

From Jay Z Decoded

**I** saw the circle before I saw the kid in the middle. I was nine years old, the summer of 1978, and Marcy was my world. The shadowy bench-lined inner pathways that connected the twenty-seven six-story buildings of Marcy Houses were like tunnels we kids burrowed through. Housing projects can seem like labyrinths to outsiders, as complicated and intimidating as a Moroccan bazaar. But we knew our way around.

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Marcy sat on top of the G train, which connects Brooklyn to Queens, but not to the city. For Marcy kids, Manhattan is where your parents went to work, if they were lucky, and where we'd yellow-bus it with our elementary class on special trips. I'm from New York, but I didn't know that at nine. The street signs for Flushing, Marcy, Nostrand, and Myrtle avenues seemed like metal flags to me: Bed-Stuy was my country, Brooklyn my planet.

When I got a little older Marcy would show me its menace, but for a kid in the seventies, it was mostly an adventure, full of concrete corners to turn, dark hallways to explore, and everywhere other kids. When you jumped the fences to play football on the grassy patches that passed for a park, you might find the field studded with glass shards that caught the light like diamonds and would pierce your sneakers just as fast. Turning one of those concrete corners you might bump into your older brother clutching dollar bills over a dice game, *Cee-Lo* being called out like hardcore bingo. It was the seventies and heroin was still heavy in the hood, so we would dare one another to push a leaning nodder off a bench the way kids on farms tip sleeping cows. The unpredictability was one of the things we counted on. Like the day when I wandered up to something I'd never seen before: a cipher—but I wouldn't have called it that; no one would've back then. It was just a circle of scrappy, ashy, skinny Brooklyn kids laughing and clapping their hands, their eyes trained on the center. I might have been with my cousin B-High, but I might have been alone, on my way home from playing baseball with my Little League squad. I shouldered through the crowd toward the middle—or maybe B-High cleared the way—but it felt like gravity pulling me into that swirl of kids, no bullshit, like a planet pulled into orbit by a star.

His name was Slate and he was a kid I used to see around the neighborhood, an older kid who barely made an impression. In the circle, though, he was transformed, like the church ladies touched by the spirit, and everyone was mesmerized. He was rhyming, throwing out couplet after couplet like he was in a trance, for a crazy long time—thirty minutes straight off the top of his head, never losing the beat, riding the handclaps. He rhymed about nothing—the sidewalk, the benches—or he'd go in on the kids who were standing around listening to him, call out someone's leaning sneakers or dirty Lee jeans. And then he'd go in on how clean he was, how nice he was with the ball, how all our girls loved him. Then he'd just start rhyming about the rhymes themselves, how good

they were, how much better they were than yours, how he was the best that ever did it, in all five boroughs and beyond. He never stopped moving, not dancing, just rotating in the center of the circle, looking for his next target. The sun started to set, the crowd moved in closer, the next clap kept coming, and he kept meeting it with another rhyme. It was like watching some kind of combat, but he was alone in the center. All he had were his eyes, taking in everything, and the words inside him. I was dazzled. *That's some cool shit* was the first thing I thought. Then: *I could do that.*