

## THE FACE

ANNABEL MCGILVRAY  
meets  
**BABA BRINKMAN**  
Rap MC, author

**T**HE self-described “troubadour for the modern world” is still pulling himself out of bed when we first speak. Outside, buses are roaring through the streets of Edinburgh with a little extra pre-festival ferocity; inside, our troubadour Baba Brinkman stretches, carefully rubs the midday sleep from his eyes and launches into an exposition on Geoffrey Chaucer, rap music and the melancholy of modern poetry.

“Rap is a form of oral poetry and when Chaucer was writing, poetry was also oral,” says Brinkman, an Edinburgh Festival veteran back for his third season. “Poetry’s something different now, something that we read for our edification and an enriched cultural experience. But that’s not where poetry started; rap is bringing poetry back to its roots. I think of them as bookends, the oldest and the latest form of rhymed narrative expression in English.”

He’s not the first to draw parallels, but this white middle-class Canadian, brought up in the woods of British Columbia with a foolhardy tendency to breach random cultural barriers, is the only theorist proving his point by performing great chunks of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* in the rhythm-driven jargon of rap.

On stage, the beat is a foil for Brinkman’s delivery as his words punch the air with all the sex, drugs, theft and violence of the original. It’s significantly abridged and simplified, but far from a Good News Bible sanitisation, the rap version of Chaucer maintains the ambience of the original — in the end a “toord” is a “turd” — and has drawn the admiration of audiences and academics in North America and Britain.

“If somebody hasn’t heard of it and I tell them what it is, it’s initially total scepticism: ‘Oh, this is going to be a big joke’, ‘Oh, this is going to be horrible, it’s going to be one of those minstrel-show style things where the nerdy white person dances around pretending to rap, how embarrassing,’” Brinkman says. “I still have fun doing it because I’m still blowing up that scepticism every time I do the show.”

In a rare five-star review, *The Scotsman* has declared the show “could hold its own in both the rapping world and the theatre world”.

The technical skill of Brinkman’s performance is the manifestation of his long devotion to the world of hip-hop. The flirtation with medieval poetry that inspired his master’s thesis comparing rap and Chaucer didn’t occur until much later.

“When I was a teenager I wanted to be a poet, but I didn’t want to be depressed, melancholic, self-deprecating,” he says.

“I felt like poetry was a depressing profession when I looked around. When I made the connection that rappers are poets I thought, ‘Now here are some poets who are doing something interesting and not just complaining about how nobody likes poetry any more.’

“I really related to it as poetry. I thought that the word play, the rhyming patterns, the rhythmic patterns ... all that, I thought was really innovative as a form of expression.

“It was like a window into another world, and it was another world because I’m not from the inner-city environment.”

Brinkman was brought up far from rap’s urban ghetto heartland in what his publicity guff refers to as British Columbia’s “tree-planting sub-culture”. His parents were part-time hippies.

While the name on his passport is Dirk Brinkman the Fourth, Brinkman’s father gave him the name Baba at birth because of his calm demeanour, which reminded his parents of the Indian teachers on whom the title is often



bestowed. The family spent summers contracted by the government to replant trees around the state. “I would be out there with the second generation, the dirty kids running around in the tree-planting camps while the parents were at work,” says Brinkman, now 29. “We pretty much had free range of the woods and got to explore creeks, fish and climb trees and do all that fun stuff.”

It was during a decade of replanting clear-cut swaths of BC that he practised his rapping against the background of the day-long repetitive rhythm: “stab the shovel, open the hole, plant the tree, close the dirt, take three steps, stab the shovel”. He planted more than a million trees and, as he raps on his most recent album, began “running my mouth like a bloody

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nose” to master the skill of an MC, the best of whom wield words like machetes in the unscripted rapping duels (freestyle battles) of the hip-hop world.

“Hip-hop is a culture and it’s sort of self-regulating. There are certain styles that are seen as being effective and authentic and other styles that are seen as parasitic or just aping it.

“I want to do it in a way that is real and have people listen to it and think ‘Wow! This is real lyrical rap; this is not just some professor trying to rap as a joke. This holds its own against any other rapper.’”

Today, the man who grew up with hippies to become an MC with an MA in his back pocket has a MySpace page complete with messages from a global mix of exotic troubadour groupie beauties. There are messages from hip-hop artists curious about what he is doing and others wanting to collaborate. And up there next to Chaucer in the list of influences, are interna-

tional rap stars Lyrics Born and Ludacris, closely followed by John Donne and a little further down, rapper Rakim and John Milton.

Technology means he can collaborate with producers from anywhere and, because of that, earlier this year his third album *Lit-Hop* was released on his own label Lit Fuse Records and received national airplay in Canada. He relishes the fact that some people he meets now know of his original rap first and only learn of *The Canterbury Tales* party trick later.

Underlying the theatrics of the Chaucer rap performance and the recently released accompanying book *The Rap Canterbury Tales* is a desire to renew the wider world’s acquaintance with the reputed father of modern English and at the same time to open the ears of others to the versatility and power of rap. That’s where poets should be looking, he says.

“I want poetry to give me an experience and I want to listen to it being recited. Hand in hand with poetry being reduced to the page and losing its oral element, it’s also losing its sound effects and rhyme and alliteration and consonance, and all the wordplay around the sound of the words,” he bellows above the roar of Edinburgh’s buses.

“That’s always been definitive of poetry and now that’s been exorcised [with] this whole free verse dominance. I want to see a renaissance of rhyme and I do see a renaissance of rhyme, it’s just in rap.

“Rhyme used to be an art form — it was lost — and rappers rediscovered rhyme and it’s causing a flourish now and it’s something that everyone can relate to because when young people hear rappers rhyming they freak out. It’s funny, it’s spontaneous, it’s creative and it’s powerful, too, because once you learn how to do it you can tell your story in a way that captures people’s attention.

“Poetry’s not dead, it has just evolved into rap,” the rapper with the receding hairline says. “And I’m a modern troubadour.”

*Baba Brinkman is a guest at the 2007 Brisbane Writers Festival.*

## CLOSE-UP

**Big break:** When my latest album, *Lit-Hop*, got on national radio. Before that, most people who knew of me had heard *The Rap Canterbury Tales*.

**Highlight:** Edinburgh Festival 2004. I got a five-star review in *The Scotsman*, which was the best review from the best reviewer. Suddenly my show was massively sold out.

**Lowlight:** A few weeks before Edinburgh 2004, at the Montreal Fringe Festival, when my shows were totally empty, the reviewers were lukewarm and the other crew using my space wiped egg off the stage with my costume.

**Favourite poet or MC:** Geoffrey Chaucer and Canadian K’naan, who was a Somalian refugee and who has a clever perspective on the pointlessness of gangsterism in hip-hop.