

Kool & the Gang: Robert "Spike" Mickens, Claydes "Charles" Smith, Robert "Kool" Bell, James "J.T." Taylor, Ronald Khalis Bell, "Funky" George Brown, and Dennis "Dee Tee" Thomas (from left), 1981



PERFORMERS

KOOL & THE GANG

THESE PROGENITORS OF FUNK ARE ALSO THE AUTHORS OF SOME OF POP MUSIC'S MOST MEMORABLE - AND DANCEABLE - ANTHEMS.

BY RJ SMITH



You can think of Kool & the Gang as a worldwide generator of good feelings. They are that, for sure. But at their core is a forceful, deep funk born on the streets of Jersey City, which came out of their love of jazz and their fight for survival. It's this fight, this sound of hard-nosed rhythm and soulful expression, that speaks across genres and generations and has

made them not only the authors of some of our most memorable anthems but also the most sampled group in hip-hop history.

Bassist Robert Bell's pops was a boxer in a Black neighborhood on the Upper West Side of Manhattan; upstairs from the gym where he worked out, Bell's father heard the jazz pianist Thelonious Monk practicing, and some of Bell's earliest memories are of his dad

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: On Don Kirshner's Rock Concert, 1974; a streamlined lineup, 1978; on *Midnight Special*, 1974.



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”

talking about Miles Davis and Monk – who became his godfather. The Bells relocated to Youngstown, Ohio, where young Robert and his brother Ronald would collect old paint cans and make beats on them, as they couldn't afford drums. When the family moved to Jersey City, New Jersey, Robert devised his persona: “Everyone in the neighborhood had a nickname and here was I, a real country boy, so I decided I better have a nickname too so I could fit in,” he explained. “There were a couple of guys around called ‘Cool’; I liked that name, so I thought I'd spell it with a ‘K.’”

In a corner of Jersey City, Robert, along with his brother Ronald Khalis, a saxophonist and keyboardist; trumpeter Robert “Spike” Mickens; guitarist Claydes “Charles” Smith; saxophonist/flautist Dennis “Dee Tee” Thomas; keyboardist Ricky Westfield; and drummer “Funky” George Brown formed a bond (most of them while at Lincoln High School) that led to bigger things. There were diversions; Kool ran with the Imperial Lords gang for a while. But even at 14, he could see a future in music, and with his high school pals they formed a succession of New Jersey bands mixing jazz and R&B. They called themselves Five

Sounds, followed by Jazziacs, then Jazzbirds, and then Kool and the Flames.

They were riding the bus to their gigs, while the crowds and sound grew bigger: grooves modeled on James Brown's band but twisting and changing direction unpredictably, loaded with solos from everybody on hand. Jazz was their teacher: Multi-instrumentalist Ronald Khalis Bell, who would become the group's producer and arranger, later explained how his “greatest influence was John Coltrane. When I heard him, that was it, then I knew. It was like a call you know [...] that's what brought me into it.” They were gigging with jazz stars like McCoy Tyner, Leon Thomas, and Pharoah Sanders.

In 1969, Gene Redd, a New York cop and onetime executive at King Records, signed them to De-Lite, a fledgling Brooklyn-based label straddling what had been soul and what was going to be disco. With Redd's encouragement, the group changed its name to Kool & the Gang, and they quickly became the biggest act on De-Lite.

Look at the cover of their self-titled 1969 debut: eight young men standing on the street, staring at the camera like they want to eat it, like they don't know



Getting down at Radio
City Music Hall,
New York City, 1982



if they are gonna ever get off that street. The music barely had a name yet, but the word in the air was funk – a bad smell embraced with love because it was real, and Kool & the Gang were making great funk from the start.

There was no singer on their early albums, but there were a lot of voices in the background – voices from the corner, block party cheers and playground shouts, street noise lifting the grooves and breaking them up, grooves switching back and exposing drum breaks and horn solos galore. Equal parts joy and nervousness, it was music you could dance to, but you had to be alert to the changes the band put you through.

Later, fans around the world rightly heard in the music a party all were invited to. But from the start, Kool & the Gang were speaking to a Black audience that came up the way they had. The way critic Vernon Gibbs put it in 1974, they “got the sweaty groove, midnight at the Five Spot, laid back and curling. Got the tension, got the flow, got the fire that was blazing up

from those times. Got the screech and the holler, got the distance. Got the urge of Black genius rebelling against confinement, got the creative simmer, got the go. Got the passion.”

Fans loved them but they weren’t hitting it on radio. Challenged by its label, the band took note of a fledgling subculture on the rise. “We began looking at ways of breaking through, bypassing the radio,” Dennis “Dee Tee” Thomas explained. “Now once that would have been impossible, but the discotheques were beginning to spring up and we could see what they were into. We needed to make a much harder, funkier, tighter kinda thing than what we’d been doing.”

