
Dissecting the origins of Canadian hip-hop

Kinga Jakab;staff reporter;kjakab@imprint.uwaterloo.ca

Have you ever wondered where hip-hop in Canada originated from? Groups that might quickly come to mind are The Rascalz, k-os, Kardinal Offishall, Choclair and Maestro. Incidentally, that happens to be about the majority of Canadian hip-hop artists that have seen their fair share of national and international fame. In honour of Black History Month, WPIRG's Paola Jani invited Cheryl Thompson, an MA candidate at Ryerson working on a thesis about Canadian hip-hop, to shed light on the evolving status of hip-hop and the bumps along the way.

Beginning in 1988, five members of Toronto's black community formed Milestone Radio Inc. with beliefs that Toronto was in need of an urban/dance radio station. In 1990, Milestone Radio applied to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) to create Toronto's first urban radio station. Passed over for a country station, the Milestone team was not discouraged.

Meanwhile, Toronto's Maestro Fresh Wes's "Let your backbone slide" release in 1991 made him the first Canadian hip-hop artist to make a mark on "American charts," and he is noted today as the grandfather or patriarch of hip-hop in Canada. Canada's shimmy into the once American-owned hip-hop scene came after waiting for half a decade to pass. Other Canadian artists were prospering in pop and rock markets, but hip-hoppers were fighting for the spotlight in the rap game. Additionally, since Canada didn't have a true urban radio station, Canadian hip-hoppers had no means to play and promote their music to wider audiences.

Hip-hop in the United States is deep-rooted to African slavery and African oral culture, and today, Thompson maintains, it is "a refusal to identify with a pop market, and an insistence on a continued connection with 'the streets'" that characterizes hip-hop. Thompson thinks that this "keeping it real" to the streets is more than a cliché; rather, keeping alive the "collective experience of living in the ghetto." Directly, these have little or nothing to do with Canada. Instead, Thompson offers, the "realness" in Canadian hip-hoppers lies in our multi-ethnicity — our people come from everywhere and this creates strong national and international bonds.

The evolution over the next seven years is obvious just by looking at the lyrics to Maestro's 1991 "Let your backbone slide" and his 1998 hit single "Stick to Your Vision." They are clear indicators that artists started to utilize their Canadian heritage, instead of conforming to the kind of hip-hop that was in demand in the U.S. It is no wonder that Maestro still had to prove himself over the years as a Canadian hip-hop artist — he joined the industry with nothing authentic to offer; an industry already boasting incredibly popular Southern, West and East Coast rappers. Thompson suggests the struggles that Canadian hip-hop artists endure are due to issues of authenticity: "We've essentialized the African-American identity. We say 'that's how they do it, that's how we do it.' I'm here today to tell you it doesn't have to be that way."

The Rascalz's 1998 release of "Northern Touch" created a mission statement for Canadian hip-hop fans. The Rascalz, and Canadians Choclair, Kardinal Offishall and Thrust articulated what it means to be a hip-hop artist in Canada. The lyrics: "then expand cross seas and over lands / got people in Jamaica, Trini, and London / Australia" and "world domination is the base of foundation / no time wasting / fire walk we trail blazing / burn to the next destination / flexing on this world exploration / team with the best in the nation," express nothing short of acknowledging their worldliness and utilizing the accompanying mass appeal. So trail blaze they did and the shift towards creating Canada's own identity in the hip-hop industry had begun.

Meanwhile, Milestone had reapplied to CRTC in 1997 and were passed over again for Radio One on CBC. But Milestone's perseverance paid off when in June 2000 CRTC awarded them a radio licence. In February 2001, FLOW 93.5 became Canada's first urban format radio station.

But Thompson questions the use of the word "urban" — what the heck does it even mean? Dictionary.com defines it as "of, pertaining to, or designating a city or town; characteristic to or accustomed to cities; citified." Respectively, urbandictionary.com offered these definitions: "City-like. From the Latin words 'urbs,' which means 'city,' and 'marketing term used to hide the fact that they are focusing on a racial group,' 'Black people or other minority,' and 'downtown area,' amongst similar definitions. The latter few seem to provide a much more cultural definition.

The Milestone website defines their vision of urban radio as "diverse, cosmopolitan music format based on rhythm and blues music and related genres. This format is a modern-day reflection of the rich musical traditions of black musicians and the black-influenced music over the past century."

Indeed, it is the influences of American hip-hop and African oral culture that shaped Canada's perceptions of hip-hop. But Canadians are responsible for the telephone, the Wonderbra, electronic music synthesizers and caulking guns, and why should it end there? Discovering our identities as citizens of Canada and citizens of the world can only propel

Canadian hip-hop artists forward, with wide eyes and inspirations that are unique to Canadians. It may be a combination of "urban-ness" and emulation of American hip-hop that created Canadian hip-hop, but the evolution is only a few years old and the face of Canadian hip-hop no longer has wool pulled over its eyes. I leave you with the immortal words of k-os, one of the few Canadian hip-hoppers who doesn't seem to mind living in the suburbs: "Try all the game, but you'll never know this mystery / When your pilot has no plane / Said you're the man you used to be seen / Holla and ya holla, you follow you fall."