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DON'T BELIEVE THE HYPE
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ASIAN AMERICANS IN HIP HOP

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ZINE TEAM

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Seeking Liberation While Facing Marginalization

by Ninochka McTaggart, Co-Curator of *Don't Believe the Hype: LA Asian Americans in Hip Hop*

Ninochka McTaggart, PhD researches representations of racial and gender dynamics and stereotyping in mass media and popular culture and is a Senior Researcher at the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. The title for the exhibition came from her dissertation entitled "Don't Believe the Hype: Gender and Interracial Relations Between Asian Americans and Blacks in Hip-Hop," which was influenced by "Don't Believe the Hype" by Public Enemy, highlighting the media's role in the negative stereotyping of African Americans. McTaggart believes that Asian Americans and other people of color are also targeted by this type of stereotyping.

Although Asian Americans may feel some sense of exclusion from hip hop culture, hip hop can still be a site of empowerment and liberation, where one can rebel against the limited standards of what is deemed acceptable in the white, mainstream, or strike out against parental expectations to pursue careers in other fields.

Historically, a Black/White divide has characterized the American racial order. However, this racial hierarchy does not take into account Latinos, AAPIs, other immigrant groups, and multiracial people. Asian Americans are frequently stereotyped as falling closer to whites than blacks in the American racial hierarchy, due to their model minority status (Bonilla-Silva 2004). This model minority myth erroneously assumes that a strong work ethic and passive demeanor of Asian Americans have been the impetus for high rates of educational attainment and high household incomes compared to other racial groups. However, there exists a pressure for AAPIs to claim a bond with either black or white, which reflects their otherness and leaves them rejected by both racial groups (Okimoto 1994).

The panethnic racial identity of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) has an especially interesting relationship with hip hop. Hip hop was born in the 1970s in Bronx, New York City, with roots in African American, Afro-Caribbean, Black, and Latino artistic expressions as voice for Black and Latino urban communities, to speak out against marginalization and racial oppression. It has transformed over those past four decades into a global movement whose "voice of the underdog" ethos has resounded with various racial, ethnic, class, and sexual orientation groups. From the early days of hip hop, a West Coast hip hop movement emerged that included Filipino DJs and break-dancers, and steady

AAPI involvement has continued ever since. Yet, scholars of Asian American involvement in hip hop have nevertheless pointed out their relative invisibility in the mainstream representation of the genre (Ogbar 2007; Phi 2008; Wang 2006).

This could be due in part to racialized conceptions of gender for Asian American men that emphasize their otherness from blacks and whites. Asian American men are pegged as dorky computer nerds with no sex appeal, while Asian American women are categorized as submissive and exotic, with little creativity to offer but their sexualized bodies (Espiritu 1997; Ho and Mullen 2008). Prevailing images of Asian American masculinity and femininity directly counter the representations of Black men and women in popular media. In hip hop, we often see hypermasculine and powerful Black men who garner "street cred" and women and the images of Black women as sexual aggressors or as angry and overbearing women who refuse to take flack from anyone. The narrow and exaggerated images of Asian American men and women in passive and obedient roles fuel the notion that Asian Americans are the antithesis of hip hop, which often prides itself on its oppositional nature and display of hypermasculinity.

From the early days of hip hop, a West Coast hip hop movement emerged that included Filipino DJs and break-dancers, and steady AAPI involvement has continued ever since. Yet, scholars of Asian American involvement in hip hop have nevertheless pointed out their relative invisibility in the mainstream representation of the genre.

As AAPI Americans vie for success in a context where whiteness is not the norm, they inevitably face barriers that are both gender and race specific—some of them are similar to what they encounter in mainstream society, yet others are more unique. The barriers and challenges that AAPI hip hop participants face, as well as the empowerment that they find within the culture, cannot be understood without incorporating an intersectional lens. Crenshaw (1989) first introduced intersectionality theory in her research on black feminism and Collins (2009) notes cultural patterns of oppression are tied together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society, such as race, gender, class, and ethnicity, forming an "interlocking oppression." As they construct hip hop as a space where racialized stereotypes are less pronounced, they nevertheless encounter limits to being accepted and are relegated to the margins, where narrow gender norms still dominate.

BREAKING IT DOWN: DJ EQUIPMENT

with DJ Phatrick

Turntablism: art of manipulating sounds + creating new music, sound effects, mixes + other creative sounds + beats, typically by using two or more turntables + cross fader equipped DJ mixes.

TURNTABLES

- two sources of music
- plays vinyl records
- allows DJ to manipulate a record

CHANNEL FADER

- volume of each source
- aids in mixing one song into the other

CROSS FADER

- mixes the audio between the left + right turntables
- allows one sound to fade-in while another fades out

MIXER

- allows songs to blend together seamlessly

HEADPHONES

- is plugged into the mixer
- allows a DJ to preview a song that they will play next

PITCH FADER

- adjusts the tempo, pitch + speed of a song
- aids in mixing one song into the other



Although Asian Americans may feel some sense of exclusion from hip hop culture, hip hop can still be a site of empowerment and liberation, where one can rebel against the limited standards of what is deemed acceptable in the white, mainstream, or strike out against parental expectations to pursue careers in other fields. In a society that is becoming more multifaceted and racially diverse, the culture of people who have historically lived with the contradictions of being outsiders—a “culture of resistance”—is becoming increasingly relevant to everyone (Martinez 1997). Even without having had a black, urban experience, hip hop still represents a location that provides a space of freedom and comfort for those who participate.●

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Q & A #1 with artist SWANK (Paul Nandee)

Interviewed by Janelle Sangalang

Q: Tell me about your childhood. Where did you grow up? Do you have any siblings?

I was born at the old Cedars Hospital, East Hollywood, where the Scientology mothership is now. I've stayed in the Northeast part of LA till present. Only child.

Q: Tell me about your parents or your family background. Were your parents originally from here?

My parents immigrated from Thailand.

Q: Did they have certain expectations they wanted you to uphold?

Toe the line, don't make waves. Do well in school and get a good job.

Q: As a kid, were you always creative? Did your parents encourage your creativity?

As far as I can remember, I always drew and doodled. I loved watching cartoons and the TV was pretty much my babysitter.

My mom taught me the first thing I learned to draw, which was a really basic drawing of a house. We lived in an apartment at the time, so looking back that was pretty aspirational for someone immigrating for a better life.

Q: Some immigrant parents expect their children to pick a career path of a doctor, lawyer, or engineer. Did your parents have certain career expectations for you?

Yeah, all of the above. Throw in getting your CPA (Certified Public Accountant), Real Estate, and Securities licenses and doing that on the weekends.

Q: How did you get into graffiti? How did it end up becoming your career? Did you ever guess that the art you practice could end up being your career?

