

This Is A Fuckin' Business

By Khadija Alam and Rachel Kahn

In 1999, when Yasiin Bey (then-known as Mos Def) and Talib Kweli hear about the killing of Amadou Diallo, they know they have to respond.

A year later, they release Hip Hop for Respect. The EP features 41 rappers, and it gets released when much of New York City is enraged after the four cops who shot Amadou are acquitted.

24 years later, Khadija Alam and Rachel Kahn ask: Why has no one heard Hip Hop for Respect? And does it still matter?

TRANSCRIPT

ARCHIVAL GRAMMYS TAPE

TREVOR NOAH: And the Grammy goes to... I Can't Breathe, H.E.R.

CROWD: [Applause]

MUSIC: [I Can't Breathe by H.E.R.]

If we all agree that we're equal as people

Then why can't we see what is evil?

I can't breathe

KHADIJA: A few years ago, H.E.R. won one of the biggest awards at the Grammys: Song of the Year.

H.E.R.: I didn't imagine that my fear and that my pain would turn into impact and it would possibly turn into change.

KHADIJA: The song's called "I Can't Breathe." It gets its name from the last words that Eric Garner spoke before he was choked to death by an NYPD officer.

ARCHIVAL ABC NEWS TAPE

ANCHOR: America's largest police force is facing a serious controversy over a video that's gone viral showing officers arresting a suspect who later died.

KHADIJA: H.E.R. released the track less than a month after George Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. It's part of a long history of musicians using their art to speak out about police brutality. From N.W.A.

MUSIC: *Fuck the police / Fu-fu-fuck the police*

KHADIJA: To Kendrick Lamar.

MUSIC: *We gon' be alright / We gon' be alright*

KHADIJA: Back in the 90s, an up-and-coming hip hop duo were doing the same thing.

MUSIC: [Definition by Black Star]

One, two three

Mos Def and Talib Kweli

We came to rock it on to the tip-hop

Best alliance in hip-hop, Y-O

KHADIJA: Their names are Yasiin Bey and Talib Kweli. You might know Yasiin as Mos Def, that's what he was going by back then. Together, the two of them are known as Black Star.

KHADIJA: Socially conscious hip hop is their bread and butter. So back in 1999, when an unarmed Black man was killed by four white cops in the Bronx, they knew they had to respond.

KHADIJA: The man's name was Amadou Diallo. He was 23 years old. The police fired 41 shots into the doorway where he stood. 19 hit him. The first one likely killed him.

RACHEL: A lot of musicians released songs inspired by Amadou's death. Wyclef Jean, The Strokes, Roy Campbell Jr, and most famously, Bruce Springsteen.

MUSIC: [American Skin (41 Shots) by Bruce Springsteen]

It ain't no secret (It ain't no secret)

No secret, my friend

You get killed just for living in your American skin

RACHEL: But Yasiin and Talib's project was different. It was special — they got 41 artists to come and feature on the EP, and they planned to give the money they made to charity.

RACHEL: They called the project Hip Hop for Respect. Because this wasn't just any protest song, this was hip hop's response. It was coming from people who were the same race as

Amadou. Who were close to the same age. Who even lived in the same city — a city that was angry.

ARCHIVAL ASSOCIATED PRESS TAPE

CROWD: No justice, no peace! No justice, no peace!

RACHEL: But, you've probably never heard of that EP. It never won any awards, it's not on streaming platforms, and it was barely played on the radio — which was a huge deal back then.

RACHEL: We spoke to journalists who've been covering hip hop for decades — even some of *them* had never heard of the song.

SHOE LEATHER MUSIC

RACHEL: But we wanted to know: if an EP brings together over 41 rappers to protest the killing of a Black man by police — but no one hears it — does still it matter? Does Hip Hop for Respect still matter?

KHADIJA: This is Shoe Leather, an investigative podcast that digs up stories from New York City's past to find out how yesterday's news affects us today. This season, we're going back to 1999 to tell the story of Amadou Diallo.