Tailoring their sound to the coalescing audience became a gateway to bigger things. On their fourth studio release, *Wild and Peaceful* (1973), Kool & the Gang scored three hits – “Funky Stuff,” “Jungle Boogie,” and “Hollywood Swinging” – each rendering urban America as a playground that never went to sleep. Suddenly they had a bigger, whiter audience, and were playing national



FROM TOP:
Ronald Khalis
Bell (left) and
J.T. Taylor in
the studio,
1984; on
German
TV, 1985;
backstage in
London, 1982.



FROM TOP:
In New York City, 1984;
Dee Tee Thomas (left) and
Robert Bell (right) joined by
Nile Rodgers as they receive
the Marian Anderson Award,
Philadelphia, 2019.

TV shows. At the same time, they recorded music for a legendary album called *Hustlers Convention*, a project shaped by Last Poets member Jalal Mansur Nuriddin, using the name of Lightnin' Rod. *Hustlers Convention* (1973) was a remarkable evocation of Black street corner rhymes set to funk.

Kool & the Gang had been making great dance music before disco, and the inferno they helped establish both recognized their game and tossed it aside in the pursuit of novelty. Although their disco hit, "Open Sesame," was featured in the global phenomenon *Saturday Night Fever*, the band felt a need to again revise its sound. Instrumental in the effort was an undersung Black industry entrepreneur with connections in assorted directions – SOLAR Records' Dick Griffey. Witnessing contemporary bands who'd exploded over the previous few years, from Earth, Wind & Fire to the Commodores, Griffey told Kool

in 1978 that his group really ought to get a singer. That led them to bring in James "J.T." Taylor, a smooth-voiced crooner from Hackensack, New Jersey.

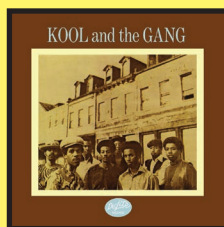
They also brought in Brazilian producer Eumir Deodato to take the reins. "Deo" had achieved marked pop success with jazz-tinged acts, as well as a hugely successful collaboration with Earth, Wind & Fire. His own jazz-funk hit "Also Sprach Zarathustra (2001)" had preceded "Funky Stuff" on the pop charts a few years earlier. He didn't mess around, creating a cleaner sound for the band with more pop structure. With J.T. on the mic and Deodato behind the board, a new smooth, precise era opened before them.

Not long after J.T. had arrived, Robert and his wife, Deborah, were at Studio 54 when they noticed the venue featured a regular ladies' night. Light bulb flashing, he talked about it with drummer George Brown,

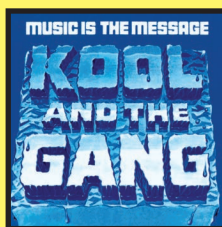


Ronald Khalis Bell, Robert Bell, Dee Tee Thomas, and George Brown (from left) receive Kool & the Gang's star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, 2015.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



Kool & the Gang
1969 (De-Lite)



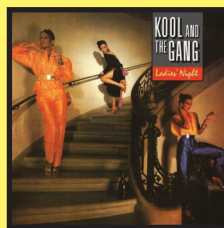
Music Is the Message
1972 (De-Lite)



Wild and Peaceful
1973 (De-Lite)



Light of Worlds
1974 (De-Lite)



Ladies' Night
1979 (De-Lite)



Celebrate!
1980 (De-Lite)



Something Special
1981 (De-Lite)



Emergency
1984 (De-Lite)

then walked into his brother's home studio with those two words. "Ladies' night?" Ronald Khalis replied. "They have those all over the world." In 1979, Kool & the Gang's "Ladies' Night" became a massive hit. A year later, they returned with the undeniable "Celebration," a Number One hit that became associated variously with the 1981 American hostages returning from Iran, the 1982 St. Louis Cardinals, Wendy's crispy chicken nuggets, and the astronauts aboard the International Space Station for whom "Celebration" served as a wake-up call. It has been played at weddings, bar mitzvahs, and sports events ever since; Ronald explained that it was inspired by lines Robert read in the Quran (Robert and Ronald Khalis converted to Islam in 1972). During J.T.'s nine years on board, Kool & the Gang released their four biggest albums: *Ladies' Night* (1979), *Celebrate!* (1980), *Something Special* (1981), and *Emergency* (1984).

Despite the recent deaths of key members, Kool & the Gang have kept the groove going. They have recorded twenty-six studio albums, most recently *People Just Wanna Have Fun* (2023), and they have featured dozens of band members over the years. They have been playing live for six decades, and earned the nickname the Black Stones, because like the other ones, they keep rolling. They performed for Nelson Mandela, and they were the only band President Obama gave permission to ignore the embargo of Cuba. They have gone on the road with Van Halen, and performed in Dubai and Monte Carlo. They have a star on the Hollywood and the Youngstown, Ohio, walks of fame. The other Stones can't say that. Tonight, we welcome them to join their peers in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.