

Kool & the Gang

Kool & the Gang is an American band formed in Jersey City, New Jersey in 1964 by brothers Robert "Kool" Bell and Ronald Bell, with Dennis "D.T." Thomas, Robert "Spike" Mickens, Charles Smith, George Brown, and Ricky West. They have undergone numerous changes in personnel and have explored many musical styles throughout their history, including jazz, soul, funk, rock, and pop music. After settling on their name following several changes, the group signed to De-Lite Records and released their debut album, *Kool and the Gang* (1970).

The band's first taste of success came with their fourth album *Wild and Peaceful* (1973), which contained the US top ten singles "Jungle Boogie"^[1] and "Hollywood Swinging". Kool & the Gang subsequently entered a period of decline before they reached a second commercial peak between 1979 and 1986 following their partnership with Brazilian musician/producer Eumir Deodato and the addition of singer James "J.T." Taylor to the line-up. Their most successful albums of this period include *Ladies' Night* (1979), *Celebrate!* (1980), and *Emergency* (1984), their highest selling album with two million copies sold in the US, and the hit singles "Ladies' Night", the US number one "Celebration", "Get Down on It", "Joanna", and "Cherish". The band continue to perform worldwide, including as support for Van Halen in 2012 and their fiftieth anniversary tour in 2014.

Kool & the Gang have won numerous awards, including two Grammy Awards, seven American Music Awards, and, in 2006, a Music Business Association Chairman's Award for artistic achievement. In 2018, the Bells, Brown, and Taylor were inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame.^[2] Their discography includes 23 studio albums and almost 70 singles. They have sold 7.5 million and 4.5 million RIAA-certified albums and singles, respectively, in the US.^{[3][4]}

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Kool & the Gang	
<div></div> <div>Kool & the Gang performing in Germany in 2017</div>	
Background information	
Also known as	The Jazziacs • The Soul Town Band • The New Dimensions • Kool & the Flames
Origin	Jersey City, New Jersey, U.S.
Genres	R&B • soul • funk • disco • jazz
Years active	1964–present
Labels	De-Lite • Mercury
Website	koolandthegang.com (http://koolandthegang.com)
Members	Robert "Kool" Bell <div>Ronald Bell</div> <div>Amir Bayyan</div> <div>Curtis Williams</div> <div>Dennis Thomas</div> <div>George Brown</div> <div>Lavell Evans</div> <div>Louis Taylor</div> <div>Shawn McQuiller</div> <div>Timothy Horton</div> <div>Michael Ray</div>
Past members	Larry Gittens <div>Donald Boyce</div> <div>Earl Toon</div> <div>Kevin Bell</div> <div>Kevin Lassiter</div> <div>Caldwell MacMillan</div> <div>Odeen Mays</div>

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Otha Nash

Ricky West

Robert "Spike" Mickens

Rodney Ellis

Royal Bayyan

Sennie "Skip" Martin

Woody Sparrow

Claydes Charles Smith

Clifford Adams

James "J.T." Taylor

Jake Wolpert

History

1964–1969: Formation

The band formed in Jersey City, New Jersey in 1964 when seven school friends decided to perform together as an instrumental jazz and soul group named the Jazziacs.^[5] Among them were Robert "Kool" Bell on bass, his brother Ronald Bell on keyboards,^[6] Robert "Spike" Mickens on trumpet, Dennis "D.T." Thomas on saxophone, Ricky West on keyboards, George Brown on drums, and Charles Smith guitar.^[7] All of them, except Smith, attended Lincoln High School in Jersey City.^[8] Robert Bell had given himself the nickname "Kool" as a way of adapting to the street gangs in his neighborhood after moving from Ohio, and took the name of someone named Cool, replacing his with a "K".^[9] The Bells' father Bobby and uncle Tommy were boxers. They moved to New York to train and lived in the same apartment building as Thelonious Monk, who became Robert's godfather. Miles Davis would drop by because he wanted to be a boxer.^[10]

