

**“HipHop: Art, Commerce and Politics” - Panel Discussion at the Frankfurt City Library
October 30, 2007.**

Interview with Murray Forman

File Murray_Forman_Interview.wmv

(Words that could not be identified are marked “????”.)

Man: We're interviewing Professor Murray Forman (inaudible due to background noise) for his thoughts on the current Hip-hops.

Woman: Okay. So, let's start of with the first question. Why do you think Hip-hop is reduced merely to black in fashion and why do people seem that once Hip-hop is mentioned that this is the key idea?

Professor Murray Forman: I think that has a lot to do with the way Hip-hop is circulated right now. It's become a media phenomenon, and it's also become a commercial phenomenon, so the style of fashion is easily marketed and it's also in many ways the surface. And those who only look at the surface will see that first, and they will make the association between Hip-hop and some of these issues of most commercial and obvious aspects. It's those who look a little bit further and look past the surface that start getting a better sense of what the culture is and what some of the history is, and also what some of the various and I think also more complex issues are.

Man: What first brought you to Hip-hop?

Professor Murray Forman: I started out as a journalist that was connected to Hip-hop through Reggae. I was more involved with the Reggae scene in Canada at the time. But in the same way that Jamaican and Caribbean influences are or were essential to the genesis of Hip-hop, at a later stage the genesis of Hip-hop in the cities I was living in in the mid-1980's also had this important Caribbean connection. The DJ's and sound systems very naturally started accommodating some of the early MCs with rappers in the sessions in the night clubs and the like. So that's what got me into it. That's what led me into it. But I've got to say that what kept me into it was, I saw the political potential after 1982 and the release of *The Message* by Grand Master Flash & The Furious Five I saw that it was going to be more than just a simple partying music. I saw it had the potential to really be a protest music on the part of, you know, maybe the best protest music by some of the folk guys like Bob Dylan, up through people like Curtis Mayfield and on from there. So I saw this a being really an important new mechanism, artistic expression of cultural value.

Woman: So I guess in relation to that, sort of: Do you think, perceptions of Hip-hop will change as it reaches its 50th birthday, much as perceptions of Jazz and Rock changed?

Professor Murray Forman: Yeah, sure. Yeah. I mean, the perceptions of Hip-hop already changed substantially in several ways. Those who're inclined to dismiss it found plenty of reason to dismiss it. There's a lot of ammunition for their arguments. Those who're inclined to love it and maybe find something of interest and treasure it have also shifted their attitudes. They've seen and experienced the richness of Hip-hop. As the culture ages, and as people grow older in Hip-hop, I think styles will – have changed and will change. We're going to see new aesthetics, new themes and issues, we're going to get, you know, individuals who have different social values and there may be different social perspectives that may use Hip-hop as a means of articulating those values. So it's going to keep changing. That's part of the excitement. Hip-hop has a history of reinventing itself. So, let's see where it goes.

Man: I think I'm more kind of basical. What do you think young people, children – Hip-hop - what draws them in? So much more, it's particularly so much (inaudible) cultural. You see Turkish (???) children, African Americans, Latinos, all in all...

Professor Murray Forman: Well, I mean, that's a good one of the questions to ask. I mean, Hip-hop is cool right now, and I also think it's become the Lingua Franca of global protest as well. The groups that take it up with the most urging and the highest stakes tend to be those who are the social underclasses marginalized in various ways with its ratio in class or age even. But I think, Hip-hop in its oral form is one of the things that people are talking and experiencing into the world, so it's a natural way of articulating yourself, your identity and your politics, I think. So that's the oral tradition. Then I think its history is also about story-telling. It's just a great medium for telling stories. Whether these are reality stories about one's actual perspective and experiences or whether these are fictional stories. You know, representational stories about things either they'd like to see or that they know exist but are just outside their experience. So I think there's an awful lot about it that attracts young people as an expressive form.

Woman: What parallels do you see between Hip-hop culture, I mean, you mentioned it's a global phenomenon, sort of. What parallels do you see between Hip-hop-culture in the US and Hip-hop culture abroad?

