

Native graffiti art, indigenized ipods©, Inuit break dancing, indigenous-language hip hop and video, Indian bling and urban wear: the roots of hip hop culture and music have been transformed by indigenous cultures and identities into new forms of visual culture and music that echo the realities of Aboriginal people. Beat Nation is about music, it's about art and it's about the spirit of us as indigenous peoples and cultures.

The influence of hip hop on marginalized inner-city youth has been written about, Gucci© handbags have been made with graffiti art and car commercials feature hip hop tracks, but the culture of hip hop still has room for independent and local transformation, able to ignite youth expression and creativity. Hip hop has been used by youth and cultural workers from the Northwest Territories to South Africa as a tool for youth empowerment and expression.

In Vancouver BC, the unceded territory of Coast Salish peoples and a meeting ground for many different urban Aboriginal youth, hip hop has been an inspiration to art and politics since the early shows in the 90s put on by Shawn Desjarlais and Tribal Wizdom productions. On his political awakening and the inspiration of using Native hip hop for empowerment of Native youth, Shawn Desjarlais said, "I remember I felt mixed emotions back then: part of me wanted to cry, another part wanted to go out on the street and kick ass. Instead of scrapping though, we felt we should raise awareness through means other than violence. So we got out the spray paint and literally painted the town red, with all types of slogans, everywhere!"

<http://www.tolerance.org/teens/stories/article.jsp?p=0&ar=44>

In Vancouver's slice of unceded Coast Salish territories, the influx of Native female MCs like Kinnie Starr, Rapsure Risin', Jerrilynn Webster and the fast and furious stylings of Manik1derful and his partner in crime Os12 represent hip hop with a message. Hip hop as activism has been a driving force in Aboriginal expression.

From MCs to graff writers, video makers, painters and poets, Aboriginal rights and rhymes have inspired a new fusion of hip hop and diverse indigenous cultures. Distilling these influences into contemporary art and experimental music was an extension of using these mediums to engage young people in their culture(s). Aboriginal cultural lyricscapes peppered N8V hip hop tracks and from Cree to Inuit to Haida to Mohawk and more, our realities and our dreams were reflected in the music, the art, and the culture of hip hop.

The music and the culture was a way to attract both urban and rural Native youth to become more aware of our rights, histories and cultures. *Redwire Magazine*, a national Native youth-run publication, was tuned in to the power and influence of hip hop in 2003 when they released their first Aboriginal artist spoken-word CD, which they followed in 2005 with another release of Aboriginal hip hop.

Aboriginal artists have taken hip hop influences and indigenized them to fit Aboriginal experiences: The roots of hip hop are there but they have been ghost-danced by young Native artists who use hip hop culture's artistic forms and combine them with Aboriginal story, experience and aesthetics.

In Kevin Burton's video, *Nikamowin*, Cree language becomes the heartbeat and pulse of the staccato beats that are the only audio element for this experimental work. Reconfiguring notions of 'traditional', the soundtrack – the work of sound artist Darcy O'Connor – consists entirely of the breaths, pauses, and Cree language spoken by Kevin. The landscape and cityscapes become fractured and jolted in relation to the breaths and the beats of speech, reflecting on indigenous cultural identity.

Nicholas Galanin's video works, *Tsu Héidei Shugaxtutaan I* and *Tsu Héidei Shugaxtutaan II*, are a pared down eloquent look at contemporary beats and traditional dance juxtaposing a contemporary experimental soundtrack with a traditional dance phrase and a traditional drum song on a contemporary dance phrase. This juxtaposition becomes an iconic exploration of 'traditional' and 'contemporary'.

The traditional art of West Coast formline designs are interpreted loosely in Sonny Assu's series *idrums*: the form of an ipod© is gracefully assimilated into flowing lines and ovoids. In Sonny's use of the ipod© as part of his visual language, ipod©s are not replacing indigenous culture; indigenous cultures are assimilating technologies as the ipod© itself is assimilated into the overall aesthetic of the *idrum* works.

An explosion of hot colour and saturated pallets in Andrew Dexel and Bracken Hanuse Corlett's work are a giveaway to the influence of graffiti art. Andrew says of his evolution from graffiti tagger to formline design artist that he spent many years in graffiti art learning how to draw a line. That grace in line work echoes throughout his representational and abstracted forms.

Bracken's explorations of graffiti and street art have informed his approach to 'traditional' art or the use of West Coast formline design. In his electric-coloured self-portrait, culture is represented by the sphere

that is just out of reach. The search for culture through art and expression is one of the influences for the assimilation of hip hop forms into indigenous aesthetics.

