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Hip-hop goes to college

By Brian DeBose
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Young people bobbing their heads to rap artist Nelly's "Hot in Here" or old school tracks such as Boogie Down Productions' "Criminal Minded" or Eric B. and Rakim's "The Ghetto" are commonplace on street corners, at parties and in cars — but almost never in college classrooms.

Andrew Ryan is changing that.

Mr. Ryan teaches Beats, Rhyme and Culture from 7:20 to 10 p.m. in Room A208 of Robinson Hall at George Mason University. This is the second semester the three-credit course has been offered through the university's New Century College, which schedules a progressive collection of culturally inclusive courses and programs for innovative young minds.

Mr. Ryan, himself a young mind, was born in Birmingham, England, but raised in the Bronx, N.Y., from the age of 4. At age 26, he is seldom more than five years older than the students he teaches.

"Some of the students have told me they admire my desire to teach the subject, especially being so young," says Mr. Ryan, who graduated from Binghamton University in upstate New York with a degree in computer science. He came to George Mason to earn a master's degree in the subject and is working on his doctorate in information technology.

Instructing young students on the influence hip-hop music has had on society, politics and culture throughout the world usually doesn't fall to "old heads" — baby boomers, yuppies and buppies — because they often lack passion for the culture and the music and wouldn't necessarily translate it as well to students as someone Mr. Ryan's age.

In the early 1990s, record companies began placing parental advisory labels on CDs after political activists including C. Delores Tucker; singer Dionne Warwick; and Tipper Gore, wife of former Vice President Al Gore, testified before Congress in several attempts to have the music of rap groups such as Two Live Crew and N.W.A. censured or banned for being gratuitously violent and sexual and unsuitable for children.

The influence of rap includes the wave of "urban" clothing lines — such as FUBU (For Us By Us, a New York City-based urban street-wear label known for its following among rap artists); Roc-a-Wear, founded by rapper Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter; and Sean John, Sean "P. Diddy" Combs' clothing line — that either were started by rappers or influenced by the rap culture.

Also on the rise because of the popularity of the music is the transformation of rappers into music executives. Mr. Combs is chief executive of Badboy records, and Percy "Master P" Miller founded the New Orleans-based No Limit Records.

Several rappers — former N.W.A. member Ice Cube, Eminem, Queen Latifah and numerous others — have moved on to both the big screen and the small screen. The movies "Friday," "Belly," "Set It Off," "The Bone Collector" and, most recently, "8 Mile" all star prominent hip-hop artists. Ice T has a continuing role on "Law and Order Special Victims Unit," and Queen Latifah played a lead role on "Living Single."

The craze has led to a controversy among traditional, bona fide thespians, including

Samuel L. Jackson, who complained recently that rappers are taking jobs away from real actors.

The George Mason University administration found it hard to believe a course on hip-hop would appeal to the majority-white student body. "I had to introduce the idea slowly," Mr. Ryan says of his initial conversations with faculty.

He had an edge, though, because he had grown up in the New York City borough where DJ Cool Herc invented the culture about 1979. It started with sampling and mixing portions of old rock, jazz and blues songs from the 1950s, '60s and '70s to make a new, hard-edged, urban sound.

Before long, poets — mostly black men — looking for a new medium for expressing their frustrations and giving themselves a voice in society were grabbing the microphone and challenging other rappers at DJ battles. Thus began the golden age of hip-hop.

"Two turntables and a microphone was all that was required then," Mr. Ryan says about the time when he found his passion for the music.

Like Mr. Ryan, the students can't get enough of the music and the discussion on who's keeping it real, keeping it right, and who's faking.

"Keeping it real" became the catchphrase for myriad rappers who portrayed themselves as gangsters, rapping about violence, sex and denigrating women, who surfaced in the early '90s. Many were copycats trying to imitate hard-core groups such as N.W.A. to make money and not to get out the message about Los Angeles gangs, the drug culture and the evils of police brutality.

Erick Sermon, a former member of the famed New York rap duo EPMD (Erick and Parrish Making Dollars) with Parrish Smith, once said, "All these so-called 'keeping it real'-type stars is a fraud; they gets the sword."

Terms such as "keeping it right" — the new "keeping it real, for real" — are reserved for inflective rappers who use their rhymes to speak about social indifference or injustice or just to tell personal tales about their "real" life experiences. Mr. Ryan calls this the "true essence of hip-hop."

Breaking down phrases and lyrics in this fashion is exactly what students find so compelling about the course, especially those who are trying to understand the music for the first time, not to mention learning the difference between rap (the lyrics) and hip-hop (the music).

"It comes down to something that KRS-1 said: 'Rap is something you do, hip-hop is something you live.' It's a lifestyle, a culture," Mr. Ryan says.

That's how he sold the class.

"Hip-hop and contemporary black issues are good research topics," Mr. Ryan says.

The student response has been overwhelming, so much so that the course graduated to a three-credit elective in the fall. More students than the course limit of 28 tried to enroll.

A few of Mr. Ryan's students are taking the course again this semester; several say they were not fulfilled when the university ran the course for the first time as a one-credit pilot.

"I took the class last spring to demystify my own thoughts about the music itself, and I didn't get enough out of it," says Josh Seffinga, 21, of Haymarket, Va.

He says he didn't start listening to the music until 1997, but adds that the course offers him a "totally new way" of looking at the music.

Amanda McDonnell, 25, of Springfield, says she took the course because it was the

only one that got her attention. "The title and the idea of taking hip-hop as a music course is different than anything you would ever take," she says.

Mr. Ryan says he has been most impressed by the number of white students who have signed up. He exhibits some pride that he has just five black students in the 28-member class.

"It's like Tupac Shakur said, 'By the time we hit 2020, the president of the United States will have either owned a hip-hop tape at some point in his life or be a fan of the music,'" Mr. Ryan says. "It really is a testament to how far the music has come and how far it branches out beyond race, economics, and culture."

Mr. Ryan isn't alone. Although he says he is not aware of similar courses being taught at any of the many other colleges in the region, more than 40 professors around the country are teaching courses on hip-hop culture.

"I assumed Howard University or Maryland would have been the first to start a hip-hop class, but they're just not there," he says.

The class covers nearly 200 years in chronological order all the way to the present, looking at the Harlem renaissance, the civil rights movement, up through the golden age of hip-hop in the 1980s and early 1990s.

"We try to make a link between the past — even going back to old slave narratives — and the present to see where there are bridges to hip-hop and how it is influenced," Mr. Ryan says.

"We get into the geographical breakdown about how the music spread to the Western U.S., which brought you 'gangsta rap,' and then to the South with the Atlanta and New Orleans sounds."

The debates among students about beats and rhyme delivery can last for hours, and sometimes Mr. Ryan says he has to force the class to stop so the course can move forward.

"But the subject that gives you the most discussion in my course is race and the music. Whose music is it? Is hip-hop becoming too influenced by white society, like jazz and rock and roll [were]?" Mr. Ryan says.

"I think hip-hop is the first musical genre it has been difficult for whites to incorporate because of the culture it created, [as evidenced] by how few white rappers have been able to be successful in the music," he says.

He says that single topic is what his students view as most compelling about the music. The course has shown him just how accepted the music is on its face by all ethnicities without alterations — be it MC Solar from France or Racionais MC's (Rational MC's) from Brazil. And yes, even by successful white American artists like Eminem, whose most recently released CD, "The Eminem Show" proclaims him to be "the worst thing since Elvis Presley to use black music to make myself wealthy."