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Jason Bisnoff

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Ain't No Love In New York City

By Jason Bisnoff

**New, York, City, get it right, get it tight, get it hype
New York City's in the house tonight
All day, off and on, Broadway
The world's Big Apple is what they all say
-KRS-one New York**

In a vote this fall following a public hearing in March, Bronx Community Board 5 in the West Bronx will decide whether the site of DJ KoolHerc's childhood home and the parties that are said to have preceded and pioneered hip-hop culture is worthy of a co-naming in the art forms honor. The part of Sedgwick Avenue that could become "Hip-Hop Boulevard" would be the city's second rap named street. The idea was originally proposed by historian Jacob Morris and comes on the heels of Councilman Fernando Cabrera's fervent proposal for a Hip-Hop Museum at Kingsbridge Ice Center in the borough nicknamed the Boogie Down. "Hip-Hop Boulevard" has already made it to the City Council, typically a sign that ratification is all but certain.

Co-naming a street or city block is a far simpler legislative process than the more popular and well-known process of renaming a street. Most people are aware of the Interboro Parkway being renamed for Jackie Robinson, the trailblazer who changed the world of sports in the county of Kings. However the more than 100 streets that are co-named in New York City each year go largely unnoticed. They are seemingly small amendments except to those who have their cultural contributions validated and chronicled in these single block homages and the residents who have their neighborhood tied to a prominent figure.

In the past decade, proposals have cropped up and been shot down time and time again for street names being co-named for hip-hop artists. The majority of these cases have happened in the nooks and crannies of New York City where hip-hop was born and bred. From the formerly impoverished Clinton Hill neighborhood of Brooklyn to the still largely ghettoized South Bronx neighborhood of Longwood, the stages where hip-hop was born has the sites where advocates have attempted to preserve its legacy and contributions to the city it calls home. Leroy McCarthy has been a driving force behind the push for acknowledgement of hip-hop and the principal figure in the push for hip-hop co-naming.

"The people love hip-hop and the politicians need to give respect to how the people feel about it. The culture is something that was born here and it's a worldwide phenomenon for over 30 years," said McCarthy. "With that I think that the politicians of New York City, the gatekeepers, the officials, they should give love

back to something that has given so much to New York with no support from it's genesis."

McCarthy came to New York from Jamaica in the 70's and saw his life from that point on surrounded by hip-hop. Living in Brooklyn and with family in the Bronx he was a part of the early hip-hop culture during the birth and mainstreaming of the music.

"Hip-hop should be commemorated in New York City for all it has done for New York City over four decades," said McCarthy. "What I envision is to have one, at least one, hip-hop artist receive recognition in each borough of New York City."

After college McCarthy worked for Bad Boy Records in its heyday with Craig Mack and The Notorious B.I.G. as a representative in Atlanta, Georgia.

"Early on we were getting tapes before they went to the radio and then Rapper's Delight came along and that pretty much set it off," he said.

In hip-hop's infancy when Bronx native KRS-one and Queens bred Marley Marl threw shots at each other's borough in early tracks such as "South Bronx" and "The Bridge" it was referred to as the bridge wars because to drive from the Bronx to Queens one must get across the northern end of the East River by way of either the Throgs Neck, Whitestone or Robert F. Kennedy Bridges. By subway it is inaccessible unless one first goes through Manhattan but the Bx12 and BxM4 buses use the Bronx-Whitestone Bridge to make public transportation between the two founding hip-hop boroughs possible.

**Inhale deep like the words of my breath
I never sleep, cause sleep is the cousin of death
I lay puzzled as I backtrack to earlier times
Nothing's equivalent, to the New York state of mind
-Nas *NY State of Mind***

Officially co-naming a street can be a lengthy process that takes months and at times years. The first major obstacle is timing. Most community boards throughout the five boroughs will only approve applications for street co-naming on a twice or thrice a year basis. Along with these small windows comes a firm deadline for applications to be received weeks ahead of time.

For a figure to even have a chance at being honored they must meet criteria which differ across different community districts and boroughs but mostly in a linguistic sense. In order to explore an average application, let's take the case of Manhattan Community Board 12 which has an application easily accessible on the website, a rarity on sites with .gov in their url.

In the northernmost corner of Manhattan, encompassing the neighborhoods of Washington Heights and Inwood, any person who hopes to have their name above the sidewalk needs to have a significant amount of time with documentable contributions to the neighborhood in question; the city or country at large, or as it is told in the official documentation: "Prospective honorees should have a minimum of 10 years community involvement and should have demonstrated an extraordinary and consistent voluntary commitment and dedication to the community, or have contributed significantly to New York City or national life and have lived or otherwise are identified with this community in a substantial way."

