



BEATS 'N' RHYMES

Words From The City aims to tell the story of Australian hip hop, give outsiders an idea to the culture. Yet filmmakers **RHYS GRAHAM** and **NATASHA GADD** tell **GUY DAVIS** that they weren't trying to make a comprehensive account, merely the starting point.



"We came at it from the perspective of wanting to make a film that captures a sense of time and place, that captures a moment in time," says Rhys Graham of *Words from the City*, the Australian hip hop documentary he co-directed with Natasha Gadd. "Tash and I are definitely both music obsessives, and we've been hip hop fans for most of our lives, but we're very much novices when it comes to the hip hop scene. So we wanted to see how hip hop as an art form reveals about the culture here and now. We wanted to make a movie about music we love but we also wanted it to be something a little bit more than that, something that could sustain a longer film experience."

Graham and Gadd worked for nearly two years to raise the money to film *Words from the City* the way they envisioned it – "We knew we wanted fairly high production values, we wanted to capture the musical stuff really well and do justice to the work of the artists," says Graham – before filming for six months and then editing for another six. The end result is a vibrant piece of work that spans the country, looking at a diverse range of artists and groups (including Koolism, the Hilltop Hoods, Maya Jupiter, Downsyde and MC Trey) and revealing what motivates their individual styles.

"I think in the couple of decades that Australian hip hop has been developing and rising, it's largely been a suburban form," says Graham. "But I think these days it's wherever you go – small towns to big cities. We wanted to show where the artists are from, where they draw their influence from – whether it's political or cultural or family or just good times."

One thing that the filmmaker wants to clarify is that *Words from the City* is by no means the last word in Australian hip hop – the genre is too big and broad for one film to do that. "We didn't want it to seem like a comprehensive overview or definition, we wanted to spend time with a small number of artists and see what they're doing and how they talk about their own art form," says Graham. "There's nothing I dislike more than those music documentaries when you have some filmmaker trying to define what he loves. For us, it was about who was at their top of their game, who's making great music and who's reaching audiences. We wanted diversity, so we looked at different parts of Australia and different styles of MCing. Some approaches are very political, some are more concerned with great production and lyrical wordplay. We approached the people that we thought would reveal something about the maturity of Australian hip hop, what's going on here and now."

And while it seems that local exponents of the form would seem to have found a fair dinkum Australian style in recent years rather than simply ape US artists, Graham believes that nationality has little to do with keeping it real. "I'm always very wary about trying to define Australian hip hop," he says. "From the time hip hop first took root in Australia, there have been people who've been trying to create an authentic voice. I don't know if that's necessarily an Australian voice, it's just about your own individual voice. The defining element of hip hop is that you talk out about your own story and be truthful to what you've experienced and what you've done and music you know and love."

If nothing else, *Words from the City* stands as one of the best advertisements for multiculturalism in Australia – it showcases artists from a wide range of races and backgrounds. According to Graham, however, this wasn't necessarily intentional. "Usually when you stray out of the rock arena, you do get that diversity," he says. "You get people from every corner of Australia who love this music and want to make it. While we were looking for diversity of music, I don't think we were deliberately looking for cultural diversity. Although we were accused by some blogger of marginalising white voices! But if you go out and listen to hip hop, people do come from varied backgrounds. That's the reality of Australia."

Words from the City is now available on DVD through Madman Entertainment.