



Mason Schools Students In Hip-Hop Culture Classes – April 2004

By Matthew Orr & Vanessa LaFaso

Are the lyrics of Jay-Z and Eminem worthy of an in-depth analysis? What are the inspirations behind the words, symbols and icons seen spray-painted on warehouse walls and public trains? Questions such as these are finally being answered in an academic arena, and George Mason University offers an array of classes that may fulfill the intellectual thirst for hip-hop culture.

Hip-hop culture classes are slowly permeating through college campuses as a topic worthy of academic analysis. At Mason, the English and Art and Visual Technology Departments, as well as the New Century College, all offer courses in defining and identifying hip-hop and its culture. "Hip-hop is something you live," said Andrew Ryan, a professor, who teaches two courses for Mason's New Century College: "Hip-Hop: Beats, Rhyme and Culture" and "Black Voices in Hip-Hop." Lecturing on such poignant topics is not what Ryan considers labor; it is his passion. "Teaching a hip-hop class is something I always wanted to do," he said.

"Black Voices in Hip-Hop" predominantly studies the social, economic and political issues that surrounded hip-hop from 1954 to 1980. The class is history- and research-based and, as such, educates students on the culture's evolution. Ryan's other class, "Beats, Rhyme and Culture" looks at hip-hop as a worldview and lifestyle, as opposed to a simple form of entertainment. The class analyzes song lyrics and compares them to elements of the way of life, such as urban survival, struggling youth and socio-economic factors that play a large role in the culture. "It is unfair to critique the culture [sitting] on your couch," Ryan said.

Ryan does not limit hip-hop to just the music. The class also focuses on elements outside of the conventional college classroom lessons. However, Ryan feels the diversion from typical college agendas is imperative for students to gain an understanding of the culture separate from the perspective they gain from the music. Ryan's class studies aspects of the lifestyle such as deejaying, emceeing, graffiti or tagging and break-dancing.

"Beats, Rhyme and Culture" is not the only class that explores the hip-hop culture in detail. Cynthia Fuchs, a professor from Mason's English Department, teaches a class from a different perspective. "Hip-hop in Film" analyzes hip-hop artists as they expand into Hollywood mediums and demonstrate the diversity of their talents.

Much like Ryan's class, Fuchs stresses graffiti, dance and performance, as well as other areas. "We consider the various functions of hip-hop, in commercial and social, as well as political, venues," she said. Since the class is predominantly a film class, students can expect to study hip-hop classics such as Spike Lee's "Do the Right Thing." In regard to the subject's value, Fuchs said, "The culture is everywhere, part of daily experience, in ads, fashion and politics."

Ryan said that hip-hop classes are popping up all over the country. "In 10 years, you'll have tried and true hip-hop scholars." Now, students blasting Jay-Z on their way to Mason will have no reason to complain about the dullness of a college education.