

ISTHMUS

Hip-hop heroes: DJs and emcees demand respect for Madison's scene

by

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"Feel Good Music," a song by Tefman, blares from a laptop. "I had a vision/I would never be the same/So I stand up tall/And initiate the change," raps the local artist.

A UW student opens a lecture on hip-hop education with a spontaneous freestyle.

An organization honors the memory of a deceased hip-hop artist by helping young people learn to express themselves through spoken word.

The organizers of the Madison Hip-Hop Awards prepare to honor the scene for the fifth year in a row.

You don't have to look far to find hip-hop thriving in Madison. So why is it so hard to find local artists on the radio, in concert venues and in positive publicity for the city?

"The use of hip-hop in education or as outreach tools to our young people is generally supported. However, the Madison community has a misconception that local hip-hop shows are plagued with violence and are generally problematic," says Karen Reece, president of the Urban Community Arts Network (UCAN), a group working to secure performance opportunities for local emcees, DJs, producers and more.

Hip-hop has long been a voice for the marginalized, but given that it dominates American popular music, it's surprising that so little local talent can be found on local events calendars. This is doubly surprising given that the UW is a pioneer in the study of hip-hop music and culture. Two of the most visible examples of the university's efforts come from the Office of Multicultural Arts Initiatives (OMAI): First Wave, a multicultural arts program for incoming students, and the Getting Real IV lecture series, a semester-long program focused on the academic study of hip-hop.

The spring 2014 lectures come at a time when local organizations have redoubled their efforts to ensure that local artists have places to present their work. At long last, prospects for local performers may be improving.

Gaining legitimacy

Hosted by OMAI and UW education professor Gloria Ladson-Billings, Getting Real brings artists, scholars and other pivotal hip-hop figures to campus to inspire students, celebrate a relatively new academic discipline, and start conversations about hip-hop's future.

OMAI director and Getting Real organizer Willie Ney says these lectures give hip-hop legitimacy while highlighting career paths for young fans in the First Wave program. They can also help non-fans gain respect for hip-hop as both an art form and a field of study.

"It's a really important thing for them to emulate people getting their doctorates [and] master's degrees, where the area of focus is hip-hop through the sociological and anthropological [perspective]," Ney says of the First Wave students, many of whom come from underprivileged backgrounds.

Each lecture has a different theme, from feminism to teaching. Educators Toni Blackman, Michael Cirelli and Baba Israel discussed the future of hip-hop in academia on March 3. Cirelli, executive director of Urban Word NYC, comes to the UW every year to coordinate the weeklong Hip-Hop in the Heartland summer institute, which has been helping educators integrate hip-hop into their teaching for nearly a decade.

On April 14, Charlotte Hill O'Neal will discuss the globalization of hip-hop. A former Black Panther, she now co-directs the United African Alliance Community Center in Tanzania and performs spoken word as Mama C.

Getting Real is just one example of the university's efforts to address cultural conflict and change through the arts. OMAI recently launched a performance series that shares the stories of inmates in Oshkosh at the Wisconsin Resource Center.

"We'll use this as a framework to reach out to more prisons," Ney says. "We try to instill in our students an understanding of activism."

Extending that activism to the rest of the city is much more difficult.

"I graduated from UW right as the First Wave program was welcoming its inaugural cohort. To bring in all these unbelievably talented young artists from all around the country, that's a very special thing," says Kyle Tran Myhre, an artist and writer who performs as Guante. After spending his formative years immersed in Madison's hip-hop scene -- and writing about it for *Isthmus* -- he moved to Minneapolis. He recalls that the UW scene and the greater Madison community struggled to work together.

"The ingrained insularity of most college campuses always presents an obstacle to that kind of work," Myhre says.

UCAN's Reece agrees, noting that the university's hip-hop scene and programs have been "very segregated" from hip-hop events in the rest of the city.

"Artists booked are typically UW students or national touring artists, and events are primarily marketed to university crowds," she says.

Mark "Shah" Evans, UCAN's vice president, says an upcoming hip-hop festival co-organized by Wisconsin Union Directorate (Union South, March 28) is an example of the kind of progress he'd like to see in terms of booking local artists. Evans, who has worked in the music industry as a promoter, consultant and manager, emphasizes that university shows are key for local artists trying to build their careers.

"If you can say you performed at your hometown university, especially a Big Ten school, that's huge. It's the best money and the most diverse crowd," he explains.

Building bridges

Evans and Reece don't just blog these observations or share them with friends. Along with other members of UCAN, they strengthen ties between local and UW hip-hop communities with workshops and other events that draw members of both.

