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Rhode Show: In Their Own Words

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BY RICK MASSIMO
Journal Pop Music Writer

PROVIDENCE When David Gonzalez leads lyric-writing workshops at the Broad Street Studio at AS220, he says he’s got an ethic that he reinforces constantly to young students:

“Tell somebody something.”

The self-titled debut CD of The Rhode Show, the youth hip-hop group that’s an outgrowth of the Broad Street Studio, does just that:

While much of the hip-hop you can hear on the radio is, at best, intriguing pop, the music of the Rhode Show inherits the genre’s best traditions — personal perspectives on life as it’s lived here and now.

The disc opens with “Rewind,” a group dialogue about the laziness and lack of contact that’s the flip side of the high-technology lifestyle. “I seen people pass on life with a chance to exist/ Dodge human contact; barely understand what it is . . . . You pass on life to count your friends on MySpace,” goes one verse. Khyree Brown’s “Blackman” reacts against the stereotypes that African-American youths face. Singing high and clear over a rhythm track that combines R&B and dancehall reggae, “I’ve been working so long/ to be more than a token face in a crowd/ This ‘black kid’ stuff really got me down/ . . . Blackman, you’re probably not smart enough/ Blackman, you’re proud but your heart is rough/ Time says you’re bound to end up/ Another Channel 6 type,” a reference to getting on the local news for committing a crime.

But the full impact of the album comes on “I Don’t Know,” written and performed by four youths from the Rhode Island Training School (who go only by their first names on the record’s credits). It’s the flip side of gangster life, with the indignities of incarceration laid bare.

“We don’t use many utensils; they’re plastic ones/ And when you want extra food, you got to ask for some . . .
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"I sit back in this box, wonder why I chose to face this/ Used to drive around the block; now I’m a number, now I’m faceless/ I got holes in my socks, state food’s a little sour/ Windows dirty and black — five-minute cold-type shower.

"Try to remain patient, try to remain calm/ that way I don’t be abrasive, flip through the pages of Psalms/ To find the error of my ways, find some insight and wisdom/ Physically I’m held at bay, mentally can’t lock me in prison.

"I want my life back, so I can be the kid that God knows."

THE RHODE show was formed five years ago, says Gonzalez, whose title is performance art coordinator at AS220, and a disc was overdue. "We needed a product," he says; because the group was constantly being asked whether they had discs for sale.

The kids in The Rhode Show often come from difficult backgrounds: two-thirds are making the transition from being in the care of the state Department of Children, Youth and Families, including the Training School. But they did 32 shows last year, Gonzalez says, the proceeds from which financed this record. And they have more coming up, including — just this summer — at AS220’s annual Foo Fest, the SoundSession festival in downtown Providence and a series of performances in Providence neighborhood parks. Lynne McCormack, the director of Providence’s Department of Arts, Culture and Tourism, which booked the Rhode Show for the parks, says of the group, "It’s a wonderful way for youth to find their voice.

"The fact that ... they all coalesce to make work about who they are is an amazing thing. And there aren’t a lot of opportunities for young people to do that work in a concentrated way, so that they have a chance to develop those stories that they tell."

Gonzalez meets with his performers in thrice-weekly writing and rehearsal sessions, in addition to holding music workshops at AS220 and at the Training School.

Activities can include fixing up a verse, as on a recent afternoon, or working on performance skills by running around the block before rapping, or even working on enunciation by rapping with a cork in one’s mouth, Gonzalez says.

It can be frustrating — Gonzalez has to dress down one of the performers at a recent meeting, and keeping young minds focused is never easy. But the rewards are worth it.

Gonzalez says that a Rhode Show rapper will come up with a verse whose poeticism and honesty will make Gonzalez take a walk around the block, or go up to the third floor of AS220 and start banging on doors telling people they have to hear it.

"Seeing that one moment where a kid gets it.... They tap into something they didn’t know they had. These kids have done it over and over again."

AT 8 ON a recent Monday morning, Gonzalez and Anjel Newmann, 19, were conducting a workshop with a first-period class at Cranston East High School. The class's teacher, Linda Remick, had seen The Rhode Show and wanted its members to inspire her class with the power of their own words.
“They’re great to see,” Remick said. “They inspire thought and change.”

