



BEASTIE BOYS

A L A N L I G H T

ONE OF HIP-HOP'S FINEST LIVE ACTS

The Beastie Boys altered the direction of popular music at least three times, and lived to tell the tale. Their 1986 debut album, *Licensed to Ill*, was the first hip-hop album to reach Number One on the charts, and did more than any other recording to introduce the genre to the suburban masses. *Paul's Boutique*, the 1989 followup, is generally considered the pinnacle of hip-hop's golden era of sampling, and is still viewed as one of the finest rap albums ever made. The Beasties' third album, 1992's *Check Your Head*, solidified a truce between the worlds of hip-hop and alternative rock, creating a kind of global hipster coalition that cast a decade-long shadow.

And that wasn't even the end of their accomplishments: Michael Diamond (Mike D), Adam Horowitz (Ad-Rock), and Adam Yauch (MCA) have not only continued to make hits and maintain their status as one of hip-hop's finest live acts, they also became pioneers in music video,

social activism, and street-level entrepreneurship. "One of my favorite groups is the Beasties," no less than Bono himself once said. "Their journey is really one to watch, from just having fun with their own middle-class-ness to a growing awareness of the way the world is." In 2011, twenty-five years after their initial Budweiser-fueled assault on high school parking lots and college frats, the *Hot Sauce Committee Part Two* disc debuted in *Billboard's* Number Two slot and turned up on lists of the year's best albums.

In 1987, the very idea that the Beastie Boys would end up in the (then newly established) Rock and Roll Hall of Fame would have been preposterous. Everybody knew that these knuckleheads were just a novelty act—three smart-ass, white, Jewish, New York City kids, clever enough to come up with a shtick that clicked with MTV viewers and then ride it for all it was worth.

But the truth was that Diamond, Horowitz, and Yauch



were more sophisticated, and more experienced, than that. Growing up in New York City during the economic drought and cultural explosion of the 1970s, they were a product of the hardcore matinees at CBGB and the early hip-hop nights at the Roxy. When the Manhattan high-schoolers (initially Diamond, Yauch, John Berry, and future Luscious Jackson drummer Kate Schellenbach) decided to start a band, “kind of as a joke,” according to Yauch, they gave it “the stupidest name” they could think of—Beastie Boys.

After releasing the high-velocity punk EP *Polly Wog Stew* in 1982, they started to mess around with hip-hop, first documented with the snotty, prank phone call antics of the disc’s “Cooky Puss.” They solidified the Beastie Boys lineup into a trio with Horovitz, and connected with NYU student Rick Rubin—known as “DJ Double R” at the time—and their sound and



OPENING PAGE Adam Horovitz (Ad-Rock), Adam Yauch (MCA), and Michael Diamond (Mike D) (from left), 2004. **THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP** Beastie-robics, 1987; movin’ the crowd, 1987; clowning, 1987; with RUN DMC, 1987.

style came into focus. They fell in with the newly birthed Def Jam Records, where they were accepted because, as friend and early collaborator DMC once said, "they were so real—it wasn't like a bunch of white guys faking just to be down with hip-hoppers."

New manager Russell Simmons scammed the trio a slot opening for Madonna on the Virgin Tour in 1985, where their profane hollering and crotch grabbing horrified the tween-age Madonna-wannabes in the crowd. "Every night, they'd go out and make 95 percent of the people in the audience hate them," said Simmons. "But they built that other 5 percent into a fan base." (For her part, Madonna said, "I thought they were so adorable.")

Meanwhile, the songs they were recording with Rubin—sonic breakthroughs like "Hold It, Now Hit It" and "Slow and Low"—were starting to break on hip-hop radio. The LP that resulted was nothing less than a phenomenon: *Licensed*

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THE ULTIMATE TASTEMAKERS AND COOLHUNTERS



to *Ill*'s nonstop barrage of “a lot of beer, a lot of girls, and a lot of cursing,” powered by Rubin’s crunching, kaleidoscopic grooves, quickly sold four million copies. The tape loops—these were the days before digital samplers—came from Led Zeppelin, the *Mr. Ed* TV show, and the funk band War, and added unprecedented detail and dimension to the tracks.

