



## Byron Hurt and Hip-Hop's Influence on Male and Youth Culture

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Hip-Hop is a form of music that has distinctively American roots, like jazz and the blues before it. Its driving rhythms and intricate rhymes have solidified Hip-Hop's place in the pantheon of music worldwide, so that now "just about every country on the planet seems to have developed its own local [hip-hop] scene."<sup>1</sup> But it is Hip-Hop's role as 'modern-urban-folk' that has solidified it as a vital and influential cultural movement.

Forged during the early seventies in the Bronx, New York, Hip-Hop served as a means of urban creative expression, merging various forms of inner-city art into its own distinct flavor. MCs (vocalists) would rap over crafty beats spun by DJs, scating not only about the revelry that surrounded the burgeoning scene, but about various social issues and the day to day life of their neighborhoods. This helped to create the sense that Hip-Hop was a voice for a culture and a generation that had little other voice in mainstream America. Hip-Hop was about expression. It was about celebration. It was about innovation.

However, in the early nineties, the 'voice-of-the-streets' began to take on a more nefarious tone. The combination of commercialism and crime-related "gangsta" rap began to congest and control the market. Now MCs, instead of rhyming about social issues and their skills as a lyricist, were boasting about violence, misogyny, drugs, and materialism. This branch of Hip-Hop was not only popular to the African American inner-city youth, it became, ironically enough, wildly popular to middle-class white suburban youth. The popularity of this "gangsta" branch of Hip-Hop is still prevalent and influential today, and is, unfortunately, what most people perceive Hip-Hop to be.

This is where Byron Hurt comes in. Once a quarterback for the Northeastern University football team, he was hired as a trainer for an innovative education program called Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP). The program was founded by the acclaimed anti-violence activist Jackson Katz, who gave a series of inspiring lectures at both Northern Arizona University and Arizona State University in April 2007.

Byron Hurt is a nationally renowned activist who challenges the role Hip-Hop plays in promoting violence, denigrating women, and stereotyping men. His award winning film *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* can be viewed as his attempt to reclaim an art form and culture he holds dear. The film features interviews with artists,

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industry moguls, fans and a variety of academics, and explores the issues of masculinity, violence, sexism and homophobia in Hip-Hop music. He understands the influencing power of Hip-Hop, especially for today's youth, and therefore questions the image and message that Hip-Hop seems to be pervading. He asks, "How do black women and men feel about the pervasive images of scantily clad and sexually objectified women in rap music videos? What do today's rap lyrics tell us about the collective consciousness of black men and women from the hip-hop generation?"<sup>2</sup>

Culture has always been shaped by the storytellers. Today's storytellers use microphones and multi-million dollar music videos to tell their tales. But what is the tale they are telling? What are their effects upon male and youth culture? How can 'the story' be rejuvenated with a message of positivity and a call for social justice? Are there voices of change that are already out there, just not accessed by the masses? How can these voices be heard?

These are amongst a few of the questions that Byron Hurt addresses. It is Northland Family Help Center's hope to have him as a guest speaker at NAU in February 2008, so that we may continue to be at the forefront of exploring the role that men play in preventing sexual violence, and the positive and negative influences that popular media has upon youth culture.

<sup>1</sup>[http://worldmusic.nationalgeographic.com/worldmusic/view/page.basic/genre/content.genre/hip\\_hop\\_730](http://worldmusic.nationalgeographic.com/worldmusic/view/page.basic/genre/content.genre/hip_hop_730)

<sup>2</sup>Okum, Rob. 2007. *Voice Male: New Visions of Manhood. Byron Hurt's Crusade to Save Hip-Hop From Itself*. pg. 8.