

SCHOOL'D BY FUNKMODE

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INTERVIEW WITH RAHFEAL GORDON - HIP HOP SAVED MY LIFE - PART 1

Rahfeal Gordon is an award winning motivational speaker, entrepreneur and author who, like Hip Hop, grew out of a harsh and challenging environment before becoming a great success. What is especially notable about Rahfeal, however, is that he actually credits Hip Hop culture itself for being a big part of his success. In this two-part interview, we will get to know Rahfeal and how Hip Hop changed his life.

FM: What is "Hip Hop Saved My Life"?

RG: I created "Hip Hop Saved My Life" in 2005-2006. It's a seminar that tells my story in three parts. It starts in my youth, my adolescent years, and my struggles during that time. And then the transition, the things I learned from adolescence to young adulthood. And the third is where I am now. I remember watching a music video and thinking, "why doesn't anyone have a video of a motivational speaker that was representing Hip Hop and saying positive things to people?" and my friends encouraged me to go for it. In the beginning, no one was really biting it. But the next year, it took fire and got picked up by documentaries and was in the front page of newspapers and magazines. That's how the seminar came about. Then, usually with the seminars, I invite a Hip Hop artist to come out and perform during intermission. When we first started it, MySpace was the biggest thing and we sent emails to everyone there. Then we went to Def Jam and we were out in front trying to send out proposals. What I was trying to say was "Hip Hop Saved My Life" is going to be your introduction to a motivational speaker in Hip Hop who is going to be as big as Nas, as Jay Z, as a Russell Simmons. I felt like, in my view, there wasn't a major motivational speaker in the culture of Hip Hop. I felt like, if I could create a platform to allow other people in the culture of Hip Hop to become motivational speakers, that would be awesome. Both Jay Z and KRS-One talked about being a blueprint, or a pioneer. And one thing about being a pioneer, which is what "Hip Hop Saved My Life" is about, is that pioneers in any culture get the most bumps and bruises. They're the ones who go through more storms than anyone else because no one has done it before them. Then, anyone who comes after doesn't have to go through as much because they have a blueprint.

FM: To the detail you feel comfortable expressing, what unique challenges did you face as a child?

RG: Losing my brother who was murdered. Not being able to have my parents around consistently growing up. Living in the shelters and trying to figure out ways to stay positive and productive. The environment I was living in was very negative and "survival of the fittest". Growing up without guidance from my parents because of their personal struggles with drugs and addiction. By the time I got to the third grade is when things really started to unfold. That's when it got really extreme with the abuse, whether it be physical, verbal, or even spiritual. My Father was the guy who I looked up to a lot. So, to see him dealing with drugs and the people that were actually giving it to him, it messed up my mind because I'm trying to figure out, you know, here's the man who I admire, my role model, my superhero, my Batman, my Superman, but he's actually embracing Kryptonite. So, for me, I couldn't understand that. That's when I started questioning a lot of things that were going on. My Mom ended up being abusive with drugs. I always said that she followed in the footsteps of my Father. My Father was a drug dealer and then he ended up abusing the drugs that he sold. So, in a sense, it got heavy for them. Now, my Mom, because she loved my Father so much, she kinda stayed even though he abused her verbally and physically. It got to the point, by the time I got to the third grade, my Mother couldn't take it anymore. There was a major, major fight and that caused them both to split. My Mom ended up leaving for a couple of days and left us with our Father. And, we were really scared of our Father at that time, because it was extreme at that point. My Mom broke down. She couldn't build herself back up and then she pretty much left everything behind for a while and went with my Grandmother.

FM: Did your challenges change once you became a teenager/young adult?

RG: You get to the point where you become immune to the fact that your parents are not around and you're living in shelters. But, you're probably wearing the same outfit, so you've got the pride issue. And then, it also started to shift to the peer pressure. Because now you're thinking, "where am I gonna get this love that I've been so much yearning for?" So, I'm looking for it in individuals who aren't family members or anyone I'm around whether they were negative or positive. There was also dealing with the fact of "Okay, I need to eat. Where am I gonna eat? How am I gonna get money to eat?" So now, here's the point where I have to be creative and also be aware of my resources to eat. I have to ask myself, "What type of creativity or gift do I have to help provide me food or shelter?"

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FM: Was being at school a haven for you or was it an extension of those difficulties?

RG: Absolutely a haven for me. I looked at it as my own personal city. I didn't have my Mom around so my Principal, who was a woman, became my school Mother. I had Aunts and Uncles who were my teachers. I literally had a visual where I saw these people as my family. I only hung out with my friends at school. There was a time where, after every quarter, the Principal organized this big celebration for those kids who were on Honor Roll. They got to have a sleepover and all the smart kids got to stay together. She always saw potential in me. Even though I didn't make Honor Roll, because I was struggling with my personal life so that affected my grades, she still allowed me to come stay the night at the school with these kids, so I got a chance to see how they played and how they interacted with each other. I got a chance to embrace their methods of studying, what they talked about, their music. So, for me, I got a chance to see things in a different view. And she, my Principal, my school Mom, wanted me to see this to understand what I needed to do to become greater.