“We are reclaiming the hip-hop culture,” Gonzalez tells the students.

The idea is to show young people what they can do by themselves, with their own words and work, and that corporations don’t have to make their art for them.

Growing up in Brooklyn, N.Y., Gonzalez, 28, tells the kids, he went to a school where there was “no such thing as, like, chairs.” He sat on a radiator and shared books with other students. He won a poetry contest and got to meet several members of the New York Mets. One of them gave him a dollar. “They gave me a dollar! I got something!” Gonzalez remembers thinking.

Gonzalez, who buzzes around the room in the course of the 45 minutes, speaking from the front, from the back and at a desk, wakes up the early-morning class. “Shakespeare was garbage,” he says. “I’m as good as him.”

He backs off from that. “Half the words we even use were invented by Shakespeare — ‘because,’ ” he gives as an example.

But the point is, “What art is about, it makes them peers... The whole idea is that your words are just as powerful as anything else.”

HE GETS the students to write, just for a few seconds, something about themselves and what’s around them right now — the weather, their hair, their feet, whatever — and then spend a few more seconds on any topic that might be interesting to them. “That’s a picture of who you are at this moment,” Gonzalez tells them, and that’s where The Rhode Show’s poems and lyrics start.

Newmann, a recent Cranston East graduate, recites several poems and answers questions from the students. In this setting, her work isn’t as hip-hop-influenced as it would be in musical performances. Her centerpiece is the poem “I’m Inspired By.”

I’m inspired by passionate dreams captured and conveyed on the corner of a canvas

Deep rooted principles that cause me to stand this

Knowledge, education, and books that they banish

Diversities of culture like black, white and Spanish

I’m inspired by the role of women and men expecting less out of them

The overdosage God gave males of testosterone

Living a lie to keep your face in the heart of them

And [expletive] theories that say you have to be part of them.

Gonzalez recites a few poems, including “Tommie Smith,” his poem about the runner who touched
off a controversy at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics with his raised-fist protest on the winner’s podium, and talks about "crazy songs that make no sense." As an example, he cites the ubiquitous one-word refrain of Jim Jones’s hit "We Fly High."

“BALLIN’!” he shouts. “Just imagine that writing process.” He hunches over, miming writing into his own hand as the students laugh. He stops to think. “BALLIN’! Yeah, that’s good.” He writes it down.

In a corporate-dominated music business, Gonzalez admits that if he were offered $10 million to write “BALLIN’!,” he’d “say yes.” But the point is to “fight this big monster,” and the Rhode Show is “committed to saying a little bit more.”

At the Training School, Gonzalez says later, that’s a hard sell. Gonzalez describes the hip-hop culture of the Training School and the Rhode Show as opposites.

For one thing, the Rhode Show aesthetic is to look within yourself and be honest. At the Training School, Gonzalez says, a kid is looking over at the kid next to him, and there’s a lot of peer pressure to look hard to those around you.

And while the Rhode Show’s ethos is anti-corporate, anti-mainstream, anti-radio, Gonzalez says it’s hard to convince a Training School youth of that when “all they got is a radio.”

THE YOUTHS in the Rhode Show reflect a cross-section of the population of the Broad Street Studio: roughly one-third, according to Gonzalez, have taken advantage of the free art programs of the studio, and two-thirds are making their way out of state care, including the Training School. Confidentiality rules prevent Gonzalez from divulging who’s who, and he prefers it that way — so there’s no stereotyping.

The young people making the transition from DCYF get stipends, financed through grant money, to be part of the show.

“Paid to write rhymes!” Gonzalez tells the students at Cranston East. “How dope is that!”

He warns them that it’s not worth it to hit a fellow student and get sent to the Training School. He’s joking, but it raises a point: Is the stipend program rewarding bad behavior?

“We’re giving kids the resources to show them an entire new world,” Gonzalez says. “We’re paying kids to learn about their opportunities.”

In a separate conversation, AS220 artistic director Bert Crenca agrees. For one thing, “overwhelming evidence” shows that the youths of the Training School are poor, and he says almost all were sent there for crimes committed out of financial necessity.

“We have failed these kids,” says Crenca, a member of the Providence School Board. And to pay them a little money to lead them down a different path? “Pfft,” Crenca snorts dismissively.