I was already skateboarding. One of my buddies was like let's start tagging too. We picked names and started dropping them wherever we went.

Even though I did well in school, I hated academics. All I wanted to do at that time was skate, draw, smoke weed, and hang out with my friends. When I realized I was going straight to community college after high school, I junked my senior year and barely passed enough where I was able to walk on stage for graduation.

There were older guys doing graffiti that were getting commercial work at the time, so a

"career" in this type of art didn't seem so far-fetched.

After high school I was painting with some older guys that were past college and getting commercial work dressing sets for music videos, TV shows, movies, etc. and they put me on some projects. I ended up getting into ArtCenter College of Design for college and graduating, appeasing my Asian parents for going to a "prestigious" school.

Q: Looking at your previous artwork, specifically *Means to Some Ends*, we can see the different advertisers that you worked with, like RayBan. Do you have a favorite commissioned piece?

My favorite commercial project to date was for GATORADE. They sent me and my homie UNIT to Tampa, Florida a week leading up to Superbowl XLIII (Steelers vs. Cardinals). They set-up an artist's loft studio for me to paint canvases in and had all these legendary National Football League (NFL) players come through for interviews and to hangout. My dad is a huge NFL football fan, so I watched a lot of football growing up. Meeting all these players I watched growing up in that setting was awesome, you couldn't pay for an experience like that. We went to the game, Steelers won.

I was also a graphics contractor for NIKE for awhile and did a lot of character designs of different athletes. And aside from dealing with some extreme weather, being able to pay my bills spray painting day in and day out is pretty cool too.

Q: Aside from your solo pieces, you also work together with other graffiti artists. You're in a graffiti crew, Seeking Heaven (SH). How did you all come up with this name and how did you form?

The Seeking Heaven Crew was started by PRECISE, he came up with the name of the crew. I got down with SH because they were all guys from my area. The SH crew were up the most and doing the best pieces I came across at the time. This was pre-internet, so if you wanted to get to know people you had to do it in person. I started hanging out and painting with them and eventually got absorbed into the crew.

Q: You just worked with the Chinese American Museum to create the site-specific mural, *Means to Some Ends*, what are your upcoming projects?

Just continuing to work on commercial projects to pay the bills and finding time to work on non-commercial works for myself.

Q: What is your process when you first start on a piece? Do you listen to music while working? Who or what do you listen to?

Every project whether commercial or personal starts with a concept and a ton of research. During the research and design phase of a project I find myself listening to a lot of NPR and podcasts. When it gets into the production phase where I'm executing I'll listen to music, mostly streaming random stuff from rap to electronic to reggae to pop, etc...

Q: You’re featured in the exhibition, *Don’t Believe the Hype: LA Asian Americans in Hip Hop*. Was hip hop an influence in your life and art practice?

I listened to a lot of hip hop growing up and participated in the culture around me as much as I could at the time. I couldn’t rhyme and sucked at dancing and DJing, so art was my thing. I airbrushed t-shirts for dance crews, designed flyers for parties, and made mixtape covers for my MC and DJ homies.

Q: One of the four pillars of hip hop is graffiti, do you think your artwork touches upon hip hop culture?

Graffiti as we know it originated from New York hip hop street culture. By the time I got into it, even though I listened to hip hop, a lot of the guys I was painting with weren’t even into hip hop. They were punkers, rockers, and metal heads.

Q: Do you listen to hip hop? Who is your favorite artist?

I grew up listening to a lot of Native Tongues era hip hop.

Q: Do you identify as Asian American?

I am Asian American, first generation. Although everywhere I travel outside the US, I am just an American that looks like a “giant Chinese.”

Q: How has your ethnic background affected your career (if it has)? Do the people who commission your work have preconceived notions, expectations, or stereotypes of you?

Graffiti is a very anonymous and meritocratic activity. You’re often judged on what you do and what you leave behind. Rather than what you look like or your personality. I am mostly commissioned based on my portfolio of past projects. I don’t advertise myself as an Asian/Asian American artist, I’m just an artist. This museum project is the most ethnically related thing I’ve ever done.

Q: How long have you been practicing graffiti as a career? Do you ever run into graffiti artists that surprise and or interest you?

I started tagging in middle school, around 14/15 years old.

I’m always surprised at the new stuff graffiti artists come up with. The culture is constantly evolving, that’s what keeps me interested.

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SWANK’s art is on view in CAM’s exhibition, *Don’t Believe the Hype: LA Asian Americans in Hip Hop*.



•SWANK•

“Expression Predilection”: Reflecting on Asian / Asian American Rappers, Styles, and Appropriations

by Kenneth Chan

While the hip hop movement includes arts like dance, graffiti, and DJing, rap music has undeniably become the most popular. Tricia Rose, one of the preeminent hip hop scholars, described rap music as

- **propelled by Afro-diasporic traditions. Stylistic continuities in dance, vocal articulations, and instrumentation between rap, breakdancing, urban blues, be-bop, and rock ‘n’ roll move within and between these historical junctions and larger social forces, creating Afro-diasporic narratives that manage and stabilize these traditions.**¹
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Although rap music has origins in Afro-diasporic roots and traditions, Rose also notes it has continued to shift and change through technological innovations like sampling and music production, and through its cultural and spatial contexts. Hip hop’s originators were responding to their environment: the South Bronx in the 1970s, a time where the city’s black and brown residents had to respond to issues like affordable housing, a lack of sustainable jobs, and the increased policing of neighborhoods in response to the rise of crack cocaine.

One common theme within rap music is the concept of authenticity. To be authentic or “to keep it real” means to perform genuine originality and creativity, and stay faithful to expectations of the genre. As scholar Oliver Wang notes, the authenticity of an artist might even be more important than lyrical and musical talent.² If we accept a limited definition of what authentic hip hop is; Black, predominantly male, and emerging from the 1970s South Bronx, then the idea of the Asian American hip hop rap artist doesn’t fit into these parameters.

For Asian American hip hop artists, the issue of authenticity can be a challenge, especially as these performers don’t appear to meet their audience’s expectations of a hip hop artist. As Oliver Wang writes, some of the earliest Asian American rappers emerged from the college scene, performing for student organizations in the 1990s, during hip hop’s phase of mass commercialization. Subsequently, Asian American hip hop artists were sometimes seen as gimmicks; an antithesis to this idea of “authentic” hip hop.

But if we recall that hip hop and the concept of an “authentic” hip hop is fluid, reflexive, and as Tricia Rose reminds us; a reinterpretation and revision of what has come before, then we might be able to better understand where Asian Americans fit in the genre.

