

THE SOUL OF EUGENE HIP HOP

Leaving Chicago behind, Kevin Hustle wants to use hip hop to create strong communities in Eugene



PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

If you've spent time in a city, even little Eugene, you know the main characters on the sidewalk: the kid looking to bum a cigarette; the person staked out on a corner trying to convince you that the world is doomed; and the folks just angling to get you to buy their stuff.

This is how I bumped into Kevin Hustle in downtown Eugene. I'll admit I was skeptical when he approached me with something along the lines of, "Hey, check out my demo."

But holy shit, it was fantastic. His flow, his beats and his messages — he has some for everyone. Perhaps that's because this is a man who eats, sleeps and breathes hip hop.

Hustle, aka KVN H\$L, (né Kevin Caldwell, but soon to be legally changed to Kevin Hustle because, yes, he is that serious) honed his self-promotion techniques in his hometown of Chicago, where hundreds of up-and-coming artists work for the same goal: making it. And "making it" doesn't necessarily mean the stereotypes we've been fed: Dudes with five Lamborghinis pouring expensive bottles of booze over horny, naked chicks.

For Hustle, the focus is on the beautiful things that hip hop does for its community, like bringing people together for barbeques, getting to know your neighbors and working towards common goals with one another. He wants this for Eugene.

Hip hop traditionally has meant different things depending on the person, Hustle says, and the genre has grown into a whole lot of sub-genres. He sums up his sound as hip-hop soul.

"I think in modern society people need to be able to enjoy your music, feel something that's real and vibe out, that's all," Hustle says. "I put in a message and keep a message in the music.

He adds: "If I feel it from my soul, I'm gonna make it soul."

His sound is also that of his own story — what the roots of hip hop are all about. "You have to understand culture and you have to be able to identify with your culture," he says. "I have a deep urge to express myself and I have to express myself, especially my culture."

After leaving Chicago, Hustle traveled to Memphis, Ann Arbor and Atlanta, with more stops along the way, all the while churning out three albums and a few music videos. He says he's shared his sound with folks from every background under the sun.

"You have to understand so much politics," he explains, "'cause when you're dealing with people in different geographies, you really have to understand the social politics of different places if you really wanna connect with them."

Hustle landed in Eugene by happenstance while traveling and promoting his music (plus, he heard we have awesome weed) and he stuck around once he saw how much more comfortable — not to mention safe — people are expressing identity here — gender expression, race and even the "travelers," too.

"There's no problem with building a hip-hop community here," he says. "I already see all the evidence that shows it's fertile."

The communities downtown and around the University of Oregon campus, which he says are vital to succeeding in the local music scene, have been snatching up his demos and showing lots of encouragement through one-on-one conversations.

"I think people [downtown] really appreciate the hustle," he explains, emphasizing the importance between location and self-promotion. "And this is a college town. I feel that if [Eugeneans] don't incorporate more hip hop, you're going to experience cultural clashes."

Now, there is something that comes to mind when "hip hop" and "Eugene" are stacked together. This town has a very large, very white middle and lower class with a pretty homogenized music scene (among other things). That doesn't exactly scream "hip-hop mecca."

Hustle says the hip-hop scene is different here considering that people can make hip-hop for leisure instead of by necessity.

"Hip hop came from a need, and now that it's evolved, people do it for fun," he says. "Here, people don't have that thirst and hunger. It's not in 'em 'cause it's a little easier to live in Eugene."

The poverty in Eugene isn't comparable to other parts of the country, Hustle explains, so a drive for success is not vital when the demand isn't based on survival.

"The artists here do it for fun," he says. "The thing that makes an artist actually go out there is their need to. A lot of people, that's not their only option. Then, once it becomes your only option, you have to commit to what it means to be successful."

Yet Hustle insists that the potential is here if people — whether they're involved with the hip-hop scene or not — work together, though he does offer a caveat.

"Even when people want to work together, we haven't been taught how, so it's just uncomfortable," he says.

Hip hop is all about community, which means introducing different cultures and being supportive of one another. Hustle explains how that for hip hop to grow here, people must partner up from different parts of town.

"I love creating systems that aren't rigid, and hip hop in its culture has to be fluid," he says. "It's the number-one art — it forces you to paint, it forces you to see colors."

As far as local involvement is concerned, Hustle says that he's seen an amazing amount of enthusiasm from locals about fundraising for his latest video for his song "Music." He's performed at the Black Forest and The Boreal and intends on doing two-plus shows a month from here on out.

Hustle has also been collaborating with Ife, a videographer from Artistic Outlet Media, who is helping him shoot the new video with scenes from around town.

Between performing and promotion, his next big project in the works is designed to document Eugene through the lens of hip hop (he's calling it "Adventure Hip Hop") with fellow Eugene rappers — which rappers, however, has yet to be decided.

More than anything, Hustle says that "at the end of the day, all we can do is live and pray to inspire people. I can allow people to see what they already know from a different perspective."

Kevin Hustle performs 9 pm Friday, July 29, at The Boreal, 450 W. 3rd Ave; \$2 suggested donation. Hustle says hip-hop artists are welcome to join him on stage and have a hell of a time sharing flows. Hustle also performs 8 pm Saturday, July 30, at The Barn Light downtown.