

The Hip Hop Shop keeps hip-hop alive in Athens

By Ryan Lytle, Staff Writer □ □ November 11, 2008 | noon

Sitting on Union Street, hidden on the second floor of The Union Bar & Grill, is a gem. It is where spoken poetry and hip-hop collide into one unique blend. This gem is known as The Hip Hop Shop. □ □

The Hip Hop Shop was created three years ago by a couple of Ohio University students who were looking for a place to perform hip-hop. After working with the Hip Hop Congress, the idea for The Shop arose.

Next came finding a venue, which became an easy task. One of the students who headed the project worked at the Shishah Café, and he went to the owners with the idea. The owners fell for the plan and The Hip Hop Shop was born. Since then, the venue has moved to a larger space, The Union, and has become a staple of the place every other Monday night. □ □

One man responsible for making sure every aspect of The Hip Hop Shop is in order goes by the name D. Jones. Called the “most professional one running The Shop,” Jones is quick to brush off any credit. “It’s a family thing,” he said. “I’m just trying to step up and take care of things.” Anita T is a regular performer at the shows and says a lot of the work that has been done is because of D. Jones’ efforts. “He was the one that continued The Hip Hop Shop,” Anita said. “He keeps hip hop alive in Athens.” □ □

It is apparent that hip-hop is not only staying alive in Athens, it is being celebrated to the maximum. When first entering The Hip Hop Shop, sounds of hip-hop ring throughout the bar. Although there are not many people in attendance as equipment is being set up, a party atmosphere is present. People begin coming in as 10 p.m. rolls around, and the party takes off. Before any live performances begin, the sounds of Tupac Shakur and M.I.A. blast from the speakers as people dance and sing out loud.

Once the stage is set, D. Jones takes the microphone and welcomes all patrons. He then asks all MCs to take the stage to “warm up the microphones.” The act of warming up the microphones is a tradition at The Hip Hop Shop. Each MC gets a chance to either freestyle or perform some original material to beats provided by the house DJ. □

Once the mics have been warmed up, each MC gets the chance to take the stage and perform some of his or her original songs -- and it is all completely original. There won’t be any covers played at this venue. At one point, an MC shouted out, “I’d like to thank myself for producing my own shit!” This is hip-hop in its rawest form.

Eddie Franks, who goes by the stage name Cuff, loves hip-hop for the fact that it really is original material that has meaning. “It’s just a good way to express your feelings and get things off your chest,” Franks said. □ □

The crowd that shows up for The Shop creates a positive atmosphere for the performers and for anyone showing up for the first time. It wouldn’t matter whether the MCs are

struggling on stage or blowing the place away with their talents -- someone watching from the crowd would not know the difference because of the support the audience provides for the MCs. This is why Hill, a member of the hip-hop group Dysfunktional Family, has such a passion for The Hip Hop Shop. "A reason to come to this is because basically you won't find a better group of people who are more willing to accept you and let you be a part of this," he said. □□

After some of their performances, D. Jones, Anita T and two members of Dysfunktional Family take time to discuss their motivations and passions in regards to The Hip Hop Shop. "It's not like hip-hop is everywhere in Athens," Jones said. "You may hear it in the bars, but you won't be able to find it live like this anywhere else." So what really makes The Hip Hop Shop different from what people are hearing on the radio or watching on television? The other member of Dysfunktional Family cringes at the thought of being compared to mainstream rap. He goes by the name Schwartz the Slack-Jawed Yokel, and he shows true care and compassion for hip-hop. "We're trying to do music that's actually about something," Schwartz said. "If it came to it, I'd rather give my music out to a million people because it means something than to have a million people buy my music because they thought it was the new trend." □□

The conversation eventually moves on to the venue. "The Union has been awesome," Anita said. "It's cool because it is a free-standing venue for anyone to perform. They have always been about promoting independent music." The Union allows people of all ages to attend The Hip Hop Shop. There is no age restriction or even a cover charge to watch these people perform. "It's all free," Jones said. "It's free because hip hop is all about freedom, so we want to express that." □

It is apparent that D. Jones and his crew love performing and want to share their love of hip hop with the world, but The Hip Hop Shop still remains an underground event. "It's definitely still up-and-coming," Franks said. "There's still plenty of room to grow." So why should people make the trip to The Union on Monday nights? "It's an opportunity to learn more about hip hop," Jones said. "Rap is what people see on television, and it is just a part of hip hop. Rap is not hip-hop. Just like your arm is not your body -- it's just a part of your body." □□

For those who are looking to expand their knowledge of music and have a great time as well, The Hip Hop Shop is the place to look. Every other Monday beginning at 10 p.m., The Union opens its doors to all that are looking to satisfy their musical appetite.

Be sure, though, not to confuse the raw material of hip-hop with mainstream rap. The Hip Hop Shop will make very clear that the performers are in no way the embodiment of that: "This is hip hop. This is not rap. Rap is on the radio, and this is not that." □□

Amen to that.