Firstly, it’s important to remember that hip hop isn’t static; it changes over time to reflect cultural changes, musical trends, and geography. For example, two of the best-selling artists in 2005 were 50 Cent and The Game; two gangsta style rappers. In 2017, you have artists like Kendrick Lamar; a lyrical talent that incorporates that genealogy of gangsta rap but with other genres and styles like funk, poetry, and spirituality in albums like *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015). Also, there are numerous sub-genres in hip hop that coexist at the same time such as queer hop, crunk, trap, horrorcore, bounce, trip-hop, neo-soul, etc.

Secondly, for Asian American rappers, their music and reinterpretation of hip hop music reflects the Asian American experience. Of course, it’s important to acknowledge that Asian American hip hop, just like the Asian American experience, depends on race, class, gender, location, etc. Asian Americans are one of the most diverse groupings in America. Likewise, Asian American hip hop can’t be understood as a singular genre or style.

Take for example, Filipino American rapper, Bambu. Bambu’s music reflects his complex identity as a political, leftist, Filipino American, and former gang member brought up in Los Angeles. In “Where You From,” he raps:

*From a gang that started out as a car club
Other gangs popping so Satanas got to arming up
And now I work to end all the killing
My peers in the street corrupting our young children
If you really from the days that you claim
Then why would you want our kids to go through the same thing?*³

Referring to the history of one of the first Filipino American gangs, the Satanas, Bambu both tells the story of how they went from a car club to a street gang, and how as an older former gang member, he works to end violence in the streets.

Meanwhile, you’ve got Awkwafina, born and raised in New York; who’s known more for her comedic, self-deprecating style, and quirky personality. In “Pockiez,” she jokes both about looking like a teenager (but aging well!), and riding in her second-hand Nissan; lyrical imagery that contradicts mainstream hip hop’s desire for luxury vehicles and brands:

*I got good genes and I’m agin’ well
Is a b!tch 13? They can never tell
Ay roll up in a second-hand Nissan
Mothaf!as on the boulevard with a fleece on*⁴

1. Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 25.
2. Oliver Wang, “Rapping and Repping Asian: Race, Authenticity, and the Asian American MC,” in *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*. Ed. Mimi Thi Nguyen, Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu (NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 36.

3. Bambu, “Where You From?” Recorded 2012, track 20 on ...One Rifle Per Family, Beatrock Music, digital.
4. Nora Lum, “Awkwafina – Pockiez (Official Video),” YouTube video, 2:27. Posted [June 2018]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YsSre22qito>

And to give another example- check out The Mountain Brothers, a trio out of Philadelphia who came out in a period of the 90s when a big focus was on complex, mind-blowing, multisyllabic raps (rhymes in **bold**):

*My mass is **critical**, raps **Invisibl** like **Skratch Piklz** and **X-Men**
Gettin **fem’s confessin’**
Expression predilection for sex and **affection** when I **finesse them**⁵*

Through these three examples, we see Asian American rap artists develop their own style and authenticity, revising rap traditions in a compelling way to express their own narratives.

However, even though Asian American artists are able to create their own sense of authenticity, it doesn’t always mean they’re able to do so successfully or in a compelling manner. As journalist Youn Kwang-Eun astutely observes in his exploration of Korean hip hop, Korean rappers who attempt to mimic “authentic” representations of gangsta rap through macho lyrics or rapping about their experiences growing up in “marginalized” communities actually end up sounding inauthentic.

In a freestyle session, Changmo stresses marginality of his hometown, Deoksori. He sneers at “the dweeb suckers in Seoul,” who apparently told him to stop characterizing his birthplace as Harlem. They have a point. Deoksori is no Harlem. It’s a suburb of Seoul in Gyeonggi Province. Wasn’t Changmo privileged enough to take piano lessons since he was five? How can he rap like he’s been marginalized, when everyone knows all he did in his youth was commute between school and hagwon, or cram schools, and started rapping after buying a home-recording mic one day?⁶

Hip hop music reflects the space and time of the environment it emerges from. If an artist isn’t able to convince their audience that their music truly reflects their experiences, it can come off as disingenuous, boring, and trite. Poorly imitating styles doesn’t just come off as inauthentic, but also brings in the issue of cultural appropriation and anti-Black racism. In its most basic definition, cultural appropriation describes “the adoption or use of elements of one culture, by members of another culture.”⁷ While this practice might seem like harmless exchange, we need to consider historical and structural inequalities and anti-Black racism, whether it be examples of police brutality, legacies of segregation, and institutional racism.

One could argue that relatively privileged Asian artists take from Black hip hop artists and traditions, and profit from them with little credit or pay. Appropriation isn’t just about cultural exchange, but the adaptation or utilization of elements of a culture that is not as privileged or treated equally by a more powerful and privileged group.

Let’s be clear though- all Asian American hip hop is a form of cultural appropriation through the adoption of a Black creative art. But where does the line between appropriation and theft, minstrelsy, plagiarism, or anti-Black racism get crossed?

Jason Chu and collaborator Tow-Arboleda Films received criticism over their music video “This is Asian America,”⁸ a riff on popular rapper/singer/actor Childish Gambino’s “This is America,” which pointed towards issues like police brutality, anti-Blackness, and gun violence.⁹ “This is Asian America” utilized a similar aesthetic, background, and style as Gambino’s video, but instead engaged with issues like mental health, bullying, and the model minority stereotype.

As one Facebook user expressed:
I’m sure the Asian community does have issues and I sympathize with that. But copying a black man’s video when there is so much anti blackness in the Asian community is just so tone deaf. So yes, tell your stories. In your own way!!!¹⁰

Such criticism deserves to be validated and acknowledged, especially if Asian/Asian American participation only continues to grow in hip hop, and Asian American anti-Blackness continues to be a serious issue. It also points to how hip hop, despite its fluid and ever-changing form of authenticity, continues to be associated with the voice of resistance, the marginalized, and strong roots as a Black creative art. For Asian American rappers, nuance, reflexivity, and understanding are of utmost importance in creating an art that others (and not just their own demographic) can find appealing and compelling.