Professor Murray Forman: Some of the parallels like I said have to do with this idea of a political expression that Hip-hop in virtually every nation, every context that I've seen it has a political slant at some point. It also has party themes and the like and more like social themes, but it very very clearly takes up the political. So that's one of the strongest aspects of consistency that I've seen in a global sense. I think one of the other more troubling ones is that there's a global tendency to veer towards the most sensational aspects, which is often the gangster rap subgenre, and so in a lot of international contexts and here in Germany I'm hearing about this as well, with the Aggro Berlin scene and label that there's a little bit of an attempt to copy or impersonate some of the thug and gangster images, and that's not necessarily the most interesting or exciting of Hip-hop. It certainly is sensational and it does attract attention, but I'm not convinced that that's a good move for global Hip-hoppers to take that on. Or at least to take that on solely. They invest themselves solely in the gangster scene, I think they're missing an awful lot of what Hip-hop can be.

Woman: What do you think can be served by teaching Hip-hop in the classroom?

Professor Murray Forman: That's a good question. As I like to say, the academy, the university needs Hip-hop way more than Hip-hop needs the university. But in that regard I think there's a few things. First of all I think young people who are getting into a higher education... We have to be aware, too, that there are far fewer African American, Latino kids, who are the primary audiences and often producers of Hip-hop, there are far fewer of them getting into universities than other folks, than the white folks of middle-class backgrounds. But kids of all backgrounds are coming into universities with a Hip-hop sensibility. They know the history, they love the music and the scene, some of them are DJs, MC's, graff writers and B-boys and B-girls. And when they come to school they hit this wall, you know, traditional disciplinary study, and they get disengaged. You know, they see the world through a Hip-hop lens. And so one of the things that many many many of my colleagues and I are doing is trying to say that work is now rigorous enough that you can study Hip-hop and apply it to social analysis. You can do various kinds of economic and industry analyses in and through Hip-hop. You can do gender, race and class issues in and through Hip-hop. And so you see the light bulbs going off when these Hip-hop kids come into the university, they encounter the books, solid theory and research, and then they start studying these things in a Hip-hop framework. I think one of the other things is that – and this has to do a little bit with, let's say, academic and intellectual privilege, is that if you're a staller, get a doctorate or the like, certain doors open for you, and we have to recognize that as a social privilege the same way that class and race offer certain privileges in our temporary society. That said, if you can open a door and hold it open while the people rush in and allow access to certain resources of the Hip-hop community, then

that's part of what academics can do for Hip-hop.

Woman: So you said just in one of your academic quotes that Hip-hop struggles the legitimacy at every juncture, confronts including additional cultural value. In spite of this, do you think that it plays a positive social role particularly for you?

Professor Murray Forman: Yeah. You know, when I say that it kind of has these confrontations, I see that as a positive thing. Right? I mean, some walls are meant to be moved and torn down. And as I said, here in Germany I think people understand in a lot of different ways that can be interpreted. I think Hip-hop does have a capacity at its best to challenge a certain orthodox – certain values that do require some adjustment. Around issues of class, around issues of race, around issues of gender. Some of the biggest problems in Hip-hop that I recognize and others recognize as problems are in those areas. They get the most talk in Hip-hop, even though Hip-hop may be derogatory towards women. They get conversation going about all the ways in all of society that, you know, women are discriminated against, right? They talk about race in ways that, you know, we can step back and look at society more broadly and say, well, race is a crisis not just within Hip-hop, race is a social crisis. So I see that as the positive. It sort of points fingers, takes names, kicks ass. And in that regard it does serve as a change agent at its best. At its best. When it's appropriated in various capacities by commerce, by commercial exploitation, maybe it starts serving other masters. But at its best, when it's autonomous, when it's motivated by, I think, that social need, that artistic need for certain kinds of expression, I think it's – I see it as an only positive factor.

Man: That's all

Woman: That's it. Thank you very much.

Professor Murray Forman: Thank you.

Man: (inaudible; several people talking at once & very low)... Frankfurt and share this with us.

Professor Murray Forman: As this is on tape, though, I want to thank the Consulate and the US embassy in Berlin for bringing me here. This is a privilege and the networking that we're all able to do I think is valuable, so I'm hoping that some of the people I've met here in Frankfurt and across Germany will be able to stay in touch and collaborate again.