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Growing Up in Public

Don't ever tell the members of the Rhodeshow you're a big fan of their early work. The hip-hop collective began its life as a grant-funded youth outreach program, presenting hackneyed skits on the dangers of smoking.

"It started with some really corny bull," recalls 29-year-old Rhodeshow founder David Gonzalez. If you're really curious, he will happily reenact some of those early performances, but trust me on this one, it's best left in the past. Now, several years and several new additions to the troupe later, the Rhodeshow is trying to leave behind the after-school special stigma and establish itself as a full-fledged part of the hip-hop scene.

"We're trying to put off that whole youth program shit, get rid of that altogether," Gonzalez informs me. "People feel sorry for us like, 'Oh, youth program. Let's go watch them and buy their CD in support.' And then when we get on stage it's like, 'Rrrraaaaaaww!'. Get rid of that (youth group) stereotype."

With the knowledge and drive of the kinetic Gonzalez to guide them, the teens and twentysomethings of Rhodeshow are making a statement with their second CD, the appropriately titled *Growth Project 2.0*. You can throw out the warm and fuzzy image of naive positivity and its attendant artistic mediocrity and judge Rhodeshow on its own merit. This is a real hip-hop group. They curse. They laugh at dirty jokes. They write songs about real life. They're definitely not using their music to preach to you about the health hazards posed by cigarettes. (Though you really should quit; it's a filthy habit.) And just to prove how serious they are, they brought in Joey Beats, the local production maestro with the national reputation,

to provide the musical backdrop. His contributions are reminiscent of Liquid Swords era RZA: gritty, minimalist, and head nod-inducing. Having one producer provide all but two of the beats helps provide a cohesive sound for a large, diverse group of young talents growing up in public.

"The appeal of our music doesn't match the music that we were brought up with," remarks Andre, one of the elder statesmen of the group at a wizened old age of 21. "The ideas that we have, the type of people that we are, the lessons that we learned growing up are more in line with the hip-hop that you guys grew up with," he says, referring back to the hip-hop touchstones of David, Joey, and this writer's teenage years. It's an influence that is curiously strong in the Rhodeshow's music considering their ages. In 1994, the year of such landmark albums as Nas's *Illmatic* and the Notorious B.I.G.'s *Ready to Die*, Andre was seven-years-old. Amber, an 18-year-old charter member of the group, was four.

"I started seeing all the other artists," she says. "What they talk about doesn't necessarily have to be about rims, cars, all the stuff that I was listening to. You start to just feed off of that. That's what I did. It inspired me to write about what I was feeling."

The Rhodeshow doesn't deal in the kind of crass, insipid commercialism of the Top 40 set, nor are they the sort of fussy, self-concerned college radio MCs who make hip-hop about hip-hop. Instead, they rap about what they know: dead-end jobs, absentee parents, death, romance, growing pains, and everyday struggles. It's like Aasim, a 16-year-old newcomer to the group, says: "I just want to make sure I'm putting out music that I know is real. I don't want to be another disposable rapper."

The music they make is honest, exuberant and unpretentious. At times you can hear the vocalists grasping for a level of nuance or sophistication that isn't quite there yet, but they already have a head start on achieving. What they lack in polish or complexity, they make up for in energy and unabashed self-expression. On stage they come alive, radiating enthusiasm and determination in contrast to the self-satisfied or standoffish tendencies of so many hip-hop performers. At a Friday night Sound Session performance, they won over a crowd at the Black Rep that wasn't there to throw any pity parties for the fresh-faced scamps in some youth program; the Sound Session audience only cares about whether or not you can rock the stage. Once the beat dropped, even some of the members who were shy and fidgety during our interview confidently worked the crowd like it was their job.

For some of them, this could be a job one day. Others will go on to find other careers. "I think I'm gonna go to school to be an anesthesiologist," cracks Andre, "just so I can make a shitload of money and do everything I want creatively on my own time."

Michelle, an 18-year-old rapper and singer, is a bit more reflective about what the Rhodeshow represents for her. "I watched my dad give up on art and be a miserable person over it," she recalls. "I don't want to be that person. I want to find an even balance. Whatever this turns into for me is what it turns into. As long as I'm doing what I love that's all that matters."

Check out *Growth Project 2.0* at therhodeshow.com.

One Minute Review

Growth Project 2.0 is an appropriate title for the Rhodeshow's second CD, as it finds them maturing beyond the "youth group" tag they've tried so hard to live down. The trials and tribulation of youth and growing up in the city are still prominent subject matter, however, which keeps the artists humble and firmly rooted in an authenticity they never betray with nonsense talk about guns, self-aggrandizing exploits, or material desires. With 11 out of 13 tracks provided by underground production whiz Joey Beats, the musical backdrop provides a consistency and coherence to a project with almost as many different vocalists as there are songs. Group members Michelle Mancane and Andre Bradley particularly impress by doing double duty as MC's and singers, and newcomer Alinola Daramola (with help from Mancane) absolutely blazes the mic on the standout track "I Had a Feeling."