For Asian American rappers and hip hop artists alike, developing their own style means to utilize hip hop as a way that authentically reflects their own styles, environments, background, identities, and on-going movements and trends inside and outside the music industry. Still, these artists must negotiate and recognize what hip hop means as a Black art and the important stakes around cultural appropriation, theft, plagiarism, and anti-Blackness. It’s up to the listener or reader to draw the line between appropriation and racism, and decide when an artist is and isn’t “keeping it real.” But the construction of communities of resistance within the hip hop movement can only be done with artists who are willing to listen, reflect, and change. ●

5. Inmybestclothes. “Mountain Brothers – Galaxies: The Next Level [HQ].” YouTube video, 4:02. Posted [Oct 2009]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ptd2CuBR-Tg>
6. Youn Kwang-eun. “Removed from Context: The Unbearable Lightness of Korean Hip Hop.” Korea Expose. Last modified October 27, 2017. <https://www.koreaexpose.com/removed-from-context-unbearable-lightness-korean-hip-hop/>
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8. Tow-Arboleda Films. “This is Asian America.” Facebook video, 3:16. Posted [May 2017]. <https://www.facebook.com/towarboledafilms/videos/this-is-asian-america/885501631659290/>
9. Donald Glover. “Childish Gambino – This is America (Official Video).” YouTube video, 4:04. Posted [May 2018]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYOjWnS4cMY>
10. https://www.facebook.com/towarboledafilms/videos/885501631659290/?comment_id=885563301653123&reply_comment_id=887264678149652&comment_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R%2389%22%7Dhttps://www.facebook.com/towarboledafilms/videos/885501631659290/?comment_id=885563301653123&reply_comment_id=887264678149652&comment_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R%2389%22%7D

Firecracker, a bi-weekly event that happened every first, third, and fifth Friday of the month for nearly a dozen years, was founded in 1998. The events took place at the Grand Star, a venue built in “New Chinatown” in the 1940’s that would become a watering hole for celebrities & city officials well into the late 1980’s. During this period, tuxedoed waiters flambéd tableside, Marty & Elayne performed regularly, and Hawaiian diva Delfin Thursday played the downstairs piano bar with a wink and a smile. But, by the time Firecracker established its home there in the late 1990’s, not much nightlife existed in Chinatown. Chungking Road had yet to reinvent itself as a destination for art galleries in Los Angeles. It was the dawn of a new millennium, but Downtown LA’s renaissance had yet to take shape. However, a fuse was lit.

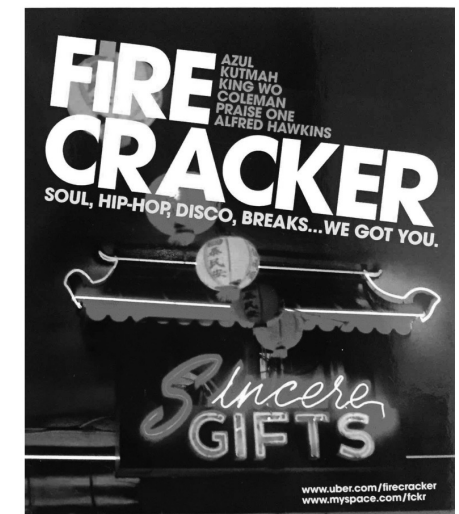
As told to writer Mike Sonksen for KCET, co-founder Lisa Yu says, “When the idea of Firecracker was first conceived, Daryl Chou, myself, James Kang, and a few other friends envisioned an artistic space where local writers, poets, visual artists, and musicians could come together to perform, share, and inspire. We craved a space where our community could come together to create and grow, so we wanted to make sure that this party incorporated not only the music that inspired us, but also other artistic elements that were part of our scene.”

They contacted four DJ friends -- Wing Ko, Eric Coleman, Alfred Hawkins, and Paris Potter -- to be the original DJs for the upstairs, which was transformed into a dance floor. Before long, the location, the people, and the music merged into one. Lisa says, “We showcased artists who inspired us, like Chaz Bojorquez, Omar Ramirez, Mear One, HVW8 crew.” Alfred, who started Giant with Shepard Fairey and served as art director for both Elwood/Aesthetics and Zoo York, was Firecracker’s primary designer, but other artists and designers, like Carlos Vega, Matt Cox, and Gene Sung, were approached to design artwork for Firecracker as well.

“Quickly, and beyond what we ever imagined, our intimate party grew into something much larger and took on a life of its own. After a while, Logic joined the official crew, as did Azul and Kutmah a bit later,” explains Lisa. They also teamed up with like-minded artists and organizations, like Stones Throw Records, B+, Visual Communications, URB, Giant Robot, Chocolate Bar, and Root Down to cross-pollinate the party.

By December 2007, Vice declared, “This might be the best party in LA.” Firecracker had firmly established itself as a vital part of Los Angeles’ social fabric. Not only were the events racially inclusive – it seemed every ethnicity in the city was represented - but every age group was represented as well. By the time it celebrated its final event in December 2009, Firecracker had featured guests from across the musical spectrum, including Grand Wizard Theodore, Aloe Blacc, Madlib, Beat Junkies, Anderson .Paak, Egyptian Lover, Arabian Prince, Freestyle Fellowship, Flying Lotus, Maseo (De La Soul), Karriem Riggins, Valida, DJ Spinna, Kenny Dope, Peanut Butter Wolf, Domingo Sieté, Mayer Hawthorne, Biz Markie, Rob Swift, Miguel Atwood-Ferguson, Ninth Wonder, Angelo Moore (Fishbone), among many others. A blueprint for musical and cultural events was created that others would follow for years to come. According to filmmaker and

photographer B+, “When Firecracker opened, most people didn’t even know where Chinatown was - let alone go down there to socialize. Daryl, Alfredo, Lisa Yu, Wing, Jim, C-Boogie, Paris, and Coleman built an institution on the backs of a bi-weekly party that was simply that. Good music, fun times, cool space. In the process a whole scene grew up around that part of town and many legends graced the doors of Frank’s Grand Star.” ●



BRENDA
CHI

ICE BOWL
*** Famous ***
CHINESE FOODS
DANCING

GRAND STAR
Jazz Club



Q & A #2 with Daryl Chou, Firecracker Producer/Co-Founder

Interviewed by Emily Gao

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Q: Before we get into the interview, I want to get to know you've been jiving to. As a lover of music, who are you listening to lately?

Artists who seem to have old souls, no matter the genre or era, like KRS-One, Anderson .Paak, Shakti, Curtis Mayfield, Radiohead, Coltrane.

Q: What was the inspiration in starting Firecracker?

The original idea was to create a broader experience, an artists' salon if you will, where writers, filmmakers, musicians, painters, and dancers would have a communal space to exchange ideas and take part in performances collectively. The goal was worthy but it never really got off the ground. We ended up doing something more scaled down, but in the end, what was actually established may have ultimately had more impact, due to Firecracker's longevity.

Q: In over your decade of experience, what Firecracker memories stand out to you?

The people. We attracted a cross-section of people from seemingly every ethnicity, which is relevant because we started during a time when specific clubs seemed to cater to specific demographics. Nightlife wasn't very diverse at the time. Also, since we started things in an old-school venue with existing regulars, we also had people of different ages as well, some well into their 70s. This added to the richness of the diversity of our crowd ... Also, the vast array and quality of guest DJs, musicians, spoken-word poets, and artists who performed with us throughout the years really stand out.

Q: What do you hope to be the legacy of Firecracker?

I hope Firecracker's legacy carries through via the continued intermingling of people, ideas, and music.

Q: How did you, Lisa, and Jim meet?

