

Voices of Hip-Hop in Madison

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Background



The Madison community has long had a contentious relationship with its local Hip-Hop scene. Many describe the climate surrounding Hip-Hop as a cycle, where support for the genre rises and falls over time. The Hip-Hop community faces a multitude of obstacles like censoring of some Hip-Hop songs in bars, repealing of liquor licenses, and closing Hip-Hop supportive venues that severely limit opportunities for Madison artists. When these barriers are combined

with challenges like racism and negative stereotypes of the genre, it creates an environment in which the Hip-Hop community has difficulty thriving. Periods of higher support for Hip-Hop in the city help increase acceptance, but do not eliminate these barriers.

The Urban Community Arts Network (UCAN) has worked with UW Madison Community and Environmental Sociology Students on several research projects aimed at understanding and improving the state of Hip-Hop in Madison. In previous years, students have investigated the relationship between violence and live music shows and the portrayal of Hip-Hop in media publications. They found that Hip-Hop shows are no more violent than any other genres of music, and that the media often portray Hip-Hop in a negative light. With this current project, we interviewed members of the Hip-Hop scene to understand how they perceive Madison Hip-Hop and what they would like to see happen in the future.

Methods

At the beginning of the Fall 2018 semester, our class met with UCAN President Karen Reece and several other members to discuss the history of Hip-Hop generally and locally. We gained a general idea of the concerns and gaps in the community from prominent Madison Hip-Hop artists. From there, we compiled a list of questions that we all felt were open-ended and unbiased.

With Karen's help, we held three focus groups: one group of young artists, one of long-time members of the scene, and one group of artists who did not fit either category. We also compiled a list of rappers, dancers, DJs, producers, supporters, reporters, etc. to interview individually. These contacts were obtained from Karen and her connections within UCAN and throughout the community.

Interviews lasted about 30 minutes and focus groups about 50 minutes. We met at locations all over Madison, such as local coffee shops, community centers, recording studios, and restaurants.

Two people were assigned to every focus group and interview so that there were two sets of recordings and notes. This way each person could code the interview and then compare codes. Since we had no predetermined codebook, every groups codes were different, which was initially a challenge. However, there were several underlying themes that helped to categorize our data.



Interviewees Roles

Role	Count
Rapper	13
Rapper/ Producer	4
Promoter	2
Rapper/ Promoter	3
Combination	10
Total	32

The Hip-Hop Scene

When asked about the current Hip-Hop scene in Madison, almost every interview discussed at least one of the following aspects:

#1: Madison's Hip-Hop scene is under-recognized

Most interviewees mentioned that they felt as though the hip-hop scene was largely invisible to the greater Madison public. One interviewee said that the Madison Hip-Hop scene is "Nonexistent. At least in the public eye," another added "[Madison residents] probably don't know much about it. I mean I am in the scene and still don't even know much about it."

#2: Madison's Hip-Hop scene is under-supported

Many interviewees also felt as though there was a lack of support for Hip-Hop from venues and those in control of the entertainment scene in Madison, despite there being an audience for it. An interviewee, said that Hip-Hop is "Unpopular...to venues, [but] popular to the people..." One member of the mixed focus group said, "It seems pretty dead to me. There's not a lot of opportunities. There isn't any consistency as far as performing or venues," to which others responded that even when venues are receptive to Hip-Hop, they are often looking for a certain type that is not representative of local artists.

#3: The Madison hip-hop scene suffers from a lack of solidarity and heightened competition between artists.

When there are only a few venues in the city that are willing or able to play Hip-Hop, tension among the community is inevitable. As one rapper from the OG focus group put it "When you only got like two spots to do Hip-Hop, everybody in Hip-Hop doesn't get along". He argues that more venues would decrease this tension and help the scene thrive. One person from the mixed focus group explained, "there is a cliqueness to the scene..."

#4: Local artists find it much more difficult to find success in Madison than in other cities

In their own words: "You get a lot more love out[side] of this town then you do in this town... Milwaukee, Rockford, Minnesota, you go anywhere outside of Madison they appreciate Hip-Hop.... But out here, it's like there's no appreciation honestly." "There's a lot of pushback when it comes to Hip-Hop in Madison...so you see a lot of people moving to LA or like different areas where they can get more exposure...."

