

BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

The Freestyle Union

The Freestyle Union, begun in Washington DC, is primarily a product of the will and energy of founding Director Toni Blackman. “Freestyle Union,” she says, “was an oral jam session that became a collective. Four people getting together for improvisational rap and poetry quickly turned into eighty participants. We are now an emerging artist development organization for rappers.”

Freestyle’s chief development tool is the Cipher Workshop. “A cipher,” says Ms. Blackman, “is a circle, the cipher is the circle of unity in the hip-hop culture to which we belong. Hip-hop as an art culture includes dancing (popping, locking, and breaking); graffiti and other visual art; d.j.’ing (a disc jockey functions both as composer and musician); beat boxing (making music with your mouth); and rapping (which is what Freestyle Union is about). But we are not really trying to develop rappers, we are aiming at the development of the committed artist, a writer and ‘ultimate performer’, and that is separate from commercial rapping.” In much of her community, says Blackman, “people do not talk about a concept of ‘community service’, because if you’re involved in hip-hop culture, the implication is that you work to improve the world. I tell Freestyle’s young people that that is cool. There are hip cats out there doing this kind of work. But they don’t know how to do outreach; most of their outreach has been toward keeping their heads above water. They don’t know that helping other people helps themselves. There aren’t enough examples of people who look and talk like them doing outreach. But, when they see it! So here I have this guy who’s been in jail three times and he’s carefully helping a seven year old redo a poem: that’s where the message comes from. So most of our performances are with the kids and the young people and are part of community events. For me, it’s taking that young person’s natural tendency to rebel, and using it, so that it becomes hip to care.”

Now relocated to Brooklyn, NY, Freestyle Union still sees its purpose as “using oral improvisation as the basis for the human and creative development of emerging artists.” “In order to get art going,” says Blackman, “you need to focus outside yourself. Our basic ingredients still include the analysis of proverbs and the debate of current events.” New to the Brooklyn phase of Freestyle’s operation is a series of intense workshops on artist development. “Because so many rappers come out of the community and/or see only the commercial side of hip-hop, they need to be able to view themselves as artists in order to enhance their performance” says Blackman. The new workshops will continue to emphasize writing, speaking, and performance, but will also add such topics as: ego management; holistic health care; the study of hip-hop history, culture, and values; and the rapper’s role as storyteller and historian – a *griot* for the community.

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