# HOW THE LATIN RASCALS MASTERED THE MEGAMIX

I can still feel the excitement in my blood when I think about some of the first visits to record label offices, once I crossed that line from hobbyist to professional DJ. After playing in clubs for a year or so, and then getting on the radio, by 1990 I was given an open-door invitation to stop by the offices of the very record labels whose 12-inches I had purchased religiously for years with my hard-earned cash (and school book money): Profile, Nu Groove, Cold Chillin', Big Beat, Tommy Boy, Sleeping Bag/Fresh, Def Jam, etc. Several of these first visits are etched in my memory, particularly the first time I went to Tuff City, at the time the home of The Cold Crush Brothers, The 45 King, Lakim Shabbazz, Spoonie G and others.

Arriving at Tuff City's address, I surmised that despite being the first hip-hop indie to ink a deal with a major, it had not experienced the financial windfall that others had. Their offices were in a very modest midtown office building with virtually no staff, piles of vinyl stacked throughout haphazardly. But before reaching the actual office, I entered the elevator with another individual, a mild-mannered, slightly chubby guy with glasses who struck up a conversation with me after he noticed I was carrying a bag of 12-inch vinyl. He asked if I was going to Tuff City, and introduced himself as Ed Chisolm, the head of promotion for the label. Before we reached our floor, told me he was also a songwriter and had penned "Let The Music Play" and "Give Me Tonight" by Shannon. My polite response hid my disbelief. In my head, I was thinking "yeah, right!"

Shannon's back-to-back hits were utterly massive! They dominated radio and clubs, crossed over into the mainstream, and appealed to the hip-hop, R&B and club crowds. The songs ushered in a sound that would initially be called Latin hip-hop, which evolved into freestyle, the uptempo cousin of 80s electro hip-hop. The genre typically borrowed a variant of the drum pattern laid down in Bambaataa's "Planet Rock."

To become transfixed by either song did not require multiple listens. It was immediate. The gated kick drums, hitting below those arpeggiated synths, followed by the melodic chords repeated through a delay, and that staccato baseline just grabbed you and gave you that feeling, the one that makes you squint your eyes and move your neck, even before Shannon does her thing with her seductively restrained verses and explosive chorus.

After finishing my record run and returning to my apartment, I made a bee-line to my records and found the stack of red and gray-striped 12-inches that made up my collection of records released by Shannon's label, Emergency. I pulled out my Shannon 12"s, and there it was, in black and white, below the song title of each song (Chris Barbosa—Ed Chisolm). At that naive age, I would have assumed that anyone who wrote two of the biggest songs from the first half of the 80s would be taking calls from Madonna in their penthouse recording studio overlooking Central Park.

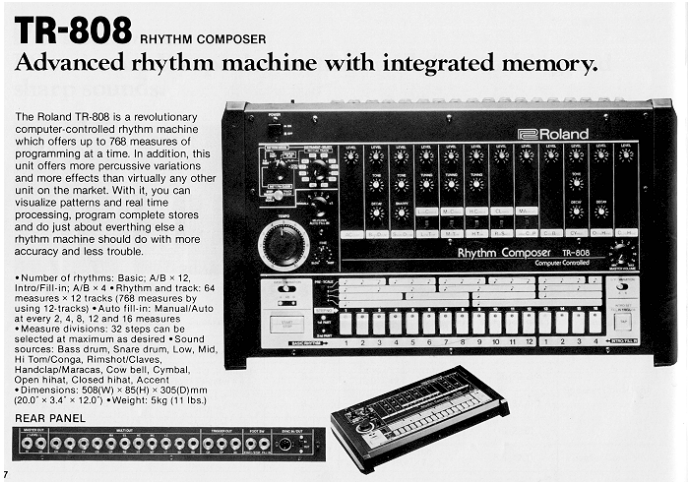

It was an eye-opener, a reality check of sorts, that showed me that the music industry has a shiny veneer but is really made up of hard workers living from song to song. Some of these forgotten talents were masters of melody, while some were technical geniuses that took existing technologies and squeezed every ounce of creativity from them as humanly possible.

In fact, it would be impossible to talk about modern music without talking about technology. It's the love affair between the two that has pushed music production forward, starting with the earliest mono tape decks, then multi-track recorders, the subsequent synthesizers, samplers, sequencers and eventually, software-based instruments and recording platforms. Throughout this history, developments in technology directly shaped the sounds of their time, just as, conversely, the imagination of producers and engineers guided the design and sonic aesthetics of the never-ending evolution of music technology.

I'm old enough to have witnessed first hand the majority of this history. I was drawn to music not just by what I was hearing (and then with MTV, seeing) but also by the machines used on stage and in the studio. As a teen, discovering cassette four track recorders and synthesizers, DJing with mixers and turntables, and then early drum machines and samplers, my musical interest expanded to include, more and more, music made by machines. Whether it was a synth that could emulate lush strings or create a sound that had no musical reference, but still sounded great, or a drum machine spitting out a relentless beat, each of these pieces of gear on their own possessed a kind of magic. They had futuristic or hi-tech names, like Emulator or DMX. They did things with sound that were previously unthinkable… and in many cases, unplanned.