I met Lisa and Jim through a college friend. Through Tony Lee, who DJed at Chocolate Bar (another influential club night at the time), we met Wing Ko. We came to find out Wing had three DJ friends who had coincidentally played a house party at Lisa's the year before. That was Alfred Hawkins, Eric Coleman, and Paris Potter. We joined forces in 1998 and ended up creating what would become one of the pillars of Los Angeles nightlife for over a decade, helping to revitalize Grand Star and to kick-start the art scene on Chungking Road. In fact, besides DJs and musicians, some of our earliest guests were visual artists like Chaz Bojorquez, Jose Ramirez, Joseph Lee, and Norton Wisdom. Also, the outdoor block parties we threw to celebrate our anniversary every year were a precursor to Chinatown Summer Nights. In fact, quite a few of the DJs that play these events now used to be regular guest DJs at Firecracker.

Q: Who are some of your artistic influences? And why?

Prince, Stanley Kubrick, and Dr. Dre are three artists whom I admire. Their attention to detail and the way they set things up where they had creative control over their projects is impressive. As a result, I believe these artists were able to express themselves more freely as they intended.

Q: Why did Chinatown become the home base for Firecracker? Were you considering it anywhere else?

Chinatown became home base for Firecracker because the owners of Grand Star were friends of my family. I grew up going there with my mom as a kid, when it was still a restaurant with a piano bar and tuxedoed waiters who'd flambé at the table. That relationship continued into adulthood. This was before the San Gabriel Valley became the Asian food epicenter that it is now.

Q: How do you see the genre of hip hop changing? Where do you think it will go next?

Hip hop continues to evolve and will continue to do so with each successive generation. Hopefully, the elements of community, social justice, and resistance against oppression continue to be prevalent in hip hop, no matter how it develops musically. Like Firecracker, hip hop brings together all walks of life, no matter one's background.

Q: What was the reason behind ending the concert series? Is there a chance of it coming back?

Although we've had hundreds of live musicians and DJs perform as guests, Firecracker was not necessarily a concert series. Firecracker was a club night, a party with a conscience, where progressive ideas and music coalesced. That said, we may reunite for a one-off. In fact, this year would've been our 20th anniversary.

Q: Since the ending of Firecracker, what projects have you moved onto?

Since Firecracker, I produced a couple of performances at El Pueblo Historical Monument, one in conjunction with CicLAvia. Also, I finished a M.Ed. from UCLA and have taught for many years.

Q: In hindsight, is there anything you wish you would have done differently?

I wish we'd taken Firecracker international. The experience is something that we would've liked to have shared.

Q: Consistency played a key role in the success of Firecracker. Any other advice to future artists who want to promote and host something like your events?

Be true to yourself. Do what you believe. Persistence and consistency are vital.

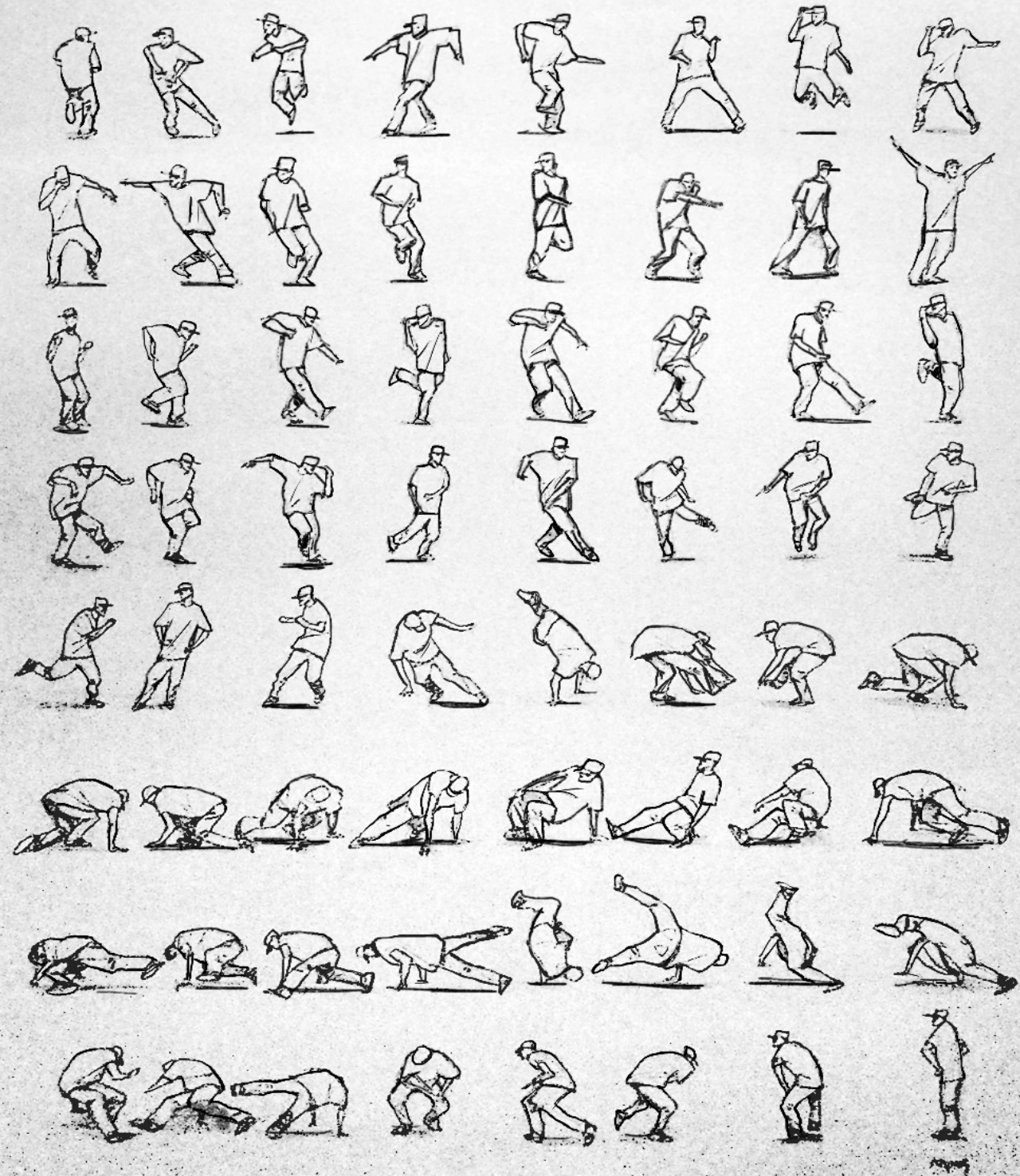
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Ephemera from the Firecracker music series is on view in CAM's exhibition, *Don't Believe the Hype: LA Asian Americans in Hip Hop*.

