



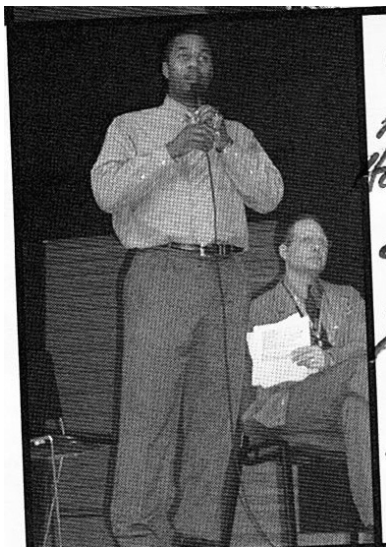
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A Conversation About Music, Legacies, and Youth Culture: An Interview

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As a follow-up to his own article in this collection Damon Cagnolatti decided to interview Thomas Lee about his experiences with EMERGE, a student group designed to build critical thinking through discussions on hip-hop, the local community, and youth culture. Thomas Lee is currently the director for the Pasadena, CA based transitional housing organization known as "Hillsides Youth Moving On." At Hillsides Thomas assists emancipated foster youth (ages 17-21) in achieving financial and social independence.

Damon: Members of EMERGE from 2003 have moved on to become managers, supervisors, teachers, and professors. In college, many of them have gone on to start up EMERGE at several different colleges and universities throughout California. There's a lot of success that comes out of K/D. But what inspired you to open your classroom to the students of K/D during your free period? I mean, it not a common practice.



Thomas Lee



Thomas: I have to tell you the students drove it. They seemed like they were yearning for something. Even my first year there, I was accepted so well by the youth. They asked me questions trying to figure out “who is this guy?” and “what is he about?” Remember when I first started at K/D, I was the only Black male English teacher. Then they saw that I had a deep love for hip hop and they heard me talk about social issues especially 9/11 which happened my first year as a teacher. So they got an in-depth view of social politics and beliefs because I thought it was important to talk about social concerns. There were several students who came from other English classes who came to me and said that they wanted to start an organization and asked me “would you be interested in being our sponsor?” So of course I said yes. It was the right time and right space—the setting was right for it.

Damon: Speaking on your deep love for hip hop, in what ways do you think hip hop could get students to become more actively engaged in learning?

Thomas: I’m worried it doesn’t have as big an impact as it used to have. The political messages were easier to access in the 1980s and early 90s. If you look now, hip hop is everywhere! Artists sell everything! They are used to advertise for computers, cars, auto-insurance, you name it. Now the politics of hip hop has become invisible for our youth. And this makes me question whether hip hop as a whole can have as deep an impact on ideas and critical thinking of youth as it once did. I think this ability is now best demonstrated through particular artists, which takes me back to the era of Black Soul-Music from the 1960s and 70s. Despite popular belief, it wasn’t all of Soul Music that had political messages. It was only a few artists like Curtis Mayfield, James Brown, Marvin Gaye, and The Ojays who inspired people through timely songs about American social politics. It wasn’t a full blown social movement like Hip Hop has been since the late eighties.



For the youth of today the question becomes: how will they get access to the kinds of politically conscious messages available in some hip hop? To be specific, I'm talking about the kind of messages that get them to engage in self-reflection on issues of access in a capitalist structure, or issues surrounding our education system, and things of that sort. They really have to go out and find it. They have to seek it. They have to be exposed to it. The only people who might do that would be older relatives, maybe a professor, or mentor of some sort. But they're not going to get it on the radio or TV. So what do we do when artists who could be great vehicles in getting that message out have now been co-opted by the corporate structure?

Damon: What artists would you identify as either "great vehicles" for political commentary or artists who've now been "co-opted" by the corporate structure?

Thomas: I think I'll start with the latter group. Common, was a major player at one time, but now he wants to be a movie star; same thing with Ice Cube! Dr. Dre! He used to be a part of The Worlds's Most Dangerous group NWA. He's selling headphones and computer programs. Even Snoop Dogg was able to get a massive amount of people's attention. He could have done something. But the most important thing to guys like him is "gangster capitalism," which is all about somehow getting into the system and making as much as you can as fast as possible. Jay-Z too! He had enormous potential, but now he's interested in being a basketball team owner and hanging out with Warren Buffett. Now I think someone who has enormous potential are artists like Lupe Fiasco or Jay Electronica or Lil Wayne. All of these guys are incredibly smart and talented. However, the question is still how will these kids get it? There is no vehicle for them to hear new artists breaking through with an incredible message. That's where it's been completely imbalanced. So I don't know if hip hop can be that new medium as a whole or



if it will be specific artists who serve as a catalyst for more political and communal activism.

Damon: What I hear is a concern about hip hop's influence on the community. How viable a space is the classroom to introduce these artists and their messages, if our concern is to cultivate a critical community?

Thomas: Sure. The classroom could always be a viable place for building community. Nevertheless, one of the things I have seen in my own experiences is that with hip hop music there are going to be students who really embrace it and others for whom it might end up being foreign to them. I think it's hit or miss with the current group. That is where I have had my biggest struggles. Usually they love it because it is new, fresh, and intriguing. However, they are bombarded with so many different things that grab their attention. It is like being one person against an avalanche of stimulants and it's hard to beat that. Overall, many [students] have a hard time accepting hip hop on its own terms while still being critical of it. However, hip hop seems appropriate given that my brightest students have usually been critical about the kind of education they were getting and the environment in which they lived. That is where they start.

