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Rap route to Chaucer's Canterbury

Vancouver wordsmith ready to break out of medieval mould

BY MIKE DEVLIN
Times Colonist staff

Baba Brinkman saw a void and he filled it. That's how he describes his novel idea for *The Rap Canterbury Tales*, a multi-faceted play, book and CD based on 14th-century English author Geoffrey Chaucer's book of the same name.

Brinkman, a Vancouver-based rapper and educator with three CDs and a book to his name, took *The Rap Canterbury Tales* to the far corners of the world in 2004, including Prague, Australia and Edinburgh.

He also performed the piece at nightclubs, high schools and university campuses.

Brinkman, who received his master's degree in medieval and renaissance English literature from the University of Victoria, is still getting mileage out of his masterwork. U.S. National Public Radio and *Rolling Stone* magazine have praised his work in recent weeks, and he spent last month touring high schools in California and Puerto Rico.

Many instructors in North America have adopted the controversial pursuit of teaching rap lyrics to students. But when they hear of Brinkman's concept — which recasts Chaucer's tale of storytelling pilgrims with modern verbiage, adopting the tone of a rap battle — they literally rush to book him.

"You don't have to know about or care about Chaucer to enjoy it," says Brinkman, 28. "But it is getting a big following because of the unusual literary connections that it brings."

Teachers are usually his biggest fans, he says. But once the high school kids and rap fans grasp his concept — and realize he is a formidable rapper — they eventually come around.

"The academic side is easier to win over than the hip-hop side," he says. "The hip-hop world is going to be initially skeptical of something like this, and I've known that since the beginning. I knew everybody thought I would be some nerdy white guy aping rap. That's why I started to enter into a lot of freestyle battles. If someone wants to say I'm not a real rap-



Baba Brinkman says you don't have to know Chaucer's original tales to enjoy the rap version.

Lit Fuse Records

per, I'll battle them. I can kick rhymes off the top of my head like crazy."

Brinkman has been more focused lately on his career as an aspiring rapper. His third CD, the aptly titled *Lit-Hop*, hits stores nationally today.

Chaucer is nowhere to be found on the disc; in his place are top-shelf B.C. rappers Moka Only and Josh Martinez, plus some of Brinkman's friends from the U.K., where his work is extremely well-received. It's an impressive turn, full of the head-nodding hip-hop exclusive to

the West Coast. But Brinkman — whose mother is Liberal party politician Joyce Murray — knows the struggle that lies ahead of him as he attempts to establish himself as a rapper outside of *The Rap Canterbury Tales*.

"It was never meant to be my end all and be all," he says of his Chaucer project. "But that's my bread and butter. I'm not a signed rapper and I'm not a famous rapper, either. I think I'm a good rapper and I can rock a crowd. But that's not what I'm in-demand for. Club hip-

hop does not pay my bills."

What does keep food on the table for Brinkman is a wildly original project that enables him to teach North American students about the lyrical and educational value of hip-hop, be it from Olde England or the Dirty South.

"A lot of kids are like, 'If you're a real rapper, why are you at this school?' I tell them not every rapper has a major label deal — which is 99 per cent of them. Most have day jobs or they are hustling somehow. This is my hustle."

LITERARY TAKE ON GREAT MCs

Of all the Top 10 lists in circulation, one that has inspired much online debate is MTV.com's The Greatest MCs of All-Time (published below). We asked lyrically minded Baba Brinkman to give us his thoughts on the website's ranking of the best rappers.

1. Jay-Z. "I can't really argue with that," Brinkman said. "Jay is No. 1 for all-around accomplishment. He's made a mark. And he knows what he's doing."

2. Tupac. "I would reverse Tupac and B.I.G. Tupac had more range, he could riff on so many topics. But his diversity of flow wasn't there. He didn't really try different styles. I wish he did."

3. Notorious B.I.G. "For lyrical flow, I'd put him at No. 1. He breathes rhythm. Biggie spoke like a demon, said things that were straight evil that I can't support. But rhythmically he was the pinna- cle."

4. Rakim. "When he came out, he was so far ahead of everyone lyrically. When you hear him, your instinct is to either give up or work way harder."

5. Nas. "He's definitely in my Top Five. I'd even put him higher. He's struggled to find his identity, but there's a few out there whose lyrics can and will be studied as poetry of an era. Nas's will for sure."

6. KRS-One. "He's a huge influence on me. I listened to KRS religiously. Even if you don't agree with everything he says, you've got to respect him."

7. Big Daddy Kane. "I only really got turned on to him in the last few years. When I was travelling in the U.K., a friend gave me some of his CDs. I'm realizing now that I missed out. He was way ahead of his time."

8. Ice Cube. "He's focused more on his acting career lately, but I give him huge respect."

9. Eminem. "I think he deserves a spot for sure. He was a huge innovator and put the concept of rhythm patterns on the forefront. He got so much more criticism over the content, but to anyone who writes their own rhymes, they were freaking out over his form."

10. LL Cool J. "I think he's got historical credibility, but I don't think he has contemporary credibility. I don't want to diss, but I don't listen to LL."

— Mike Devlin