Prospective honorees in this spot north of Harlem must also be deceased for two years. All these rules can be thrown out the window in extraneous circumstances and the applications can be thrown out the window altogether if the community board does not feel the person in question is worthy. This is cited numerous times in the application with nearly no information on the intangible and arbitrary system of merit for which this decision will be made. If and when your application gets the ax, it is a 5-year wait until you can once again make your case.

The application process is as thorough as it is uncertain. It begins with signatures, this step can be done in person or online and in Manhattan's community board 12 it requires a list of every impacted business or resident along with 150 signatures of approving parties. For other applications it can be required to get 75% of impacted neighbors to sign off on the potential for an extra sign to hang on the corner. When the signatures and formal application are handed over first to the Traffic and Transportation Committee within that district, it will take on average a month for them to deem it worthy of full deliberation from the board.

A major point of contention is often geography, if this person is worthy why in this specific corner of the city that never sleeps. If all of these questions, requirements and any other qualifications are met and suffice to the liking of the community board it will move on to the New York City Council. Once it makes it past the community board, often the hardest critics to please, it is usually just a matter of double checking the discretion of the board below them and finally passing it along to the mayor for what, in most cases, is even further dotting of I's and crossing of T's. After all is said and done most signs go up within six months of approval from the Mayor's office. Through this whole legislative maze, over 100 streets per year on average are co-named in honor of a noteworthy New Yorker between the five boroughs.

While numerous signs have been proposed but not posted throughout the city, there has been one exception in the borough Nas referred to as "The Foundation." In 2009, Run DMC Jam Master Jay Way was officially announced and posted on the corner of 205th Street and Hollis Ave. in Queens. This was seven years after the group's DJ, born Jason Mizell but known as Jam Master Jay, was shot and killed in a recording studio in Jamaica, Queens at the age of 37. The honor also came seven years after the Rock 'N' Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland recognized the group.

Days after Jay died, murals on this famous street corner went up in his honor and months later a nationwide museum deemed him worthy of honoring but it took the city he represented, shouted out and lived in his whole life 7 years to officially bestow him with the postmortem honor. Despite how long it took to come to fruition, it is to date the only hip-hop name that appears in green and white.

“They are doing great things with honoring Jam Master Jay. Unfortunately their cohorts: The Beastie Boys, Wu-Tang Clan and Biggie Smalls can’t join them in showing that for New York City, hip-hop is significant,” said McCarthy.

To move between Queens and Manhattan, the way A Tribe Called Quest, Nas or Run DMC got to the major studios, record labels or concert venues in the middle of Gotham, there is the Queensboro Bridge and Queens-Midtown Tunnel as well as the E,F,N,Q,R and M subways and numerous bus routes.

**The Big L's back to attack with a phat rap
Matter of fact black I'm puttin' Harlem on the map
What's up cause I'm a stiggy star
Breakin' 'em up and then talkin' they heart
You better believe that Big L is the man that be rippin' microphones apart
-Big L *Let Em Have it 'L'***

Much like the art form itself, the proposals for streets with hip-hop monikers have extended across cultural, racial and socioeconomic lines. Consider Beastie Boys Square, a proposal for a co-naming in honor of three Jewish rappers who paired with Rick Rubin to turn the music scene upside down in the mid 1990s with their classic album "Licensed to Ill." Beastie Boys Square is a name proposed for the corner of Rivington and Ludlow Streets in the Lower East Side, which was made famous after it appeared on the cover of the 1989 Beastie Boys album, "Paul's Boutique." Much like their African-American, underprivileged, stereotypically hip-hop counterparts, their contributions to the neighborhood were deemed unworthy of this honor, bestowed in the triple digits annually.

U2 was honored with the corner of 53rd and Broadway in 2009 when they had a week stay on "The Late Show with David Letterman." With ex-Mayor Michael Bloomberg in attendance the bands street sign was unveiled as "U2 Way" and the four Irishmen were named honorary New Yorkers. Michael "Mike D" Diamond, Adam "MCA" Yauch and Adam "Ad-Rock" Horvitz are New York natives in the truest sense. The group came up and met on the Lower East Side, credited shows at CBGB for inspiration, recorded at 171A, wrote songs in their apartment on Chrystie Street and shouted out specific spots and larger elements of the city numerous times on every one of their albums. These contributions were not deemed worthy of a street co-name, the privilege given to U2 five years prior. After his passing from cancer earlier this year, Adam Yauch Park was unveiled in Brooklyn Heights.

