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Exploring Hip Hop at SMC

By Lou Fancher



SMC's Hip-Hop & Social Justice Series Committee and student publicist (L-R): Maria Luisa Ruiz, Scott Schonfeldt-Aultman, Cynthia Ganote, Aaron Sachs, Jennifer Kennedy, Randy Menjivar. (Kennedy and other students in a Public Relations class handled the program's publicity campaign.) Photo Ohlen Alexander

Popular notions of Hip Hop spring from the all-too-familiar media exploitation of artists, according to both Slaughter and Schonfeldt-Aultman. "I thought it was all rappers with money, cars and women," Slaughter says, "but actually, Hip Hop came out of neglect and was a way for people to find a voice for themselves." Schonfeldt-Aultman agrees: "It emerged out of poverty and wasn't always violent."

The class is becoming a powerful tool at SMC, which has had its share of difficulty when it comes to racial issues. A recent Western Association of Schools & Colleges report, citing SMC for "little evidence of tangible results" in the areas of diversity and civility, revealed a glaring need for improved communication. "Through the class, students connect with other students—they find it stimulating," says Schonfeldt-Aultman. "A roundtable event pulled in close to 80 people—And they stayed!" he adds.

Any trouble stirred up by SMC's Hip Hop series is not caused by the course. Racial, economic, gender and social injustice bubble barely below the surface of American culture; at SMC, the dialogue has begun. The triumph in exploring Hip Hop, the real pay-off for students, can be found in Slaughter's reformulated dreams: "I realized we can all learn from each other. I know that we can make a difference."

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Hip Hop and Social Justice, a new course led by Associate Professor Scott Schonfeldt-Aultman at Saint Mary's College, is both trouble and triumph. Combine a small, Catholic college, populated and positioned amidst affluence, with Hip Hop, a spoken art form rising out of poverty and largely articulated by artists from underserved communities, and the ensuing discussions become vivid.

Which is exactly the purpose of the course and a related series of panel discussions, films and live performances held at SMC during the past year. "I originally came to Saint Mary's to make changes," says Robert Slaughter, a sophomore Political Science Major. Born in East Oakland and raised in North Richmond, Slaughter never expected to go to college until Making Waves, a Bay area educational support program, gave him direction and enough faith in his abilities to pursue his dreams. Still, there was frustration. "I saw African Americans on the front of SMC brochures, but I didn't see diversity on campus," he explains.

Schonfeldt-Aultman saw the same picture. "I was aware that there are students whose lives at Saint Mary's don't reflect who they are, or their histories." Discussions with students, along with grants from the Campus Committee for Inclusive Excellence, led to the Hip Hop course. "These courses are growing at universities across the country," Schonfeldt-Aultman says. "It gives students ideas about race and class and gender: they see that there are undercurrents, there are political and social issues beyond the mainstream Hip Hop stuff."