

The Mayor Is Down With Hip-Hop

Written by Robert L. Jamieson Jr. ID2798
Friday, 30 June 2006 01:28 -

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If you were told that Mayor Greg Nickels was kicking back with Layzie Bone of hip-hop's Bone Thugs-n- Harmony, you'd figure hizzoner had lost his mind.

If you heard Nickels had rubbed shoulders with Sir Mix- A-Lot or DJ Quik, the West Coast rapper who has worked with Jay-Z, you might think the whole thing was part of some clever PR plot.

I did.

Picture, if you can, Nickels and his calculating adviser, Tim Ceis, huddled around a table deep in City Hall.

Nickels: This plan to clean up city nightclubs is going even better than planned, T-Dawg.

Ceis: Damn, skippy. We got Mr. Lucky out of the way on Queen Anne. Larry's in Pioneer Square is next. Hip-hop and the violence it spawns in Seattle will be history.

Nickels: Word up. But I don't want people to think I'm anti-hip-hop. Makes for bad press. Plus, my wife likes to get jiggy on the dance floor to the dope rap beat.

Ceis: Yo, I feel you. We'll do a photo-op with rappers and fool the public into thinking you are the most fly mayor around -- Greg "Chief Boot Knocka" Nickels.

Reality has a fine way of mucking up the wild imaginings of a columnist, which is what

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happened after word came across my desk the other day about the Mayor's Award for Excellence in Hip Hop.

The mayor? Hip-hop?

Those two things come together like Dick Cheney and Amnesty International.

This had to be a joke. What next? The Mayor's Award for Best Strip Dance From Four Feet Away?

The award, it turns out, is serious business.

I suspected it was part of a slick campaign to make Nickels seem kinder and gentler as his office cracks down on troubled nightclubs.

Wrong again.

The idea to recognize Seattle's hip-hop community started at the grass roots, not the Mayor's Office.

It got a spark several years ago after Seattle radio personality Tony Benton says he heard Nickels say that hip-hop was responsible for violence in the nightclubs.

"I thought the time had come for city government to see what hip-hop was really about," says Benton, better known by his moniker "Tony B." on KUBE-FM (93.3).

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Benton called the Mayor's Office, imploring city officials to see that hip-hop is about dancing, DJs and, in most cases, positive vibes.

He pointed out that hip-hop was thriving below the radar in Seattle, just like grunge music and raves once had before exploding on the local scene.

Seattle hip-hop artists even expressed a hunger to work with the city and police to make sure a few knuckleheads didn't kill the music fun.

It worked.

In 2002, Nickels decided to allow the city for the first time to sponsor a ceremony honoring the local hip-hop community.

"Tony reached out to us. We thought it would be a good partnership," says Lori Patrick of the city's Office of Arts and Cultural Affairs.

Such an unexpected collaboration is worth noting because in the public eye the worlds of hip-hop and city government have clashed.

This is an instance where both sides are working to nurture and recognize local contributions to one of the most universal, multicultural and commercially thriving music forms on the planet.

Yes, some hip-hop glorifies violence.

Yes, some hip-hop is about misogyny.

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Yes, some hip-hop makes my stomach turn.

But some is not all -- and the hip-hop that does offer a truthful testimony to life as it is lived or perceived by artists tends to get pushed aside by critics who would give other equally searing music forms a pass.

Positive stuff surrounding hip-hop too often fails to make headlines.

Last year, the Mayor's Office recognized Seattle-area rapper Sir Mix-A-Lot as an industry pioneer.

It honored Melissa Noelle Green for her prowess with the spoken word, and shined the light on the volunteer staff of KMIH-FM -- X-104 -- for broadcast innovation.

The station is run out of Mercer Island High School.

"Artists no longer feel as ostracized," Benton says about what the awards mean.

"They are feeling as appreciated as other genres such as rock and jazz."

In previous years, top hip-hop artists have come from around the country to co-host the Seattle awards event.

The annual gathering has featured seminars to help producers and promoters run successful shows.

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Seattle added to rock "n" roll with Jimi Hendrix.

It powered grunge with Nirvana.

The city is poised for a hip-hop takeoff.

The Blue Scholars, a local hip-hop group, are fast rising in national stature.

Dee Jones, who has a new album called "Feelin' a Million," is approaching the launching pad.

So much talent is out there.

The Boot Knocka at City Hall wants to hear what you've got.

Nominations for this year's awards can be made at: www.seattle.gov/Arts/WhatWeDo/CommunityArts/hiphop

Nominations must be received in the Office of Arts & Cultural Affairs by Friday, August 4, 2006.

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