

From Rez to Rap to Right Now with Hip Hop **Ostwele / Ron Dean Harris**

Hip hop has helped to shape my life, my career and my worldview. It has been present in the majority of my life and I don't really see it going anywhere. Hip hop has had many faces and phases, and I'm lucky to have been able to witness some of those. They have taught me more about the world and about myself. In the chase for hip hop stardom, I have come across both adversity and victory, but in the grand scheme of it all, hip hop has shaped me into the man I am today.

My first experiences with hip hop were so long ago that they are hard to recall, but if I were to name one it would have to be break dancing in the 80s. I remember my older cousins breaking and wearing the fashions of the break dance culture. Even at home on the Rez in the Fraser Valley, there were cousins on the hunt for cardboard to break on and even my cousin Douboy and I would wear our track pants and try to do backspins and windmills at the age of 5.

A lot of the hip hop culture I experienced was with my cousin Douboy, as we were born the same year and had the same interest in music and culture. He, my aunt and my uncle would pick me up from my grandparents' where I lived in Maple Ridge (a small town outside of Vancouver) and we would listen to whatever new music Douboy would get on the way into Vancouver in the car. We had an hour or so to listen to anything from Run DMC, Sir Mix-A-Lot to N.W.A. I remember Public Enemy being one of my favorites and I would boast about having all the albums and seeing them live in '92. For Christmas one year my Grandmother (Mama) bought me a Jive/Zomba Records promo video on VHS which included Too Short, Boogie Down Productions, Kool Mo Dee, Steady B, The Skinny Boys and Schooly D, just to name a few. In 1992 my mother was working for the Musqueam Nation as a drug and alcohol worker and hosted an event with Maestro Fresh Wes at the Commodore Ballroom. She had asked me who I would like to see and I named him. Pretty soon I was the tour guide of sorts for him and his crew. This was like a dream to me: One of the people who I listened to loyally for years was right in front of me! This was the first taste and real start of my fascination with the hip hop artist lifestyle on the road and on stage.

When I was in 8th grade, I started to walk about and leave the confines of the small town I was living in to venture into the streets and scenes of Vancouver. I started wandering and checking things out in town, and once came across a flyer for an all-ages hip hop party. The event was a rap contest and there were many groups there, some of which still exist in some form or another. I remember seeing all the people there and

being in awe of the fashions and also the rappers on stage. Some were not much older than me, and that was a key factor in me wanting to further pursue rap and hip hop. It suddenly seemed possible, as I saw people that were like me in many ways doing it.

It was tough at first to be accepted into a new scene. I was a small-town boy alone in the city, but luckily I met many people that were great friends and very knowledgeable in hip hop. I spent a lot of time outside of clubs for the first years of my life in Vancouver's hip hop scene, since I was only 13 on my arrival and couldn't go inside. Eventually I met some promoters who gave me flyering jobs and this allowed me to get into some after-hours clubs and events. Watching the DJs and break dancers from the shadows is how I spent most of my time at clubs, packing around my giant black sketchbook and sharing tags with other artists. By the time 9th grade came by, I was hooked to the gills on hip hop and all aspects of its culture. I dropped out of school that year – to my mother's obvious dismay, to say the least – and stayed home writing raps, drawing in a sketchbook and taping Rap City on MuchMusic. In retrospect and in some stressful nightmares, this wasn't the best choice I could have made as a teenager, but I thought I had it all planned out. That year I filled notebooks and lined paper with verses and poetic ideas for songs beside doodles and tags of various monikers I was planning to use. I remember my mother once being so choked that I had used all my paper for raps and not schoolwork. Once my mother challenged me to stay in school and maintain a certain grade average for the reward of turntables. I'm not a DJ today and needless to say I never stuck to the agreement. (Sorry Mum!)

