



## **Rap Story**

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One summer when I was nine and Neel was eleven, he had a tape. It was one of those Maxwell C-90 tapes, brown with silver stickering, spools squeaky from overuse. He had written on it in scrawly blue biro 'Rap Trax!' I couldn't work out if the exclamation mark was his or the album's. The 'X' seemed so abbreviating, so exciting, so dangerous. It was a simple anarchic act that went against all of my private school upbringing. The streets were coming to Harrow.

My cousin Neel lived in Croydon, Surrey, away from the rest of our family. Every summer, his mum would send him to stay with his grandma, our ba, in Harrow to learn Gujarati. I hero-worshipped him. He was a complete nerd but self-assured and confident. He was an expert at chess and had a labyrinthian knowledge of UK comedy. We would lie on our fronts and read our comics together while my ba watched her Bollywood tapes. This was the only time ba would see us all summer outside of meals.

Ba had a tape player in her bedroom that also allowed you to record your own voices. We would sit up there for hours with blank tapes, press record and say whatever came to our minds, only occasionally choosing to script things and give them a proper narrative arc. The recordings veered from rehashes of our favourite bits from 'Allo Allo or Only Fools and Horses to postmodern skits involving characters pooled from all our favourite TV shows.

That one day though, he held up Rap Trax! He put it in the tape recorder and pressed play. We had those first five seconds of tape silence before it spooled into the uneven crunch of a warm vinyl crackle. Our other cousin Nishu, who lived in Southall, with all the real Asians, had decks and records and was about 5 years older than Neel. He'd recorded this album for him.

Then

My ears bled

My head exploded

My heart started beating...

There was a fuzzy distorted horse-neighbor twisted into a repetitive sample, a booming kick drum thudding against my diaphragm, snares snapping like slaps round my face...  
DON'T-DON'T-DON'T BELIEVE THE HYPE (woooooo-ahhhhhwwwwaahhhh)...

'Who the fuck is this?'

'Public Enemy.'

*Back*

*Caught you lookin' for the same thing*

*It's a new thing check out this I bring*

*Uh Oh the roll below the level*

*'Cause I'm livin' low next to the bass C'mon*

*Turn up the radio*

*They claim that I'm a criminal*

*By now I wonder how*

*Some people never know*

*The enemy could be their friend guardian*

*I'm not a hooligan*

What the fuck were they talking about?

'What are they talking about?'

'Not believing the hype.'

'Oh right.'

Neel was a master at presenting vagueness as confident commentary.

'I don't get it.'

'It's just politics stuff. You know.'

'It sounds amazing.'

I wanted to remain cool in front of my cousin. Instead my heart was trying to burst out of my chest. My mind was trying to pump its righteous fist in explosion. My feet wanted to tap. I didn't want to display too much uncool emotion but noticed Neel was tapping his foot between the kick drum and the snare so I followed. We stumbled into an awkward rhythm with each other. Then KRS-One, then Eric B and Rakim, then Whodini, then Kid'n'Play, then... then... my mind was fizzing. I was being filled with the bonhomie of black power and black rage and black funk and edu-tainment and I didn't know what to say. It rendered me speechless. Neel was lost in a trance, his feet tapping and his head nodding independently of each other, and the beat. I stole looks at what he was doing and tried to focus on the words, what they were saying in the strange spoken lyrics, the 'rap.'

'We should write our own,' said Neel.

'Okay, but I need to record this off you.'

'Yeah, no problem, got a tape?'

I always had blank tapes with me, just in case I needed to blam something off the radio or in case an impromptu radio play presented itself. I pulled it out. It was one of dad's old Bollywood tapes that I hadn't heard him listen to in ages. I handed it over. The tabs were broken, meaning it couldn't be recorded over. Neel pulled a tissue out from next to ba's

bed and tore off two bits, rolling them into balls, filling the tape gaps. He put the tape in the second deck, rewound Rap Trax! to the beginning, put the volume down so it wouldn't interrupt the new scheme he was planning, and pressed record. Rap Trax! was 90 minutes away from being mine.

'We should write our own,' said Neel, repeating himself a bit more urgently this time.

'Yeah, cool. Definite.'

'I've been studying beatbox.'

'What's beatbox?'

'You don't know?'

'No.'

'You've got a lot to learn.'

'Sorry. They don't listen to this sort of stuff at my school.'

'Beatbox is where you make the noises of the drum in your mouth. Like this... Pu-tu-pitpit-pu-pu-tu-pitpit... get it?'

He continued his demonstration.

Pu-tu-pitpit-pu-pu-tu-pitpit...

Pu-tu-pitpit-pu-pu-tu-pitpit...

Pu-tu-pitpit-pu-pu-tu-pitpit...

He stopped.

'Aren't you going to rap over the beatbox?'

'I don't know how to...'

'Oh dear. So much to learn.'

While Rap Trax! recorded on to a tape for me, Neel found some scrap paper and we started writing our first rap lyrics. Bandyng about subject matter and title, we got stuck on the idea of cool, so my first rap song became 'Pretty Cool.'