Their first gigs took place as the opening act to a weekly jazz night held in a local theatre every Sunday.^[6] They also played occasionally with McCoy Tyner, Pharoah Sanders, and Leon Thomas during their early period.^[11] The group then underwent several name changes, including The Soul Town Band and The New Dimensions,^{[12][8]} during which they would play Motown covers as the backing musicians for Soul Town, a small Jersey City-based organisation similar to Motown.^[9] In 1967, they decided to perform as their own identity and became regulars at the Blue Note Lounge in Jersey; one of the MC's advertised them with a new name, Kool & the Flames. However, their manager Gene Redd advised against it to avoid confusion with James Brown's band, The Famous Flames. This led to a further change to Kool & the Gang, in 1969.^[13]

1969–1972: Signing with De-Lite and early albums

After securing their new name and line-up, Kool & the Gang secured a recording deal with Redd's new independent label, De-Lite Records. Redd wrote: "I discovered these eight supertalented incomparable young musicians [...] I immediately realized that their potential would earn them success unknown by most musicians".^[14] The group entered the studio and recorded their debut album, the all-instrumental *Kool and the Gang* (1970), with Redd as producer, arranger, conductor, and partial songwriter. It is their only album with guitarist Woody Sparrow who completed a temporary eight-man formation.^[15] The album peaked the *Billboard* R&B chart at No. 46. Around this time, the group began to develop their stage performance after they witnessed a set by Willie Feaster and the Mighty Magnificents which, according to Robert Bell, "Blew us away [...] We thought, 'Wow, if we want to be in show business, we have to change our act. We can't just stand up there and play'".^[16]

The band followed their debut with two live albums: *Live at the Sex Machine*, recorded the year before, and *Live at PJ's*, both released in 1971. They returned to the studio in 1972 to record *Music Is the Message*, released in July 1972 which went to No. 25 on the R&B chart. It was quickly followed by *Good Times* in November, which features the band backed by a string section. The elements of jazz, rock, and instrumental styles on the record made it difficult for reviewers to label them as one specific genre.^[16]

1973–1978: Rise to fame and low period

Kool & the Gang had their first commercial success with their fourth studio album *Wild and Peaceful* which gave the band three more hits: "Funky Stuff" in the Top 40 pop chart and "Jungle Boogie" and "Hollywood Swinging" in the Top 10.^[17] The latter two songs sold over one million copies and were certified gold by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA).^[18] Their success continued with *Light of Worlds* (1974) In October 1974, the group landed a spot on the national television music show *Soul Train*.^[19] In 1975, Kool & the Gang released *Spirit of the Boogie*.

In 1976, Kool & the Gang entered a period of commercial decline following the rise of disco music in the charts. *Rolling Stone* writer Geoff Himes wrote the disco-era "frowned on [their] loose and greasy approach to dance music".^[13] This was demonstrated by the band's three albums released during this time, *Open Sesame* (1976), *The Force* (1977), and *Everybody's Dancin'* (1978). Robert Bell said De-Lite Records had built the group's own recording studio in Philadelphia.^[20] Bell later spoke of these albums: "It bent our style a bit and we didn't feel at home with it".^[21] *The Force* and *Everybody's Dancin'* displayed the group's attempt to adopt disco elements with featured female vocalists and a string section, but Robert Bell later said: "We got too fancy and over-creative [...] We got away from the basic Kool & the Gang sound [...] and the public didn't like it". The change in style affected their ability to secure as many dates than before, working "just off and on" during this time.^{[20][22]} The latter album received negative responses; one review for *Everybody's Dancin'* had the headline: "Kool and the Gang have gone bland". Writer Mike Duffy wrote: "They've joined the disco lemmings [...] The edge has gone. Say so long to the raw and raunchy".^[23]

During their low period, the band gained some mainstream attention with their contribution of "Open Sesame" to the *soundtrack* of *Saturday Night Fever* (1977).^[21] "Summer Madness" was also used in *Rocky* (1976), but not released on its *soundtrack* album.^[21]

1979–1986: J.T. Taylor and commercial peak

To help their situation, Kool & the Gang changed musical direction in two distinct ways. After several years of consideration, they decided to bring in a dedicated lead vocalist to become more of a focal point to their music, at the suggestion of promoter turned SOLAR Records founder Dick Griffey.^{[24][25][26]} By 1979, South Carolina-born singer James "J.T." Taylor had joined the group who noted that vocals added more warmth to the songs, especially to ballads which the group had avoided as no one could sing them properly. Taylor also recalled some resistance from some members, and the group of female singers they had used on *The Force* and *Everybody's Dancin'*.^[27] The change in style developed further when the band entered a four-album association with Brazilian musician Eumir Deodato as their producer, who helped them move towards mainstream pop and dance-oriented music, with greater emphasis on catchy hooks and chorus lines.^[28] The first choice for a new, outside producer was Stevie Wonder but he was too busy.^[27] In 1979, the band recorded and released *Ladies' Night*, which became their most successful album since their formation helped by the singles "Too Hot" and "Ladies' Night" which went to No. 5 and No. 8 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart, respectively.^[29] In January 1980, *Ladies' Night* was certified *platinum* by the RIAA for selling one million copies in the US.^{[17][4]}