Modern music's path is littered with fantastic unintended results. I'm quite sure the good folks at Technics, when developing their series of direct-drive turntables, never envisioned what hip-hop DJs would do with them in the 80s, leading to a new musical language, turntablism. When Marley Marl sampled a drum from a record for the first time, in an instant changing the way music is made, he had no manual guiding him, nor did he have existing records to emulate, no pun intended.

Consider the beloved Roland TR-808: released in 1980, it was virtually obsolete by 1982, when it was used in "Planet Rock." Another two years later—an eternity in technology—the sub-bass sound created by tuning the 808 kick all the way down became the signature sound of hip-hop, pumping out of New York from 1984 to 1986 (Run-DMC, LL Cool J, Beastie Boys), years after most producers deemed the machine unusable. Think about that: a machine (or rather its sound) that for a time could be found at a thrift shop or flea market became the most identifiable electronic musical instrument, perhaps in the history of music, with a lifespan of several decades and counting.




Arguably the greatest technological innovation in music was the use of magnetic tape to record audio, the first step towards the creation of the recording industry. It allowed music makers to record and re-record performances. Additionally, with the precision of a steady hand and razor blade, tape could be cut and spliced to edit and rearrange compositions. Before the advent of multi-track technology, master recordings were created by splicing together various pieces of tape from as many studio takes as were needed in a recording session, creating the illusion of a perfect performance.

In the 80s a very small group of young DJs and engineers took tape editing to places that the designers and manufacturers of tape machines could never have imagined, similar to what turntablists did with turntables. Unlike DJs, however, this group had virtually no predecessors to be mentored by. Almost out of thin air, Chep Nuñez, Albert Cabrera & Tony Moran (together as The Latin Rascals), and Omar Santana (a Latin Rascal affiliate) transformed tape editing from a passive, transparent engineering process into a prominent rhythmic element. These tape editors infused records from across the club music spectrum—including hip-hop, new wave, freestyle and R&B—with a sense of kinetic excitement, perfecting a technique that would inspire the digital cut-ups so common in contemporary dance and electronic music.

For a brief time in the early 80s, this elite cadre of tape editors were sought out by the best producers and labels to add their touch to records, getting prominent billing on label credits. "Edited by the Latin Rascals" would be a selling point, which is kind of wild, considering they weren't remixing, adding keyboards or overdubbing drums, but were instead cutting up phrases and beats, extending sections, adding rapid-fire silence and deck stop effects.

This editing process was a combination of masterful technique and vision. To achieve these edits, sections that were to be used in the edit would be dubbed from a master tape to another tape deck, however many times necessary, and the new material would be cut up. Doing this now is as easy as moving a cursor to the edit point, but with tape, the technique was entirely tactile and manual.

The tape would be rocked back and forth over the tape head to find the precise edit point, which would be marked with a white pencil. The tape would then be released from the machine heads and then run through an editing block which would hold it in place and allow it to be sliced by a razor which would be guided by a perpendicular groove. This isolated piece would then be spliced together with another piece of tape and this process would be repeated over and over, resulting in the final "edit."

Most of the records that were edited were produced with a sequencer on a fixed tempo grid, so an editor would have to make sure the tempo of his edits matched it. The start of a single bar would be marked on the tape and the distance to the next marked bar would be measured. Using a calculator, the distance in millimeters for 1/4 notes, 1/8 notes and 1/16 notes could be determined. This process, also known as "bullet editing," was incredibly time-consuming and involved a great deal of imagination. Hearing a new edit, the way it distorted time, was thrilling. Watching these edits play on a reel-to-reel machine, with the myriad of taped-together sections flying by one after the other over the tape heads, was spectacular.

It make sense that the Latin Rascals would first meet at Downtown Records, at the time on Worth Street in Lower Manhattan. Sure, it was record store, but it was so much more, a virtual community center for anyone interested in the sounds of urban New York City. Inside you'd find aspiring artists, producers with demos, indie label guys looking to sell their wax, bedroom DJs looking for the latest releases and even known artists and DJs who benefitted from talking to fans for honest feedback. Downtown specialized in 12-inch vinyl which was, for the most part, one of just two ways to get the latest underground records.

Since most of these artists never went on to get album deals, to possess their music meant buying their record. The other way was, of course, taping these records off of radio mixshows or from your friend. In 1981, Tony Moran was an employee at Downtown and frequently was behind the store's turntables playing new promos. Anthony Cabrera would come to the store and get his edit-filled mixes played. One day, the programming director from 92.3 WKTU, then known as Disco 92, was in the shop and heard one of these mixes and asked for a copy. In time, The Latin Rascals' edits were being played on the station and soon after, they would have a daily lunchtime mixshow. As their star grew, they moved to 98.7 Kiss-FM.

Text: Stretch Armstrong
Quelle: Cuepoint
Layout: Bruno Gullo