

THE BATTLE OF THE SUNDAY TALKING HEADS By David Brock

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*In the turf war
between citizens and
citizen-dogs, who will
be brought to heel?*

By Tony Hendra

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FLEX

S T I M E

“He can cold rock a party,” says Puffy Combs. He’s “the ultimate choice for any event,” says Mariah Carey. He’s who Howard Stern listens to “when I have my sex,” says Stern. Meet
FUNKMASTER FLEX,
the hottest D.J. in hip-hop.

BY NANCY JO SALES

UNDAY NIGHTS OUTSIDE TUNNEL, the line around the block is so long you’d think Puff Daddy was inside, handing out the Benjamins, baby; but all those kids in the Polo and Hilfiger are really waiting to see the guy who helped make Puffy a star. “Go Flex, go Flex!” says his Alvin and the Chipmunks–like tag on Hot 97 FM, the local radio station that rocketed to No. 1 in the land after Funkmaster Flex took control of the evening show. Flex, the hottest D.J. in America—the “hardest-working man in hip-hop,” by his own confident account—is no mere player of records but a music-industry playa, not so different from the bad boy at Bad Boy Records himself. “It’s scary when you see them in the station at the same time on their cell phones,” laughs Dennis Rivera, Flex’s producer and cohost at Hot 97. “They never stop making moves.” Neither of these young hip-hop moguls shows any intention of ceasing to synergize (“I’m always thinking of the next thing to do,” Flex says demurely of his plans); and the real reason behind their success (forget the schmooze factor) may be an uncanny sense of what makes a body move. “Flex can make a gold album and cold rock a party,” says Puffy. One young man, pumping arms to keep warm

outside Tunnel, puts it this way: “I’m gonna sweat my ass off tonight.”

“Flex! Flex!” Japanese club kids shout, swinging blond dreadlocks. Headphones on, Flex is presiding over the two turntables and a microphone in Tunnel’s elevated, clubhouse-style D.J. booth. The D.J.’s cushy body—in a red BIG DAWG sweatshirt advertising his newly formed entertainment company—is wiggling, his long, slender fingers rubbing at the vinyl, then jabbing at the cross-fader, back and forth. All night he flies from his machines to his four strongboxes—which hold old-school rap, new-school rap, R&B, and reggae, respectively—flipping through tight stacks of dog-eared record jackets (800 of them), the look and feel of which seem to spark his next idea for what to play. “I never plan what I’m going to play,” Flex says. “It depends on what the room’s like, the ratio of guys to girls—if there’s more guys, I won’t play a lot of reggae ‘cause that means the girls won’t dance. . . .”

Tonight, as on every Sunday, the D.J. booth is jammed with girls—all wanting to be seen chilling next to the plump Funkmaster, all looking very Mary K. Blige in their tight Lycra and their Gucci shades. (One, when asked her age, declines to answer. “You might be the po-

lice," she says with a little smile.) But Flex has no time now for the ladies—he's got to get this party going. "There's a point in the night"—1:30 A.M., he says—"where the crowd has to get off, they have to, 'cause if they don't get off—it's just like climaxing—it's not good, it's not good."

Flex's foreplay is the tease. Abruptly, he stops the music—a Busta Rhymes single he's been playing ("Where my dawgs at?" goes the refrain)—and starts doing what purists complain he does just too damn much: talk. "Why can't he just play the music, man?" one dripping dancer groans. Flex grabs the mike. "I don't hear enough noise," he needles the 3,000-strong crowd in his buzzing, baby voice (Flex's voice is the anti-Wolfman Jack, high in the nose; "Yee-ah," he says). "This ma'fucker is the hottest thing you're gonna get tonight. Who's gonna make some noise? Where my Jersey ladies at?" Flex demands.

His "Jersey ladies" cheer. Flex giggles; he giggles a lot. In his hard, red rubber-soled shoes and oversize trousers, he's a mixture of hip-hop king and hip-hop clown, always looking for a chance to

make people laugh. Even when he comes up short, he's still playing the songs he knows—and he always knows—they want to hear. "I know what makes a kid move," he says matter-of-factly, "what he wants to listen to, when he's driving on the highway, when he's out in a club. . . ."