"My hope is to make sure we are booking UW artists in local shows and local artists in UW shows," Reece says. "We believe this will help create more performance opportunities and give both scenes [exposure]."

She cites connections with First Wave, WSUM radio and Wisconsin Union Directorate as progress.

Dexter Patterson, who performs as Tefman, is both a UW student and a local artist. He's made a point of building bridges between the two worlds.

"The majority of the students I talk to at the university have no idea about the local hip-hop community," Patterson says. "My goal is to try and bridge that gap as much as possible before I graduate."

Tefman will host a WSUM show featuring independent hip-hop artists starting in April. He's also pleased that the WUD music committee has partnered with UCAN to host a local music series.

"Things are looking up, and that has me really excited," he says.

There are other signs of progress, too. For example, First Wave alum and OMAI education director Sofia Snow is now on the Madison Arts Commission (MAC). First Wave student Zhalarina Sanders coordinates the JVN project, which honors late First Wave student John "Vietnam" Nguyen. It encourages self-expression through hip-hop with events at local community centers, libraries and the Boys & Girls Club.

"The facilitators giving teaching workshops are receiving [college] credit," Sanders says. "We look for student artists on campus who are interested in teaching."

Hip-hop initiatives like this could also help keep more recent college grads in Madison.

"They feel more roots in Madison because they've connected with kids and often parents," Sanders says.

Fighting fear

The citywide hip-hop scene has benefited from strengthening its relationship with the UW, but there's more work to be done. There's still a stigma when it comes to putting local acts on local stages.

"For approximately the past year, there has not been a single local venue that was willing to book an entirely local bill," Reece says. "Hip-hop artists could be booked as openers for national touring artists, but those opportunities are limited."

Recently, a couple of venues, like the Inferno and Willy St. Pub (the Wisco), have allowed local hip-hop bills, but they are very selective in who they book."

Stereotypes play a large role. When violence breaks out at a hip-hop show, the reaction is typically much more heated than when it happens at a rock or punk show, Reece says. Plus, fights at hip-hop shows tend to generate media coverage.

"There has been a trend toward harsher penalties for establishments that experience a disturbance during a hip-hop concert," Reece says. "If a fight breaks out at a bar during a rock or country show, staff typically will deescalate the situation, and police may be called. If a fight breaks out during a hip-hop show, police are often called, and that police call will almost certainly make the news the next day."

Madison Police Department spokesman Joel DeSpain says police reports from concerts do not indicate what type of music was being performed.

"We respond to complaints, but we're not responding to the type of music," DeSpain says of the department's current approach, as well as the approach former Police Chief Noble Wray used.

DeSpain notes that some officers have met with venue managers and hip-hop advocates to ensure that certain styles of music aren't getting singled out. He also points out that some officers, such as Anthony Ward, are emcees.

Media outlets also contribute to hip-hop stereotypes.

"It has been very difficult to get media attention for local hip-hop shows that are well attended and peaceful," Reece explains. "The only time the Madison community sees local hip-hop in the media is when there is a problem."

Anthony Lamarr, an award-winning local artist, reminds others that hip-hop is everywhere, not just in the news.

"It's on the radio, on sports games, in your car. At least in the last 10 years on a national or international level, hip-hop has dominated the industry," he says. "If Madison is truly progressive, it needs to fully embrace hip-hop."

Lamarr says MAC's efforts, including a hip-hop subcommittee he has belonged to, can strengthen the scene by bringing more people into the discussion.

Evans says Madison simply needs to stop being "scared of hip-hop," noting that when venues shut down shows in response to violence, another problem emerges: "hundreds of angry people getting kicked outside at once."

The show tends to go on when violence erupts at a non-hip-hop gig. During a recent concert at the Barrymore Theatre, country artist Jason Isbell stopped in the middle of a song to point out a fight, which security guards hastily broke up. He thanked them, the audience clapped, and the show continued without a hitch.

Reece points to the Mifflin Street Block Party and FreakFest as further examples of the politics of enforcement.

"These events were allowed to occur year after year in spite of drunken crowds, violence and arrests," she says. (Freakfest 2013 security personnel made nearly 30 arrests in a matter of hours.) "Instead of putting a stop to the festivities, perhaps by penalizing establishments [with problems] -- like having them remain closed on the night in question -- the city invested numerous resources and hundreds of thousands of dollars to try to manage the crowds. Imagine if the same community mentality was applied to keeping hip-hop as a regular part of Madison's nightlife."

Learning to deal

Darwin Sampson, owner of the Frequency, says several obstacles affect the health of the local hip-hop scene, in particular a misunderstanding of what hip-hop is. His landlord expressly forbade hip-hop shows at the downtown venue following a 2013 incident.