ARCHIVAL ABC NEWS TAPE

ANCHOR: Amadou Diallo was unarmed. A 22 year old West African immigrant with no criminal history, shot to death last week by four New York City police officers.

KHADIJA: I'm Khadija Alam.

RACHEL: And I'm Rachel Kahn. This is Shoe Leather season five, After Amadou. You're listening to This Is A Fuckin' Business.

MUSIC OUT

BUSINESS IS NOT USUAL

KHADIJA: In the days after Amadou Diallo's death, Jarret Myer is at work. He runs the record label Rawkus.

JARRET MYER: I remember being in my office and Devin pulling me aside. A good portion of the artists signed to Rawkus were Black artists, particularly Black male artists. Devin was a Black woman.

KHADIJA: Jarret's talking about Devin Roberson, who was the head publicist at Rawkus.

JARRET: And she wanted to make sure I fully understood the gravity of the situation. I do remember her being like, we're going to do something and you're going to support this. It was a, it was everything stops for a moment and we address it. Business is not usual. It was a very big deal.

KHADIJA: Rawkus is an independent label, so when the artists care about a cause, Rawkus listens.

JARRET MYER: If you're signed to like, let's say Universal, and all of a sudden you want Universal to care about, you know, something that's going on in the world that's meaningful to you as an artist. Their attitude is, you know, we're a big corporation. We don't do that. And if you have a problem with it, you can sit down because there's a million other artists here. We were really in partnership with those artists. I mean, it wasn't, there was no label without those artists. And so we were there to very much service their vision.

KHADIJA: And the label especially cares when those artists are Yasiin Bey and Talib Kweli.

RACHEL: Yasiin and Talib are Rawkus's rising stars.

MUSIC: [Intro by Black Star]

RACHEL: In 1998, a year before Amadou's death, Yasiin and Talib create a duo called Black Star. They release an album: "Mos Def and Talib Kweli are Black Star." Pretty self explanatory.

It's like that. Mos Def and Kweli. (Black Star... guide me... Black Star... Black Star)

It's like that. Mos Def and Kweli. (Black Star)

RACHEL: Black Star does a style of hip hop called "conscious rap," or "progressive rap."

RACHEL: Here's Yasiin and Talib explaining what that means in an interview in 1999.

ARCHIVAL BET TAPE

YASIIN BEY: People always say the like, you know, we're progressive rap or we're purist hip hop. What? Like, you know. And I'm like, okay, if that's the case, then like, what are the alternatives to this? What is like purist as opposed to like, watered down or.

TALIB KWELI: Progressive as opposed to stagnant.

YASIIN BEY: Right.

TALIB KWELI: You're not one of those platinum stagnant rappers. We're more progressive.

YASIIN BEY: You know? I mean, we just, you know, we're rhyming about what's sincere and real to us. I mean, we we both have a, you feel like we have a responsibility to be mindful of

what we saying. And, we not going to make a certain type of record just because that's the type of record you got to make to make money.

RACHEL: But for Talib and Yasiin, even a serious song can be a hit.

MUSIC: [Definition by Black Star]

RACHEL: The album's lead single, Definition, reached 60 on the Billboard Hot 100. In the song, Yasiin and Talib rap about the murders of hip hop legends Tupac Shakur and The Notorious B.I.G.

I said one two three

It's kind of dangerous to be a emcee

They shot Tupac and Biggie

Too much violence in hip-hop, Y-O

RACHEL: I get why the song was a hit. It's talking about serious issues, like violence in hip hop. But man is it catchy.

RACHEL: In that song Definition, Yasiin and Talib sample a song called "Stop the Violence." It was a big hit in the 80's.

MUSIC: [Stop the Violence by Boogie Down Productions]

One two three

The crew is called BDP

And if you want to go to the tip top

Stop the violence in Hip Hop, Y-O

RACHEL: And that's what Yasiin and Talib aim for: making hits — but not sacrificing meaning to do it.

