

Women's Movement DJ Leydis Breaks Down Hip Hop in Cuba

Written by Greg Schick ID4203
Tuesday, 04 March 2008 00:40 -

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DJ Leydis is a pioneer of the Cuban hip hop scene. As one of the first female hip hop DJs, she injected a feminist worldview into the male dominated culture. She co-founded the all-female collective Omega Kilay of Cuban emcees, deejays, dancers, activists and more. Two years ago she came to the Bay Area where she continues to perform as a DJ, poet and community activist. We spoke with Leydis last week about Cuba, politics and women in hip hop.

worldhiphopmarket.com - How did you first get into hip hop music?

DJ Leydis - My interest in music started around 1997 or '98 when I moved to Habana, the capital of the country, to study and dance to Cuban music. It was there that I met a group named Grandes Ligas ("big leagues") from Vedado who gave me a lot of inspiration thanks to their lyrics and way of expressing themselves that gave me a great affection for hip hop music. From that moment on I realized this was the music I wanted to represent, play, and support. I started as an activist in the creation of Proyecto Comunitario ("community project") 19y10 in the streets, incorporating the 4 elements of hip hop culture.

worldhiphopmarket.com - What drew you to become an DJ?

DJ Leydis - Several things inspired me to be a DJ, mainly the fact that we didn't have a female DJ in the Cuban hip hop movement, so I wanted to represent women in the culture. I was familiar with DJs and b-boys and had their support. It's not easy being a DJ in Cuba since we don't have all the necessary resources but we have the love and the desire to represent.

worldhiphopmarket.com - Is hip hop a popular style of music in Cuba?

DJ Leydis - Hip hop isn't a popular genre in Cuba but it's definitely known to young people. It doesn't get a lot of media coverage on radio or TV, but we have our own means of communication and ways to let people know there is hip hop culture in Cuba.

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worldhiphopmarket.com - Is the hip hop scene in Cuba close-knit or are there any rivalries?

DJ Leydis - We have communication issues sometimes just like every other place or country, but since we have a small community we have to work together and support each other like family.

worldhiphopmarket.com - Do the politics of Cuba play any part in the hip hop scene?

DJ Leydis - Yes, we have a lot ways to infuse politics into our music such as fighting against racism and respect for women alongside the organizations that support us. However, we don't really have political music in favor of or against Cuba, we simply have "the message!"

worldhiphopmarket.com - What is the current state of Cuban hip hop?

DJ Leydis - Despite having a lot of artists outside the country we still have many more in Cuba representing and giving their best to hip hop. For example, we have a International Festival of Cuban Hip Hop, an International Symposium, and we're moving forward with the same energy and desire to maintain Cuban hip hop both outside and within the country.

worldhiphopmarket.com - Tell us about when and why you formed Omega Kilay. What is it's purpose?

DJ Leydis - Omega Kilay formed in 2005 after la Agencia Cubana de Rap ("Cuban Rap Agency") organized a concert just for women of hip hop in all the genres of hip hop culture. A few of us had ideas, perspectives, and thoughts that if we were united in representing for women it would be even better. It turned into a great idea that became reality because it was the first and only project to this day organized exclusively by women with graffiti artists, dancers, theater, DJs, spoken word, and our own organization and ideas.

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More than anything, we were trying to send a message to other women that "yes, you can!" and looking for our own niche in the Cuban movement, defending the rights and respect that women deserve, letting people know the virtues that women have in this culture, that we don't just want to represent in hip hop as dancers or sexual objects, that we also have a message in our lyrics, poetry, paintings, music, etc., and that we are more than just a project...we are a family, we are mothers, and we are strong women with a lot of love and respect for hip hop culture!

worldhiphopmarket.com - What kind of topics or themes are contained in your songs?

DJ Leydis - The themes of my poetry are based on real life topics. A lot of them are based on my own real life. I don't think I could write poetry if I didn't have something special touch my heart, something that hurts me, I feel, see, or inspires me. I don't think there's any other way I could do it without my muse. I discovered poetry one day when I realized that I could put my feelings onto paper, such as the feeling of being a mother, the value of being a single, spirited woman...the feeling of being able to bring a life into this world is so big and powerful. My poems are really peaceful of you look at them from from one point of view. They are very insightful and I think some of them can help you find your own way. They're not just written for women but they are still very female-oriented because after all I am proud to be able to represent Cuban women and mothers and women of the world.

worldhiphopmarket.com - Do you still perform any spoken word?

DJ Leydis - Yes, I'm still working as a poet and DJ but truthfully what I love to do most in hip hop culture is being a DJ because it's what really inspired me to get into the culture. I want to perfect my art every day since in Cuba we didn't have all the necessary resources a DJ needs for their art and I would like to represent it in this country where DJ culture has such a big following.

worldhiphopmarket.com - When did you first come to the USA?

DJ Leydis - I came to the U.S. on April 9, 2006.

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What has been the response to your music in the USA?

DJ Leydis - I feel really happy because despite not speaking the same language I felt a good energy and acceptance from the American public. We also had the help, organization, and a lot of support from clenchedfistproductions.com.

worldhiphopmarket.com - Tell us about your 2004 album, Platos Rotos, what it was and how you put it together.

DJ Leydis - Platos Rotos was an independent project created by DJ Leydis and DJ Yari with help from producer Randy Acosta with our own resources. Since we don't have record companies we can rely on to help put out a CD in Cuba, all the rap CDs in Cuba are made through our own resources.

worldhiphopmarket.com - Are you currently putting together a new album or any other upcoming projects?

DJ Leydis - Yes, I'm working on a new mixtape. I want to make something like "From Cuba and the Bay Area". I'm working on maybe making one just featuring my poetry, and I'd also like to possibly put together a program for young girls where I would teach them how to write poetry, how to be a DJ, the virtues of being a woman, etc. and above all living out my dream I came here for, which is my music and the love I have for it. It's really important in my life as an artist.

Visit DJ Leydis at <http://www.myspace.com/djleydis>

Interview by Greg Schick www.worldhiphopmarket.com