"You've got property owners who maybe don't understand a lot about hip-hop," Sampson notes. "They hear 'hip-hop' and think gangsta rap [about violent topics]."

Sampson says that larger cities have implemented more robust security protocols, and that Madison should consider doing the same.

"Madison is experiencing things that larger cities have experienced but learned to deal with," he says. "I've worked with several security companies in town, and there's no uniform process for [crowd control]. It doesn't really discourage the troublemakers."

Sampson says he's encouraged city officials to provide funding for security training and additional personnel, but his requests haven't produced action.

"If you do it for hip-hop, you have to do it for every genre of music...and that's a financial obstacle," he says of streamlining security procedures for shows.

Hip-hop's image in popular culture isn't helping matters, either. At his March 3 Getting Real lecture, Cirelli argued that overrepresentation of mainstream hip-hop is one of the biggest barriers to collaboration.

"Now we only get to see one monotheistic perspective: the gangsta-pimp-ho trinity," he explained, referencing a term from Tricia Rose's book *The Hip-Hop Wars*. He also noted that scapegoating mainstream artists is perpetuating this reductive view of hip-hop: "We're blaming 50 Cent and 2 Chainz when they're not really responsible for that."

And when popular artists like Lorde and Macklemore make headlines by criticizing hip-hop's excesses in extremely broad terms, it's easy to see how this musical genre can seem one-dimensional to a casual observer.

On the flip side are people like Evans, who works as an educator and public speaker.

"I've used 2Pac and Biggie to teach Shakespeare," he says.

Meanwhile, Sampson says he's gently pushing boundaries to try to open the doors to more hip-hop acts. This involves educating others about the music and its diversity of forms.

"I've been hosting more hip-hop shows lately, mostly under the radar," he says. "I'm trying to get [my landlord] to be more flexible and let him know that it's a popular music form, and if I'm not allowed to tap into that, it hurts my business."

Collaborating for change

Despite the obstacles, the local hip-hop community feels hopeful these days. The positive vibes are a result of multilateral efforts to advocate for the artists.

"There's something shifting, and there's a community willing to push through obstacles and make something happen," says Karin Wolf, the city's arts program administrator.

Madison Media Institute and MAC came up with a survey to help quantify the local hip-hop scene's problems and involve the mayor's office in a plan to address them.

"The purpose of this survey is to present MAC with a comprehensive analysis of hip-hop and how it relates to Madison," says Chris Taylor, dean of students at Madison Media Institute. "The commission will decide if they should make a recommendation to the mayor's office to assist in helping the culture grow."

The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., helped create the survey. Results are expected by late spring.

Meanwhile, UCAN members are working to bolster the image of local hip-hop artists. Some members focus on building trusting relationships with venue owners. Others have been meeting with city stakeholders such as the mayor's office, the Alcohol License Review Committee and the Madison Police Department for nearly two years, "to work on strategies to prevent venue doors from closing," Reece says.

Even when venues do shut out local hip-hop acts, UCAN tries to find places for them to perform. The organization also hosts workshops, forums and other educational events to help artists market themselves, feel empowered and resolve conflicts professionally.

These skills can be especially useful when communicating with city officials, as Evans often does. He argues that some city policies can encourage venues to pass on hip-hop acts.

"When fights break out, the police threaten to pull venues' liquor licenses," he notes. "So my goal is to fight the city [policies] instead of the venues."

Along with artists like Tefman and DJ Pain 1, Evans has been working with city representatives, law enforcement officials and venue owners to create show-booking guidelines. He devotes a great deal of energy to these projects because he knows that hometown support is crucial for the artists.

"When you try to book a show out of town, places are going to ask why you can't book shows in your own city," he notes.

Hearing my music

Despite this enduring problem, Reece is hopeful about the scene's future.

"Madison has many extremely talented artists who could be competitive on a regional and national level. They just need the opportunity to be seen and heard," she says.

Taylor would like to see "a committee of stakeholders appointed by the mayor to address the topic," one with "open dialogue and, most importantly, a strong follow-through."

"I would like to go to a bar and hear my music," he adds. "I am a 40-year-old black man, and rap music has been the soundtrack to my life. It has enraged me, but it has also soothed me. It held me when I was down and gave me something to sing about when I was up. Rap allowed me to connect culturally with my kids and provide for them. Rap comforted me when my mother passed [away] last year."

Rejecting hip-hop music can lead to dismissal of an entire culture and its unique responses to an increasingly multicultural society. Missing out on that would be a shame, Taylor says.

"There is so much beauty in the culture of hip-hop. Not just rap, not just spoken word, not just graffiti, not just DJing or breakdancing, but hip-hop as a way of life, death and celebrating humanity."