

# Cuban hip-hop scene reaches major crossroads

HABANA DEL ESTE, Cuba (AP) - On broiling summer days more than a decade ago, teenagers here spent hours watching breakdancing on "Soul Train" and listening to American rap floating across the radio waves from Florida.

Then they gathered on street corners, surrounded by rows of apartment buildings with chipped paint and laundry hanging out the windows, and copied what they'd seen and heard.

Now in their 20s, these men and women have moved beyond imitation to become the backbone of Cuban hip-hop, a distinct, explosive movement of socially conscious rap. And with success has come a crossroads: continue developing edgy, socialist lyrics—or aim to make money with party and gangster rap?

"The biggest issue hip-hop cubano is facing is not to become a replica of what happened back home," said Nehanda Abiodun, an American exile in Cuba who was given the honorary title "hip-hop godmother" by local rappers.

"Hip-hop in the United States started out as a voice

of protest, an alternative voice for urban, inner-city youth to voice their grievances, to talk about their living conditions, their hopes and aspirations," said Abiodun, a member of the Black Liberation Party before fleeing to Cuba 14 years ago as a U.S. fugitive facing racketeering charges. "But now what we see in terms of rap in the United States, for the most part, it's really not talking about anything."

Cuban rappers have tackled global issues such as racism, war and environmental pollution. They have even pushed the boundaries of limited freedom of speech in communist Cuba to criticize police harassment and economic hardship—sometimes paying for their rebellion with sanctions.

But as pressure for commercial success increases, some Cuban rappers are tempted to produce lighter, less political music, particularly in the form of reggaeton, a mix of rap and reggae with lyrics about girls, cars and partying.

"There is an element of commercialism that's creeping in," Abiodun said. "You cannot blame these young



Cuban B-Boys breakdance as fans look on in awe.

people for wanting to see the fruits of their labor, but will they be able to maintain that responsible, intellectual rap and still get paid?"

There is optimism among a collective of 18 hip-hop artists called The Cartel, a new movement dedicated to issues-oriented rap and "keeping it real."

"We started when there existed nothing, when people thought we were crazy," said Cartel member Magyori Martinez, 26, of the group IPG&B. "Now, we are still

struggling, but no one looks at us like we're crazy."

"Our mission is to try and maintain the essence of underground hip-hop," added Randee Akosta, 21, of the duo Los Paisanos, or The Countrymen. "It is our way of life, our reason for being."

On a recent afternoon, members of The Cartel spilled out of Akosta's small Havana home as they prepared to rehearse for Cuba's 10th annual hip-hop festival in November.

The group's talent has

been recognized by Pablo Herrera, the island's most noted hip-hop producer. Herrera, 37, is producing The Cartel's first album, set for release by the end of the year. He began his career with the rap group Amenazas, whose members later moved to Europe and became Orishas, Cuba's most famous hip-hop group. The group won a Latin Grammy for Best Rap/Hip-Hop Album last year.

Back home, feelings about Orishas are mixed.

They started as "a group like us, from the barrio, with a message," Akosta said. But then they sold out by leaving the island and mixing more commercial music into their rap, he said.

Other rappers say they're disappointed that Orishas hasn't done more to publicize Cuban hip-hop—even though their success has helped expose the world to Cuban rap.

On the island, Orishas' international success legitimized other rap groups' efforts and helped prompt the Cuban government to create a state-run agency for developing hip-hop talent and exporting the music.

The agency focuses on

nine hip-hop groups, out of the island's estimated 500-plus. Most of those groups are moving toward reggaeton, while several try to balance their commitment to underground rap while still pursuing commercial success.

Two rappers walking that line—Adeyeme Umoja, 24, and Sekou Messiah, 30—comprise Anonimo Consejo, considered among the island's best duos and the only group belonging to both The Cartel and the agency. They have rapped about their African roots, revolution and hip-hop culture since the mid-1990s.

Lyrics on a recent demo confront everything from class divisions—"the plight of the poor is the fault of the rich" in the song "American Dream," to young Cuban women pursuing foreign tourists—"He could be your grampa! ... If you want me, I want you, but I don't have any money."

In the last three years, Anonimo Consejo, or Anonymous Advice, has performed around Cuba as well as in New York City, Brazil and Venezuela. The agency pays the rappers extra when they

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