

Common Weal Community Arts Inc.
Regina, SK

Hip Hop: Successes and Struggles in Saskatchewan

By Oin Nicholson

This essay was written to share the result of the 'Up Against the Wall: A Discussion About Graffiti Art'. This project was a series of panel discussions organized by CARFAC, Saskatchewan (an organization dedicated to provide advocacy and support for Canadian visual artists) and Common Weal Community Arts (a non-profit Saskatchewan community arts organization) in 2004. They were held in Regina, Saskatoon and Prince Albert including artists, youth organizations, police officers and interested community members. The purpose of these discussions was to promote dialogue and understanding between communities of people.

There is extensive documentation of the history of this cultural movement and creative revolution available in books, music, film, news media and the Internet. This history is continually being added to as artists continue to produce, perform and exhibit their work.

The Hip-Hop creative 'Elements' are a legitimate form of artistic expression. They are comparable to the more "established" and "supported" mainstream arts in medium, demand of skill development and mastery, and audience appreciation.

Hip-Hop: Definition and Description

The Hip-Hop Elements include rapping (MC's), turntabalism (DJ's), breakdancing (b-boys or b-girls) and graffiti painting (graff writers). It is sometimes stated that beat boxing is considered the fifth creative Element. These Elements are the forms of creative expression for Hip-Hop artists. 'Rap-music' is a commonly known musical genre, which has long been associated with negative images of Black and Latino American youth. Most people dismiss it for its negative connotations, often associating it with gangs, drugs, violence, prisons and degradation and abuse of women. While rap music is only one aspect of what Hip-Hop is, most do not know that there is even a difference. Hip-Hop artists commonly understand that rapping is something you do, Hip-Hop is something you live.

In the beginning, Hip-Hop was about developing the self and community, beautification of community, expression, communication, voice, love, fun, relationships, pride, activism and understanding. It is a creative movement that was aligned with a social-political movement, for 'the people'. For a generation of people who had their cultural heritage taken from them, Hip-Hop represented a new, cultural expression. Like every creative genre that came before, Hip-Hop has pioneer artists, essential in defining and popularizing the form; from its early roots of love, passion, community, activism, politics and voice; to its commercialization and globalization.

Saskatchewan Hip-Hop

Canada and Saskatchewan are a part of this future, as Hip-Hop has been a part of the artistic our landscape since it became available in the early 1980s. The origin of Hip-Hop in Canada and Saskatchewan is similar to its roots in America, with young people who could relate to and empathize with the challenges being expressed through Hip-Hop, and by the ‘Hip-Hop generation’.

The reality of living in Saskatchewan is often an isolating experience, a major contributing factor for young people relating to an art form that could connect them to many other people from around the world. Saskatchewan Hip-Hop artists have been performing and practicing here since the mid-80s.

Tallis Newkirk is a Hip-Hop artist who moved from Halifax to Toronto and, finally to Regina. He was learned a lot about the Canadian Hip-Hop scene through his travels. In an interview he said,

“I think being in a place like Toronto makes it easy to get caught up in the wave, and sacrifice your own creative integrity trying to emulate what’s blowin’ up in Toronto, which, until recently, really just reflects what’s been blowin’ up in New York and the southern states. Here, I don’t feel like I’m bound by any of these parameters. I found myself just writing about things that are unique to Saskatchewan, like the plight of the farmers. I wrote a verse about the weather and how it affects farmers, and how that effects the rest of us. It’s not the same-old, same-old.” (February 14-27, 2001, *The Carillon*)

Challenges and Barriers to Acceptance

The stereotyping of Hip-Hop artists and the Elements has been one of the biggest barriers in their acceptance as legitimate arts forms and artists. As with other new art forms and genres, not all segments of society are receptive to these forms of expression. Historically, painters, sculptors, actors, dancers, musicians and any artist who produced art outside the current, accepted standards of society, were subject to criticism, censorship, slander and even abuse. As with all new artistic practices that challenge the current, accepted forms, Hip-Hop has had to endure its share of public criticism. The stereotypes have been created due to a number of reasons, both internal and external to Hip-Hop.