"Where my dawgs at?" Flex teases the crowd with another riff—and then halts it again. "I don't see enough *bouncing*," he chides. "It's already 1:30, and we ain't even got shit *bouncing* yet. Where my Long Island niggas at? Where's all the ma'fuckers making money in here?" "Ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh," chants the crowd. Flex giggles; they're playing along. "Ah-ight!" he says with a laugh.

He blasts another few bars—"Where my dawgs at?"—and then he stops it—again. "This record ain't for no pretty niggas," he continues maddeningly. "This ain't for Cristal niggas—"

"Ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh—" Fists pump in the air. "Where my Harlem niggas at?" says Flex. A lot of noise. "Word the fuck up!" Flex giggles. "Now where's Queens at?" "Ooh, ooh, ooh—!" "Ah-ight. . . ."

"Where my dawgs at?" Flex gives the crowd the song again; they commence

bouncing. Looking around, you think they'll remember dancing to Funkmaster Flex at Tunnel the way people remember jitterbugging to Tommy Dorsey at Roseland. Flex almost has his climax now. The dance floor's writhing like a mass orgy waiting to happen, thousands of bodies undulating in the pink-lit smoke.

But again he stops the music, cold. The crowd grows furious—"Ahhhh!" "Ah-ight," says Flex calmly. "I think I know whose house this is." He pauses, everyone waiting breathless for the answer, which they already seem to suspect. "Brooklyn!" Flex screams. "Make some motherfuckin' noise!"

An explosion of throaty calls. Flex throws the song back up—"Where my dawgs at?"—and the boys are smashing into each other, embracing roughly; the girls are rocking high up on their shoulders, fists churning in the air. . . .

FLEX PLAYED AT MY BUTTERFLY album-release party," says girl-about-town/international diva Mariah Carey silkily. "He's the ultimate choice for any event."

Over the last year, the Funkmaster has become the D.J. de rigueur for happening soirées around the city: the MTV Music Awards after-party, the NBA All-Star Bash, L. L. Cool J's birthday party. (He gets a handsome, five-figure sum for an appearance, same each week for his four hours at Tunnel, ten to two.)

His cachet has quickly translated into a mini-empire. Since Dick Clark, there hasn't been a D.J. who's so dominated and exploited a music scene. "He's off the meter," Puffy says. In addition to his Franchise Records and Big Dawg Films (now producing Hype Williams's hip-hop-gangster flick *Belly*), there's Flex's party-promotion company (Big Dawg Entertainment) and, of course, his mix tapes and CDs (*Funkmaster Flex*, *60 Minutes of Funk*, Volumes I and II, which went gold, and the upcoming Volume III, *The Final Chapter*, coming out in June). "You can only name a few people who can do what he does," says Steve Rifkind, founder and president of Loud Records, Flex's distributor. "Quincy Jones, Puffy, Rza, Jermaine Dupri. . ." Rifkind attributes Flex's ascendancy to "his brain."

Certainly one of Flex's smartest moves was mass-marketing his mixes. His use of top artists in hip-hop and R&B as freestylers on the albums (Missy Elliott, Erykah

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Since Dick Clark, there hasn't been a D.J. who's so dominated a music scene. "He's off the meter," says Puffy.

Badu, Jay Z, among scores of others) increases his power both as a performer and as a broker of cool. "He has enormous influence," says Abbie Kears, a producer for MTV News. "If you're a new hip-hop artist, you pretty much have to be played on his show."

Oh, and the Funkmaster is also hawking for Mountain Dew and Starter sportswear and "talking to people" about getting his own TV talk show—"It's close. I think Flex needs to get into television," Flex says, giggling at his own use of the third person, a semantic tic often seen in superstars.