The next year I was back in school, where I didn't really fit in. This used to bother me, but now I look back and know that I am an artist and was never supposed to fit in. I did OK in school but was never really as focused on scholastics as I was on art, and that was evident, as I never even attended most classes. I would spend much of my time hiding in the library or some nook or cranny of the city writing raps, break dancing and tagging. Around this time (I was 14 years old), I started to dabble in recording and got a song done in studio and on the radio for my first time with a guy name Darian. From there I was introduced to radio and was given my first real paid gig. I played the Red Jam Slam which was a music showcase hosted by the *When Spirits Whisper* radio show on CFRO 102.7 FM in Vancouver at the former Nelson Place. After this I was offered a spot on the radio show and then went on to co-host the show shortly after. This was an intense time for me; I was not doing well in school, but in media I was accelerating at a fast rate. I continued to record Karaoke machine rap tunes and was playing an instrumental form of rap over acoustic guitar with a schoolmate, Steve Rio. We had formed a loosely affiliated band called Rhymeordeal Soup and had nothing really

more than some rehearsals together, but these were key learning points for me. Being able to make music was the best environment for what I wanted to do, and having a radio show gave me knowledge, confidence and a venue in which I could test out my abilities.

Not long after, I joined a hip hop crew called Q-Continuum and was rolling with another called Asian Bomb Squad. Many of the members are now some of the Canadian hip hop elite like Moka Only, Prevail, Sichuan, Kyprios and Birdapres, to name a few. I spent a lot of time chasing parties and jams, looking for people to rap with and partners to chase the "Hip Hop Dream" with, which was hard as I was younger than the rest. When they turned 19, I was still 15 or 16 and was left out of the bar scene for years to come. As my friends graduated into the adult scene of professional rap, I stayed back and started to explore my own raps and style further. Around this time, I attended more under-age hip hop parties and engaged in break dance battles. This was another outlet for my expression and I did fairly well, but not as well as the hardcore B-boys and B-girls that had been doing it for much longer than I had. I used to love to watch Dedos and the AA Crew roll into a party and chill everyone out. Watching and doing was the schooling I went through. Around this time I met Emotionz and his crew who would later become the Fresh Coast Massive. We found out that we were both into hip hop and that connected us instantly; at last I had found my peers to chase the Dream with. During this time we explored all types of hip hop and Electronic music, but generally we listened to West Coast underground like Project Blowed, Black Market, and other fast-paced, hi-energy syllabic rap. We partied, rapped, battled and even fought together while practicing our techniques as a collective.

As time went on we started getting more paid gigs and stages on which to show our talent. The Native Youth Movement was also being formed at this time and the brother Echohawk, or Shawn Desjarlais, was putting together hip hop shows. I was invited to many of these and got to show my talent. I was contacted by the television show, *First Story*, to do a special and also was set to do a performance at one of the Tribal Wizdom shows opening for Litefoot, a Native American rap artist from the States. At this same time, upon hearing some of the raps I did, Litefoot asked me to go on tour with him throughout the United States on his 1999 Red Ryder Tour. We played 24 shows in about a month and a half in seven states, starting in Washington and going through the Southwest and back to end up in Canada. On this journey I learned the more about the business than I have done before or since. Litefoot's business and life practices were more than a role model; they were really something to base life upon. Unlike myself, he lived a clean, sober and very spiritual lifestyle. Don't get me wrong, I had just been initiated into the Spirit Dance society the year before, but his personal ethic and dedication to

excellence were nothing I could ever match. On this tour we were the roadies, the performers, the merchandisers at times, and also a collective. What I learned was the power given to you is just that – it's power, and it should be used appropriately. Litefoot taught me that helping others is helping yourself, and this proved to be a great wisdom while fighting the urge to addictions, substance abuse and other peer pressures. I then chose to fight for conscious music and the empowerment of youth.