IT ALSO GOES to the heart of what AS220 is about, Gonzalez and Crenca both say: Art isn’t an idle pastime for people privileged enough to have idle time; it’s an essential of life, and if a former Training School student can be paid to learn to, for example, fix cars as a life skill, why should art
take a back seat?

The Broad Street Studio and the Rhode Show have had successes and failures in terms of recidivism, but Crenca says even when someone goes back to incarceration, either as a juvenile or as an adult, most maintain some kind of contact with AS220.

Writing and performing, says Crenca, teach lessons for life that too many young people, no matter what their situation, don’t get anywhere else. “It’s a formative experience . . . that shows the bad and good of what you’re capable of . . .

“When you complete one thing, like a song, you get the idea that you can complete something else. Like school.”

The end goal, Crenca says, is to put young people on the path to “a life of choice.”

For a lot of the performers in the Rhode Show, the structure of the group, with schedules, workloads and revealing yourself to your peers and audiences, fills a void in their lives.

Michelle Mancone, 17, speaking on the day of her graduation from Cranston East, says, “I was kind of like a vegetable” before joining the Rhode Show two years ago. “The hip-hop vibe is a crazy vibe,” she says, “a really good feeling.”

The challenges and the community feeling of the Rhode Show have helped her overcome her quiet nature, and helped her listen a lot more. This helped her in school, she says, by inspiring her to take a difficult situation and ask, “What can I do to make this work?”

Josh Boseman, 15, calls the Rhode Show “my second family.” Anjel Newmann, 19, who has gone from dancer to writer to rapper to aspiring producer in her five years in the group, goes that one better. “I wouldn’t even call it my second home. It’s my first home.”

Khyree Brown, 20, the singer of “Blackman,” agrees. “When I walked into my house, it felt like prison,” he says. “When I came here, I felt free.”

ALEX BAPTISTA, 18, of East Providence, was in the Rhode Show during his last year of high school at the private Providence Country Day. He was in the group as part of his senior thesis, and to learn about the recording process.

Baptista now studies film at the Columbia College of Art, in Chicago, but he’s back for the summer as a Rhode Show guest writer. He says the knowledge of recording and of the creative work ethic that he gained in The Rhode Show has been useful in film school.

It’s also been a cultural eye-opener. “Many people here have hard lives,” Baptista says, adding, there are “kids younger than me who have two children.”

Baptista collaborated on the song “Product” with a Training School student known on the record as Gibo, although “I didn’t know what the Training School was when I started” in 2005, he says. He and Gibo wrote and performed alternating verses, which was an interesting experience seeing as how, Baptista says, “We literally can’t even talk to each other.”
Gonzalez acted as an intermediary, and had to go back and forth from the Training School to bring verses to the two authors. And Training School staff had to check the work at all times to make sure messages weren’t being slipped in and out.

ON A RECENT Saturday night, the Rhode Show took the stage at the Living Room, in Providence, for a short set as part of the Rhode Island Hip-Hop Peace Fest. While some of the other rappers in the early going seemed to be performing for arena audiences that existed only in their imaginations, the Rhode Show hit with a performance that was not only rehearsed and tight, but filled with the urgency of performing to an audience of peers, with material that strikes at their own lives.

Anjel Newmann, her sister Amber, and Mancone rip through “Formatted Into Rhyme,” which takes off from its somewhat-sterile recorded version into a manifesto about the importance of art and the sacrifices of that life. Amid lyrics about stocking shelves and being “always on the grind,” “This is what we’ve come to identify as the hardest/ An artist that puts their heart into whatever their art is.”

Brown glides through “Blackman,” his smooth delivery almost masking the pointed lyrics. And the Newmann sisters return for “Front Line,” an antiwar song that also contains what could be the Rhode Show credo:

“I walk with pride, expose ignorant lies/ Can’t hide our voice, can’t stop our rhymes.”

Listen to songs from Rhode Show at www.projo.com/music

In addition to The Rhode Show, The Broad Street Studio at AS220 offers free art instruction to area youths in photography, music, writing and visual arts. For more information on the Studio, to buy a copy of the Rhode Show CD, or to learn about upcoming Rhode Show performances, go to www.as220.org.

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