MUSIC OUT

RACHEL: So when a young Black man is shot and killed in the South Bronx — the birthplace of Hip Hop — they aren't gonna keep quiet. They're gonna do something about it.

MAGIC IN THE STUDIO

KHADIJA: In March 1999, a month after Amadou's death, the four cops who killed him are charged with second-degree murder. A month after *that*, on April 23, Talib and Yasiin enter Sony Studios in Manhattan to begin recording what would become the EP: Hip Hop for Respect.

KHADIJA: In tow are dozens of rappers *and* Organized Noize. They are the iconic production team that flew in all the way from Atlanta. They had already produced hits for Outkast and TLC. Like this one.

MUSIC: [Waterfalls by TLC]

Don't go chasing waterfalls

Please stick to the rivers and the lakes that you're used to

KHADIJA: Organized Noize want to make something hot — something big.

KHADIJA: Yasiin and Talib had initially only planned to release one song. But so many artists want to contribute to the project that they end up making four.

MUSIC IN

RENE JOHN-SANDY II: It was dope energy to see how many people, you know, just came out, you know, to really want to support it and, you know, want to be a part of it.

KHADIJA: That's Rene John-Sandy II. He's one of the assistant executive producers of Hip Hop for Respect. He was in the studio when everyone started showing up.

RENE JOHN-SANDY II: So, you know, I think there was a lot of magic in the room, you know, I think, you know, was just cool to see everyone kind of get together.

KHADIJA: The recording session starts in the morning — and goes until midnight. For the most part, Hip Hop for Respect comes together in that one sprawling studio session. Which is really impressive.

RENE JOHN-SANDY II: I thought everyone came with a tight verse. And I think that's one of the really cool things about especially all these artists, you know, they take their craft very seriously. So they're not going to get on a, on a collaborative cut and, you know, put like 8 or 16 bars that's just going to be kind of like BS, you know [Laughing].

MUSIC OUT

RACHEL: 41 artists. Most of them are from New York. Many of them are huge names. And they're all in one studio, coming together to make music about an issue that they care about. And it sounds like this.

MUSIC: [One Four Love by Black Star]

My people unite and let's all get down

We gotta have what? Love, peace, and understandin'

One god, One love, One light

One aim, One voice, One fight

RACHEL: The song is called One Four Love — it's the lead single from Hip Hop for Respect. Talib kicks it off with the intro.

MUSIC: [One Four Love by Black Star]

Yo, you sent out the signal right?

And this is what happened

The voice of Hip Hop got heard

Never compromised

This is how we put it down, c'mon!

RACHEL: Kool G Rap mentions the NYPD's Street Crime Unit— that's the police squad who shot Amadou Diallo.

MUSIC: [One Four Love by Black Star]

Told you, right? G be the one that come and hold the mic

And aim it at the whole vice squad that's out patrolling nights

RACHEL: Sporty Thievz, another hip hop duo, rap about being pulled over by cops for no reason.

MUSIC: [One Four Love by Black Star]

I'm sober, they pulled me over

What I do, yo? (what we do, yo?)

Po-po go, "I'm drivin' too slow" (cool, yo)

Eyes tourin' them, explorin' them (damn)

Four of 'em—that's why I'm ignorin' them (uh-oh)

RACHEL: Shabaam Sahdeeq name drops Amadou and others who were shot and killed in the Bronx by the NYPD.

MUSIC: [One Four Love by Black Star]

Anthony Baez, Eleanor Bumpurs, Diallo

Let it keep happenin' and there's more to follow

It's even deeper than that, penal shot in the back

Forever we fight and cuss, but the world still adjust

So many bullets just to stop one man

Is that the plan? To leave us all dead in the street?

RACHEL: Pharoahe Monch mentions the protests for Amadou at City Hall.

