

Mic Crenshaw

When it comes to music, race and getting results, the Portland artist and activist doesn't mince words

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

When Mic Crenshaw came to Portland, it was sort of like shaking a personal Etch A Sketch. He wanted a fresh start. That is understandable.

He had left behind an on-going struggle with white supremacists in Minneapolis, Minn. His connection to the streets involved a lot of drinking and fighting, he says. He was ready for something new.

In 1992, Crenshaw made his way to Portland where his mother had relocated. He would rise to become the front man for the Portland live hip hop band, Hungry Mob. In 2001, Crenshaw won the Portland Poetry Slam Championship and has become one the Pacific Northwest's well known emcees and social justice activists.

Combining activism, education and music Crenshaw's community efforts led him and a colleague to create Globalfam, a company formed to deliver computers to young adults in Rwanda. Today, the company houses and produces Crenshaw's music and manages the community projects in which Crenshaw and Globalfam are involved.

In March, Crenshaw became co-manager of KBOO with Monica Beemer, formerly the executive director of Sisters of the Road. Most recently, he has returned from a tour through the African continent as a member of the Afrikan Hip Hop Caravan. The caravan could loosely be described by the lyrics of KRS-One who gives hip hop an acronym: Her Infinite Power Helping Oppressed People.

Sue Zalokar: Tell me about where you come from.

Mic Crenshaw: I grew up on the South Side of Chicago. As a child, I moved around a lot and I wound up in Minneapolis finishing high school and taking some college classes. It was there that I became a political activist, primarily around issues of anti-racism and organizing youth to respond to racist violence and the Klu Klux Klan.

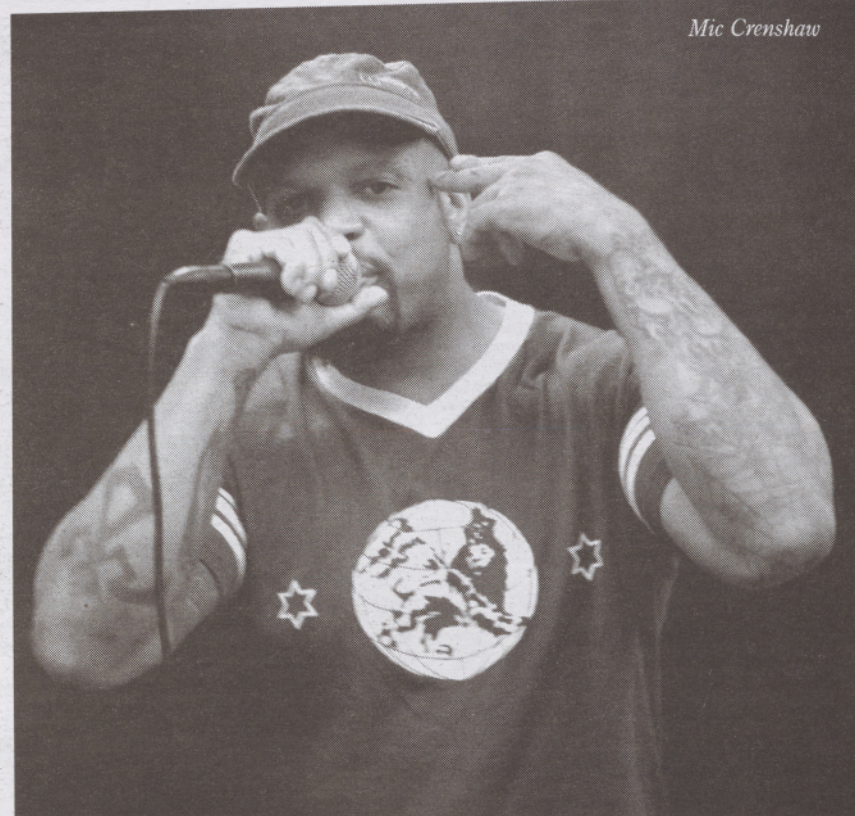
In 2004 in my journey, I was at a conference in Rwanda for Economic Justice and Youth Empowerment, Genocide Reconciliation and HIV/AIDS. One of the conditions of being at the conference was that I had to follow it up with two years of work in the United States that supported some of the objectives that came out of that conference.

We committed to helping some of the activists who were at the conference start a computer center in Burundi in central Africa. We have kept that computer center up and running since 2007 with computers donated by Free Geek here in Portland and shipped through funds raised at a hip hop concert at Wonder Ballroom. We recently were funded for three more years through a grant.

S.Z.: Corporate hip hop: Where do you, personally, draw the line? Is corporate hip hop genuine?

M.C.: Corporate hip hop is something that lies parallel to what I do. I'm in an industry where people who have the most exposure are people that are kind of groomed and sponsored by commercial interests.

We're living in a time where people do what they do with a degree of independence — and control — over what



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they do. They are carving their own paths independent of the corporate entities.

S.Z.: The face of hip hop is changing... look at Iggy Azalea and Azealia Banks ...

M.C.: I'm not that impressed with any of it. The thing is each generation has its pet issues that we get excited about — and for good reason. The reason to get excited about them is that these issues are part of long-standing issues.

The means of music consumption and distribution has changed, but the social issues are the same.

There is still police violence. The disparity between the rich and poor is getting wider. White supremacy is still at the root of a lot of our social issues regarding race and police and violence and social ills.

Police have been killing black people,

young black and Latino men and women, without any recourse or accountability, for hundreds of years in this country.

That continues to happen. The way that people grapple with it in their own time is to treat it as if it is our problem currently, and it is. But often, it lacks a historical context to see that this has always been a part of our experience here in the United States.

S.Z.: It is a kind of gentrification — one that replaces faces of color with a white, blond face.

M.C.: The gentrification of music, of generally black genres, R&B and soul and hip hop and blues and rock 'n' roll ... it's happened in all of those genres. Art forms that were championed and developed by black people were taken over by a white

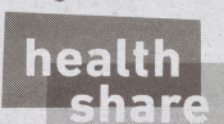
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