

9-28-2006

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Recommended Citation

Milkovits, Amanda, "Changing voices, faces of hip-hop" (2006). *Broad Street Studio*. 31.
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Changing voices, faces of hip-hop

A Brown University professor traces the evolution of hip-hop as part of the "Songs of Social Justice" colloquium at the University of Rhode Island.

BY AMANDA MILKOVITS

JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

SOUTH KINGSTOWN – Commentator Tricia Rose could talk about what hip-hop is meant to be.

But a group of teenage performers from AS220 in Providence put her words into action.

During a presentation Tuesday night in the University of Rhode Island's colloquium series "Songs of Social Justice: The Rhetoric of Music," the Brown University professor spoke about the evolution of hip-hop – from an underground music scene about the experiences of African-Americans, to a commercialized glori-

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fication of the thug life.

It's an ironic evolution for a genre of music that can be like poetry, grown from the roots of black experiences and written in protests against crime, poverty, racism, and about the search for a better life. This is the music that has grown out of the experiences of African Americans, Rose said, just like jazz and blues, with the same roots in black history.

But she sees how hip-hop has been hijacked by the mainstream, and how the ghetto life – the pimps, the drugs, shootings, and gang warfare – has been turned into something to emulate and consume.

“So what should be narratives that make us depressed and out-

raged become narratives we celebrate,” Rose said.

She talked about when she picked up a DVD of hip-hop artist 50 Cent, *Live at Detroit*, and noticed that clicking the remote brought up an image of 50 Cent in a bulletproof vest and the sound of gunfire. (50 Cent has been shot numerous times.) Viewing the televised concert, she saw that the audience appeared to be all white.

These are the images that people who don't know about the black experience are buying – the sexism, gang violence, drugs. Hip-hop, like other music of social justice, can be expressions of injustice, she said. But, when that is seen as what it means to be cool, to be black, to be a tough young man, to be a submissive woman, then the message of protest becomes something to follow, “and it's that moment we're

hanging in right now,” Rose said.

As the diverse crowd in the Edwards Auditorium listened, Rose read the lyrics of several hip-hop songs and then played them. Some nodded their heads to the drum backbeat as she played Akrobatik's song “Remind My Soul”: “Yeah, it's getting wild out here/ Makes me wonder how a black man can raise a child out here. ... We're no longer supposed to be slaves/I bet Harriet Tubman will be turning in her grave/Like remind my soul.”

The crowd was warmed up by Rose, and brought to their feet by a troupe of five members of AS220's Broad Street Studio Rhode Show, which wrote and performed its own songs.

Amber Newman, 16, her sister Anjel, 18, David Dayday Arkins, 17, and Michelle Mancone, 17, sang about growing up in the inner-city, a rap about the first graf-

fiti artist, named “Cornbread,” about wanting more for their lives.

AS220's performance coordinator David Gonzalez, who performed with the Rhode Show, teaches hip-hop workshops at the Rhode Island Training School. “I'm trying to get them to take away the commercial control of the culture and give them back the art,” Gonzalez said later.

Rose's talk about the power of hip-hop music rang true for each of them.

“This has helped me grow and mature,” said Mancone. “I've learned a lot of things about culture and myself. I was looking for help, and it was a positive thing.”

The colloquium continues Tuesday with Augustin Lira and Alma discussing Chicano/Latino songs.

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