MUSIC: [One Four Love by Black Star]

God, please allow me to preach for him

A voiceless man through a spirit—I speak for him

Step to city hall, for delf, do it for dolo

With visions of cops inside the Public Enemy logo

RACHEL: And everyone on the track comes together for the final chorus

MUSIC: [One Four Love by Black Star]

My people unite and let's all get down

We gotta have what? Love, peace, and understandin'

One god, One love, One light

One aim, One voice, One fight

KHADIJA: At Sony Music Studios, on the day they record Hip Hop for Respect, Talib says that making music would be the best way for them to contribute to the protests taking place across the city.

KHADIJA: And not just any music — but hip hop. Music that began in the place where Amadou Diallo was killed.

FROM BIRTH TO BUSINESS

DAN CHARNAS: All right, so what's up?

RACHEL: We were hoping to just kind of like start a bit at the beginning and get some context about the hip hop industry in the '90s. So could you tell us about the birth of hip hop in the Bronx?

DAN CHARNAS: [Pause] Well. I mean. You're not going to need all that, right?

RACHEL: We're talking to Dan Charnas. He's a music journalist, and wrote a book called *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip Hop*.

DAN CHARNAS: Hip hop, even though it is now global, is really, or at least began as a local art form. A local folk music, if you will. It was not even music, it was just stuff kids were doing at parties, right?

MUSIC IN

RACHEL: Many trace the birth of hip hop back to one particular party in the South Bronx in 1973. The music for the party was played live by a kid who called himself DJ Kool Herc. Herc was only 18 — it was a Back to School party.

RACHEL: Like any good DJ, Herc noticed when everybody flocked to the dance floor — it was during the instrumental breaks of the records he played. So using two turntables, he found a way to just play those breaks, and to isolate the beats.

RACHEL: It was a hit, and soon everybody in the Bronx was doing it. During the breaks, people would dance — hence, breakdancing — and speak to hype up the crowd — rapping.

MUSIC OUT

RACHEL: You're probably wondering why we haven't played you any of this music. That's because it was all done live, at parties and community events. The first hip hop record didn't come out for six more years — in 1979.

MUSIC: [Rapper's Delight by the Sugarhill Gang]

Now what you hear is not a test

I'm rapping to the beat

And me, the groove, and my friends are gonna try to move your feet

DAN CHARNAS: So, all this ecosystem, too, was developing outside the mainstream music business because around 1979, around the time of the first rap record, disco was peaking and frankly, had already experienced a kind of, symbolic backlash. And by 1980, 1981, disco was a

dirty word in the business, and rap and rap records were seen as simply another fad, a child of disco. And so hip hop really needed to create its own institutions outside of the music business in order to survive.

MUSIC OUT

KHADIJA: Now, it's the 1980s.

MUSIC: [The Message by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five]

It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder how I keep from going under

It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder how I keep from going under

KHADIJA: Songs like "The Message" by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five describe what it feels like. It's the heyday of the crack epidemic. Much of the South Bronx is rubble after landlords realized they'd make more money off of their buildings if they burned them down for insurance.

MUSIC: [The Message by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five]

Broken glass everywhere

People pissin' on the stairs, you know they just don't care

I can't take the smell, can't take the noise

Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice

DAN CHARNAS: You had, a number of different assaults on young people in New York and around New York. And hip hop, in many ways, was a response to those attacks. Just bald faced attacks on on black youth.

MUSIC: [Fight the Power by Public Enemy]

DAN CHARNAS: Public Enemy incorporated a lot of this into their lyrics.

Fight the power

Fight the power

Fight the power

We've got to fight the powers that be

DAN CHARNAS: Remember, it's the Reagan era, too. So you're again facing, severe federal neglect, state neglect, city neglect. Contempt. Not just neglect, but contempt.

MUSIC OUT

KHADIJA: It's against this background that hip hop is flourishing. It's developing its voice — outside of the mainstream.