Just steps away from the proposed square in the East Village are the headquarters of New York's first hip-hop radio station, Hot 97. Walking into the station doesn't live up to the "Where Hip-Hop Lives" slogan. At 395 Hudson St., a building owned by the New York City District Council of Carpenters Pension Fund, it serves as a reminder of how hip-hop has gone corporate and moved out of the shadows to be a part of the culture at large.

"If you are talking about New York Politicians, they don't love anything that has to do with rebellion, street culture, graffiti and the lyrical content of a lot of rap," said Ebro Darden the head of programming from Hot 97. "Hip-hop comes from dysfunction. It comes from lower income neighborhoods and we have to remember that, in America, telling the story of the downtrodden and the have-nots has not always been accepted in the mainstream. Hip-hop broke through that barrier. I think it will take a while until the municipalities have a hand in it."

On Hot 97's The Morning Show, the counterpart to the instigation of Ebro is the antics of Peter Rosenberg, the Jewish hip-hop head from Maryland. From his point of view, the legislation is always out of touch with the streets and with hip-hop it's no exception: "I am a public hip-hop enthusiast and I haven't spent one second thinking about hip-hop street signs," said Rosenberg.

From his perspective it plays into the dwindling rebelliousness of the once counterculture that hip-hop represented, "Hip-hop doesn't want to be totally mainstream," he commented. "It was rebel music, it isn't anymore. If you are three black kids from Brooklyn is it really rebellious to start rapping? No, it's more rebellious to start a rock group. It's not even rebellious to be white and in hip-hop anymore."

Jay Dixon is fifty-five years old and African-American, he was able to grow up with the art form and fit the demographics of it's earliest adopters, before he joined Hot 97. "The messages in hip-hop records have a disconnect with other cultures because they didn't experience it or misunderstand it's message and the reasons why they express the thing they say about their lives," he also remarked about it's delayed acceptance. "I don't think it is so much the records that make it special or the music but the connection to the time and place."

But with an eye to the future, these three personalities who are central to the art form do hope it gets its due, "I think over time more people will understand the messages in this music," said Dixon.

"When the next municipal leaders are the hip-hop fans that is when you will see ideas like Christopher Wallace Way happen if that's what the neighborhood wants," added Ebro who considers himself Latino and goes by the moniker Old Man Ebro on social media.

In the wake of the terrorist attack of Sept. 11, 2001 North Manhattan based rapper Cam'ron brought along Brooklyn's own Jay-Z for a track celebrating the city that never sleeps entitled "Welcome To New York City." To get from the home of Cam'ron and his rap group Dipset, featuring Juelz Santana who also takes a verse on the track, in Harlem to the home of the man born Sean Carter's Roc-A-Fella records you have to cross the lower end of the east river. There is a litany of ways to get from the island of Manhattan to the BK including the Williamsburg, Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges but also the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel, which connects Battery Park to Red Hook. With the reopening of the Montague tube earlier this year there are currently 15 different subways that go between Manhattan and Brooklyn including the 2,3,4,5,A,B,C,F,M,N,Q,R and the J and Z for which Jay-Z got his stage name.

**Welcome to the melting pot, corners where we sellin' rock
AfrikaBambataa shit, home of the hip-hop
Yellow cab, gypsy cab, dollar cab, holla back
For foreigners it ain't fair, they act like they forgot how to add
8 million stories, out there in the naked
City it's a pity, half of y'all won't make it
-JAY-Z *Empire State of Mind***

When Leroy McCarthy returned to New York from years working in Atlanta and other cities, he lived merely blocks away from where Biggie Smalls had lived and his first proposed street sign would have gone up.

His long term goal of having multiple streets across the city honoring rap music all started in August of 2013 when he first advocated for Christopher Wallace Way on the corner of St. James Place and Fulton St. in Brooklyn after the late Notorious B.I.G. His quest to honor hip-hop's fallen heroes began with perhaps the most noteworthy attempt for a sign honoring a New York rapper, in honor of the big apple's hip-hop martyr.

Christopher Wallace Way was proposed and supported with the belief that the artist known as Notorious B.I.G. had significant contributions to New York culture and that the street where he grew up and the borough he represented deserved to bear his name. Christopher Wallace was born and raised in what is today known as the neighborhood of Clinton Hill but he used to shout out as Bed Stuy. The sign was intended to be at the corner of his childhood home.

"All around the world there is graffiti, signs and t-shirts commemorating Biggie Smalls but where he is from, there are no signs or moniker or anything showing that he came from here," said McCarthy about his inaugural mission. "In the supermarket where he used to bag groceries there is a picture for him up there but we are trying to get something from the city to commemorate Biggie Smalls. He represents more than one individual, he represents Brooklyn and represented it hardcore until he died."

