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VENDOR PROFILE

Jason 'Black Stone' Lyles

BY LEONORA KO
STAFF WRITER

Music has always been a part of life for Jason "Black Stone" Lyles, from his childhood to his current choice of selling Street Roots newspapers.

Jason grew up in Long Beach, Calif. His mother was a business owner and his father was an artist with deep roots in black culture and music.

While other kids got footballs and basketballs, he always had a musical instrument, thanks to his parents.

"I used to try to climb up on the seat to get to the piano," he said. "Eventually they got me a keyboard. (They'd be like, 'He's just making songs up! This kid's amazing!'"

Just before Christmas one year, when he was 9, his mother died. The experience taught him that his viewpoint didn't necessarily line up with mainstream society.

"Everybody was like, 'It's the greatest time of the year,' and I was like, 'Then why do I feel like I just got hit by a Mack truck?'"

"The family where I come from is a prestigious black family," Jason said.

"Everybody goes through the conveyor belt, goes to college, comes out of college and gets married. I know I can do that, but I don't want to do that."

Jason found his passion in hip-hop culture and freestyle, where rap lyrics are improvised on the spot.

He remembered the first few times he was in a freestyle circle, a kind of group competition between rappers inside

a crowd of onlookers: "Scared to death, heart beating, I'd be rapping against these grownups," he said. "It didn't matter. They would push me in the circle and have me rap. And they were like, 'This kid just dusted you off!'"

When he was 15, he learned how to make beats from a stranger who showed him the basics at a local music store.

"Making beats" is a modern way to compose music using a computer and an endless stream of musical instrument sounds available, such as drums, keyboards and even samples of existing music, which can be combined into new beats.

It is a skill that takes creativity and technical know-how to turn chaos into music. Jason was hooked.

"From then on, I started chasing it," he said. "And then I met a girl. Her name was Runway Star."

Jason said he and Runway Star played their original beats for each other and probably inspired one other. Eventually

they drifted apart. Later, Runway Star produced the beat "Teach Me How to Dougie," a song that reached No. 1 on the hip-hop charts.

"Yeah that was my ex," Jason said. "I see her on Instagram and Facebook. I can hit her up right

now, and she'll hit me back. Other than that, in the flesh I haven't seen her."

Jason has had his ups and downs in life, but music has been a continuing thread. While he has held positions as a supervisor, valet and security guard, he has also worked as a DJ in California and at Gresham Skatepark.

"Times got hard," he said. "I was living in a trailer with a friend of mine and it was rough."

He used what little money he had to buy a tablet and a microphone to make music.

"I just turned that trailer into my studio," he said.

After moving between California and Oregon for eight years, Jason decided to settle down in Portland.

He explained: "You ever see a picture of all the smog in Los Angeles? In order to breathe good air, you have to pay a lot of money to stay by the beach, or you pay a lot of money to live up in the hills."

"I left because I realized I don't have to pay that much money to breathe pristine Northwest air."

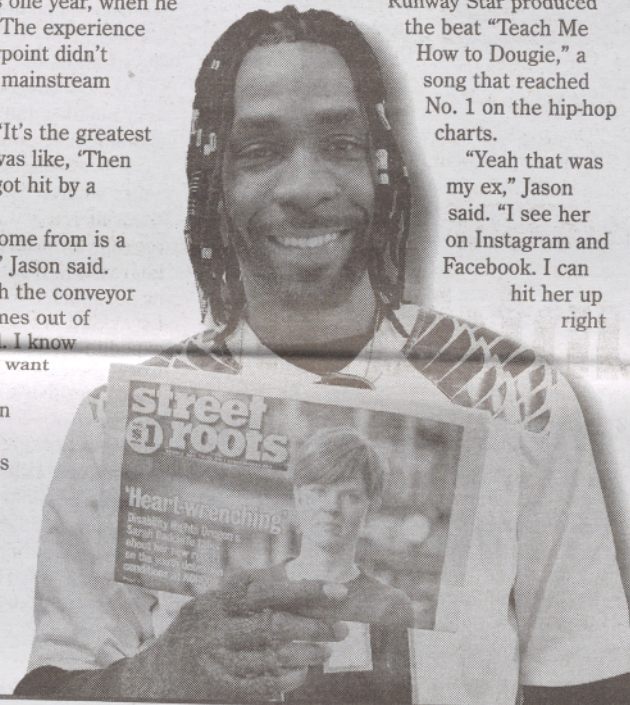
Jason uses "Black Stone" as his hip-hop name and described the music he is making now: "I grew up and listened to certain music in Long Beach - gangsta music. But I have a totally different approach. I'm more like a party rapper, rapping to the ladies."

He belongs to the group New West and another called the Weirdos. Jason has a manager. He was interviewed by the Portland radio station JAM'N 107.5 and had a show at the Fifth Avenue Lounge last December.

"It's like different things are taking off," he said.

As his career begins to pick up, Jason said selling Street Roots gives him flexibility. He sells the newspaper at Safeway in the Pearl District.

"I'm a recording artist and producer," Jason said. "Street Roots really helps me out with that process as far as being creative. Doing what I need to do."



Answers to Page 15 Puzzles

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Sheeptoast

by Elizabeth Considine