DAN CHARNAS: It allowed for, a, a fertile ground, not only for creative ideas, but for, what I might call it, you know, the sort of the authentic political voice. A lot of people like to make a little too much of this, like, hip hop was not founded as a voice for the voiceless. The founders hip hop didn't necessarily see it that way. Their voice was their voice. We're sort of romanticizing it, looking back. Folks in the early part of hip hop wanted to get paid for their performances, they wanted to have hit records, they wanted to wear flashy clothes. But at the same time, they could do that by talking about things that they were facing.

KHADIJA: This is important. Even when it was creative and new and independent, hip hop wasn't always about politics or struggle. But artists realized that they could get big off of rapping about their lives. And they do get big.

MUSIC IN

KHADIJA: As hip hop gets more popular, it's not operating outside of the music business anymore. In the '90s, hip hop *is* the music business.

DAN CHARNAS: When a genre becomes mainstreamed, when it becomes big business, it just naturally becomes debased. What do I mean by that? By debased, I mean, flattened. Right. In early hip hop, the creative prerogatives in the culture promoted difference, right? If you were biting somebody else's sound in hip hop, that was a bad thing. But when the impetus is to get on the radio and to have the next hit, sameness becomes the, the, the most important thing. Right? That's what corporate, that's what corporations do to culture. That's what corporate life does to culture. It promotes a flattening and a sameness.

MUSIC OUT

RACHEL: Here's where independent labels like Rawkus come in. Rawkus and its artists are releasing different music. They don't sound like Jay-Z,. Their music is less flashy, more lyrical. It's like the more political strain of music of the '80s. When hip hop was trying to "fight the power." Or, like that song Talib and Yasiin sampled in their first album — "stop the violence."

MUSIC: [Stop the Violence by Boogie Down Productions]

One two three

The crew is called BDP

And if you want to go to the tip top

Stop the violence in Hip Hop, Y-O

RACHEL: It's not a secret that Rawkus is making a different style of music — the authenticity, or at least the performance of it, is part of their brand. There's a scene about Rawkus in *Brown Sugar*, a romantic comedy released in 2002. *Brown Sugar* is a love story between a hip hop journalist and a record exec who's fighting with his label — he thinks they prioritize money over talent.

ARCHIVAL BROWN SUGAR TAPE

That's what we do here, we make hits. You wanna keep it real, you go to Rawkus.

RACHEL: Fun fact: Yasiin Bey plays a side character in the film — a rapper who won't sign with the main label because it's too commercial.

MUSIC IN

RACHEL: So in 1999, there's a real split in hip hop. And on one side, you've got underground rappers like Talib Kweli and Yasiin Bey, working with indie labels like Rawkus.

DAN CHARNAS: And so it doesn't surprise me that if somebody is going to be making a political record that it would come out of that camp.

MUSIC OUT

A PERFECT STORM

RACHEL: It's February 2000, a year after Amadou Diallo is killed. The trial for the cops who shot him finally reaches a verdict.

ARCHIVAL COURT TV TAPE

CLERK: What was your verdict? In reference to the charge of murder in the second degree under the first half of the indictment.

FOREPERSON: Not guilty.

RACHEL: Each of the four officers are found not guilty on six charges, including murder and manslaughter. A couple months later, in April Yasiin and Talib finally release their EP: *Hip Hop for Respect*.

RACHEL: It was supposed to come out the previous year. But the delay in its release might work in their favor. Because the cops were acquitted, another wave of protests is taking over the city. And protests sometimes have anthems.

RACHEL: They choose this song, *One Four Love*, as the lead single, the song that came together in one long session.

MUSIC: [*One Four Love* by Black Star]

My people unite and let's all get down

We gotta have what? Love, peace, and understandin'

RACHEL: They also made a music video for it. In the video, the artists rap in the middle of a makeshift shooting range. You can see NYPD vehicles and officers in uniform. Newspaper clippings about Amadou's death. Photos of him and other Black people killed by the police. Rev. Al Sharpton even makes an appearance, saying the lyrics of the chorus.

MUSIC OUT

AL SHARPTON: One god, one love, one aim, one voice, one fight!