When the push for Christopher Wallace Way was under way, supporters saw first hand that New York and hip-hop had a relationship that could be called defunct, to put it lightly.

“Christopher Wallace Way has everything to do with who owns the buildings in that neighborhood now. It is hipsters, hip-hop is not part of their musical palate,” said Ebro of the failed attempt at honoring the Notorious B.I.G. “It’s about money. Hip-hop comes from the streets, low-income neighborhoods. That doesn’t help property values or people’s pockets.

After the petition to put the legendary rappers name in FHWA font went viral and was favorably covered by media outlets and hip-hop blogs alike, McCarthy found that contributions in hip-hop culture were not understood or appreciated by Brooklyn Community Board 2. The group cited lyrical content, attitude towards women and even his weight as issues that made him undeserving. Lucy Koteen, a member of the council, later told 1010 WINS that, “He does not seem like the kind of role model that we would want to emulate.” For now, like Beastie Boys Square it is all a dream.

“There is a generational gap, a social gap, a cultural gap in terms of dealing with the community boards. A lot of them are people who are not necessarily hip-hop fans or even hip-hop knowledgeable, so it is tough to convey to them that hip-hop should be honored,” McCarthy said.

Staten Island’s isolation makes it accessible only from the Ferry in Manhattan and the Verrazano Narrows Bridge from Brooklyn.

**I grew up on the crime side, the New York Times side
Staying alive was no jive
Had second hands, moms bounced on old man
So then we moved to Shaolin land
-Raekwon of the Wu-Tang Clan *C.R.E.A.M.***

Staten Island is often the forgotten borough amongst Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens and The Bronx and for the early years of hip-hop this was also the case. While Queens, The Bronx, Brooklyn and Harlem had the first stars with the likes of Marley Marl, Biz Markie and Grandmaster Flash; Staten Island hadn’t found a rap act to call its own. This came crashing down in 1992 with the arrival of 10 rappers who called themselves the Wu-Tang Clan and called their borough Shaolin as an homage to the kung fu movies they had obsessed over in their teenage years. In the next decade RZA, GZA, Method Man, Raekwon, GhostfaceKillah, Inspectah Deck, U-God, MastaKilla, Cappadonna and Ol’ Dirty Bastard would release several critically acclaimed albums as a group as well as making waves with solo careers and a historic record deal that allowed for each member to have their autonomy and spot in the group, allowing for cross promotion. In 2004, Ol’ Dirty Bastard died of a drug overdose following several years of struggling with legal troubles, drug addiction

and mental instability. The death of one of the founding members a decade ago has significance because it makes them eligible for a street co-naming. Leroy McCarthy has started a petition on Change.org to make Targee Street and Sobel Court in the Park Hill neighborhood of Staten Island, Wu-Tang District.

“If they were to give a street sign to somebody like Biggie Smalls or the Beastie Boys or Big Pun or Wu-Tang Clan, it would give some type of credit to the misfits, to the underground to the non-conformists because that is what hip-hop has historically been. I think that is something they don’t want to do,” said McCarthy.

With nearly every attempt to acknowledge a community contribution of a hip-hop figure being met with opposition, a street artist came up with a way to honor the art forms connection to its womb while avoiding legislative gridlock. Jay Shells initially put up 30 signs across the city with the only parameters being that the lyrics mentioned a specific location. From "Cough up a lung, where I'm from, Marcy son, ain't nothing nice," by a young Jay-Z to "Cause I want to be on 106 and Park pushing a Benz," from The College Dropout, the lyrics, much like the art form do not discriminate and are posted at the location they pay homage to without bias of the message. Though many of the signs were taken down after being placed, the message was loud and clear as the New York Daily News, New York Times and numerous other publications took notice of the signs and what they say about New York's deep connection to rap music. According to Shells, “The response has been overwhelmingly positive.”

“It began as a way to visually mark these important spots,” said Shells. “It has evolved into much more. These are street stories and that is the truth about it.” Though the project is said to be non-political, Shells does have feelings about the way other signs have been rejected and the way New York and hip-hop relate, “New York is the city that birthed hip-hop to begin with. Whether we feel that New York bureaucrats and government embrace hip-hop culture or not, the public does and the public responds to it and the public knows New York is the birthplace of hip-hop which has gone from a fad to more than music, a movement, an entire culture. And it will always have come out of this city so this city will always live and breathe hip-hop and you don’t have to look very far for it.”

