

Hip Hop & Sydney's Western Suburbs – A Brief Pot-Stirrer

by Miguel D'Souza 1988

presented as part of the Urban Expressions Hip Hop Festival, Sydney, Australia

The area we're supposed to be addressing is race and gender, but I want to add the element of class into the discussion. As the Howard Liberal government further dismantles avenues that allowed youth living in disadvantaged circumstances some social mobility, and yet as the media and consumerism consistently make inroads into Australian society for hip-hop, I want to address, however briefly how class is a factor that is at play in Sydney hip-hop. That it isn't immune from class and while hip-hop seems to have resolved, for the best part, issues of race and gender for people, class appears as a new conflict that Sydney hip-hop has to address before it divides the music's culture into the haves and have nots. I'm concentrating on class and the West and ignoring whole issues in race and gender and ethnicity, but I have five precious minutes.

Years ago in a shed in St Clair, I encountered Ser Rec, Def Wish and Die C over a few bongs and discussed the issue of trainers, particularly those Pumas with the fat laces that seemed to have somehow bounced back into vogue with the rave set back then. I tried to understand their anger and resistance to other young people adopting a style they had retrieved from the culture parts bin. Long before Ninja Tune made it fashionable, these lads had adopted the D.I.Y. philosophy, do it yourself, managing to recreate a style that had years to come before it broke into the mainstream. 'The saga from the suburbs...' def wish cast rhymed in *Battle Grounds of Sydney* 'the saboteur's adjoining gaining ascendancy through words. Rhetoric rhyming, I'm signing the contract that's asking the cast to put this place on the map'. Representing Western Sydney was the resistance to Sydney's long tradition of stigma associated with living in Sydney's West. As discussed in Diane Powell's brilliant book *Out West – Perceptions of Sydney's Western Suburbs*, the west has been the subject of negative stereotyping for years, most of it from people who don't live there. Hip-hop's old school in Sydney set about dismantling the effects of this stereotyping from the beginning while adopting what was then an underground culture that appealed to those on the fringe. As Ser Rec said to me at the time, 'I listen to hip-hop because I am *with* them', referring to black Americans considered the underclass in America.

It's no surprise that hip-hop spread first around the Western Suburbs, only then making the trip en masse to other suburbs around Sydney. At this point, I'd like to acknowledge my dear partner Sheila, from Sydney's Western Suburbs, who always says to me, 'why are *you* writing about the West, you don't even know the first thing about what it's like to live there'. This is completely true,

Sydney's west, and its youth, have long suffered the misperceptions spread by people documenting their area, whether it be the media, the arts, government or the financially better off. Hip-hop allowed them the opportunity to be cool, to be feared, to be exclusive and to lead. Hip-hop may have been black America's CNN, but for the b-boys west of Parramatta, it was their morse code. Alone, unsupported by any direct exposure to American hip-hop culture, western suburbs' youth transcended limitations of class (and race and gender and ethnicity) through hip-hop. They were up against alot, including suspicions in the West itself that this culture was foreign, encouraged crime and drug-taking; racist attitudes about what white boys were doing identifying with a black culture, and the ethnics that listened to it. Then there were the attitudes outside the West, expressed most recently via the inner-city dance party culture that initially embraced hip-hop.

Back in 1992, Andrew Murphie and Ed Scheer wrote in their article on dance parties that 'it was ironic, for example, that whilst the children of Australia's many non-Anglo-Saxon migrants in Sydney's West lived out hip-hop culture for years before it became fashionable – buying most of their records at expensive import prices because record companies refused to release them here – they were regarded as dangerous to mix with (read unfashionable) by the inner city dance crowd'. Similarly, when the last of the big dance parties began to be held at the Homebush State Sports centre, the first chill-out lounges appeared, as a haven for the 'inner-city' crowd, it was said. When I was going to dance parties in the late 80's, I hid my sense of embarrassment when party people said that the party scene was dying because it had been invaded by people from the suburbs. They weren't talking about Killara either, they meant westies.

So why is it now hip-hop is so fashionable, and even those inner-city types are getting on the case? Has

Australia overnight become a classless society where the culture developed and nurtured by non-Anglo and Anglo-Saxon youth from the West has overcome geographical boundaries and flooded the city with hip-hop rhythms? Nope. What has occurred is that as hip-hop has become more globally-oriented, and has tapped into the trappings of globalised culture through technology and all the old definitions and arguments about keeping it real and representing are irrelevant because the economic, social and cultural gaps between the inner-city and suburbs, the technology-rich and the information poor, have widened, the inner-city has its own hip-hop culture, one more easily adapted to the pages of the Metro, the ready-fusion of trip-hop, the stage at Vibes and other spaces where it is more readily understood by a middle-class, university educated literate culture and accepted by an aesthetic that has separated hip-hop from resistance.

Hip-hop is now an artform, people rant and rave about the five or four or whatever elements, and the reasons for why these things occur, the resistance to consumerist, capitalist, white-Anglo society are no longer heard, because those people for whom rap equals resistance are no longer heard in this context. Hip-hop has made the move from being a culture and underground movement that expressed Western Suburbs' youth's resistance to the negative attitudes to them, their culture, their suburbs and their lives through the adoption of a culture and music so fundamentally opposed to good, middle class values. It has moved to being a culture adopted by hip university students, those with a background in the performance arts, the academy and most of all, the inner city. It isn't hip-hop anymore.

In recent years, in response to the rise of the consumer-driven r'n'b and mainstream hip-hop culture, Western Suburbs' hip-hop has upped its activity rate, returning to the D.I.Y. ethic as opposed to directly addressing or attacking inner-city hip-hop. *Basic Equipment* was the showcase that polarised opinion, addressing the work of suburban, and predominantly Western Suburban, hip-hop practitioners and cliques like the ill-fated Funnel Web. Where was the rest of the city? Some asked, others questioned the sense in excluding even the viewer with images and opinion that apparently confirmed stereotypes of what Western Suburbs boys are like. But what *Basic Equipment* did, for me, was document what has happened to hip-hop culture in the West, and re-emphasize the point that resistance still is at the core of Western Suburbs hip-hop, in case anyone feared either had gone away. The B-boys remained silent, resisting through the means they knew best.

Greg Tate wrote once of hip-hop that 'what it is, even at its most progressive, is agendaless. It reacts better than it proposes ...' he went on to write, and this is from the inaugural issue of Vibe magazine in 1992, that 'hip-hop should be an invitation for everyone to break the silence around injustice, but it has become an invitation to party for the right to demagoguery. As a successful counter-cultural industry, whose style assaults have boosted the profits of the record, radio, junk-food, fashion and electronic industries, hip-hop's work is done. But as a harbinger of the black revolution, hip-hop has yet to provide itself capable of inspiring action towards bona fide social change. Now we'll see, like Bob Marley sang, who's the real revolutionary. After all, real bad boys move in silence'.

(C) Miguel D'Souza 1988