"Flex is sexy," purrs supermodel Veronica Webb. "He has that pretty chocolate complexion. And, of course, stardom is sexy." Webb, better known for things other than rapping, also freestyled on Flex's Volume II mix tape, declaring—now famously, or infamously—"I am premium pussy." The line came about while "[we were] riding around in the limo drinking cosmopolitans after Puffy's rap roast," she lets on with a naughty laugh.

It's hard to imagine when Flex has the time to carry on in limousines with supermodels. "She said that?!" he exclaims nervously (after being told Webb said she found him fetching), quickly adding, "She can't say that!" Flex has a girlfriend, Monica Joseph, a producer at *The Maury Povich Show*.

Flex—who often has to ward off complaints from callers to Hot 97 with "I like to talk!"—can be shy in person and is admittedly old-fashioned (his girlfriend is a childhood friend "from the local skating rink"). He's never seen without his trade-

mark deck-of-cards-size pendant of Jesus (with the dazzling diamond eyes and diamonds in the crown of thorns). "I went to Catholic school and my parents wouldn't let me go outside past eight o'clock," he says. "I was always inside. That's how I learned to D.J."

Growing up in a strict, religious Jamaican household in the Bronx, Aston Taylor Jr. conceived of "Funkmaster Flex" while mixing Michael Jackson and Madonna and reggae records alone in his room. He picked up D.J. skills from his father, a video technician who also spun records informally at parties in the neighborhood. "Watching my dad, I never wanted to play music or rhyme," he says. "I always wanted to be the one that played the records. I thought that was cool."

WHEN HIP-HOP MUSIC EMERGED in the eighties, he desperately wanted to be a part of it. His first job was lugging around record boxes for Chuck Chillout, then one of the main D.J.'s, with Red Alert, on Kiss FM. "I did everything for Chuck Chillout," remembers Flex. "If he wanted fried chicken, I got it. If he wanted McDonald's, I got it. If he wanted \$20, I gave it to him. You had to make it happen, or you took the risk of him saying, 'Yo, man, why don't you just go home?' And then it was, 'I'm gonna be at my house? With my mother and my sister? And there's gonna be no hip-hop playing and people are gonna be calling me Junior?!' But whatever time I was with

Chuck Chillout, I was considered being in hip-hop. I was around the music, the language, the clothing. . . . And everybody called me Flex!"

At 22 (he's 30 now), he was D.J.-ing at clubs like Red Zone, Mars, Homebase, and Powerhouse while holding down a day job in A&R at Profile. "Hip-hop is everything, even what time you get up in the morning," laughs Flex. "The hip-hop people didn't come into the label until, like, four."

In 1992, he was hired to do what he considers his breakthrough gig, the Def Jam Records Christmas party at the Puck Building. Kid Capri, the biggest D.J. in New York at the time, was also on the bill. "It was me and him playing together, and there were two rooms," says Flex. "I went there early to scout it out and see which one was better. And I said, 'Mmm, I wanna be in the room with the alcohol and the performances.'" He chuckles.

The program director for Kiss FM approached Flex at the party and promised a permanent spot; it never happened, but word of him started zooming around the stations and he was soon hired by Hot 97, which was looking to create a rap show. "In the beginning, people didn't like it," says Flex. "People would call up and call me nigger. 'Stop playing that fuckin' nigger music.' But I remember one night, we were going to the phones, and someone asked for Onyx—a hip-hop group—"and I was like, yo, it's on."

EVERY NIGHT EXCEPT SUNDAY, FLEX DOES his mix show. The Hot 97 studio on Hudson Street is regularly visited for on-air sessions by a host of rappers and other celebrities, from L'il Kim to Ma\$e to Mike Tyson to Patti LaBelle. But tonight, it's just Flex, his producer, Rivera, and Cipa Sounds, a slim, mustachioed 21-year-old D.J. from the Bronx Flex has taken under his wing. "I see him six days a week," says Cipa. "He teaches me. He gave me a shot at the Tunnel, and then"—he shrugs modestly—"I blew up."

Something else is about to blow up tonight.