Barriers

Underrepresentation in Media

Negative media coverage and a lack of coverage were frequently brought up in both interviews and every focus group. Especially when compared to the media coverage of other music genres, participants pointed to the language used, how it's racially coded, and speaks negatively about Hip-Hop and Hip-Hop fans. Negative media representation keeps harmful stereotypes alive. Interviewees also discussed the lack of local radio play. Without a consistent outlet, it's hard for artists to gain and maintain momentum with their music.

Misconceptions & Lack of Education

Interview participants frequently brought up misconception that local residents have about Hip-Hop and the community, which leads to the negative perceptions they hold about the genre. A few interviewees suggested that part of the problem may be due to a lack of deep knowledge about the scene and the culture. Others tied the lack of knowledge to negative perceptions by speaking about the impact of Hip-Hop being a predominantly Black form of cultural expression. Most implied that residents, police, and venue owners hold both conscious and unconscious racial biases towards the genre that contribute to the negative perceptions that is so harmful to the community.

Venue Issues

Interviewees mentioned how difficult it is for Hip-Hop artists to books shows. One rapper mentioned the trouble he has; "As soon as she mentions Hip-Hop... it's like, "No, we can't do it... we just don't want that type of crowd."" Interviewees claim that it's not just venue owners, but also the Madison police. There were multiple stories of police using tactics – threatening a venue's liquor license or shutting it down indefinitely – to stop the booking of more Hip-Hop shows.

The fear of Hip-Hop has spread to businesses across the city. The same rapper told us another story of the time he was having a CD release party at a clothing store; police told the business owner there was a good chance of riots if they held the event. Interviewees also talked about issues with venues only supporting white rappers and national Hip-Hop acts.

Lack of solidarity within Community

Many interviewees discussed the lack of solidarity and community within local Hip-Hop. Issues include not supporting one another, not respecting one another, and not working with one another. One rapper stated that even though he has been "in the scene" for four years now, he does not feel a *part* of the scene. There is a sense of clique-ness and exclusion felt by some. Tensions also arise between different age groups in the scene. However, all members recognize that this lack of connection is bad, because it does not help build community and keeps talented individuals from connecting with opportunities and veterans of the scene.

Strategies for Improvement

Respondents identified three main strategies for improving Hip-Hop in Madison:

#1: Improve the perception of Hip-Hop in Madison

Respondents thought that, for Hip-Hop to thrive, community support for Hip-Hop needs to be built, through community and school outreach.

"If we go to a lot of these [schools] and we show them what we're doing, I think that would let a lot of people know who we are, and they might gravitate towards [Hip-Hop]"

"The general public needs to show up for shows. By supporting the Hip-Hop community the negative perceptions will go away."



#2: Increase venue and radio access, and better police relationships

Respondents said they need better access to venues and the radio, to showcase their music. Others said there should be a better relationship between Hip-Hop and the police.

"With the venues, if we could get more exposure, that would be a start."

"What I would like to see is essentially a set of police designed only for Hip-Hop events. Maybe four or five officers, all minority, who meet with [artists and promoters], so that the [Hip-Hop] community feels like these police are here with us and not for us. I think that, to me, is the biggest thing."

#3: Promote unity within the scene

Respondents said that the Hip-Hop community needs to unify, collaborate and support artists within the community

"Start viewing yourself as community not your competition."

UCAN and the Taskforce

Urban Community Arts Network, or UCAN, is a local non-profit that was founded in response to the continued exclusion of Hip-Hop from Madison area venues and music events. As an organization, they aim to empower and unify the Madison community through urban arts, specifically Hip-Hop. UCAN fosters creativity and collaboration by organizing live music events and



promoting professional growth through low-cost workshops. They strive to create safe performance opportunities for all local Hip-Hop artists. They also maintain an open dialogue with City officials, the Madison Police Dept. and local venue owners to create sustainable opportunities that will keep the Madison Hip-Hop community vibrant.

As part of this on-going dialogue, UCAN recently participated in the city's Task Force on Equity in Music and Entertainment in order to identify the root causes of the current inequity and lack of diversity and explore best practices used in other communities. After meeting for over a year, the task force culminated in a report that outlines a set of recommendations for both long-term and short-term goals and strategies to not only address the issues in the music and entertainment scene but also establish continued communication between the city and community in order to insure sustainability of the desired music and entertainment scene. The report and its recommendations were accepted by the city, but, as of April 2019, have yet to be adopted or put into practice

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- All of the people who agreed to be interviewed and shared their stories

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