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B.C. hip-hop artist admires Chaucer

Baba Brinkman has performed *Canterbury Tales* at Oxford, Cambridge and elsewhere

BY LUCY HYSLOP
SPECIAL TO THE VANCOUVER SUN

Few people would be able to list Geoffrey Chaucer as their No. 1 influence on the MySpace website (let alone follow the 14th-century scholar with J-Live, Ludacris, et al) and keep their street cred intact.

But Vancouver hip-hop artist Baba Brinkman, who has performed his acclaimed rap version of *The Canterbury Tales* to university classes at Cambridge, Oxford and Harvard as well as more than 50 schools and colleges in B.C., says he had little choice.

"No person that I haven't met has affected me more," says the 27-year-old. "Chaucer is very exciting — he's such a good people person."

Who knew Chaucer was a rapper? "There are so many parallels between Chaucer and hip hop," states Brinkman, who has a master's degree in English from the University of Victoria. "Just as in freestyle hip hop, [where] the audience is required to show the rappers whether they like it or not, the Pilgrims were supposed to show whether they liked the tale being told. And they really knew how to deliver a medieval diss."

After six years spent spreading his message verbally, Brinkman has launched a book, *The Rap Canterbury Tales*, with his words opposite Chaucer's original, alongside illustrations by his brother Erik. But, as Karl Siegler at Vancouver's Talonbooks explains, it took a year to persuade Brinkman to write down his



STEVE BOSCH/VANCOUVER SUN

Hip-hop artist Baba Brinkman has a master's degree in English.

performances.

"His initial reaction was that he was working in an oral, performance-based tradition that seemed completely antithetical to the ethereal, 'academic,' print-based-culture that he thought poetry had become in the English language. But he finally agreed to publication," he says, adding jokingly, "After all, even Chaucer eventually had to take a break from his performances and write it all down — that's how he became 'the father of the English language.'"

For Brinkman, his motivation is clear: "A big part of writing the book was that more people would hear about it and come to a performance, or listen to the CD [*Rap Canterbury Tales*]. If it were just a book, it would have a lot less value for me."

(Turns out he's in notable hip-hop company: rapper Snoop Dogg is reportedly writing his literary debut,

Love Don't Live Here No More, this fall.)

Brinkman has also just released *Lit-Hop*, a soulful CD with hints of jazz and funk that raises the bar of his literary hip hop ("I didn't want to be the tired old guy rapping Chaucer and that was all I [would] ever do," he explains).

"He was once compared to Eminem — white boy rapping — but the lyrical content of his raps have always gone deeper," says Lin Gardner, an independent producer at Song City Studios in East Vancouver who produced and mixed Brinkman's latest CD.

"He has now really developed his own voice after two years of continuous touring; any Eminem comparisons can now be cut, and his work is more lyrically intelligent and musically rich than ever."

"Baba is a true rapper — while he's not black or ghetto, he is 100 per cent totally immersed in the genre

and doesn't pretend to be anything other than himself."

And that is a "privileged middle-class mischievous little rascal," to quote the opening track, *Genesis*. Born of "hippie tree-planting" parents, his name "comes from India, where it means 'guru' — my dad said I looked peaceful when I was born, like I was a reincarnated Buddha."

"I am really blessed for how I grew up — in a positive, spiritual, New Age kind of environment," adds Brinkman, who now starts a two-month U.S. tour. Yet even that is fodder for his lyrics on *Social Contract*.

"The other shade of that hippie mentality is a lumping of everything Establishment as being negative and I think that causes problems. If you dismiss everything and end up disengaging from society, then society just degenerates. I don't dismiss my upbringing at all; but now I want to re-engage — and hip hop is the way to engage and galvanize people."

The track also features Vancouver singer Jena Fair, and the CD includes collaborations with local rappers Josh Martinez, Moka Only and MC Junk. But Brinkman also looked to the U.K. (Infinite Potential, Lucid Notion, Dizraeli), where he performed all over, including the Edinburgh Festival twice. "U.K. hip hop really inspired me because I found it so inclusive," he says. "In North America there's almost a pathological mentality that you have to be a gangster to be a rapper. In the U.K. and Australia that's just not the case — it's about word play."

Catching up with Brinkman at Templeton secondary in East Vancouver recently, where he performed for 14- to 17-year-olds who were enraptured by the time he was done, Brinkman's proselytizing fervour is tangible.

"I'm trying to communicate an enthusiasm for literacy and think of language as empowerment," he says. "The problem with rap is that 90 per cent of the exposure it gets is all of the worst of 10 per cent of it. People's first impression of it is that it's misogynist, superficial and violent. But the first rap that came out was so positive — *Rapper's Delight* [by the Sugar Hill Gang in 1979] with its lyrics 'a hip hop the hippie the hippie / to the hip hip hop.' A lot of the original ethos was celebration. It's just a really potent form to express yourself in."

Judging by the reaction from the students and teachers alike, as well as from rappers and punters at his recent book launch at the Media Club, Baba Brinkman looks like a man who has won universal respect — or 'props' as they say in hip-hop lexicon.

For more about Brinkman's book and CD, log on to: www.babaword.com.