"Yo, Flex, we gotta put it on," Cipa's telling the Funkmaster, waving a CD. It's "Second Round K.O.," the young rapper Canibus's

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Impact; Les Misérables; The Object of My Affection.

Marlboro—6817 Bay Pkwy., at 69th St. (232-4000) Barney's Great Adventure; City of Angels; Deep Impact; The Object of My Affection; Titanic.

Pavilion Theatre—188 Prospect Park West, Brooklyn (369-0838) Barney's Great Adventure; Black Dog; The Butcher Boy; Chinese Box; City of Angels; Deep Impact; Les Misérables; Tarzan and the Lost City; The Object of My Affection; Two Girls and a Guy.

Ridgewood—55-27 Myrtle Ave., at Putnam Ave. (821-5993) Black Dog; Deep Impact; He Got Game; Titanic; Woo.

The Movies at Sheepshead Bay—3907 Shore Pkwy, off Exit 9 at Belt Pkwy. (615-1700) The Big Hit; Black Dog; City of Angels; Deep Impact; He Got Game; Les Misérables; Lost in Space; Paulie; The Object of My Affection.

Queens

Area Code 718

Astoria—28-60 Steinway St. (726-1279) The Big Hit; Black Dog; Deep Impact; He Got Game; The Object of My Affection; Woo.

Bay Terrace—211-01 26th Ave. and Bell Blvd., Bay-side (428-4040) Barney's Great Adventure; The Big Hit; City of Angels; Good Will Hunting; He Got Game; Lost in Space; The Odd Couple II; The Spanish Prisoner.

Centre Sunnyside—42-17 Queens Blvd. (361-6869) The Big Hit; Black Dog; Deep Impact; He Got Game; Paulie.

Cinema City—183-15 Horace Harding Expy., at 183rd St., Fresh Meadows (777-FILM#592) The Big Hit; He Got Game; Paulie; Woo.

Cinemart—106-03 Metropolitan Ave., at 72nd Rd., Forest Hills (261-2244) Chinese Box; Deep Impact; Paulie; The Spanish Prisoner; Titanic.

Continental—70-20 Austin St., Forest Hills (544-1020) Black Dog; Sliding Doors; The Object of My Affection.

Crossbay—94-11 Rockaway Blvd., at Woodhaven Blvd., Ozone Park (848-1738) He Got Game; Woo.

Crossbay II—92-10 Rockaway Blvd., at 93rd St., Ozone Park (641-5330) The Big Hit; Black Dog; Deep Impact; Lost in Space; The Players Club; The Object of My Affection; Titanic.

Elmwood—57-02 Hoffman Dr., Elmhurst (429-4770) The Big Hit; Deep Impact; He Got Game; Woo.

Forest Hills—107-16 Continental Ave., at Queens Blvd. (261-7866) City of Angels; Les Misérables.

Fresh Meadows—Eastbound Service Road, at 190th St. (777-FILM#619) Black Dog; Deep Impact; Les Misérables; Sliding Doors; The Object of My Affection; Titanic.

Jackson Triplex—82nd St. at Roosevelt Ave. (478-6777) The Big Hit; Deep Impact; He Got Game; Titanic.

Main Street Cinemas—72-66 Main St. (263-4828) Barney's Great Adventure; Deep Impact; Les Misérables; Paulie; Wild Things.

Midway—108-22 Queens Blvd., at 71st Ave., Forest Hills (261-8572) Closed for renovations.

Movieworld—242-02 61st Ave., off Exit 31, Douglaston (423-7200) The Big Hit; Black Dog; City of Angels; Deep Impact; Lost in Space; Paulie; The Object of My Affection; Titanic.

North Shore Towers—27-10 Grand Central Pkwy., Floral Park (229-7702) A Price Above Rubies.

Plaza—103-14 Roosevelt Ave., at 103rd St., Corona (639-0012) Deep Impact; Paulie.

The Movies at Bayside—38-39 Bell Blvd., at 39th Ave. (225-7711) Deep Impact; Les Misérables; Paulie; The Object of My Affection.

