

FEATURES

Outside the rhymes

Asian Americans enter the rap world

by Hanna A. Gordola

For die-hard hip-hop fans, when someone says “hip-hop”, they automatically think of artists such as Rakim, Mos Def, NWA and Dr. Dre, Public Enemy, Tupac, Biggie and Jay-Z. From the very start, these hip-hop artists reached many young people. That hip-hop magic is often associated with the young, urban and *black*.

But Hip-Hop never intended to be limited to such a specific demographic. Its magic was meant to be experienced by all people, including young Asian-Americans.

“Rap is an art form that you use to express yourself musically,” said UNC’s own rapper Andy Won, also known as Rousseau. Won is among a growing number of Asian-American rappers. Won collaborated with Duke’s John Park, a rapper making a name for himself in the Triangle.

Until rapper Jin came along, not many people knew Asian rappers existed. Even now people see Asian rappers as a spectacle rather than the artists they are, said Won.

“I’ve encountered one situation in North Carolina where this dude found out that I was rapping and he asked me ‘What do you Asian rappers rap about?’ Basically, he assumes that we all fit in this model minority stereotype. But he doesn’t understand we’re not all like that,” Won said.

Won said he recognizes that stereotypes are experienced by all players involved in the rap game.

“Just because you’re black doesn’t mean you’re a gangster or you’re an athlete. Just because you’re Asian doesn’t mean you go to school all day, study, and listen to your parents. That’s something people need to know.”

Breaking the stereotype is an uphill battle.

Jin opened the door for Asian rappers with his hit single “Speak Chinese.” Since then, no other Asian rapper, not even Jin himself, has come out with a big single.

“You need to put music out there that people can relate to. That was Jin’s mistake,” said Brooklyn’s Kamikaze Grey, a rapper who’s creating quite a stir in the music industry. “You’re telling people to ‘speak Chinese.’ Well, not many people in mainstream America want to learn Chinese.”

Grey said successful rappers put their

personal life and their personal feelings in their tracks.

“You’ve got to let people in,” he said.



Andy Won in concert at Duke’s 2005 Lunar New Year.

“FIRST thing
you’ll hear
is ‘let’s do a
VIDEO with
KARATE’
and stupid
STEREO-
TYPE s--t like
that”