

Cuban Hip Hop From the Beginning

Written by Robert ID2929

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Cuban Hip Hop: Desde el Principio (From the Beginning)

Fifty years after the Cuban revolution, which prompted a U.S. embargo against Cuba, both Americans and Cubans remain far removed from each other's realities. The documentary "Cuban Hip Hop: Desde el Principio (From the Beginning)" shows that one cultural link between the Cuba and the U.S. is Hip Hop.

The bilingual film features intimate interviews and performances by such legendary Cuban Hip Hop artists as Doble Filo, Obsesion, and Anónimo Consejo, who have all toured internationally. There is also never-before-seen footage of Common, M1 of Dead Prez, and political exile Nehanda Abiudun.

Hip Hop, a culture that incorporates various elements, including rapping, breakdancing, and graffiti, developed in the Bronx, N.Y., during the late 1970s as a vehicle of expression for disenfranchised youth. "Cuban Hip Hop: Desde el Principio " shows that Hip Hop is serving the same purpose within socialist Cuban society. Cuban rap is defying numerous misconceptions about censorship in Cuba via its highly critical lyrics. At the same time, the music is reaffirming certain limitations that Cuban society faces under Castro's regime, including the lack of commercial success for artists.

How did Cubans learn of Hip Hop, when all American ties were severed by the U.S. blockade? This documentary explains it all.

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Based on a first-hand investigation carried out over the course of five years, which included participation in Cuban HipHop concerts and colloquiums at the eighth annual Cuban Rap Festival in Havana and interviews with the most influential Cuban HipHop artists and producers, "Cuban Hip Hop: Desde el Principio" traces the development of Cuban Hip Hop step by step in a way that has yet to be formally recorded or published. It examines such moments as: the time Cubans first heard black pop music of the 70s; the first Cuban Rap Festival in 1995, which drew international attention; censorship issues Cuban rappers have faced; and the harsh Cuban reality that has led some Cuban Hip Hop artists to defect from Cuba in recent years.

"This documentary is about showing the true history of Cuban HipHop. These artists developed a Hip Hop movement with few resources and we developed a documentary about it with limited funds. I lived with these people, performed with them, and love them like family," said journalist Vanessa Díaz, the film's executive producer. Díaz initially set out to just do written research on Cuban Hip Hop, but after reviewing her footage and realizing that the Cuban artists have a great story to tell, she began piecing together her first feature length film, "Cuban Hip Hop: Desde el Principio."

About the filmmakers

Vanessa and Larissa Díaz are a Puerto Rican-Italian sister film-making team from Riverside, Calif.

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Vanessa graduated from New York University (NYU) in May 2005 with a degree in Latin American Studies and Politics and a minor in journalism. Vanessa currently works as a media relations representative for the University of California, Los Angeles, and a reporter for People Magazine. As a rapper and poet, Vanessa has recorded a CD and has been an invited guest performer at Julliard, Columbia University, Swarthmore College, and various high schools. In 2002, Vanessa received the Holmes Travel Scholarship to do research on Cuban HipHop and spent two months in Havana researching the history of this unique movement. That year, Vanessa was the only international female artist to perform at the 8th annual Cuban HipHop festival in Havana, allowing her to create a close bond with the Cuban HipHop artists with whom she worked. Following her trip, Larissa and Vanessa created a short documentary called "Cuban Hip Hop: A Contemporary Example of Transculturation." The short film was screened at NYU's annual Social Justice Forum, NYU's Dean's Undergraduate Research Conference, and various colleges and high schools in California and New York. During the summer of 2004, Vanessa traveled to Vietnam as part of a documentary film-making crew and then back to Cuba to shoot the footage necessary for her and Larissa to complete "Cuban Hip Hop: Desde el Principio."

Larissa is a third year Film and Visual Culture major, with an emphasis on documentary films, at the University of California, Riverside. She currently edits programming for two local churches. A former teacher's assistant at Riverside Community College, where she helped teach television and news production classes as well as directed and produced several shows for RCC-TV, Larissa does freelance film editing and photography.

(View the trailer at www.myspace.com/CubanHipHop or www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHudVOn36gU)