They were perfectly positioned on the edge between clever and stupid—the *Village Voice* review of *Licensed to Ill* was headlined, “Three Jerks Make a Masterpiece”—and things really exploded when the irresistibly idiotic anthem “(You Gotta) Fight for Your Right (to Party)” took off as a hit single in 1987. The Beasties later apologized for the song, saying it was “a goof on the whole ‘Smokin’ in the Boys Room’/‘I Wanna Rock’ type of song” (which it was), and that “it sucks” (which it totally doesn’t). They finally seemed to make their peace with it on the 2011 hit “Make Some Noise” and the accompanying “Fight for Your Right (Revisited)”

video, an all-star, time-traveling sequel to the original clip.

The *Licensed to Ill* shows—with a full bar set up on DJ Hurricane’s mixing table, girls writhing in cages, and a thirty-foot hydraulic phallus emerging at the, um, climax—were pandemonium. Eventually, though, the pressures of trying to live up to their onstage personae, and touring for too long, actually broke up the Beastie Boys in 1988. But after moving to Los Angeles and regrouping with the Dust Brothers production team, the trio set up shop in a pimped-out Hollywood house and started writing rhymes again. The final result was 1989’s head-spinning epic, *Paul’s Boutique*. The lyrics were dense and hilarious, and the music was simply breathtaking, a hyper-elaborate patchwork of intricately layered beats and samples. (It’s no accident that such other masterworks as Public Enemy’s *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* and De La Soul’s *3 Feet High and Rising* came out around the same time;

it was the perfect moment when copyright law had not caught up to new sampling technology.)

But *Paul's Boutique* confounded the kids who had loved the simpler thrills of *Licensed to Ill*, and the album didn't even crack the Top Ten. This was a blessing—a perfect career move—which enabled the Beasties to jettison their mass-market expectations, and drill down to the wiseacre bohemians who made up their most natural following.

They moved operations into their own Los Angeles studio space, complete with skateboard ramp and basketball court, and picked up the instruments they had put away when they left punk behind. The jamming turned into 1992's *Check Your Head*. The disc's blend of punk, funk, and rap resulted in a huge hit and served as the blueprint for the group's recordings for the rest of the decade.

During the course of the nineties, the Beastie Boys became the ultimate tastemakers and coolhunters, building an empire that would include a magazine, record label, and clothing line. They embodied a sensibility that merged the worlds of hip-hop, skateboarding, and urban chic, developing themselves as a "brand" when such talk probably would have earned you a well-deserved smack. They also put their clout to good use by organizing a series of concerts to benefit the people of Tibet and their nonviolent struggle for independence. It was a long way from the days of "Beastie Boys always on vacation."

The hits kept coming: In 1994, *Ill Communication* was the group's first Number One album since *Licensed to Ill*, and the jacked-up single, "Sabotage," was accompanied by a mustache-heavy music video that parodied seventies cop

shows and might just be the finest clip MTV ever aired. After returning to New York and setting up shop in a dingy basement studio, they created 1998's *Hello Nasty*, a B-boy bouillabaisse that included the warp-speed cutting of Mix Master Mike, some club beats, dub wizard Lee "Scratch" Perry, and even some actual singing. The electro-stomp of "Intergalactic" gave the Beasties their biggest single since "Fight for Your Right."

The twenty-first century saw the release of a post-September 11 valentine to New York City titled *To the 5 Boroughs*, the group's first entirely self-produced album. It was a stripped-down tribute to the music that first inspired them, shot through with political protest and an acknowledgment of their pride in being "funky-ass Jews."

The Beastie Boys were working on an album called *Hot Sauce Committee*, and playing some massive shows (including a headlining set at Bonnaroo), when Yauch was diagnosed with a tumor in his salivary gland in 2009. Eighteen months later, treatment had restored him to full health, if not yet left him entirely cancer-free—he wasn't strong enough to tour, but the group was able to complete the album (now titled *Hot Sauce Committee Part Two*), widely acclaimed as a return to form.

"At the end of the day," Michael Diamond once said, "we're doing this for ourselves, to make ourselves happy. And that hasn't changed in all these years. That was the game plan from Day One." More than twenty-five years after being written off as a joke, there's no telling what the Beastie Boys are capable of. They've still got more stories than J.D.'s got Salinger. They've got more hits than Sadaharu Oh. They can't, they won't, and they don't stop.

OPPOSITE PAGE Live in 1990; with DJ Hurricane, Reading, England, 1998.
THIS PAGE Live in Central Park, 2007.