Trylon—98-81 Queens Blvd., at 66th Ave., Rego Park (459-8944) The Odd Couple II.

Staten Island

Area Code 718

Atrium—680 Arthur Kill Rd., nr. Richmond Ave., Eltingville (317-8300) Barney's Great Adventure; The Big Hit; Black Dog; City of Angels; Deep Impact; Les Misérables; The Odd Couple II; Paulie; Scream 2; The Object of My Affection.

Hylan Plaza—107 Mill Rd., at Hylan Blvd., New Dorp (351-0805) Black Dog; City of Angels; Deep

Impact; Paulie; The Object of My Affection.

The Movies at Staten Island—141 E. Service Rd., at Victory Blvd., Travis (983-9600) The Big Hit; Black Dog; City of Angels; Deep Impact; He Got Game; Les Misérables; Lost in Space; The Odd Couple II; Paulie; Sliding Doors; The Spanish Prisoner; The Object of My Affection; Woo.

Museums, Societies, Etc.

American Museum of the Moving Image—Through 6/28: "Indie New York." 5/16-5/17: *Chelsea Girls* (1966). 36-01 35th Ave., Astoria, Queens (718-784-0077); \$16 nonmembers; \$8 members.

Anthology Film Archives—Through 5/14: *Underground* (1995). 5/14-5/17: 5/20-5/24: *Lou Reed: Rock and Roll Heart* (1998). "Quay Brothers Retrospective." 5/15-5/17: Program 1. 5/18-5/22: Program 2. 5/16: *The Blue Angel* (1930). 5/18-5/22: *This Dream People Call Life* (1995). 5/19: *Fear of Heights* (1992). 32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (505-5110); \$7.

Different Light—5/17: *Walk on the Wild Side* (1962). 151 W. 19th St. (989-4850); free.

Film Society of Lincoln Center (The Walter Reade Theater)—"A Passage to Argentina." 5/12: *Beyond Oblivion* (1956) and *Rosaura at Ten O'Clock* (1958). 5/13-5/14: *Martin Fierno* (1968), *Heartbreak Tango* (1974), and *The Knight of the Sword* (1970). 5/15-5/16: *Mochius* (1996). 5/15 and 5/17: *The Angry Toy* (1997) and *Facundo, The Shadow of the Tiger* (1995). 5/16: *Buenos Aires Vice Versa* (1996). 5/19-5/20: *Under the Same Skin* (1997). 5/19-5/20: *The Boss* (1958). "Movies for Kids." 5/16-5/17: *Chasing the Kidneystone* (1996). Call 875-5601 for info. 65 W. 65th St., plaza level (875-5600); \$8.50.

French Institute—"Ciné-club." 5/12: *Trois Vies et une Seule Mort* (1996). 5/19: *Entrée des Artistes* (1938). Florence Gould Hall, 55 E. 59th St. (355-6160); \$7, festival tickets \$8.

Guggenheim Museum—"Dawn: Early Chinese Cinema." 5/13 and 5/15: *Street Angel* (1937) and *Family* (1941). 5/14: *Spring River Flows East* (1947) and *Spring in the Small Town* (1949). 1071 Fifth Ave., at 88th St. (423-3587).

Museum of Modern Art—"Coming Apart: Films from 1968 and Thereabouts." 5/12 and 5/14: *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). 5/14: *Rosemary's Baby* (1968). 5/15: *Easy Rider* (1969), *I Was 19* (1968), and *Point Blank* (1967). 5/18-5/19: *My Night at Maud's* (1969). 5/19: *Lucia* (1969). "Baby It's Cold Outside: Films From Finland." 5/15: *One Man's War* (1973). 5/15-5/16: *Hulda from Juurako* (1937). 5/16: *Substitute Husband* (1936), *Restaurant Patrons Seen Through the Eyes of a Camera* (1930), *When Father Has a Toothache* (1923), and *The Village Shoemakers* (1923). 5/17: *Blue Week* (1954) and *Evacuated* (1956). 5/18: *Eight Deadly Shots* (1972). "Robin Hood Weekend." 5/16-5/17: *Robin Hood* (1922) and *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938). "New Documentaries." 5/14-5/15: *TropiCola* (1997). 5/8: *Gratian* (1995). "The Unknown Alain Delon." 5/12: *The Swimming Pool* (1969). "Big as Life: An American History of 8mm Films." 5/14: Films by Berry, Adkins, Murray, Barrie, and Avery. 11 W. 53rd St. (708-9400); free with \$9.50 admission.