Being tied to its origins as a social and political movement, some Hip-Hop artists still challenge the existing corporate, governmental and societal standards and values that have their root in greed, racism, sexism and widening the gap between rich and poor. Graffiti artists are considered vandals, with cities spending considerable resources policing and removing their art. In Saskatoon, Saskatchewan there was an incident in early 2004 that got media attention, in which a group of young artists, who paint using ‘graffiti-style’, were commissioned to legally paint a mural by a local shop-owner. When the mural was complete, the Saskatoon Police Services persuaded the owner to have the mural painted over, as they employ an ‘anti-graffiti task force’. The artists involved in this incident felt they were being censored artistically. The

Saskatoon Police Services stated that they spend close to \$500,000, annually, in graffiti removal and policing, protecting the 'rights of property owners'. Artists caught practicing graffiti art in Saskatoon will be charged with mischief and vandalism causing damage, as in most urban centers. In response to this incident Common Weal Community Arts and CARFAC, Saskatchewan organized and facilitated open, community panel discussions on urban and graffiti art, in Prince Albert, Saskatoon and Regina; with panelists representing artists and police services.

Saskatoon-based visual artist Kris Moffatt, a panelist for the Regina and Saskatoon public discussions on graffiti art, pointed to what he called, "a positive re-direction of artistic energies". He suggested that the City of Saskatoon spend \$300,000 of its \$500,000 annual budget for graffiti removal and policing, to create a fund for municipal mural production. This would offer possibilities for serious muralists to attain summer work and give up-and-coming artists a chance for their work to be displayed. He went on to say, "the city would save money over time and increase economic development by creating an artistic atmosphere that people from all around will want to check out."

Steve Wilson, is the founder of The Graffiti Gallery in Winnipeg. This non-profit organization works with young and emerging graffiti artists, who are, typically, living the 'street-life'. The gallery provides a space and an opportunity for artists working on the fringes of the law, to work towards establishing themselves as artists. The programs include skill development classes, exhibitions and opportunities to get paid for their work. The Graffiti Gallery builds partnerships with local businesses and organizations, to develop mural contracts that the young emerging artists can work on.

The Regina event took place at the Exchange on Feb.15, 2004. The Saskatoon event took place at Saskatchewan Native Theatre Company on May 15, 2004. The Prince Albert event took place at the Margo Fournier Centre on June 15, 2004.

The responses to these panel discussions clearly demonstrated antagonism towards the Hip-Hop Elements, and misconceptions of them, by some Saskatchewan residents. These discussions were well attended, educational, heated and provided a safe space for discussion to take place, between those interested, victimized and involved in graffiti. Artists were able to provide an accurate description of the practice and history of graffiti, pointing out some of the obstacles it faces, while also providing potential solutions. Police were able to articulate the realistic impact on public and private resources, while getting the chance to learn about some of the real reasons why this art is being produced. Community members were able to express support for and victimization from this art form. The response by all who attended was an overwhelming need for similar discussions to take place, many remarking that this was the first time they had ever attended this type of event and hoped that there would soon be others. While the panel was well attended by a diverse audience, it was expressed by some that they opposed the pro-graffiti message expressed by some panelists.

Success Stories: Best Practices in Urban Art

While the development of Hip-Hop in Saskatchewan has faced many obstacles, it has also seen growth in numbers of practitioners and audience, as well as evolution within the form itself. There have been numerous, organized battles around Saskatchewan for the last 4-years, such as, what is now called the 'Got Served', battles for MC's and DJ's in Regina. Clubs, bars, and festivals are now booking Hip-Hop artists and events, semi-regularly. Artists are now able to access professional studios and professional quality home-studios. Access to affordable technology is key for these artists to produce. Some artists are able to release commercially viable music, both independently and with support from record company contracts. Some artists are beginning to work with artists and industries outside Saskatchewan and Canada. Graff artists and B-boys and girls are beginning to get paid to display and perform work.

The 2003 'Prairie Echo' CD release, by Common Weal, included 4 tracks recorded as part of a pilot partnership with a local community centre, where youth were mentored by Hip-Hop artists and in Hip-Hop history and skill development. There was an overwhelming response to this project, with an average of 20 youth per night attending. The success of this project has lead to further outreach and project development. For further information check out the Common Weal web-site, www.commonweal-arts.com