There are moments when you're dancing and the spirit moves you. You lose control and your body moves on its own; electrified with energy. I've always been interested in how to capture these moments, where the music and the dancer become one. As they are directly related, I began to think of dance as musical notation. Or music in dance notation. In *16 Bars*, I took a video of myself battling at a small jam in Baltimore and drew the dance move at every beat. I repeated this over the course of the set, for a total of 16 bars of music, or 8 drawings over 8 lines. In 'reading' the drawing, you may follow along with a beat and see how the dance unfolded with the music.

16 Bars

Kenny Kong



Remixed: Awkwafina in Hip Hop

by Emily Gao

In the world of hip hop, few Asian American rappers, let alone women, come to mind. Awkwafina, otherwise known as Nora Lum, is remixing hip hop by staying true to herself. By staying authentic to who she is, half-Korean and half-Chinese Lum has carved a space for herself in a genre that was never meant for her.

Awkwafina grew up as a self-identified class clown in Queens, New York City where she gravitated towards the trumpet. After attending an arts high school for the instrument, studying journalism and women's studies in college and learning Mandarin in China, Lum returned back to New York City to make music. Lum's success started with her 2012 hit "My Vag" that sent the internet into a frenzy garnering 2 million views. The song was a parody of Micky Avalon's song "My Dick" and championed female sexuality, a topic seldom heard about in pop culture. From there, her songs "NYC Bitch\$" and "Queef" paved the way for her debut 2014 album *Yellow Ranger*. In June 2018, her second album *In Fina We Trust* was released for public consumption. You might also be familiar with Awkwafina through her role alongside Sandra Bullock in "Oceans 8." Although diverse in talent, Awkwafina's career is bookmarked by comedy rap.

To understand Awkwafina, one can analyze the her music video "Green Tea" featuring comedian Margaret Cho. Growing up, Awkwafina watched Cho's show *All American Girl* with her grandmother. Awkwafina credits Cho as her "hero not only because she was funny, but because she showed me that it's OK to be yourself, that it's OK to be a brash yellow girl, and to be a strong and brave woman."



Pairing up for "Green Tea," Cho and Lum call out the problems related to the intersection of race, gender and sexuality that Asian women face. In many respects, "Green Tea" could only come to fruition with the work Cho has laid out for future artists like Awkwafina. The song pulls a top down reform on the representation of Asian women. Near the end of the song, Cho raps in a thick Asian accent and Awkwafina calls out the choice, asking her why she is talking in such a way. The opening line sets the tone: "flip a stereotype, how an Asian bitch got concubines? Turn a grown man to a bashful bride." Traditionally, concubines were given to men as a symbol of power and stature but here Awkwafina turns herself into the role of the leader by designating herself as the one with concubines.

The music video for the song shows Lum wearing a Chinese print robe (perhaps a nod to Chinese emperors) and Cho wearing hanbok and cheongsam. Another shot shows the two in Japanese school girl uniforms, playing off the idea of hypersexualized Asian women. The duo hoped the song would help women of color embrace their quirkiness, sexuality, inner child and creativity. While the song does empower, the true magic of the song is that the singers themselves embody the mission: Awkwafina and Cho have an authenticity that they hope can bolster a community that is often bypassed.

Being non-black in the world of rap, one has to question what it means to be in a space created by African American people. In an interview with *Slant Magazine*, Awkwafina states that cultural appropriation is "a very controversial subject, and especially one to talk about when you're in the hip hop industry when you're not Black. What people have to understand is that hip hop music is music spawned out of adversity, political adversity, and it's political at its core." Awkwafina is self-aware about what it means to rap and not be Black. In other words, she sees how cultural appropriation fits in with her position in hip hop. She knows that the genre was conceived from an African American struggle. Rather than ignore the issue or glaze over it like some white rappers may choose to do, Awkwafina is aware of where her feet stand in the genre. Awkwafina seeks to pay homage to the genre, not exploit it.

Today, I feel like for Asian Americans to be heard, there needs to be more people who aren't afraid of the backlash. Awkwafina is an excellent example of what it means to be true to yourself. Her reproduction of rap is a reminder that the genre, however hostile it may seem to outsiders, can be a place for people like her. In a male-dominated space foreign to Asian Americans, Awkwafina has found a place to be herself. ●

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1979

Joe Bataan, an Afro-Filipino soul/disco artist from the East Harlem neighborhood in New York City recorded an early rap single, "Rap-O Clap-O," released several weeks prior to the epochal hit single, "Rapper's Delight" by the Sugarhill Gang.

1980

1980

Nestor "Nasty Nes" Rodriguez started the West Coast's first hip hop radio show in Seattle.

1985

Nes formed Nastymix Records with Chinese American promoter Ed Locke and a local rapper named Anthony Ray, who called himself Sir Mix-A-Lot. Soon the three had secured two of West Coast rap's first platinum albums. The label exemplified the emergence of a multiracial West Coast scene and foreshadowed hip hop's global impact in the future.

1990s

The first notable wave of AAPI artists, both self-identifying as "AAPI rappers" or labeled by the media as such, manifested in the 1990s on college campuses across the U.S. Most were dually inspired by both Asian American Studies curricula and the politics of hip hop of that era. This cohort included the Asiatic Apostles (UC Davis), Yellow Peril (Rutgers), Fists of Fury (San Francisco State) and the Seoul Brothers (University of Washington).



1993

The Japanese-born, Northern California-bred rapper known as Asia Born, who would later change his name to Lyrics Born, releases his first disc, "Send Them."

Born Ray Witzsteiner, RhythmX is a half-Japanese American artist from the Bay Area city of Vallejo. He has been affiliated with Bay Area rap star E-40 and released a solo album on E-40's Sick Wid It imprint in 1993 (Long Overdue), which featured a song "Subliminal Criminals" that included a Filipino American rapper named Grump, possibly marking the first example of a pan-ethnic AAPI rap collaboration.

ASIAN AMERICAN MCs and DJs TIMELINE

1995

The rap duo of Key-Kool and DJ Rhettmatic (Japanese American and Filipino American respectively) release the album *Kozmonautz*. Rhettmatic is a member of the Beat Junkies and later served as a DJ and producer for the Visionaries, a Los Angeles-based group.



1999

Handsome Boy Modeling School, a rap collaboration between Dan "the Automator" Nakamura and Prince Paul, releases its first album *So ...How's Your Girl?*



1992

DJs Q-Bert (Richard Quiteviz), Apollo (Apollo Novicio) and Mixmaster Mike (Michael Schwartz) from the Invisibl Skratch Piklz won the prestigious DMC (Disco Mix Competition) world championship in 1992.

The multiracial DJ crew, The Beat Junkies, formed in the Southern California city of Cerritos.

Half-Chinese/half-Trinidadian rapper, Fresh Kid Ice from 2 Live Crew, releases a solo album, *The Chinaman*.

