Positive Celebration of Hip-Hop Culture

By Kamane' Malvo
Staff Writer

From the print ads of Tommy Hilfiger and Fubu to the catchy tunes of Pepsi and Sprite television commercials, the influence of hip-hop culture has successfully moved from the east coast underground scene of b-boys and b-girls to global commercial success.

The Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco celebrates the history and evolution of hip-hop culture with its multidisciplinary exhibition of "Hip-Hop Nation" that will be on display until Aug. 12.

Visual and performing arts, film, video, flashy hip-hop clothing and artifacts from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame are on display in five different galleries: "Roots, Rhymes and Rage," "Hip-Hop by the Bay," "Rappers Delight (The Visual Avant-Garde of Hip-Hop)," "Brett Cook-Dizney's Tenderloin Murals," and the "Hip-Hop Resource Lounge."

Live performances of rap, spoken word and hip-hop dancing are free to the viewing public every Thursday Night at 6 p.m.

Jenny Brown, a 27-year-old Canadian tourist, was awed by the rich history she discovered after viewing "Rhyme and Reason" in the screening room.

"A watered-down version of hip-hop culture exists in my country," Brown said. "It's nice to experience an authentic representation of this amazing urban movement."

With the deaths of Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls and the recent controversy surrounding the trial of Sean "Puffy" Combs, the genre of hip-hop music is often portrayed in a negative light.

But the roots of hip-hop's cultural lineage can be traced back to the vocal stylings of Cab Calloway, the be-bop lingo of Dizzy Gillespie and to the poetic expressions of '60's activists like LeRoi Jones and the Last Poets.

Ahmad Wilder, a 20-year old aspiring rap artist and Yerba Buena security guard, is an avid hip-hop fan. During his various shifts at the museum, observers of the large-scale exhibit often shared their questions and ideas with him.

"The majority of the people that come in here don't have a clue about the heart of hip-hop," Wilder said. "They only hear about the negative things, so when they come in here and see all of this history, of course they have questions."

Wilder pointed to an alarm-protected display showcasing the poetic works of Tupac and exclaimed, "I try to explain to them that hip-hop is about struggle."

"Hip-hip is not about being a gangster. It's about survival," he said. "Tupac poured his blood, sweat, and tears into his lyrics. He used his gifts and talents to rise up out of the ghetto, and that's honorable."

In a recent interview with Black Electorate.com, Davey D, a popular host at KMEL, the Bay Area radio station, and journalist at www.daveyd.com, described hip-hop culture as a continuation of cultural aesthetics and expressions from past generation that can be found within African American and Latino communities.

But new hip-hop icons like Eminem and the hip-hop pop grooves that can be heard in the music of N-SYNC and Britney Spears show that the expression of hip-hop is becoming more and more racially diverse.

Kevin Powel, music critic and cast member of the original "Real World" on MTV, fears that the commercialization of hip-hop will destroy the core of its message.

"A hip-hop head is not someone who listens and copies the music, lingo, fashion and dance," Powell said during an open forum at Northeastern University. "It is someone who knows and appreciates its history, going back to the Negro spirituals of the plantation."

Kevin Powell and Davey D both contributed to the exhibits of "Roots, Rhyme, and Rage" and "Hip-Hop by the Bay" and were participants in the "Hip-Hop and Conversation" program at Stanford University in May of this year.

"Putting together a large and in-depth exhibit of the Bay Area hip-hop scene was a painstaking yet rewarding task," Davey D wrote in an article about Hip Nation's opening night. "It was really a coming together of a community in ways that haven't happened in a very long time."

Information about "Hip-Hop Nation" and upcoming events at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts is available by calling (415) 978-ARTS or visiting the center's Web site, www.yerbabuena-arts.org.

'Dining Room' Serves Up Nostalgic Fare

By Amy Doan
Staff Writer

If the walls of a dining room could talk, they'd have quite a few interesting stories to tell.

Some of these stories will be told in director Ed Wright's version of A.R. Gurney's "The Dining Room," a nostalgic look at the dining room and its role in American families that opens Friday in the Cal State Hayward Studio Theatre.

"It's a day in the life of a dining room," says Wright. "There is no specific dining room or time, but it's almost like ghosts of the past coming to inhabit and show us different lives in different dining rooms over time."

Unlike Edgardo de la Cruz's version of "the Taming of the Shrew," which precedes "The Dining Room" in this year's Highland Summer Theatre series, Wright remained consistent with the original story.

"It's fairly modern and realistic, so you really don't want to mess around with something like that," Wright explains.

The only change Wright made was the inclusion of 12 characters rather than six.

"Most of the actors play three or four roles," he says. "We use very basic costumes but add a smoking jacket, apron or housecoat to change characters." Wright wanted the emphasis to be on the story and not on fancy costumes.

"That's not the point of the play," he says. "As for the set, we will be using all four sides of the theatre for seating. All there is is a dining room table in the middle."

Wright held three auditions in April before selecting his cast members. Half of the actors are students from local high schools, and the other half are from Cal State Hayward.

"I wasn't looking for a specific look or talk," Wright says. "I picked based on what I thought they could do as far as a variety of roles."

"The Dining Room" will play Aug. 3, 4, 10 and 11 at 8 p.m., and Sunday, Aug. 12 at 2 p.m.

A.R. Gurney originally began writing shows to entertain military personnel when he joined the U.S. Army in 1952. He eventually received his master's degree in playwriting at Yale School of Drama.

In 1982, Gurney enjoyed his first breakthrough success with "The Dining Room." He has since written many award-winning plays, including "The Perfect Party," "Another Antigone," "Love Letters," and "A Cheever Evening."

"I imagine an awful lot of 'the Dining Room' was semi-autobiographical," says Wright. "A lot of interesting and important things in peoples' lives have taken place in the dining room. The story brings back memories for me, and I hope it does that for anyone else who watches the play.

"The dining room is becoming extinct."

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