After returning to Vancouver from being on the road, life seemed to be so slow. I continued writing and practicing my skills when I met Manik over the phone. We talked about our love for rap and hip hop and our friendship grew from there. We continued to help develop the Native hip hop scene here in Vancouver and started to link with other artists around the country. At the same time we started to form the Fresh Coast Massive. Together these scenes helped me build my talent and my courage to rap and take more steps into the spotlight. We studied more music and art and I started to read about quantum physics, occult societies and political history and using that in my raps. The shows kept coming, and the stages kept getting bigger. I traveled to Saskatoon for some shows and workshops with Emotionz when I met Joey Stylez. He and his crew were also chasing hip hop dreams out there with a solidarity that was unmatched by anything I had seen before. This was the beginning of Stressed Street. Emotionz and I stayed in Saskatoon for a week and a half or so until it was time to leave. Then Joey asked me to stay and check out his family's rodeo and basketball tournament. I agreed and stayed while Emotionz left to go back to Vancouver. Again a newcomer and alone in a city, I started a relationship with the Saskatoon hip hop scene, and this is how I ended up a part of a hip hop crew in a different province. I loved the fact that the Natives had such a strong unity, and Joey's family accepted me as a family member. I've played many shows with Joey Stylez and his perseverance got us a spot opening for Snoop Dogg in 2003 in which I was the very first act of the night.

While in Saskatoon one summer in 2003, I was watching the TV show *Moccasin Flats* with some of Joey's family. Not long after, I met Laura Milliken, the producer of the show. We connected and I got to show her some of my artwork and gave her pretty much all the music I had recorded. A couple of months later she called me to say she might have a part for me on the show. I sent in a tape, got a call back, flew to Toronto, and then I was on the show. The very next summer after watching the show in Saskatchewan, I was flying to be on the show to play a rapper, of all things.

Being on a television show had its ups and downs, but was definitely a great learning experience. For the first time I got to act and compose

music for a major network program. I was challenged to produce topical music by request and got to make some of the best songs I had done until that time for the show. I was surprised the networks accepted them, and I got my first credit as a composer. We did another season before being cancelled, and I was offered an opportunity to travel to South Africa to be a delegate in the first African Global Hip Hop Summit. I was set to speak at the summit and perform at a few venues there including an opening spot for K'naan and Guru. My music and message went over well there, and some of my performance was used in a documentary called *Diamonds in the Rough*, produced by Brett Masurek. The year following, I was asked to return to tour with an artist named Zuluboy who I had made a song with the previous summer in Vancouver. I toured Africa and recorded songs for a month, learning much about the Zulu culture and much more about music. I was offered a record deal there but refused, as I felt I needed to learn more about music before making such a contractual commitment.

Since then I've continued to study and learn about music theory, music production and the music business. I starred as lead in the *Moccasin Flats: Redemption* movie in which I was nominated for Best Actor at the Native American Film Fest and travelled to Labrador to do the first live hip hop shows and workshops there. Currently I am the main composer for a children's television show called *Nehiyawetan: Let's Speak Cree*, designing sound for a comic book turned animation, and working as editor at *Redwire Magazine*. Now here I am writing to you.

Throughout my life and even last year I never expected to be where I'm at now. I am truly lucky and grateful that I was granted the opportunity and drive to pursue the things I wanted to do. Along the way I've picked up skills and talents that can take me to great heights of commercial success, but in reality that isn't what I want to do. Traditionally I believe I am a speaker for my people, for myself and for the world. With this comes a heavy load of responsibility, and I feel the need to study even more and pass my knowledge down to younger people, as I was handed knowledge and opportunity in the same way. Hip hop has helped me to be who I am, but it has also opened up many more doors than just rapping for break dancing. If I were to give any advice to youth, it would be this:

Never doubt yourself. Being who you are is good enough, but studying and experiencing life will make you better at ANYTHING you do. Hip hop is a great place to find yourself, but is also a great place to lose yourself. Be careful of the dreams you chase, but never give up hope. Don't start to believe your own lies; you must be comfortable with yourself to be yourself. The love and energy you put into the art will be the energy you get back. No matter what it is you pursue, do it EVERY DAY. Talent is

natural, but skill is something you must work hard at. Lastly, be humble but confident; be zealous but relaxed; listen, but stand and speak as well; always be grateful for all you have, and never set a limit for your success and enlightenment.