

"We have always been there..."

Hip Hop, Queerness and Homophobia

Katharina Morawek caught up with Juba Kalamka, the Co-Founder and Curator of the PeaceOUT Festival, at the fifth PeaceOUT World Homohop Festival in October 2005.

Katharina Morawek: Historically speaking, how did Hip Hop come out of the "closet"? What are the connections to a queer history of the USA and to the Black Liberation movement, such as the Black Panther Party?

Juba Kalamka: This would be a long conversation (smiles). I would include the history of lesbian and feminist music activism, with bands such as Sweet Honey In the Rock and festivals like the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. There are also moments of "queer Hip Hop" charged with history - like Age Of Consents' mini-album of 1981; the Black Gay Letters and Arts Movement in the late 1980s and early 90s with people like Pat Parker, Essex Hemphill, and June Jordan, among others; the queer Punk and Indie-Rock scene which developed during the early 1990s. This is all connected in one way or the other.

With the Black Panthers, you are hinting at Huey P. Newton's speech from 1970. He made a connection between the struggle for "gay liberation" and the struggles of "people of colour" and the poor; he explicitly reclaimed this onto the agenda of the Black Panthers. You could even say that the Harlem Renaissance was Hip Hop - a better part of the people active at that time were queer and out (even though historians, black and white, like to forget the fact). Queers have always been a part of Hip Hop - as producers, DJs, graffiti artists - you just have to look close enough to see the fine threads that make the connections.

KM: You have curated the PeaceOUT Festival for four years now. How

dig me out

would you describe this work?

Juba Kalamka: I do not know how other Hip Hop festivals run, but I guess economic conditions always play a significant role. East Bay Pride in Oakland, the annual Pride Festival in California and the main facilitator of PeaceOUT, dropped us in 2003. Matt Wobensmith (A.C.R.O.N.Y.M. Records) and myself have had to keep the festival financially alive; to do this, we depend on local artists, those who pay their own fares, and acts who have a gig in the neighborhood and make a tour stop at the festival. So far, this has worked well.

Not every queer artist is interested in performing at PeaceOUT - and this is okay. I get emails from performers every month; a lot of great shit is out there. I would like to invite and pay airfares for performers so we spend a lot of time trying to get funding.

KM: You once characterised your work like this: "I approach the whole thing like a good social worker. Good social workers always try to make their work unnecessary. I am not crazy about hosting a queer Hip Hop festival, but I do it in order to create a space for queer artists. And I want to change this dynamic - because queer Hip Hop is Hip Hop." What kind of vehicle is Hip Hop for you?

Juba Kalamka: Technological developments have changed things in the past few years; equipment is less expensive and it is easier to create access to communities. The language of Hip Hop - whose reaction time is quick anyway - moves even faster; the queer international Hip Hop community could never have developed in this form without the Internet, mailing lists or message boards.

This is Hip Hop at its best and its most magnetic - raw, audacious, and immediate. Hip Hop is the language of the moment and you have to understand its fundamental terms if you want to

dig me out

address the kids. LGBTIQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersexual, Queer) activists use Hip Hop as a mouthpiece: to speak, to make music, to dance - in all kinds of ways. The more institutional forms [like *PeaceOut*], are an intermediary result, an extension line of this work.

KM: The accusation against Hip Hop culture about homophobia is not new. Nevertheless, the average media outlet cannot stop talking about how Hip Hop is getting more and more sexist, more homophobic...

Juba Kalamka: If classical "gay" media focused attention on queer, unknown Hip Hop artists, they would no longer be dependent on the scary, black ultra-heterosexual predator - let us say 50 Cent - who becomes their bogeyman. The same is true for frightening "angry poor white boys" like Eminem. It is not a new thing for the privileged classes to fetishise and, at the same time, detest the non-privileged. It is one strategy among many to distract the middle class from what is happening around them and to get them buying into more and more bullshit.

Queer feminist, lesbian and transgender communities have rendered heavy assistance in this point. They relate to us in a way in which gay non-trans men do not - and do not have to - because of their special set of [bio-males] privileges.

KM: Is it more difficult to diss someone as a "fag" or "gay" nowadays?

Juba Kalamka: Yes. I pay respect for this fact to the people who work hard within and outside the queer Hip Hop community; and those who support the artists doing this work: the people who go to the parties and buy the music, who book us to speak in schools, and [even] the gay community, which partly acknowledges and supports us. There is not a lot of money in this little sub-genre,

dig me out

but artists keep on pushing. And that is hard work.

Juba Kalamka is a member of the queer Hip Hop Crew Deep
Dickollective (D/DC).

www.peaceoutfestival.com

www.myspace.com/deepdickollective