KHADIJA: Jarret Myer, the co-founder of Rawkus, says the video got some play on BET. But they were also hoping the video would be played on TRL.

RACHEL: What's TRL?

JARRET MYER: [Laughing] Oh, you don't know what TRL is now?

RACHEL: [Laughing] See, now I feel ignorant.

JARRET MYER: TRL became like the sort of staple of MTV. It was like their, it was called Total Request Live. And it was like, sort of like their after school show. And it was this very, very strange mix of like Backstreet Boys and Britney Spears with, like, Marilyn Manson and, like Fred Durst.

KHADIJA: Jarret says that MTV *was* a big supporter of Rawkus. *Until* it went full blown TRL. Even though we didn't know what TRL was, it was a huge deal, from its first episode in 1998 to its last one, ten years later. Viewers would vote on which music videos they wanted to watch, making it the definitive countdown of the hottest music videos at that time.

MUSIC IN

KHADIJA: The single is arguably the most important song on a record. At least, commercially. It's the song that becomes a music video. More importantly, it's the song that a record label sends to radio.

KHADIJA: We've tried speaking to Talib and Yasiin over the past couple months. We wanted to know about their hopes for Hip Hop for Respect and One Four Love, the lead single. We wanted to know how they measured its success. We made it through to their managers. But that's about it.

KHADIJA: Okay. It's Friday, April 5th. Rachel and I just got out of our Business Essentials class, and, Hugh who is...

RACHEL: Yasiin's manager?

KHADIJA: Manager or publicist or something.

RACHEL: The gatekeeper to talking to Yasiin Bey.

KHADIJA: Just responded and said that Yasiin wants to talk about it with Talib, and then he'll get back to us.

RACHEL: Yeah, and that's just so crazy because it means that they're talking about it. I feel like we're either going to get both of them or we're going to get none.

MUSIC OUT

KHADIJA: Spoiler alert: We got none. But Talib has his *own* podcast, People's Party with Talib Kweli. Here he is, in 2021, talking about Hip Hop for Respect.

TALIB KWELI: There was a lot of numbers conversations. And I remember talking to Jarret and being like, look, we have to do this. And I remember you being very honest. I mean, you like, look. We're going to lose money on this. I'm not gonna make any money. But here's what we can do. We can press up, I can spend, you know, x amount of thousands for the video. We can press up this amount of records, and we did enough to make it able to compete. It was like, I can, I can do this. We have enough income to do this and not lose our shirt. And so that's what they did. And it was a hard lesson because I'm from the Self Destruction era.

RACHEL: You need to know what Self Destruction is. It's a little confusing. Remember Stop the Violence — that song that was a big hit in the '80s? The song Talib and Yasiin sampled in their first album.

MUSIC: [Stop the Violence by Boogie Down Productions]

And if you want to go to the tip top

Stop the violence in Hip Hop, Y-O

RACHEL: One of the artists who wrote that song formed a group called The Stop The Violence Movement in the late '80s after a young fan was killed at one of their shows. They released a song called Self Destruction.

MUSIC: [Self Destruction by the Stop the Violence Movement]

America's problem is

Self destruction, you're headed for self destruction

RACHEL: Self Destruction was a huge success: It brought together a bunch of different hip hop stars. It was an anti-violence anthem. And the proceeds were even donated to charity.

MUSIC OUT

RACHEL: Remind you of anything? Self Destruction inspired a whole generation of rappers — like Talib Kweli.

TALIB KWELI: And I had a romantic idea about the music business, but the music business was different when Self Destruction came out. Yeah, there was a lot more solidarity between the program directors and the DJs. By the time we did Hip Hop for Respect, it wasn't like that. It was pure corporate.

RACHEL: Despite all the similarities, it turned out that Talib and Yasiin's Hip Hop for Respect was no Self Destruction.

THE BLAME GAME

KHADIJA: For a song released in 2000, success hinged on one thing: The radio.