1994

Asia One (Nancy Yu) is a half-Chinese B-girl hailing from Denver, Colorado. In this year, she founded the B-boy Summit that began as a free event for b-boys and b-girls and eventually became a multi-day international conference that showcases various elements of hip hop through educational panels, dance battles, showcases for MCs and DJs, and a graffiti expo.



1991

The Mountain Brothers formed in this year consisting of CHOPS (Scott Jung), Peril-L (Christopher Wang), and Styles Infinite (Steve Wei). They named themselves after a group of noble bandits depicted in a classical Chinese novel. They would become the first Asian American hip hop group to sign a deal with a major label (Sony-distributed Ruffhouse).



1998

The Black Eyed Peas' single "Joints and Jams" is featured on the *Bulworth* soundtrack and becomes a commercial success for the group.

Filipino American DJ Kuttin Kandi (Candice Custudio) became the first woman to reach the finals of the DMC USA competition.



1997

The Beat Junkies released their first album, *The World Famous Beat Junkies, Vol. 1* through PR Records.

Korean American artist Jamez (James Chang). His debut album *Z-Bonics* was released, making him the first Korean American to release a hip hop album.

2000

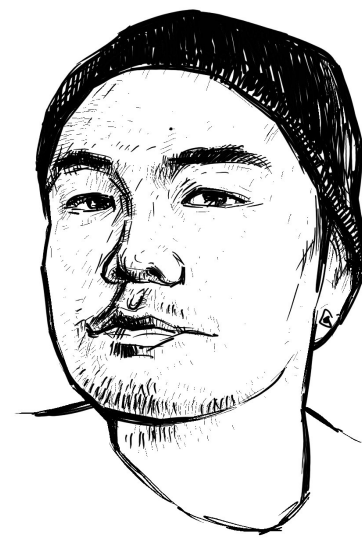


2002
Filipino American MCs, Bambu (Jonah Deocampo) and Kiwi (Kiwi Illafonte), formed the Native Guns with Chinese American DJ and producer, Phatrick (Patrick Huang).

As students at The University of Washington in Seattle, Iranian American DJ Sabzi (Saba Mohajerjasbi) and Filipino American MC Geologic (George Quibuyen, also known as Prometheus Brown) came together to form the Blue Scholars. The duo became a prominent fixture of the Seattle hip-hop scene and over their career have shared the stage with such notable hip-hop acts like De La Soul, Kanye West, Immortal Technique and Slick Rick. The group's lyrics are rooted in activism and social justice touching on issues like immigration, racism, class struggle.



2008
Meeting at Wesleyan University, Heems (Himanshu Kumar Suri) and Kool A.D. (Victor Vasquez) came together to form the MC duo of Das Racist in 2008 after both living in a dorm for students of color for social justice. The group first gained online success through their song "Combination Pizza Hut and Taco Bell."



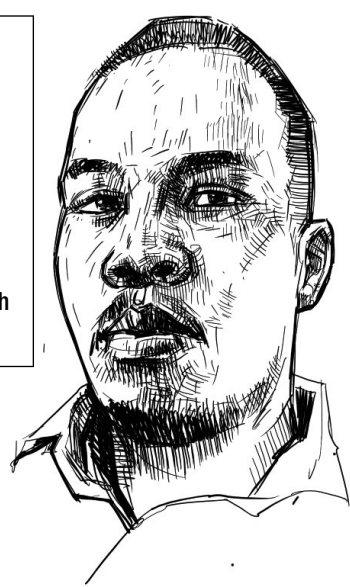
2011
Dumbfoundead (Jonathan Park), is a Korean American rapper from the Koreatown neighborhood of Los Angeles. His first solo LP, *DFD*, was released in November 2011.

Lyrics Born releases a new album, *As U Were*.

2010

2010
Far East Movement reaches No. 1 on Billboard's pop chart with the track "Like a G6" featuring Dev and the Cataracs. They then became one of the only AAPI groups to reach the top of the Billboard Hot 100 chart.

2016
Anderson .Paak (Black and Korean) releases his album, *Malibu*, to critical acclaim, is named a Freshman in *XXL* magazine, and signs to Dr. Dre's Aftermath Entertainment.



The documentary, *Bad Rap*, which highlights four Asian American hip hop MCs (Dumbfoundead, Rekstizzy, Lyrics and Awkwafina) is released.

2000

2001
First Asian American Hip Hop Summit held in Los Angeles.

The debut album, *In Search Of...*, drops by N.E.R.D., a collaboration including Pharrell Williams and Filipino American Chad Hugo from the producing duo, the Neptunes.

2004
In October 2004, MC Jin released his debut album, *The Rest is History*, on Ruff Ryders label. Jin appeared on Freestyle Fridays and after multiple wins, he was inducted into the Freestyle Fridays Hall of Fame on BET (Black Entertainment Television) and then inked a deal with the Ruff Ryders label. This made him the first Asian American solo artist to release an album through a major record label.



2014
Born Nora Lum, Awkwafina is a Chinese/Korean American rapper from New York. She started rapping at age 13 and released her first album in 2014 called *Yellow Ranger*. When not making music, Awkwafina is also a comedian, actress, television personality, and writer.



2017
The Beat Junkie Institute of Sound opened in Glendale, CA in May 2017. It is a school that offers training in the art of turntablism ranging from private instruction, group DJ courses, and workshops for those new to the craft or professionals who want to improve their skills.

Ruby Ibarra released an album, *Circa 1991*.



illustrations by Andy Yoon



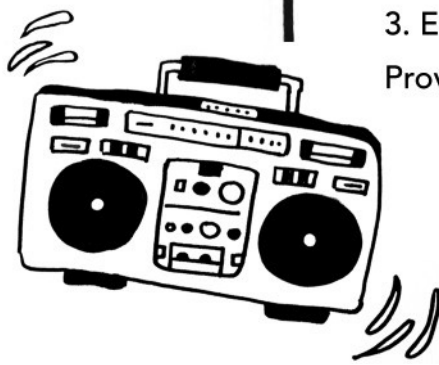
ORIGINS: Don't Believe the Hype

Don't Believe the Hype: LA Asian Americans in Hip Hop, an exhibition by the Chinese American Museum, originates from the single "Don't Believe the Hype" by Public Enemy. The song encouraged people to question and inspect what was being told to them by the media. Public Enemy's song reminds each of us to think for ourselves before buying into what others believe.

Caught you lookin' for the same thing
It's a new thing, check out this I bring
Uh Oh the roll below the level
'Cause I'm livin' low next to the bass, c'mon
Turn up the radio
They claim that I'm a criminal
By now I wonder how
Some people never know
The enemy could be their friend, guardian
I'm not a hooligan
I rock the party and
Clear all the madness, I'm not a racist
Preach to teach to all
'Cause some they never had this

- "Don't Believe the Hype" by Public Enemy, 1988

1. What is the overall message of Public Enemy's song?
2. In CAM's current exhibition, *Don't Believe the Hype*, the audience is asked to look beyond how Asian Americans are perceived by the media. How does the message of the song and the message in the exhibition complement one another?
3. In the 3rd line of the verse, Public Enemy refers to themselves as "this." What does "this" mean and how does it relate to thinking for yourself?



