



BOOM BOX PIONEER

Ralph McDaniels brought rap video to New York television

BY JESSE SERWER • PHOTO BY AL PEREIRA/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

DJ Red Alert gave him the nickname “Uncle Ralph,” but for young hip-hop fiends in New York during the ‘80s and ‘90s, Ralph McDaniels was like a cool older brother who took you to all the fresh spots and showed you how grown folks got down. Broadcasting on New York City public television station WNYC every weekday afternoon at three thirty, McDaniels’s *Video Music Box* was the first video program to feature primarily Black music. For years, it was also the only place to see “music television” in New York without a cable box. While everyone from Kool G. Rap to Jay-Z got their first TV exposure through *Video Music Box*, the real stars of the show were the common man and woman. Encouraged to shout-out their friends and hoods—a concept essentially invented on the show—ordinary New Yorkers became overnight celebrities just by wearing the right threads to the Tunnel when Ralph and company were in the house. Meanwhile, as the cofounder (along with fellow *VMB* VJ Lionel “Vid Kid” Martin) of the original hip-hop video production company, Classic Concepts, McDaniels helmed numerous classic videos himself, including the Wu-Tang Clan’s “C.R.E.A.M.” and Nas’s “It Ain’t Hard to Tell.” With *Video Music Box* now entering its twenty-fifth year, the show is still going strong, though it now only airs on Saturday nights at midnight. In 2005, McDaniels added a second program to his repertoire: *The Bridge*, which also airs on WNYC, is an hour-long trip down memory lane, exclusively featuring old-school videos from NYC-area artists. Take it from your Uncle: when it comes to rap videos, they just don’t make ‘em like they used to.

There’s some confusion about whether you’re from Brooklyn or Queens. Care to clear that up?

I was born in Bed-Stuy, but the movement then was, when you got a good job, you looked for a house in Queens. When I was about nine, my parents moved us to Queens Village—we were the first Black family on our block. I moved back to Brooklyn when I was in college and lived there most of my life. But I first became known as a DJ in Queens.

Were you down with any of the early DJ crews out there?

I had a crew called Brotherhood Connection with the Vid Kid, Lionel Martin. We played functions in the Cambria Heights/Laurelton area of Queens. I started doing my own thing at the Blue Ice Lounge, which was a legendary club in Queens Village where Russell Simmons and radio DJs like Fred Buggs used to come through. The owner of Blue Ice bought Encore, which was the biggest Black club in Queens, so I went there.

Is that when you got into video?

I took classes at New York Tech in Long Island, paying

for school by DJing. I didn’t want to do radio specifically, but I was a big fan of Frankie Crocker and the knowledge those guys had of music, so I knew I wanted to do something like that. When I graduated college, I got a job as an engineer with Channel 31, which was WARC at the time.

How did *Video Music Box* get started?

One day, these tapes came in of Black artists performing their songs. Music videos weren’t really popping yet, and I hadn’t seen anything like it, so I started calling record companies, requesting videos for specific songs. I didn’t do anything with them, just watched them myself. I proposed a show, but the station blew it off until they had this fundraiser—when we played these videos, more people called in. One day, this guy Allen Hicks said he was doing a video show. I was like, “Hold up, money, that’s my idea; I gotta be down with this.” The original show was called *Studio 31 Dance Party*. I wasn’t the producer, just the voice. But we got a new program director, and I said I had a better idea. The thought was: show it after school, because young people

seem to be into this. At first, they'd just show it during holes in the schedule, but by the end of '83, we were on every day at three thirty.

Were you always filming on location or did that start later on?

Originally, you just heard me talking. In '84, we taped the first "Fresh Fest" with Grandmaster Flash, Whodini, Fat Boys, LL Cool J, Run-DMC, and the Dynamic Breakers. That was pivotal for *Video Music Box*, because nobody had seen a hip-hop concert on TV before. No one knew that many people were going to a hip-hop show. Even the hood was like, "Dag, people are into it like that?" After that, you started seeing me on the show.

Were clubs cool with the cameras back then?