Corey Bulpitt, a respected Haida carver, has his roots in graffiti art. As a younger artist he ran into legal issues with graffiti art and that, coupled with exposure to his Haida roots, led him to apprentice under his uncle and master carver, Christian White. He now works with urban youth in a graffiti mural program that mentors young people who have been busted for street art in the production of legitimate or legal graffiti murals as well as other aspects of their art careers. His *Raven* mural under the Granville Street Bridge in Vancouver, BC is a fusion of his grace as a carver and his roots as a graffiti artist coupled with Haida story and culture. Branding the cityscape with spray-bombed indigenous culture resonates with the idea of territory and reclaiming space in a city whose indigenous roots are often hidden or disguised in a province of unceded indigenous territories.

Madeskimo's live sound and video performances are a cut-up of archival images of Inuit settlements and abstracted electric colours and shapes that pulsate with his inspired audio soundscapes. Influenced by his cultural roots, Mad Eskimo says, "The midnight sun; the infinite vistas of rolling hills, sky, and water of the arctic; the long cold and dark winters punctuated by the surreal dancing of northern lights and the vastness and lushness of the milky way; the Inuit legends and myths of yore; the sounds of nature, traditional songs, throat singing, and drumming – are all filtered through the entity that is Madeskimo."

Shadae and Morgan create Hip Hop regalia fusing hip hop image and fashion with Aboriginal art forms and styles. In Shadae's beaded NDN bling there is an ironic creation of delicate beadwork that plays on hip hop jewelry. In Morgan's work, black leather dominates along with electric green, imagining the embodiment of the regalia by an empowered female MC, a Native woman warrior, a dominatrix of proud Tsimshian culture.

Indigenous artists trace roots back to not only their indigenous culture but also to the influence of hip hop, on the other side of the imaginary line we call a border. Bunky Eco-hawk, Rose Simpson and Jolene Yazzie are three young Native artists who juxtapose urban styles and designs with contemporary Native issues and statements. From Yazzie's comic-styled *Warrior Women* and Simpson's graffiti art and underground hip hop inspired ceramic sculpture series to Bunky's use of pop icons, Native warrior portraits like *Sitting Bull* and electric colours hip hop is the ride and Aboriginal culture and rights are the fuel for their unique imagery.

Jolene Yazzie also designs custom skateboards. Native imagery is inscribed onto the decks of this urban sport, becoming part of the lifestyle of being young, urban and Native. In Newfoundland-raised Jordan Bennet's work, the skate deck is adorned with beadwork and trucks are carved out of whale bone, turning the ideas of traditional craft and urban culture into a 360° trick, spinning medicine wheels out of old skate decks and shining up surfboards with beadwork. Beadwork gets another twist with Doreen Manuel's beaded hightops. An accomplished beadwork artist and filmmaker, Doreen mixes up her traditional beadwork with beading hightops as well as moccasins.

In Cheryl L'Hirondelle's work, *ekayapahkaci*, inspired by the conscious hip hop movement, Cree syllabics are tagged onto the urbanscape. Cheryl's engagement with this work is about empowerment, about writing Cree culture back onto the land and cityscape.

Dancing the landscape with an amalgamation of hip hop and contemporary ballet, Melina Laboucan Massimo's dance work in Leena Minnifie's film *Geeka* takes a fresh look at environmental issues in this contemporary dance film. Conscious dance and indigenous environmental issues become the backdrop for the dance phrase.

Jackson 2Bears VJ composition, *Ten Little Indians*, is an onslaught of beats, spinning and Hollywood Indian movie clips. His set features hypnotic video flashes and sound bytes of clichéd Hollywood Indianspeak, all to the racist tune of Ten Little Indians, but he takes ownership of this tune and he blows it up like a rhyme warrior.

Medicine beats and ancestral rhymes fuel indigenous hip hop, art and expression. Culture and identity are in a constant state of flux; new forms created today are becoming the culture of our grandchildren – hybridized, infused and mixed with older 'traditions'. We continue to shift, grow and change. Whether the influences are hip hop or country music, the roots of the expression go back to cultural story, indigenous language, land and rights, and the spirit of our ancestors.

Our ancestors must be dancing for us: To see our culture thrive and survive they must be dancing to our beats. Like the beats of our sacred drums, we echo our ancestors in the expression of culture regardless of medium, whether electronic beats or skins, natural pigments or neon spray cans, beads or bling, break dancing or round dancing: We do it as an expression of who we are, as indigenous peoples.