FM: When do you remember first being exposed to Hip Hop? Do you remember how you felt about that experience?

RG: The farthest back I could remember is Kris Kross (laughs). I was like, you know, first, second, third grade. I remember, like, my Grandmother got me their cassette tape. And, my Mother allowed me to wear my pants backwards* to school (laughs), and I was just so estatic, and to this day I still light up about it. I still can't believe my Mom allowed me to do that. But, at the same time, I was like, this music, this particular creativity, is something I can relate to and connect with. My Father was a big Big Daddy Kane fan. And, even though it was R&B, he was into New Edition and he was a big Bobby Brown fan too, and had all the tapes. For me, that's how I got into Hip Hop. In High School, of course breakdancing was my thing. And then, in Middle School, I was very big on Tupac, Nas ... aww, Nas was my man. These were the things that I grew up with going into High School.

*Kris Kross was known for wearing their clothes backwards

FM: Can you relate how the presence of Hip Hop helped you through your challenges?

RG: Just coping with certain situations in my life. Like, "All That I Got is You" by Ghostface Killah and Mary J. Blige. I remember listening to that and memorizing the words and when I was in the shelter or going through a situation and I'm crying, I would repeat those words. I remember listening to Nas and Jay Z and hearing their words about life and their wisdom, and I don't know, it was just so potent to me. Especially Tupac, I was really big on Tupac, and what he was saying. I just took that and embraced it and applied to my life. I thought about, like, taking what's negative and making something positive, and just trying to figure out how do I do that. Because Hip Hop was always that particular culture that was birthed from somewhere people were going through a lot of struggle and wanted to be creative, and I felt like, that was me. And every song, and I have a slew of songs now that are floating through my head, they would literally just have me. I remember just, off the cuff, Tupac would say, "picture me rollin' that 500 Benz"**. The vision of it and his keen focus on wanting more, even if the materialistic piece was what you had to see as the key to success, then visualize it and put yourself in it. So, it's like, I can picture Tupac like that. But, I can also picture myself becoming a great speaker and saying Hip Hop is the reason why I'm a great speaker.

**"Picture Me Rollin'" by 2Pac

FM: That's a good point you raise and something FUNKMODE is talking about frequently. As Hip Hop culture now has mainstream exposure, it is often consumed out of context. Therefore, what outsiders see in Hip Hop might be judged as negative when, for the creators, it is something really positive. In this case, whereas people with money may hear all the lyrics about money and cars and think that they're just senseless boasting and materialistic, for the people without money, it is their way of dreaming for something bigger and expressing a wish for a better life. Are there any other lyrics that you use in your seminar which particularly helped you?

RG: In "All That I Got is You" by Ghostface, he says "Dwellin' in the past, flashbacks when I was young / Whoever thought that I'd have a baby girl and three sons / I'm goin' through this difficult stage I find it hard to believe / Why my old Earth had so many seeds / But she's an old woman, and due to me I respect that / I saw life for what it's really worth and took a step back / Family ain't family no more, we used to play ball / Eggs after school, eat grits cause we was poor / Grab the pliers for the channel, fix the hanger on the TV / Rockin each others pants to school wasn't easy / We survived winters, snotty nosed with no coats / We kept it real, but the older brother still had jokes / Sadly, Daddy left me at the age of six / I didn't know nuttin' but Mommy neatly packed his things / She cried, and Grandma held the family down / I guess Mommy wasn't strong enough, she just went down / Check it, fifteen of us in a three bedroom apartment / Roaches everywhere, cousins and aunts was there / Four in the bed, two at the foot, two at the head / I didn't like to sleep with Jon-Jon he peed the bed"*. I think that's always been one of my favorites because that was my life. So, when I'm traveling speaking to 8,000, 10,000 people, going somewhere with some multimillionaire guys, I'm explaining that verse to them, saying, "Yo, that's me!" It's always a reminder that I've come far, to never forget where I've come from and to always remember to keep it humble. Always keep it humble.

*Rahfeal said this entire verse from memory

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HIP HOP WORD OF THE WEEK

Dirt: Someone or something doing something bad/immoral or the act itself of doing something bad.

EX: "Trust me, you ain't want nothin' to do with him. Every time I see that fool, he's doin' dirt."

Song reference: "Picture Me Rollin'" by Tupac: "Will God forgive me / For all the dirt I did / To feed kids?"

BONUS: NAME ANOTHER SONG/ARTIST THAT HAS USED THIS HHWOTW

EXTRA LEARNING

- 1) What types of challenges might you have that anything within Hip Hop culture can help you with?
- 2) Have you ever heard a Hip Hop lyric that inspired or helped you? If so, what was it?
- 3) Name an award that Rahfeal Gordon has won.