It wasn't as hard as you might think. Later on in the '80s, that's when they'd say, "Please don't film the crowd," because people were so drugged out. It was crazy in some of these spots in the late '80s, early '90s, man. We always tried to preserve the integrity of the club and the scene, because what we put on TV reflected on us as well. People were still not sold on hip-hop, and a bunch of Black people getting together was still viewed as a bad thing, so we were careful. If we were filming and a fight broke out, we wouldn't show that. Any reason to take the show off the air, we knew they'd do it.

What was the craziest thing that went down while you were taping?

I was in a shoot-out in the Bronx. Flash was DJing on New Year's Eve, his birthday. Ten minutes after we got there, they started shooting up the place for what seemed like forever. Biz Markie was there. I remember being like, "What's Biz doing here?" The Ark on Beverley Road in Brooklyn was wild. We were always doing shows there, so people came on a regular basis just to be on our show. The crowd really had its own personality.

When I think *Video Music Box*, the first group that comes to mind is Ultramagnetic MC's. You never heard them on the radio, but they made great videos.

Ultra was a group that was always out in the clubs, and, if you were too, you knew them. They'd see me and say, "Yo, we gotta get our video to you." I'd get it first. We could have an impact, because hip-hop wasn't getting radio play other than late at night. I'd hear Red Alert and Mr. Magic play a song and think, "I got to get a video for that." Red was only on Friday nights, so you might miss what he played, but I could rock it the whole week.

You've always kept the same intro with Whodini's "Five Minutes of Funk" and clips of new-wave videos. I remember people saying, "Why do they have Madonna in the intro when they don't even play music like that?"

There wasn't a lot of hip-hop videos or even enough R&B videos at first, so we'd play the Rolling Stones, Tears for Fears. At that time, there were all these new genres coming out—punk, reggae was popping. It wasn't until '84 that you really started to see rap videos. That's what *Video Music Box* was really all about. I grew up on all types of music, and the opening reflects me, and that time. I'm still a Madonna fan.

Is it true the shout-out was invented on the show?

The term itself probably came from the street, but we

were the first to give people a microphone and say, "Do a shout-out." That's what *Video Music Box* was known for. It gave regular people a chance to represent whoever you were. They were ghetto superstars. There were guys that were real popular in the club—you didn't know where they came from, what they did, but they were just *known*. Those people became even more popular through *Video Music Box*. Some were just as popular as artists for a minute.

Is that how you found *VMB* cohost Crazy Sam?

No, he was a comedian. Crazy Sam's shows were like nothing else, man. He was an animal. Once I caught his act, I wanted him on the show, but I didn't know how. So we just gave him a camera for the "day." He disappeared and came back a week later with all this footage. Sam would go off into a character for, like, hours.

A lot of people don't know that you've worked on something like three hundred videos. Were the first videos you did for X-Clan?

I did some before, but "Heed the Word" helped me get started as a director. X-Clan came directly out of *Video Music Box*. Professor X and Brother J were doing promos on our show before they even formed, really. People were instantly like, "Who are these dudes with nose rings talking about the red, the black, and the green?" I remember Professor X calling me into a meeting with Island Records to tell them [that] people already thought they had a record out. It was a case of how, locally, you could get a buzz going, like areas in the South now. They had a buzz from *Video Music Box* plus what they were doing in the street with protests. Then [Professor X] turned it into a real musical project.

Those X-Clan videos really captured Brooklyn at that time. Was your MO always to illustrate the artist in their home turf?

You wanted to show spots that were popular at the time, like Albee Square Mall or the Hole [basketball court] where we shot the "Soul in the Hole" video [for the Wu All-Stars]. The key was to get as real as possible. You didn't want extras but people that were related in some way to the artists. You'd see real shit go down, and try to capture it on-screen or re-create it. The whole reason we decided to do videos was because we'd see fake-looking ones that made us say, "That person doesn't make sense in that part of town." In "C.R.E.A.M.," those [extras] were actually out hustling in front of that building in Staten Island. I'd ask dudes if they want to be in the video and they'd say, "Whatchu want me to do?" I'd be like, "Just do you."

What happened to those types of videos?

What killed it was the film office in New York said, "You can't shoot anywhere you want anymore." Now, everybody had to shoot in the same area. You didn't see those Fulton Street [or] Jamaica Avenue shots anymore. It got generic. The police complained because these shoots were shutting down entire neighborhoods. Directors were being disrespectful, arguing with cops. They were out of control. ●

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