

Speech therapy

*The former singer with
Arrested Development
speaks to homelessness
then and now*



PHOTO COURTESY OF SPEECH

BY JOSH MILLER
STREET NEWS SERVICE

Hip-hop artist, record label owner, and ordained minister Speech, whose offstage name is Todd Thomas, believes that people are receptive to a message if it is in music.

Perhaps that's why, 17 years after his hip-hop group Arrested Development released its Grammy Award-winning debut album, "3 years, 5 months and 2 days in the life of..." Speech is continuing his solo career with a new album and some new subject matter.

"Hip-hop music started in the mid-1970s, and now these people who loved it are growing up and still appreciate the art," he said. In September, he released into the hip-hop world "The Grown Folks Table," his new album.

"This allows us to now talk about different things, like having kids," said Speech, and it "makes you think about various things that we have to deal with in our lives and our community."

Homelessness and poverty have been persistent themes in Speech's life and community.

One song on the debut album, "Mr. Wendal," added a beat to Arrested Development's lyrics about beating homelessness: "To give him money isn't

charity/ He gives me some knowledge/ I buy him some shoes."

The track challenged listeners to rethink their perceptions of people living on the streets. The artists donated proceeds from the single, which climbed to sixth on the Billboard Hot 100 in 1993, to the National Coalition for the Homeless.

"The song took on a life of its own. It moved a lot of people and continues to move people," Speech said. "I feel it was a blessing to have had the privilege of writing it."

Mr. Wendal tells the story of "a man with no clothes, no money, no plate" and the disregard with which society views people living on the streets.

A series of experiences Speech had with the homeless community in Atlanta, rather than any one person, formed the basis for the song.

"We just sat down and had good conversations — real casual," Speech said. "After years of doing that, the song just came to me."

In 1993, the group invited a number of homeless individuals on stage while they performed the song at the Soul Train awards, where the group won Best Rap Album.

"I think homelessness in general still puzzles a lot of people. Why can't we correct this problem? Why can't we make this history with as much money as we and many other countries have? What is the breakdown?"

"A lot of people saw (the homeless) as if they were pieces of cardboard or city decorations," he said. "But to me they were real people with real pasts and real stories to tell."

Music made for an ideal conduit for his message.

"Homelessness is a very touchy subject, especially in America, and there's a lot of guilt involved," he said, "music helps to break down the walls and the tension that develops when people want to address an issue." Songs, he explains, can abate the uneasiness.

Seeing predecessors achieve success making iconoclastic music empowered Arrested Development to put forth the trenchant messages heard on "3 years, 5 months and 2 days in the life of..."

"Public Enemy was one of the groups that inspired me to write music with more of a purpose, because I identified with the message and also liked the music," Speech

said. "There's so many writers that would love to put out a record on various topics, but they are subconsciously deterred because they don't see that out there. They have to see something that makes it first."

Speech also feels obliged to support the artists he sees carrying forward that legacy, such as Common, K'Naan and Braille.

"These are artists that have a message to reach people that's relatable," he said, "when you start having artists that talk about things then people feel that the culture of dialogue becomes cool again, and that's important for the mass of people to get involved."

Aside from the fresh generation of lyricists, the veteran rapper and songwriter holds out hope that President Barack Obama could drastically change public perceptions of social ills such as homelessness.

"I think having the mindset — and I believe that he has it — a community activist understands the intricacies that are involved with solving the problem instead of just throwing money at the problem," he said.

"The Grown Folks Table" features no follow-ups or counterparts to Mr. Wendal. Still, Speech promises a "clean and awesomely entertaining" return to similar insights, over the solid musical foundations that made him a hit 17 years ago.

"This is a hip-hop album, so I am going back to my roots," he said, "it talks about various issues that I've encountered growing up in this world."

"The Grown Folks Table" also samples sounds Speech has encountered traveling—from Europe and the Middle East to Africa and Australia — and welcomes guests he's met along the way, such as Chali 2na of Jurassic 5 and former partners Za' and JJ Boogie of Arrested Development.

Artists from France, Denmark, and New Zealand have also contributed beats to the 20-track album.

Speech is releasing "The Grown Folks Table" on his own label, Vagabond Record &

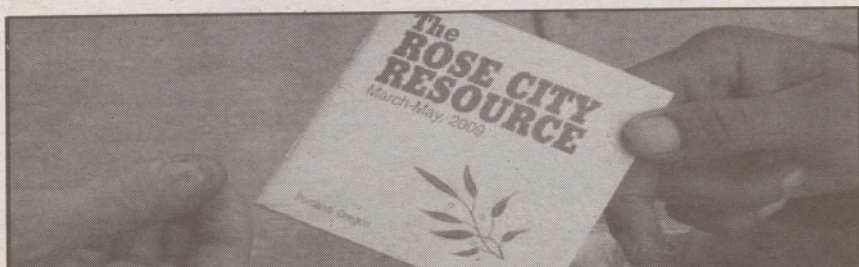
Tapes, and a preview of the CD is available on his website (www.speechmusic.com).

"Everything has changed," he said. "It's a very different landscape. Almost totally different. So much so that major labels are playing catch-up. Everyone is striving to learn."

Some things remain constant, however, such as Speech's commitment to combating homelessness.

He continues to volunteer in the Atlanta area through Hosea Feed the Hungry and Homeless.

"I think homelessness in general still puzzles a lot of people. Why can't we correct this problem? Why can't we make this history with as much money as we and many other countries have? What is the breakdown?" he asks. "I think it's so important to keep educating people because it seems like beating this is doable."



Visit us at www.rosecityresource.org

Kristina Smock Consulting

Research & Evaluation • Policy Analysis • Facilitating diverse stakeholders

www.kristinasmockconsulting.com