Museum of Television & Radio—"TV Movies." Month of May: *Skokie* (1978). 25 W. 52nd St. (621-6600); \$6.

Symphony Space—"The Envelope Please: 50 Years of Foreign Film and the Academy Awards." 5/12: *Z* (1969) and *The Battle of Algiers* (1967). 5/19: *Mon Oncle* (1958) and *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (1964). 2537 Broadway, at 96th St. (864-5400); \$8, \$5 members.

The Screening Room—Weekends at midnight: *Valley of the Dolls* (1967). Sunday brunch: *Valley of the Dolls* and *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961). 54 Varick St., below Canal St. (334-2100); \$8 (\$5 for Sunday-brunch patrons).

YWCA Cine-Club—"A Celebration of Japanese Cinema." 5/16-5/17: *The Crucified Lovers* (1934). 610 Lexington Ave., at 53rd St. (735-9717); \$5 members, \$6 nonmembers.

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lethal diss of venerable rap veteran L. L. Cool J. "It's hot," Cipa insists.

"Mm, I don't know . . ." Flex says. In the single, Canibus takes L.L. to task for how success has supposedly made him soft—a sitcom star, a pretty boy ("You walkin' around showin' off your body 'cause it sells, plus to avoid the fact that you ain't got skills!"). Hearing the song feels like what it would be to watch a minor mayor from upstate get on television and call Mayor Giuliani a fascist, a creep.

"I don't know . . ." says Flex. L.L. is a friend. On top of which, Flex knows, giving this thing play could start an all-out war. But listening to the lines—"If you really wanna show off, we can get it on, live in front of the cameras on your own sitcom"—Flex starts to giggle a little. "Let's play it once and see what happens," he says finally.

The phones light up before the track is over. The faxes come whirring in: "Yo Flex Play That Canibus Shit Again!" Flex sighs. His face seems to say, "L.L. isn't gonna like *this*." In fact, the rapper didn't at all, responding with an anti-Canibus single of his own; Flex plays it on air regularly these days. Canibus, meanwhile, has a top-ten rap hit. The war is on. It started, as it only could, on Flex's show.

"It's hot, it's hot," says Cipa, listening. "As fish grease!" says Flex.

AT THE SONY AFTER-GRAMMY PARTY at the Hammerstein Ballroom, Will Smith and Jada Pinkett are holding hands. Celine Dion is conversing with Gloria Estefan (so much in common). Bob Dylan—both irritated and comatose-looking after the "Soy Bomb" incident—is scowling. The party's in full swing.

In a booth high above the Nobu sushi and floating trays of Campagna hors d'oeuvre, Flex peers down over the sea of tuxes and Audrey Hepburn-in-Breakfast at Tiffany's hairdos. He's making some calculations. "Corporate heads, not real heads," he murmurs. This is an industry party. "I think this is a little stuffy," he says. But not for long. Flex starts tossing on the Marvin Gaye, the Earth, Wind and Fire, and Temptations—old-school tunes for an old-school crowd—mixing it all up with his favorite rappers. "Give it up for Biggie!" he orders the room. Hands wave high. Then the bow ties are twisting off, the hairdos flying apart greasily. Beefy-faced men are getting down like it's a high-school dance. Flex gazes out at the crowd going wild. "I like taking people up and down and up and down. It excites me."

He looks satisfied. "It's funny, what music can do to somebody," he says. ■