ARCHIVAL HOT 97 TAPE

ANGIE MARTINEZ: Hey! Ho! It's Hot 97, New York's #1 station, blazin' hip hop and RNB. Big day today! First of all, it's Friday.

KHADIJA: In New York, Hot 97 is an institution.

MUSIC IN

KHADIJA: In the early 1990s, the station was struggling. It had switched over from pop to house and dance music, and its ratings were falling. In 1992, Hot 97 started adding hip hop and R&B into their playlist. And things started to turn around. By 1993, the station was New York's destination for rap music. You can see it in their slogan: Hot 97 is "where hip hop lives."

KHADIJA: Jarret Myer, the founder of Rawkus, knew that Hot 97 would hold the ticket to their success.

JARRET MYER: At that time, you know, we wanted it on Hot 97. We wanted the message out. And so there's some artists on there that, that you would expect: Mos, Kweli, De La Soul, Common. Right? But there's also like Sporty Thievez on there, right? Who you may not recall but at that time were played on Hot 97 all the time.

RACHEL: So there was some strategy involved

JARRET MYER: We thought it was going to be something that maybe they did stop once an hour and Hot 97 to play.

MUSIC OUT

KHADIJA: We relayed this to Dan Charnas, our hip hop historian.

RACHEL: They were really purposefully, you know, they were putting players in there that they hoped would get it commercial play, even though it was about, you know, police brutality.

DAN CHARNAS: Like who?

RACHEL: Jarrett Myer said Sporty Thievez at the time. Common was on it.

DAN CHARNAS: Sporty Thieves were not big.

KHADIJA: [Laughing]

RACHEL: Yeah, I think he was thinking, like Hot 97 would play it.

DAN CHARNAS: It was very, very hard to get people to think about. Hip hop as an engine for political thought by the end of the 1990s, because those were not the dominant values, even in the hip hop audience.

KHADIJA: The big DJ on Hot 97 was someone named Funkmaster Flex. He would “break” records, which meant he would pick a little-known song and blow it up to a wider audience. He broke Jay-Z’s record in 1996.

DAN CHARNAS: And, and, look, he cares about what’s hot, right? He’ll play a song if he thinks it’s hot. Meaning, you know, I don’t know. Good beat, you know, great verses.

KHADIJA: Flex didn’t break One Four Love. He just didn’t play it that much. So even with a music video, over 41 rappers, and the fresh injustice of the Amadou Diallo verdict — the song didn’t sell.

KHADIJA: Things were changing in hip hop culture. But was that the only reason the song never got played? Or was there something else? We decided to ask some hip hop journalists.

RACHEL: We talked to Gabby Bulgarelli, the senior producer of Louder than a Riot, NPR’s hip hop podcast. We asked Gabby what she thought of the song.

GABBY BULGARELLI: I liked it! and I was definitely surprised by it. It definitely surprised me. I thought it was thought provoking and not shitty. [Laughing]. You know, I think it’s hard to do both. I think it’s hard to make rap that makes people want to move and make rap that also makes people want to stop and think. I think that use your brain and move your feet music don’t always necessarily intertwine. So I think this is doing that pretty well.

RACHEL: For most of the people we talked to about Hip Hop for Respect, it was their first time hearing it. In 2000, it wasn’t on the radio. Today, it’s not even on Spotify. This is Ross Scarano — he’s been a music journalist for over a decade.

ROSS SCARANO: I guess, like, I feel slightly embarrassed that I’ve never heard the song before. Like, I don’t think it’s gone on to have. And I’m not, I do wonder why, like, but it doesn’t have the same reputation as, like Self Destruction or something. And maybe because it’s like a

tougher song to swallow. And it doesn't have like a neat narrative about, like, hip hop, like looking out for itself and trying to like, you know, police itself, like it's but at the same time, like, I'm like, how did this song not resurface during, you know, moments around like, Eric Garner or George Floyd or, you know? I don't know, it's a it's a real time capsule of the song. And I'm like, glad to be aware of it now.

