast and died so young*

*Don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head
It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder
how I keep from going under
It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder
how I keep from going under...*



Pilsen alley early 1980's