In September 1980, the band released their second collaborative album with Deodato, *Celebrate!*. It became a bigger commercial success than *Ladies' Night*; the lead single "Celebration" remains the band's only single to reach No. 1 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 singles chart. The song originated from the lyric "Come on, let's all celebrate" from "Ladies' Night" which inspired Robert Bell to write a song that he described as "an international anthem".^{[13][29]} The band developed the song on a tour bus after attending the *American Music Awards*.^[30] The song was used in national media coverage for the 1980 World Series, the 1981 Super Bowl, the 1981 NBA Championship, and the 1981 return of the Iran hostages.^[13]

After the release of *Something Special* (1981), that continued the level of success of the previous two albums, the band recorded their fourth and final album with Deodato, *As One* (1982). The latter struggled to reach gold certification in the US, which led to the band's decision to end their time with Deodato as they had enough with the direction they had adopted.^[27] They then decided to produce their next album, *In the Heart* (1983), by themselves with Jim Bonnefond as co-producer. The album contained the US

top five single "Joanna". The song was declared the most played pop song in 1984 by Broadcast Music International.^[31] Bonnfond stayed with the group for Emergency (1984), which remains their highest selling album with over two million copies sold in the US. It spawned four US top 20 singles, including "Emergency", "Cherish", "Fresh", and "Misled". This feat made Kool & the Gang the only band to have four top 20 singles from a single album in 1985.^[32]

In June 1984, Kool & the Gang took time off from recording Emergency to perform at Wembley Stadium as part of a sold out summer concert organised by Elton John.^[32] That November, during a visit to Phonogram's offices in London, Bob Geldof arrived to pitch his idea of the multi-artist charity single "Do They Know It's Christmas?" to the label. He asked the group to participate, making them the only American artists performing on the song.^{[32][33]} In 1985, Bell said the band retained control of their own business affairs, avoiding to hire management on a full-time basis and preferring to hire consultants and agents for each project or a single term.^[34] By 1986, the band had scored 14 top 40 singles in the US since 1980, more than Michael Jackson.^[35]

1987–present: Later career

In 1987, the band completed a 50-city tour of the US. The tour included the group establishing their own public service program, devised by Robert Bell and Taylor, which encouraged school children to pursue education, giving free tickets to those with perfect attendance.^[36] The group rehearsed their stage show with a choreographer at Prince's studio at Paisley Park.^[28] At the time of the tour's start, the band ceased producing adverts with Schlitz beer because of their new image towards children and that they felt it had run its course.^[31]

In February 1988, news of Taylor's departure from the band to pursue a solo career were reported in the press.^{[37][13]} The group had discussed to pursue solo projects during the previous year, with Thomas suggesting the band had considered splitting into twos or threes.^[31] Taylor was replaced by three vocalists: Sennie "Skip" Martin, Odeen Mays, and Gary Brown.

In 1995, Taylor returned to the band for State of Affairs (1996), hailed as the group's "comeback" album.^[13] He left in 1999.

Kool & the Gang pursued elements of hip hop on their next studio album, Gangland.^[13]

In 2012, Bell accepted Van Halen singer David Lee Roth's invitation for Kool & the Gang to be the opening act during their A Different Kind of Truth Tour as Roth had noticed a big portion of their concert audience were women. Roth wanted the group after seeing their set at Glastonbury.^[5]

Former members

Rick West, the group's original keyboardist, who left in 1976 to form his own band, died in 1985. Guitarist Charles Smith died after a long illness in 2006 and was replaced by the Bells' youngest brother, Amir Bayyan, former leader of the Kay Gees. Original trumpet player Robert "Spike" Mickens, who retired in 1986 due to poor health, died at the age of 59 on 2 November 2010, at a nursing home in Far Rockaway, New York. Kool & the Gang added Larry Gittens in 1975 from the Stylistics. Earl Toon Jr. was briefly with the group too (1979 and 1980). Trombonist Clifford Alanza Adams Jr. died in January 2015 at the age of 62 after a year long battle with cancer.^[38] Adams, who had been with Kool & The Gang since 1977, had no health insurance to cover medical expenses.^[39]