RACHEL: We went back to Dan Charnas.

DAN CHARNAS: All right, I'm listening right now. Hold on a second... Nah. I mean, you know, it's a posse cut in the late 1990s. The first person rapping is G Rap, who hasn't had a hit in forever. Right? Not, not dissing. Right? You know. Love Rah Digga, love G Rap. But, you know, the person who's the hottest person in the world at that point is Jay. Like Jay is ascendant. And Jay's not on there. Frankly, because Jay doesn't care. And the people who love Jay-Z don't care. And that's sad, right? It's really, really sad.

RACHEL: So imagine you're Funkmaster Flex. You've got the power to make or break a record. You want to play great music. You, according to Dan Charnas, don't care too much about politics — at least not more than you care about sound. Do you play One Four Love?

RACHEL: Evidently, no. We tried to get Flex to answer that question himself, but we got no response.

RACHEL: The project's failure to take off hit Talib Kweli hard. It changed how he thought about hip hop. Here he is again talking about it on his own podcast:

TALIB KWELI: The DJs didn't play it. I didn't understand why. I know why now. Because Rawkus, even though they had the money to put it out and get it out, they did not have the money or they did. They weren't willing for good reason to spend the money on promoting it like a single. Because we're giving all the proceeds away to charity, right? And so because it wasn't promoted as a radio record, no one played it. And so it was it was disheartening. But it was a good lesson for me. It was like, oh, this is a fucking business.

MUSIC IN

TALIB KWELI: Yeah, we might care about police brutality. Everybody wants to do the right thing. But at the end of the day, who's going to pay for this? Who's got the bill at the end of the day? And I was very, I was kind of down in the dumps about the fact that people didn't really play the song or support it in the industry.

RACHEL: To Talib, it's not really the radio that's to blame. Or the subject matter. Or the beat, or the features. No one's to blame, really. It's just business.

JUST ONE SOUL

KHADIJA: If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? If a project brings together over 41 rappers to protest police brutality — but no one hears it — does it matter?

MUSIC OUT

RACHEL: There's a story that Talib Kweli tells a lot about Hip Hop for Respect. Here he is telling it on his podcast in 2021.

TALIB KWELI: And I was very, I was kinda down in the dumps that people didn't really play the song or support it in the industry until one day I was on Flatbush Avenue and a kid, told me, stopped me in the street. He was like, 'Yo, I used to think I had to bust my gun to be a drug dealer, to be a gangsta rapper, until I heard Hip Hop for Respect. And then it made me realize I don't have to do, like, do that. I can still be dope.' And it's like, if you can touch just one soul.

JESSICA CARE MOORE: Just the one in Brooklyn.

TALIB KWELI: Yeah. So you know, that helped. We touched one guy with all that money we spent.

JESSICA CARE MOORE: You touched more than that, I'm sure.

TALIB KWELI: Rest in peace to Amadou Diallo.

MUSIC: [One Four Love by Black Star]

We just tryna do it right in these boroughs that we reppin' in

Why they tryna fill us with more lead than Zeppelin?

My people unite and let's all get down

We gotta have what? Love, peace, and understandin'

One god, One love, One light

One aim, One voice, One fight

SHOE LEATHER MUSIC

CREDITS

KHADIJA: Shoe Leather is a production of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. This episode was reported, written and produced by me, Khadija Alam.

RACHEL: And me, Rachel Kahn. Joanne Faryon is our executive producer and professor. Rachel Quester and Peter Leonard are our co-professors. Special thanks to Columbia Digital Libraries and Brendan Klinkenberg.

KHADIJA: Shoe Leather's theme music — 'Squeegees' — is by Ben Lewis, Doron Zounes and Camille Miller, remixed by Peter Leonard. Other music by Blue Dot Sessions.

RACHEL: Our graphic was created by Indy Scholtens with help from Serena Balani.

MUSIC OUT