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Run DMC pal Orville Hall's Hollis Famous Burgers serves food and hip hop in equal parts

Joanna Molloy, New York Daily News

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When Run DMC rapped their way from Hollis, Queens, to the top of hip hop in the 1980s, Orville Hall was right behind them.

"I met Jam Master Jay in music class," Hall recalls. "He played tuba, and I played the snare drum. Jay and I became best friends."

Unlike the Jam Master, Hall's talents were on the business side of rap: He translated street trends to companies like Adidas, J Records, and Fila. He could have moved to SoHo forever, but the old neighborhood tugged.

"I saw the deterioration," says Hall, 46. "These are my friends' kids. What are they living in? There are no community centers, no Police Athletic League."

We walk down Hollis Ave. and the kids fist-bump Hall as he passes. We stop at a park near PS 192. "Run DMC did their first show under that tree. Here on 205th is where they wrote 'My Adidas.'

"It occurred to me that these kids don't know the great history they're walking in," Hall says. "This is the most influential neighborhood in rap music."

And it's not just Run DMC and Run's brother Russell Simmons. LL Cool J, Irv Gotti, Ed Lover, Damon John, Ja Rule, Roc Wilder and others all have ties to Hollis.

"I thought, let me take this history and put it up where the kids see it," he said. A small building came up for sale, he says, "And I bought it with my 401(k)."

He opened a gallery, and a restaurant to keep it alive: Hollis Famous Burgers and Hip Hop Museum at Hollis Ave. and 203rd St.

Inside, it's like Oz after Kansas. The walls are chockablock: Signed leather jackets from groups like The Afros, sneaker prototypes, hats, glasses and the late Jam Master Jay's turntable.

It's more than memorabilia: there's an energy the next generation is catching. Raven (Chef Unique) Johnson, 26, presides over a sizzling grill; she wears one of 100 stylish toques she's made.

The place is packed; people bring their kids for Johnson's stuffed burgers, greens, wings in honey mustard and, on Seafood Saturdays, shrimp lasagna.

"You'd be surprised how many people have not been to an urban neighborhood," Hall says. "I said, 'Build it, and they will come.'"

And they have.

Tourists from Poland, France, and Israel were there last month when, Hall says, Snoop Dogg showed up. "He posed with everybody," he says. Russell Simmons was in last week.

Hall's creating jobs - they sell T-shirts, and 1,200 bottles of homemade Hollis Famous Lemonade a week. Next, Hall envisions a Hip-Hop Walk of Fame.

Rob Walsh, the city's commissioner for small business, called.

"We're helping him set up a nonprofit organization so he can take his work far beyond his front door," Walsh says.

I take out my wallet to pay for dinner, and feel a tug on my arm. I turn to see a young man handing me a \$20 bill. "Miss," Shareef Williams says, "You dropped this."

Walsh smiles.

"You know what? You can find a business that makes money, but it's a whole other thing if you find a business that makes a difference," he says.

He already has.