

# Hip Hope

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**Hip-hop**, the music of the streets, transformed pop culture when rap became big business. STEPHEN DUNNE reports on how it's changing lives here.

As the big boy with the beardlet says, freestyling with great flair in a corner of Casula Powerhouse while two guys in requisite baggies beatbox: "This melting pot is definitely on the boil."

For the uninitiated, freestyling is improvised rapping and beatboxing is performing a drum track with your mouth. Welcome to **hip-hop**, the music you can perform anywhere, any time.

The Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre is a converted power station one derelict train stop south of Liverpool. In its enormous central space, where the boilers used to be, are about 40 people ranging in age from 11 to the early-20s, clumped together in corners, half-heartedly practicing dances and ghetto-blasters accompanied raps; watching, waiting for their run-through. It's multicultural Australia in action.

This is Death Defying Theatre's **Hip Hopera**, a huge multi-media celebration of local **hip-hop** culture - Adidas compulsory.

Youth culture has always been fractious and tribalised, but rarely has an entire segment of it been as derided as local **hip-hop**. NSW Premier Bob Carr complains about kids wearing baseball caps backwards, radio plays TISM's All Homeboys Are Dickheads, and the misunderstandings mean most of Sydney ignores a vibrant and growing scene.

The middle-class white-boy whingeing that gets sold as guitar angst cuts no ice here. As the participants keep telling me, this is about real lives, their lives.

"What people like Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love symbolise just does not apply, especially to people in Western Sydney," says Morgan Lewis, the 20-something occasional Post Arrivist who has the job of turning some 25 separate bits and pieces that came out of local community workshops into a coherent theatrical experience - choreographing 44-gallon drumming, abseiling, pyro demonstrations, DJ wars and, of course, rapping.

Appropriately, the show will open with Nirvana, but after 15 seconds, the grunge gods get wiped out by white noise.

"As David Bowie said recently: 'The only music that has power now is music which is still oppressed'," Lewis says. "Being a teenager is all about being oppressed. Every teenager has to be a rebel. It doesn't matter whether you're white, black, Asian or what. That's your thing; you are oppressed by school and teacher and so on. **Hip-hop** becomes your voice, and it's a very potent voice."

And, as the rappers who call themselves South West Syndicate (SWS) say, it's coming to you - straight outta Punchbowl.

"No-one's got a gig like ours, mate. We've got little kids in our group, we've got people in wheelchairs. There's no discrimination."

Naz, another SWS man, adds: "We've got blacks, whites, we got Middle-Eastern people, we've got all mixtures of all groups, know what I mean? There's no racism."

**Hip Hopera** has been gestating in workshops since September. Many of the kids involved have never performed before, but will finish the process with two gigs under their belts.

"Yeah, I'll be nervous a lot," says Khaled Sakr, 13, one of the rappers who call themselves Three Little Shits. "But it'll make me feel like I want to do more, and it gives some confidence."

Back on the mat at Casula, the Funky Little Deviantz are trying to nail a breakdance routine, while in the centre the Notorious Sisters and Dr No Good go through their rap. "This song is called Introducing Us and it's about us and our culture, that's why we add the Arabic language into it," says Nirvana Semaam.

Nirvana and her sister, Natalie, are the Notorious Sisters from Belmore. They met Dr No Good (aka Sahir Ekermawi), of Bankstown, during the workshops. "Most of the rap songs these days have bitch and motherf---er, degrading kind of stuff," says Natalie. "So we're trying to go against that and promote our culture as well. Not only our Arabic culture but our Australian culture."

"People think like rapping is a guys' thing, and it's not," says Dr No Good. "We're here to show the people that girls can do it, too."

"We're better than the guys anyway," says Natalie.

There are more than 25 separate acts in **Hip Hopera**, ranging from **hip-hop** to performance art to bellydancing. What everyone keeps telling me is that this is about their culture and their day-to-day lives. Any notion that these kids are just copying American styles quickly becomes untenable - these raps, in a variety of local accents, are so real you can smell the authenticity.

Race, drugs, police harassment, violence and the experience of living in Western Sydney are some of the concerns which run through the raps.

"That's what it's about," says 21-year-old freestyler, Bubba. "You can enlighten people who don't live where you do or don't know where you're coming from, give them some clues to it through your lyrics. That's why I think it's so important for people to really write from their experience, because otherwise you're doing yourself a disservice."

Media-hyped stereotypes from the US have given the **hip-hop** scene a reputation for being misogynistic, aggressive and homophobic. Bubba believes that stems from ignorance about the diversity of the **hip-hop** culture. He acknowledges, though, that ignorance can cut both ways.

"**Hip-hop** is predominantly a youth culture, without a lot of connections to older people, or people who've maybe had more experience. The way I deal with it is just to confront it. If I'm freestyling or rapping with people and they bring something up, then I'll talk right back to them and try to get a dialogue going.

Bubba is originally from New York, and is stunned at what he's seen of the local scene and of **Hip Hopera**.

"I've never encountered anything like this event. Never this much attention, this much focus, this much theatrics, this much variety. It's amazing. People are going to be completely blown away." \*

**Hip Hopera** plays at the Casula Powerhouse on Saturday and Wharf 4, Pyrmont, on December 3.