

Hip-Hop's Davey D's Hard Knocks in Question

Written by Eric K. Arnold ID1684
Monday, 18 July 2005 04:45 -

A couple weeks ago, Weyland Southon moderated a standing-room-only panel at Cody's Books in Berkeley, featuring such leading lights of the hip-hop literary movement as Tricia Rose, Jeff Chang, and Adam Mansbach. Southon, a swarthy, freckled Samoan dude, made a near-perfect moderator, spurring the conversation without dominating it. The provocative result was the sort of event Hard Knock Radio, the KPFA radio show Southon has executive-produced since its inception, has proactively promoted throughout its five-year history, addressing issues we don't hear about often enough: namely, race, class, white privilege, and social activism as they relate to the Hip-Hop Generation.

But as KPFA, along with its parent media company, Pacifica, undergoes a catastrophic, high-profile implosion, its most important program might be suffering most of all.

As the Cody's panel wound down, Southon made a shocking announcement: Hard Knock's future, as well as his own, was in jeopardy, threatened by a new boss with a bad attitude coupled with an opposing faction within KPFA. He got even more specific a few days later, firing off a widely forwarded open-letter e-mail that officially put the station on blast.

The letter, signed by Southon and the entire HKR staff, including host Davey D and senior producer Anita Johnson, wasted little time asserting the show's importance: "As many of you know, funding for public radio is constantly threatened by government forces who do not value free speech and community-minded media. The people who stand to lose the most are the next generation of listeners: people of color and youth, poor folks, and immigrants." This demographic appreciated HKR because "We understand how to speak to their concerns, engage in sincere outreach to their communities, and provide them with programming that is neither patronizing nor alienating. Without HKR as a lightning rod, these audiences may abandon Pacifica and KPFA entirely."

KPFA's internal crises are myriad and well reported (by the Express' own Bottom Feeder, among others), and the letter went on to address the epicenter of the station's recent calamity, accusing controversial station GM Roy Campanella of trying to "crush" HKR through intimidation and malicious rumor-mongering. Nevertheless, Southon and company insisted, "We refuse to abandon all that we have done in the last five years to build a new audience for KPFA, Pacifica, and public radio. We will not allow such progressives to continue to marginalize and ghettoize programming for young people and communities of color. We regret that it has come to this."

Hip-Hop's Davey D's Hard Knocks in Question

Written by Eric K. Arnold ID1684

Monday, 18 July 2005 04:45 -

In an interview two weeks prior to the vituperative e-mail, Southon explained that he and Campanella had beef from jump street; at their first meeting, he says, the GM patronizingly accused him of "causing trouble." During a subsequent meeting to discuss budgetary concerns, Campanella allegedly bragged he could get HKR made into a Hollywood movie, starring Ice Cube as Davey D. "I know Cube," the GM reportedly said. "He'll do it."

Southon says the two also frequently clashed over fund-raising issues. The HKR crew sought increased funding for a new Web site, new equipment, and street promotion. But Campanella refused to budge on the budget unless the show ceded exclusive ownership of the Hard Knock name to his corporate masters, an unprecedented move within the entire Pacifica network. The feud exploded during a widely publicized shouting match, wherein Campanella (a KPFA newcomer) allegedly violently threatened Southon (a ten-year veteran producer).

Reached by phone at his office, Campanella certainly didn't seem the violent-tempered hothead he has been made out to be in the press. His tone and manner were both polite and surprisingly calm, despite -- or maybe because of -- rumors of his imminent firing. In hindsight, he says, "There are some things I could have done better," and apologized for any misunderstanding. Campanella says the media attention he has received has been his "first experience with public humiliation," but notes that he inherited both the factionalism and the budget when he joined KPFA.

Campanella admits he called Southon a troublemaker, but says he meant it "in a totally positive sense," noting that in African-American dialect, meanings are sometimes reversed (e.g. Run-DMC's "bad meaning good"). He also denies ever demanding that Hard Knock give up intellectual property rights, and said his idea of a movie starring Ice Cube was just one "possible avenue that could be helpful to the show." Despite their history of conflict, he expressed his admiration for the Hard Knock staff, as well as a desire to resolve the situation through mediation. "I'm here and I'm open and I'm ready to discuss it," he concluded.

Southon is under the gun as well, mainly due to an anonymous note distributed to KPFA staffers claiming that "Weylan Southen [sic] and Hard Knock Radio may be using KPFA money illegally to launder money collected publicly." The anonymous letter also accused Southon of both anti-Semitism and sexual harassment, which both seem uncharacteristic. (Full disclosure: I've known Southon for more than a decade, and have appeared several times as a guest on HKR.)

Hip-Hop's Davey D's Hard Knocks in Question

Written by Eric K. Arnold ID1684
Monday, 18 July 2005 04:45 -

Southon, for his part, dismisses the allegations against him as baseless, and maintains that any monies he raised went back into the show, brandishing a pile of itemized receipts he says proves he's telling the truth. And in a letter of complaint to the KPFA board refuting the charges against him, he explained his predicament: "KPFA has refused to fund construction of a HKR Web site. As a result, we have developed innovative fund-raising strategies" to help the show "better engage our audience." Southon also pointed to the existence of a double standard, whereby some shows receive "unprecedented economic investment," "unlimited perks," and "extra attention," while others don't.

In fact, the Hard Knock guru insists the real issue here is that people of color have had a difficult time advancing at KPFA, due to the entrenchment of a hip-hop-hatin", folk-music-lovin", eco-commie clique of liberal elitists who have ironically railed against the hypocrisy of the System without recognizing their own institutional racism. For all their PC politics, Southon says, the station's "Old Guard" has clung to power tenaciously, and hasn't "allowed a new generation to come up." He notes that younger programmers -- in particular women of color who've graduated from the station's apprenticeship program -- have left in droves.

Demographically, Southon is right. With alt.country darling KPIG's recent invasion of the East Bay, KPFA should make greater inroads with the urban audience if it wants to ensure not only its relevance, but its very survival. The beleaguered station's future audience lies not with folk, but with hip-hop. And no one personifies and stimulates that audience more effectively than Hard Knock.

Consider the show's memorable moments in hip-hop broadcast journalism: Southon's trip to Cuba, Johnson's journey to Haiti, and Davey D's voyages to both the World AIDS conference in Spain and the G8 summit in Scotland are all part of what Southon calls HKR's "global presence." Musically, the show has featured everyone from locally bred stars like Goapele and Mystic to hip-hop pioneers like Grandmaster Caz and Slick Rick to progressive jazz cats like Christian McBride and Charlie Hunter. The show also has covered the Hip Hop Feminism Conference, cosponsored the Hip Hop Theatre Festival with Aya de León and Marc Bamuthi Jacobs, and aired a segment with guest correspondent Michael Franti reporting from the WTO conference in Seattle amid a fusilade of rubber bullets. Compared to that, KMEL and WYLD's programming seems rather timid.

Yet through it all, Southon says, he's never gotten involved in KPFA's endless internal political struggle. Until now. "I've been about one thing: riding for Hard Knock," he concludes. Whether that will provide his downfall or his saving grace remains to be seen.

Hip-Hop's Davey D's Hard Knocks in Question

Written by Eric K. Arnold ID1684
Monday, 18 July 2005 04:45 -

* Added Contributing source to ThugLifeArmy.com:

The Freedom Archives
522 Valencia Street
San Francisco, CA 94110
(415) 863-9977
www.freedomarchives.org