



STILL FRESH McDaniels's enthusiasm for hip-hop hasn't dimmed a bit.

friends or neighborhood. "It gave regular people a chance to represent who they were," McDaniels explains. "Some of these dudes became ghetto superstars in their 'hood—they were more popular than some of the artists we had on the show."

Meanwhile, the advent of *Yo! MTV Raps* in 1988 only underscored the show's influence, as key *Yo!*-era acts Nas, the Fugees, the Wu-Tang Clan and the Notorious B.I.G. all made their first TV appearances on *Video Music Box* (McDaniels even directed early clips for Nas and Wu-Tang). "The first time you got your clip on *Video Music Box*—whew, man, that was a big day," recalls Christopher "Kid" Reid, of Kid 'N Play. "You figured then that you'd made it."

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Some influential acts might not have existed at all if it not for the show. "X-Clan came directly out of *Video Music Box*," McDaniels says, referring to the militantly pro-black Brooklyn group who, along with Public Enemy, ushered in hip-hop's so-called "conscious" era in the late '80s. "They were part of a street organization called the Blackwatch Movement that was putting together marches, and I'd have them do promos talking about that. People were instantly like, 'Who are these dudes with the nose rings?' They got a huge street buzz and started making records."

While it's reasonable to wonder why such an influential show never left the sphere of local public television, longtime cohort Ray DeJon explains that such an evolution would likely have meant the forfeiting of an unparalleled cultural archive. "I've seen numerous offers put on the table for us to go national, and what stopped Ralph every time was that they wanted to take over the creative rights," DeJon says. "Now, whenever BET, VH1 or any of those networks wants to do a behind-the-scenes bio on hip-hop, they've gotta come to Ralph because he's the only one with the original footage."

The Video Music Box 25th Anniversary Concert featuring Nice-N-Smooth, Naughty by Nature, Full Force, O.C., Jeru the Damaja and Chubb Rock is at Central Park SummerStage on Fri 18.

And it hasn't stopped

Forget *Yo! MTV Raps*—Ralph McDaniels's *Video Music Box* is what birthed a generation of NYC hip-hop fans. By **Jesse Serwer**

In the early 1980s, MTV routinely ignored platinum-selling black artists like Rick James in favor of unknown rock bands ("Musical apartheid" is how original *Yo! MTV Raps* host Fab Five Freddy described the years prior to his arrival at the network in 1988). Meanwhile, cable TV, up and running in Manhattan since 1971, didn't become available in parts of the outer boroughs until the end of the '80s.

Ralph McDaniels's *Video Music Box*, which aired on public-television station WNYC-TV at 3:30pm every weekday afternoon from 1983 to '96, filled both voids. (It now appears on Saturday nights at midnight on WNYE-TV, which picked it up later in '96 after a brief hiatus.) An hourly showcase catering to young New Yorkers of color, it was the first televised program to regularly feature

hip-hop videos and, along with BET's now-defunct *Video Soul*, among the first to feature predominantly black artists. For rap fans (and budding artists) growing up in NYC, *Video Music Box* was like a daily newspaper and the Internet in one: the place to find out what was fresh in hip-hop's fast-evolving sound and style. Arguably the oldest video show in the world, *Video Music Box* is celebrating its 25th anniversary with a blowout concert at SummerStage featuring a batch of golden-age hip-hop stars, including Naughty by Nature, Jeru the Damaja and Chubb Rock.

"In 1983, hip-hop was this underground movement that every kid in New York was into," says Mimi Valdes-Ryan, former editor-in-chief of *Vibe* (and currently editorial director for *Latina* magazine). "But there was no place to learn about the artists. So coming across *Video Music Box* was a huge validation—this music you loved was not only on the radio, it was on TV now. Seeing [Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's] 'The Message' come to life, with the abandoned buildings in the South

Bronx and the cops pulling you over, was mind-blowing."

Initially, McDaniels—"Uncle Ralph"—and original cohort Lionel "Vid Kid" Martin placed equal emphasis on R&B, with Latin freestyle, house and dancehall sprinkled into a mix that also included such acts as Talking Heads and Madonna. After the overwhelming response to a *Video Music Box* episode taped at 1985's "Fresh Fest"—the first rap concert held inside a major sports arena, Nassau Coliseum—the program began to morph from a standard video showcase to a looser, unpredictable mélange of live performances, community news reporting and interviews conducted over the din of long-lost nightclubs like Kilimanjaro and the Ark.

"I wanted to be behind the scenes, not this host that you saw all the time," McDaniels says. "So we'd shoot the crowd and I'd talk over it, off-camera. Eventually, the crowd became more important." Segments like these popularized the shout-out—the now-ubiquitous act of calling out one's