Music appearances

The group's music has been featured in several movies:

- "Jungle Boogie" was featured on the soundtracks for the movies Pulp Fiction (1994)^[40] and Undercover Brother (2002).^[41]
- "Summer Madness" was in the movie Rocky.
- "Hollywood Swinging" was featured in the movie Roll Bounce (2005) and also in the video game Grand Theft Auto San Andreas (2004).

Sampling

Recording Artist Mila J used the entire sample for her song "Kickin Back"

- "Summer Madness" was used by DJ Jazzy Jeff & The Fresh Prince for their 1991 single "Summertime", and sampled in the Mr Twin Sister song "Rude Boy". It was also used in the John Singleton film Baby Boy.
- "N.T." has been sampled by Boogie Down Productions, Brand Nubian, De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, Nas, N.W.A, Kris Kross, Jermaine Dupri, and Snoop Dogg.
- "Hollywood Swinging" was sampled by DJ Kool, Mase, Too Short and by The Rubberbandits on their song "Bag of Glue".
- "Celebration" was used by Boards of Canada in their song "The Way You Show".

Personnel

Current members

- Robert "Kool" Bell – bass guitar (1964–present)
- Ronald Bell – tenor saxophone (1964–present)
- George Brown – drums, percussion, keyboards (1964–present)
- Dennis Thomas – alto saxophone (1964–present)
- Michael Ray – trumpet (1979–present)
- Curtis "Fitz" Williams – keyboards (1982–present)
- Shawn McQuiller – vocals, guitar (1991–present)
- Amir Bayyan – guitar (2006–present)
- Tim Horton – drums, percussion (2007?–present)
- Lavell Evans – vocals, percussion (2011–present)
- Jermaine Bryson – trombone (2015–present)
- Walt Anderson – vocals (2016–present)
- Ravi Best – trumpet (2016–present)
- Shelley Paul – tenor saxophone (2016?–present)

Former members

- Ricky West – keyboards (1964–1976; died 1985)
- Claydes Charles Smith – guitar (1964–2006; his death)
- Robert "Spike" Mickens – trumpet (1964–1986; died 2010)
- Woodrow "Woody" Sparrow – rhythm and lead guitar (1969; his death)
- Donald Boyce – vocals (1973–1976)
- Otha Nash – trombone (1975–1977; died 2003)
- Larry Gittens – trumpet, flugelhorn (1975–2013)
- Kevin Lassiter – keyboards, piano, vocals (1976–1982)
- Clifford Adams – trombone (1977–2015; his death)
- Sir Earl Toon – keyboard, vocals, writer (1979–1982)
- James "J.T." Taylor – vocals (1979–1988, 1995–1999)
- Sennie "Skip" Martin – trumpet, vocals (1987–2007)
- Louis Van Taylor – alto and tenor saxophone (1996–2017)

Discography

Studio albums

- *Kool and the Gang* (1970)
- *Music Is the Message* (1972)
- *Good Times* (1972)
- *Wild and Peaceful* (1973)
- *Light of Worlds* (1974)
- *Spirit of the Boogie* (1975)
- *Love & Understanding* (1976)
- *Open Sesame* (1976)
- *The Force* (1977)
- *Everybody's Dancin'* (1978)
- *Ladies' Night* (1979)
- *Celebrate!* (1980)
- *Something Special* (1981)
- *As One* (1982)
- *In the Heart* (1983)
- *Emergency* (1984)
- *Forever* (1986)
- *Sweat* (1989)
- *Unite* (1992)
- *State of Affairs* (1996)
- *Gangland* (2001)
- *The Hits: Reloaded* (2004)
- *Still Kool* (2007)
- *Kool for the Holidays* (2013)

See also

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External links

- Official site (<http://www.koolandthegang.com/>)
- Interview (http://www.bluesandsoul.com/feature/609/kool_and_the_gang_kool_by_name/) by Pete Lewis, *Blues & Soul*, November 2010

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