

Hip Hop Project is a Long Time Coming Interview with Kazi

Written by Davey D ID3680

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This is an incredible movie backed by Queen Latifah and Bruce Willis that will undoubtedly change the direction of Hip Hop. We sat down with Kazi the man behind this documentary and talked to him about the Hip Hop project. He gave us an earful and left us filled with hope.

'Hip Hop Project' is a long time coming By Davey D

One of the things I love about hip-hop is its resilience. Recently, we've heard countless arguments about what's wrong with the music, and relentless assertions that it's almost dead. But under these conditions, hip-hop flourishes, defying the odds to become "a rose that grows from concrete," in the words of Tupac Shakur (2Pac).

Enter "The Hip Hop Project," a new documentary that touches and inspires viewers. Directed by Matt Ruskin and produced by Bruce Willis and Queen Latifah, it has generated quite a buzz – at New York's Tribeca Film Festival, where it premiered, and in Los Angeles and the Bay Area, where it recently screened to packed houses.

No, it isn't a tearjerker where someone dies or a corny, "Kumbaya"-style, feel-good story that assures us that everything's all right. The film seriously touches the soul by shining a light on the stark challenges faced by young people in our inner cities.

It focuses on Chris Rolle, a.k.a. Kazi, a former homeless youth from the Bahamas who bears the emotional scars of abandonment by his mother. As a teenager, he lived a rugged life on the streets of Brooklyn, but he eventually "found his way," thanks to hip-hop and a dream of becoming a rapper.

As a young adult, however, Kazi set aside that dream to dedicate his life to helping wayward teens. He launched a mentoring program named the Hip Hop Project, with the goal of getting youngsters to write, record and release a compilation album. Another goal was to get the young musicians to move beyond the all-too-familiar themes of sex, violence and misogyny. Kazi challenged them to dig deep and find their inner voices.

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The process became a four- or five-year journey, as Kazi explored the deep-seated issues these teens faced, which went way beyond lyrics. In a recent interview, he explained that most young people lack the confidence to open up and express themselves, instead displaying only anger and a facade of callousness. He soon realized that they had developed callouses to protect the tender parts – their hearts and spirits.

Kazi understood that their lyrics initially reflected the pain resulting from a fatalistic view of life. The album became a secondary concern, as he realized that the kids needed healing to get on with their mental and spiritual development. And while dedicating every waking hour to assisting them, Kazi confronted his own issues over abandonment.

The journey of Kazi and the teens is moving beyond words. I have attended several screenings followed by appearances by Kazi and some of the young people. At each one, the audience was extraordinarily touched – everyone from hardened gangbangers to adults transported back to their own teen years by the stories.

For example, at the New York screening, which attracted Ice T, Al Sharpton and others from the rap community, a contrite Busta Rhymes stood up to tell Kazi that the film was a powerful reminder of what hip-hop is really about and of what Rhymes himself needs to be doing.

In our interview, Kazi noted that hip-hop has always given a voice to those who lacked it. He insisted that we must encourage people to express themselves, and we must create safe spaces where they can do that. It is only when we take such steps that we will see a change in the themes young people embrace.

In short, we have to answer their cries for help. And we must challenge ourselves not to follow the dictates of a music industry concerned only with profit.

Of all the hip-hop films I've seen or been a part of, "The Hip Hop Project" is by far the most powerful. I strongly encourage young people – and their parents – to see it.

The initial MPAA rating was R for language, but Kazi and director Ruskin appealed it, arguing

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that youngsters really need to see this film. The result was a PG-13 without alterations in the content. Critics have demanded that hip-hop start reaching for higher goals. They have only to watch this film to see that's already happening.

Davey D's hip-hop column is published biweekly in Eye. Contact him at mrdaveyd@aol.com .

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