**This goes out to Manhattan, the island of Staten
Brooklyn and Queens is livin fat and
The Boogie Down, enough props, enough clout
-Nas*Halftime***

Dan Charnas grew up in New York and was involved in the music industry during rap music’s infancy, working with some of the early top acts and labels such as Profile and American Recordings. After working in the music industry in a corporate facility he moved on to be one of the early writers at “The Source” and eventually wrote a 660-page compendium called “The Big Payback” which chronicled the rise of the art form from street corners to board rooms.

The moment Charnas realized that hip-hop had outgrown New York was in 2003 at a Yung Joc concert at the Apollo Theater. The bad boy signee, Atlanta native and future one-hit wonder was performing his signature song "It's Going Down" at the end of a concert and as he broke into the song's signature dance, a feature usually associated with southern rap of Joc's ilk, the New Yorker filled crowd danced along.

Charnas had been away from New York for 13 years at the time, residing in L.A. While he was gone, the art form had become more international, more inclusive, more universal and New York no longer was the resting place of the prodigal throne. For Charnas, that is where New York hip-hop's greatest legacy lies, it was born in New York and as it spreads to other places and other cultures it's always tied back to where it was born.

"Hip-hop is an art form and it comes from a real culture. The realness of a musical culture is exemplified in it's mobility and adaptability," said Charnas, "It's a great thing that hip-hop has adapted and thrived in other places beyond New York. Not only in L.A. and in the south but also in France and in Palestine and in Japan. It is everywhere. This way of making music, this way of expressing yourself was born in New York but it is adaptable anywhere else on the globe."

On Atlanta native Killer Mike's critically acclaimed album R.A.P. music, he has homage to New York entitled "Anywhere but Here." When talking about a city he has never lived in he spits, "Moving through New York City in a black seven fifty/ Like Batman moving through Gotham/ Dodging potholes as I gently move/ Through Harlem with my wheels on slalom...But I guess life ain't Times Square...You learn Manhattan keep on making it/And Brooklyn, keep on taking it/Cause life just ain't that fair." The legacy of New York hip-hop may be just that fact, that all hip-hop made since it was started on Sedgwick Ave. has been influenced by that pioneering sound, vibe and culture all set to the backdrop of the Big Apple.

Charnas also acknowledges that in the scheme of things the 40-year-old art form has more time to grow, "Hip-hop is counterculture. And it takes a while for counterculture to become culture. Nobody in power in the city comes from hip-hop...yet, yet. Ten years from now, 20 years from now you will see it."

When discussing the possibility of these street signs as a possible homage he spoke of himself and the people who saw this art form grow, "The people who would appreciate it are the people who were there."

On the heels of Run DMC Jam Master Jay Way becoming the first hip-hop street honor and the many failed attempts in between then and now, Hip Hop Boulevard appears to be the next successful project as it gains steam in the Bronx. This street does not pay homage as directly as those that are associated with an artist and his contributions to a specific neighborhood, community or culture. However, it's

marking of the spot where many believe hip-hop first started, a spot in New York City, has equal significance and still shows progress towards hip-hop getting its due. Hip-Hop was born from a place of struggle. The children of the jazz generation grew up with Ronald Reagan's conservative politics and saw the projects grow in population and shrink in resources. Add to this the influx of the crack epidemic and the early days of HIV and hopelessness was coupled with violence in corners of major urban centers that we didn't talk about in polite conversation.

Like coal under pressure, this phenomenon that seemed utterly devoid of positivity birthed an art form that merged poetic spoken word with the musical tones of jazz and rock. Beauty was found in the struggles of Nas, Jay-Z, KRS-one, The Wu-Tang Clan and so many more. From this birth in darkness, light shone through on early adopters from diverse backgrounds across racial, socioeconomic and geographic lines, but the roots have always remained firmly entrenched in the soil of Queensbridge, the South Bronx and Central Brooklyn neighborhoods of Clinton Hill and Bed Stuy.

Charnas points out that New York will always be ingrained in hip-hop, "Hip-hop does not die without New York but hip-hop would not have lived without New York." And McCarthy continues to ask for it's due, "I'm not asking for anyone who dropped an album to be honored but I think if the city chose to honor these specific acts it would be a great accomplishment for the art of hip-hop which started on the concrete and traveled around the world and back."

But Ebro from Hot 97 speaks for many hip-hop fans when they think about the disconnect between the love the streets has for their native art form versus the lack of recognition from the powers that be:

"Hip-Hop doesn't prefer to be in the mainstream as a culture. I think the majority of hip-hop and its fans don't give a flying fuck what municipalities or governments think about their art. I think it is very hip-hop to not give a flying fuck, that is the essence of hip-hop, 'fuck y'all we do what we want to do'."