MUSIC SPOTLIGHT: Analyzing JASON CHU

Do I make my parents proud cause I made it out of the house,
and very few other Asians are makin this kind of sound?
I was raised to be great, told to be the best
Now every project I release that fails just gives me stress
If you've ever been depressed, I know that you can relate
To the weight of a generation and a race
Every time I step on stage, I'm fighting for my place
Even Asians often tell me I don't have a rapper's face
I'm not running in place, I'm just running my race

- "Free" by Jason Chu



1. Free is defined as "not under the control of another." How do these verses show how Jason is feeling in "Free?"
2. Jason uses the word "race" twice in this verse. How is it used the first time compared to the second?
3. Explain whether you agree or disagree with Jason's definition of the word "free." Provide an example of feeling free. If you disagree, how would you define it?

ASIAN WOMEN IN RAP:

Who's? Who?

There's more to female rap than Nicki Minaj. While men dominate the airwaves and the rap game, there are women pushing to be heard and represented.

Unscramble the words to fill in the hip hop verse below or fill in the blanks to create your own version.

You can have the _____, I got the _____ inside of me
drlwo verniues

You can have the _____, I got my _____ to ride with me
amfe ilyfam

Take my last name but you can't deny my history

I'mma show you what it means to have equality

I'mma make my ancestors proud of me

I'mma help you redefine _____
lucniitysam

My fate is greater than the _____ you assign to me
dergen

Yeah I'mma turn you to a _____
nistmeif

I'mma turn you to a feminist

**- ROCKY
RIVERA,**
"TURN YOU"



"Other female rappers are overly sexual, have no wit, and their lyrics are so generic. I want to change the game to make rap that shows I'm not a normal female rapper - it's not about how rich I am, how much sex I have, or how many boyfriends I have. That's just not me."

"I wanted to show people who the person was behind the microphone this time," she added, "tell them about who I was and where I came from."



COMPARE AND CONTRAST: THE ROLE OF Metaphor+Simile IN RAP

Metaphors are comparisons done without the word *like* or *as* whereas similes do use *like* or *as*. They help visualize what is being done. Which one stands out the most to you?

I'm cooler than a polar bear's toenail

- "ATLiens" by Outkast

The Hellraiser, raisin' Hell with the flavor/Terrorize
a jam like troops in Pakistan Swingin' through
your town like your neighbourhood Spiderman

- "Protect Ya Neck" by Wu-Tang Clan

Give it a shot! Write down three metaphors.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Throwing out the wicked like God did the devil,
funky like your grandpa's drawers, don't test me,
we're in like that, you're dead like Presley.

- "Steve Biko" by Q-Tip

If the beef between us, we can settle it
With the chrome and metal shit
I make it hot like a kettle get

- "Kick in The Door" by Notorious B.I.G



Now try it with **similes**. Remember to use *like* or *as* this time around.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.



GETTING THE MESSAGE: quote analysis

Read the following rap lyrics and the corresponding question below.



You took me as safe
That was your first mistake
Who said I was safe
The other night I watched the Oscars

And the roster of the only yellow men were all statues
We a quarter of the population
There's a room of f---in' 1 percenters laughing at you
F--- a bamboo ceiling, guess I gotta play the villain
- "Safe" by Dumbfoundead

1. Who is Dumbfoundead describing as "safe?" Why does he choose this adjective?



It's a hard line when you're an import
Baby boy, it's hard times
When you ain't sent for
Racists feed the belly of the beast

With they pitchforks, rich chores
Done by the people that get ignored
- "Immigrants (We Get the Job Done)" by K'naan, Riz Ahmed, Snow Tha Product, and Residente

2. How are the immigrants and imports being compared here? What are the hard times that they have been facing and are they also the people getting "ignored?"



Skin you alive for my country, I live and die for my country
I kill a pig in a white hooded suit on the low....for my country
They got evil plans in the devil's hands, but I don't pray cause I organize
- "Us" by Ruby Ibarra featuring Rocky Rivera, Klassy, and Faith Santilla

3. In your opinion, what is the primary message Ruby is trying to get across?

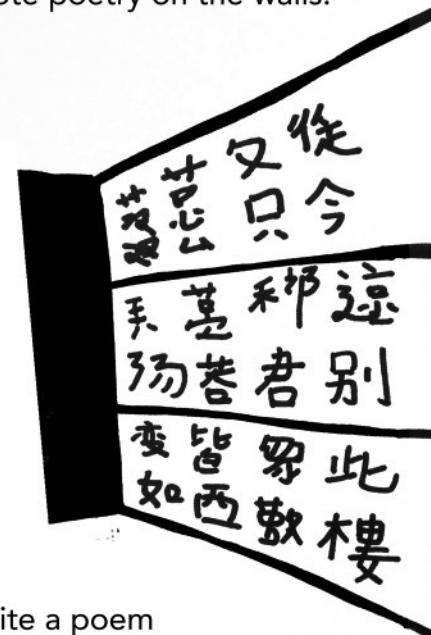
Angel Island EXPRESS YOURSELF

In 1910, Angel Island was used to regulate immigrants coming into San Francisco, California. Many Chinese immigrants were detained on Angel Island, unable to enter America. To express their hardships, many immigrants wrote poetry on the walls.

I, a seven-foot man, am ashamed I cannot stand tall.
Curled up in an enclosure, my movements are dictated by others.
Enduring a hundred humiliations, I can only cry in vain
This person's tears fall, but what can the blue heavens do?

Most of the poems are written in the styles of classical Chinese poetry which originated during the T'ang Dynasty period. They express a range of thoughts and feelings about dealing with the hardships of migrating so far from home and the difficult conditions they faced once they arrived.

Try it out: knowing what you know about Angel Island, write a poem from the perspective of a Chinese immigrant living on Angel Island.



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**DON'T
BELIEVE
THE
HYPE:
LA ASIAN
AMERICANS
IN
HIP HOP**

May 18-November 4, 2018
#DONTBELIEVETHEHYPE

DEFER, Gajin Fujita, Hueman, Kenny Kong, Nisha Sethi, Farah Sosa, Shark Toof, SWANK, and Erin Yoshi. Featuring media and documents from B+ for Mochilla, Beat Junkie Institute of Sound, Culture Shock LA, organizers of the Firecracker music series Daryl Chou and Alfred Hawkins, and the performing artists Jason Chu, DJ Rhettmatic, DJ Babu, and SETI X.

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