Neel pretty much wrote the whole thing. I hadn't grasped rhythm and rhyming enough to feel confident about my suggestions, plus I bowed to his superior knowledge about rap so I sat there as his nodding agree-machine.

*Amit: My name's Amit I got to school*

*I got loadsa friends and I'm pretty cool*

*Neel: My name's Neel, I never steal*

*And I've got the real deal*

*Amit: There was a girl I used to like*

*She was fine she was just my type*

*Neel: Then I found out she told a lie*

*She was going out with another guy*

*Amit and Neel: We're pretty cool, don't be a fool*

*Don't go to school, don't be a fool...*

We had this uneasy recording of it which we had to do in one take. It involved Neel beatboxing during my bit, then me tap-tap-tapping on a chair near the speaker during his bit, and then during the chorus, both of us tap-tap-tapping on the chair for double emphasis.

We played it back. The tap-tap-tap sounded like someone was flicking the speaker with their nail and was dominating the sound pushing Neel's vocals to the back of the mix. He screwed up his nose.

'Sounds good, man,' I offered.

'No it doesn't. It sounds shit. Really shit. No, this won't work. We need to have me beatboxing all the way through otherwise the bits without it sound whack, homeboy.'

'Yeah we do.'

'Otherwise it's whack.'

'I know.'

'How are we going to make it less whack?'

'Well...' I thought hard, I needed to be the one with the solution so I looked *pretty cool*.

'What about... errr.... ba has another tape recorder downstairs. What if we record you beatboxing onto one tape and then we play it on the other tape recorder and rap along and the recorder'll pick up both of us and the beatboxing...'

'Hmmm....'

'Well...?'

'That's dope. Except...'

'Except what...?'

'We need another tape.'

'Oh.'

'We'll borrow one from ba.'

'Whack?'

I was sent downstairs to speak to ba. My pidgin Gujarati was better than Neel's as I could communicate through my lack of vocabulary without getting flustered. The rule with Gujarati was that as a regional dialect, it had never been updated to include more modern words like toilet or internet or hip-hop or fork, so you could form the sentences around English nouns with ease and ba would understand you. As long as the verbs and gender-specific addresses were fine, she had no cause for complaint. She said words like television and food processor and cheese to mean things like television and food

processor and cheese, but without compromising her humble Gujarati upbringing. I ran down the stairs.

‘Ba.’

‘Ha, beta?’ [Yes, darling?]

‘Mune tumaro tape recorder borrow kuru che.’ [Can I borrow your tape recorder?]

Amazingly, the Gujarati word for please doesn’t really exist as there’s never a cause to use it so you just say...

‘Please?’

‘Sena mate, beta?’ [What for, darling?]

‘Ooopur, recording kuru che.’ [We want to do some recording upstairs.]

‘Su?’ [What?]

‘Hip hop nu song.’ [A hip hop song.]

‘Aa hip hop su che...?’ [What’s hip hop?]

‘Ba, mane tape recorder borrow kuru che!’ [Ba, I want to borrow the tape recorder!]

‘OK.’

I ran upstairs with the tape recorder. Neel was waiting for me at the edge of the bed gargling some spit in the front of his mouth to keep his teeth moist so he could rock the beatbox. I placed the tape recorder on the bed and plugged it in. Neel pressed eject.

‘There’s a tape already in here.’

‘We should ask first.’

‘No, we’ll just use two minutes of it at the end. She’ll never notice.’

‘You sure?’

‘Just blame it on me, I’m used to it.’

A quick scan through the tape found the end of side 2 had about ten minutes blank. Neel moistened his lips. I hit record. He beatboxed his heart out, wavering in and out of time, struggling to keep enough moisture in his mouth to get through it. I managed to hit stop at the end of the beatbox before he erupted into coughs. It was the same pattern throughout the song but we recorded it with enough time and space so the beatbox would start with my first line and end with the last line of the second run-through of our chorus. Neel coached me through the simple rhythm so we could record the vocals in one take. It was going to be awesome.

We got through the recording and listened back in anticipation. Up until this point, my life never got more exciting than receiving a new toy I really wanted or being allowed to buy a comic by my mum. Now, life had reached a new pinnacle. I felt so fucking cool.

And so went my first ever rap record, 'Pretty Cool' -- a rabid runthrough why I was awesome, like the braggadocious masters like Kool Keith or Rakim; I knew I had soul.

The next evening, ba had the local Gujarati community round her house for weekly prayers. They would sing tunelessly to the gods and take stake in the customs they had migrated to England. The night usually finished with a tape recording of the Hanuman Chalisa as recorded by supreme Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan, while the pray-ers would whisper along, in rapture to his deep voice.

As the final verse faded out, you heard the chewed crackle of a new recording on top of it... and Neel's voice boom-bapping into a room of middle class Gujaratis desperate to pray.

Pu-tis-pa-tis

Pu-tis-pa-tis

Pu-tis-pa-tis

Pu-tis-pa-tis

Pu-tis-pa-tis

Pu-tis-pa-tis

Pu-tis-pa-tis

Pu-tis-pa-tis

Neel and I listened from the stairs giggling to ourselves.