Damon: In EMERGE, you always stressed the value of "critical thinking." For educators, this concept is what we would call a loaded term. What does critical thinking mean to you?

Thomas: I think for me critical thinking means being able to think about every aspect of your environment and the ways in which you learn. It connects with the idea of meta-cognition and high order thinking. One is able to look at the way they learn and understand the world in which they live from multiple perspectives. More importantly, one is able to look at the right and wrongs of what they're interpreting and experiencing and use that understanding in ways that get other



people to consider how they're thinking. When I think about critical thought, I think it's the importance of knowing how to be fluent in discussing ideas. That literacy is a kind of fluency in the world of ideas and that it's important in helping one make their way through life whether that way be a career in science, the arts, law, or in a trade. That literacy helps one to gain a deeper understanding of other people as well as yourself. I think that's the one of the things we struggle with as humans; having a deeper understanding of these things will allow us to be more accepting of others and the struggles they're going through. I think that's where I start interacting with my students.

Damon: Let's bring it more directly back to the students of K/D. Early on in your teaching career you started out at San Gabriel High School, which served a student body that was predominantly Asian American and then you moved on to K/D. How did you feel about such a social change, having to engage African American students on their own terms?

Thomas: I loved it! One of the reasons I went to school was to teach African American youth and I make no bones about that. They deserve the best. When I went to school I went to school I went with the notion that I wanted to learn as much as I can to be able to give it all to those kids. Working at K/D was the best job that I had. But I don't want to romanticize it. There were some struggles because not all African Americans are the same. There were some students who gravitated to my style of teaching and there were some who were vehemently opposed to it. They thought it was absolute nonsense. Those that happened to come from evangelical backgrounds or those that were on a trajectory to be a part of our free-market system they did not want to hear any ideas counter to some of the things they've grown up believing. For example, when we were reading a poem by Langston Hughes where he's questioning God, there was one student who was so appalled she thought 'how dare he question



God.’ My response was why wouldn’t he? He’s questioning and thinking through ideas that invite his readers to reflect on and question those same ideas. I remember a play by August Wilson called “Gem of The Ocean” and there’s a part in the play where one of the characters is questioning why God didn’t stop the winds from blowing the slave ships across the ocean. After reading that part I always thought to myself, “the old adage ‘all things happen for a reason’ isn’t a sufficient answer for me.” When you get into a conversation with others that adage shouldn’t stop the conversation, if anything it should keep the conversation going. So, she and I used to argue back and forth everyday and she eventually left my class. I still think about that situation to this day. It’s a shame she wasn’t willing to accept that people had these kinds of questions and I wasn’t willing to simply let her silence those questions with that old adage. I had to challenge her if not to come up with better answers then at least to come up with some newer questions.

The other part of my answer to your question is that for me, I recognize that my role as a teacher is much bigger than acting as an instructor. For many of them I am a role model, a mentor, and a father figure. I think it is important for me to keep that at the forefront of my mind. It’s a burden and at the same time a blessing. I do not know what it is like to just enter into a classroom and just teach. I am almost always representing the entire Black race when I get up in front of a class. In teaching these kids there is also the charge for me to debunk every negative image of Black men that they have seen and experienced. When we speak “proper English” we’re showing them another form of expression that many of them see too rarely. When students come into the classroom, we do not know what kind of weight they are going to put on the teacher. I think students come in thinking a) the teacher is going to validate everything the we know; b) the teacher will be entertaining; or c) the teacher is like every other teacher I’ve ever had and just falls



into the blur of past instructors. As teachers, we have to be none of those things. We don't want to simply validate what students already know. As a Black male teacher I'm not on stage trying to be entertaining. And then finally, we don't want to fall into the blur of other English teachers that they've had. We want to be something more. We want to make a long-term difference. This is the kind of impact a minority teacher can have on youth and engaging minority students on their own terms is incredibly useful in thinking about how these kids develop their own identities. When they get to that proverbial fork in the road to figure out which direction their life will take it is the teacher who can get up in front of the class and show them that there are other ways of living and thriving in the world. The biggest impact that an African American teacher can have on their students is by showing all students no matter what race or culture that they have options, not everyone fits into a stereotype. That's where the fun comes and that's where learning begins.

Damon: What kind of struggles did you have with the administrators who were resistant to EMERGE?

Thomas: African Americans at K/D have struggled with youth being vocal and asserting their will. A lot of the administration at K/D was uncomfortable seeing their students do these things. But that's something I felt they needed to get used to. They didn't impede the work that students in EMERGE did but they didn't support it either, which says a lot without really saying it. I think it's because historically when youth have taken charge major changes occurred. Think back to the youth movements of the 60s and 70s. All were lead by the youth of that era. I think it's ironic that these administrators are children of the civil-rights movement but they forget that some of their major movements were lead by kids. But as soon as kids start doing it now, the impulse is to reel them in. We need to encourage students to speak their minds and to look below the surface to identify deep structural problems and to take action in



order that they might assert their own agency.

Damon: What kind of possibilities do you see for Hip Hop as a way to continue to shape communal actions in Los Angeles?

Thomas: I think the last time there was communal activity in LA was Project Blowed. I think we need to start getting artists to start performing back in the community. I remember as a youth I was able to see King T, LL Cool J, and Uncle Jamm's Army at the LA Sports Arena just outside of Downtown LA for everybody to see them. When I was 16 I saw Public Enemy and Rakim at the Civic Center in Pasadena. When's the last time you heard about a concert like that? We have to get artists to reinvest themselves in the community. Then perhaps the youth can use them as support or models for reinvesting in their respective communities.