

Hip hop is who they are



Carson Emmanuel (left) and Shaun Polanco-Simmons are part of a group of students at Options II High School who are helping a McGill grad student research how the hip-hop movement shapes teenagers' identities.

Photograph by : JOHN KENNEY, THE GAZETTE

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From living in the friendly neighbourhoods of West Palm Beach, Fla., to some of the toughest parts of north-end St. Michel, Carson Emmanuel has seen a lot in his 17 years. So when something or somebody rubs him the wrong way, he doesn't get mad. He gets even - through rap.

"This week, I had this guy speak my name in a wrong way," the Grade 11 student at Options II High School in Ville Emard said last Thursday. "Now, when somebody doesn't respect you, you know you don't take that too easily. You kind of get ticked off. So I wrote down a quick verse basically saying, 'Don't say anything that would offend me.'"

The exact lyrics are somewhat more explicit. Let's just say that his words are smart, witty and wise, just like the author himself. And if there's one thing Emmanuel has in common with countless teenagers his age, it's his respect for the hip-hop form as a way of dealing with his feelings and identity.

"I would say that hip hop is the main and dominant subculture of youth today," said Jacqueline Celemencki, a graduate student at the Education Department of McGill University. "If you want to know and understand youth culture, you should absolutely be looking at hip hop."

In fact, hip-hop culture is more than just rapping and emceeing. It's a decades-old movement that includes a range of visual and physical expression, like graffiti, urban fashion and breakdancing.

For the past few months, Celemencki has been holding group discussions with Options II students like Emmanuel about how the hip-hop movement shapes their identities and contributes to a sense of who they are. Her research will form the basis for her master's thesis.

Grade 11 student Shaun Polanco-Simmons is one of the members of her group. When he talks about hip hop, he singles out the constructive messages it can express.

"The message can be important," said the 18-year-old. "It can open up my eyes to things I didn't know about the world around me. But I like to hear positive messages, not talking about 'bitches' or 'hos' or 'I've made my money through drugs.' I like hearing about 'I lived my life proper.'"

In addition to the sounds, Polanco-Simmons likes the hip-hop style of graphic art. And while he doesn't wield a spray can, he does like to devote spare time to designing unique and colourful letters throughout his notebooks.

His schoolmate Reilly Duffin, 16, thinks of freestyle writing and rapping is a natural way to express what's on his mind. It also influences his clothing style - which tends to oversized hoodies, ball caps and sneakers.

"Freestyling is not a trick, it's your flow," the Grade 10 student said. "Everybody has a beat to them. Like your heart beat is a consistent thing. So you have that beat in you. The thing is, you just have to trust what's coming out of your mouth. Make sense of it. Make sure it's true.

"Like, I have words in my head. The trouble is putting words together to make sense. As long as I can speak a proper sentence, I can write a rap."

His approach to working is to freestyle while listening to beats of his own or those recorded by friends, or to sounds downloaded from the Internet.

"So whenever I'm just chillin', I just spin a one-two verse on there," he said.

Hip hop has come a long way since the first rappers made their names back in the 1970s - years before Noel Ngoka was born. But as far as the 18-year-old Options II student is concerned, the style and movement has always been there.

"I've been listening to hip hop since I was a baby," said the Grade 11 student.

"It was always in the background, all the time. So I guess we found each other."

The style is a fit for him, because as a downtown resident, he has seen more than his share of rough trade in his day.

"Bums, crackheads, cokeheads, people selling drugs, bums asking for money, all that kind of thing," he said. "Hip hop keeps me out of that. It keeps me motivated."

Like Duffin, it also inspires Ngoka's look: he sports the latest street wear, subtle gold accessories, wraparound shades and tilted ball cap.

"I don't care how people look at me," he said with a winning smile. "As long as I look good in the mirror, I look good on the street."

Kyle Sparks, 16, used to listen to rock and heavy metal, but then his family moved to a different neighbourhood where he was exposed to hip-hop culture.

"I got into rap," said the Grade 10 student. "I started listening to it, started deciphering it, and I started writing it."

Now, he writes verses about everything from crime in the street to the war in Iraq.

"If I see something that I think I should write about or if somebody sparks my interest in a certain topic, then I'll write about it," he said.

While hip hop might be just the ticket for many teens, others can take it or leave it.

"I like old school hip hop, but not so much these days," said Grade 11 student Brittany Fisher, 16. "All they talk about is slapping their 'bitches' and making money and selling drugs. And it's not too good. If you watch rap videos, it's all these girls shaking their ass in front of the street. And it's not good for kids watching TV and it's not entertaining. I don't like watching it."

Her classmate, Anessa Kump, 16, more or less agrees.

"I like listening to hip-hop music, but when they call girls 'bitches,' it really brings them down. And I'm not for that," said the Grade 10 student. "It makes the people see girls in a worse way. And young kids these days see rap, and they want to do like the rappers. So then they treat women the way the rappers do and say the words that they say."

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What do you think?

What kind of music do you listen to?