



New bush poets

Australian hip-hop is jumping. By **Sacha Molitorisz.**

IN POPULAR consciousness, hip-hop music is associated with drugs, thugs, vandalism, violence and other evils listed in the Victorian Crimes Act. It's certainly not considered a refined artform involving poetic wordplay and subtle musical compositions.

"It is just not possible to be an MC and not to have a sophisticated use of language," says Rhys Graham, co-writer/co-director of a documentary about Australian hip-hop called *Words From The City*. "You get mainstream Australians bitching and moaning about how the younger generation has nothing to say, but this music is more political than Bob Dylan ever was. Freestyling in particular, where people improvise lyrically, that is mind-blowing. And musically you can look at hip-hop as the perfect fusion of 100 years of funk, soul, blues, rock, toasting and r'n'b. It's about very complex structures — it's like jazz."

If you don't believe him, watch his beautiful, insightful documentary, deservedly nominated for five gongs at this week's AFI awards. It reveals that beneath Aussie hip-hop's aggro exterior lurks a message of celebration, community, family and positivity. It also shows how thoroughly Australian that message is, thanks to acts such as Koolism, Downsyde and Maya Jupiter giving the US artform an Aussie twang. Melbourne's Joelistics says Australian hip-hoppers are continuing an oral tradition dating to the bush poets and, before them, Aboriginal Australians.

Wire MC is shown taking his consciousness-raising "blackapella" rhymes from Redfern to rural communities; MC Trey delivers workshops to struggling western suburbs kids; and Adelaide's ARIA-winning Hilltop Hoods explain why, on their hit *The Hard Road*, they rap: "I coulda gone the wrong way, the easy option, but I choose to go the long way". Meanwhile, as MC Layla walks her boxer along a quiet Perth street, the scene is a picture of suburban Aussie contentment. "This is the ghetto," she says with a laugh, before returning home to snarl a rhyme.

"The older generation isn't understanding where the young generation is coming from," says Eso, half of Sydney hip-hop duo Bliss N Eso, who feature in the doco. "They see all these people in hoodies and they think we're a gang. Well, I guess we are a gang . . ."

But as the film shows, hip-hop is a way for people from a wide variety of backgrounds (poor, immigrant, indigenous) to tell their stories. Contrary to the stereotype, hip-hop in Australia is not misogynist; some of its leading lights are women such as Maya Jupiter.

It's about young Australians finding their voice. Collectively, the emerging hip-hop scene is about the nation finding its voice. "This is about people just telling their own stories," says Graham. "It's about the lives they live, and they write very personal rhymes."

This year, attempting to sell ice to Inuit, Bliss N Eso took their music to the US. "We went to Portland to test the water," says Eso. "And we got there and someone says, 'Was-sup, dude, I like your green Kombi.' I'm like, 'How'd you know about that?' He says, 'Your video's on YouTube'.

"We stayed with a crew called The Sand People, 11 of them who all live in one house, which they call The Sand Castle, and they have a studio downstairs they call The Sand Pit. They took us in. We're all linked through music — this is a worldwide family."

How was Bliss N Eso's Aussie hip-hop received? "I had a huge question mark about that," Eso says. "But they were ready for anything new. Hip-hop keeps reinventing itself."

Graham says he is no hip-hop expert. Like his wife, Natasha Gadd, who co-wrote and co-directed the film, he is a music nut who became fascinated by the genre in the late '80s and early '90s.

"We've been following the increasing complexity and brilliance of Australian hip-hop," says Graham, a Melburnian. "The bar has been raised with the general wordplay and the complexity of the rhymes. A lot of the artists have been around for a while now and are suddenly finding their voices. And the point of hip-hop is that you make it your own — you use music you find and you talk about where you're from and your experiences and it becomes very personal.

"As filmmakers, hip-hop is incredibly exciting. You see people collaborate and work in a way you can't help but be inspired by."

Words From The City screens Friday at 11.20pm on ABC.



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Emseed (left) and Joelistics are at the forefront of the Australian hip-hop scene, which is redefining the genre.