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War of the Words

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If you’ve attended an open mic night in the M-Shop this year, you may have noticed something different. Amidst the singers, comedians and lovably awkward magicians-in-training were…battle rappers? It may seem out of place at Iowa State, but members of the BattleRap club are hoping to change that—one verse at a time.

Austin Kirkpatrick, the creator of the BattleRap club and a frequent performer at open mic nights as “Mac Paddy,” has been rapping since his senior year of high school but didn’t become interested in battle rap until last year. He says he was inspired by a)

“YOU’LL REGRET EVER ACCEPTING THIS BATTLE AGAINST ME—I’LL BLOW YOU TO SMITHEREENS LOOKING LIKE MINCED MEAT.”
- MAC PADDY VS. NIPS

project in one of his communication studies courses where he looked at the impoliteness strategies used in battle rap—and quickly became fascinated with the culture.

“I think battling is the coolest aspect of hip-hop,” says Kirkpatrick. “It’s the most real—it’s raw.”

Kirkpatrick claims that battle rappers are the highest caliber of rappers, with artistry and lyrics unadulterated by music or the media. He got into battle rap through watching videos of International Battle Leagues online, starting with a Canadian rap battle league called King of the Dot. Since he got into battle rap, he’s been less interested in more commercial hip-hop.

“I don’t even really listen to rap music anymore,” he says. “I’m either making my own, or I watch battle rappers.”

After he started watching videos, it didn’t take long for him to learn the rules of rap battling, along with more specific skills and styles.

Rap battling involves rapping with no music in 90-second rounds. Although freestyle or improvisational rapping is impressive, Kirkpatrick says that a mix of freestyle and written raps is usually the best strategy. He suggests writing for 75 seconds, and then leaving 15 seconds for rebuttal.

“If there’s no freestyle, it’s not a battle,” he explains, “It’s just two rappers rapping their verses, and that’s not the entertainment I’m searching for.”

Although its name contains the word “battle,” Kirkpatrick says it’s strictly verbal.

“You don’t want this verbal combat to turn into physical combat, because then you get away from the academic perspective of argumentation and informal debate,” he says.

Unable to tame his growing passion for rap battling and equipped with his newfound knowledge of the rules and format, Kirkpatrick formed the BattleRap club last spring. Slowly, he and a few others began performing at open mic nights in the M-Shop, and started branching out to a few other events this fall.

Even though he’s passionate about it, he realizes that it’s confusing for some people.

“In Iowa…this is not where you’d expect something like this to pop up,” he says.

Kirkpatrick hopes that the club will help to change people’s perspective about rap, which is often clouded by misconceptions. He points out that what they’re doing is more like poetry.

“This is more about the intellectualism behind it,” he says. “There’s so much more to being able to speak with a great cadence than just thugs and guns. I want to show Iowa State that rapping is more than just this negative connotation.”

For Syed Muhammad (who goes by the rap name Direct), a junior in mechanical engineering and member of the BattleRap club, rap has helped him bridge a cultural
rapping since his senior year of high school. As "Mac Paddy," he has been a member of the BattleRap club and a frequent performer at open mic nights. Austin Kirkpatrick, the creator of the BattleRap club, is hoping that members of the club will attract more people to the open mic nights. It may seem out of place at Iowa State, but Kirkpatrick claims that battle rappers are the highest caliber of rappers, with artistry and delivery often found in rap isn’t just fun to listen to—it has real-life benefits for those that perform it.

If you really do get passionate about it, you’re going to be much more articulate,” he says. “Having that vocabulary expansion from looking for rhyming words will better your speaking in general.”

Many people criticize rap for its frequent use of profanity, but Muhammad points out that “vulgar” language is often more expressive. He once offered a disclaimer of an explicit rap to a friend, and still remembers his response.

“My friend told me ‘True literature is explicit,’ and that’s just how it is,” he says. In addition to better speaking ability, the quick thinking skills that rap battling sharpens are helpful in many other situations.

“Being able to think on your feet is an important skill in any other situation,” says Muhammad.

He says that in battle rap, you’re forced to not just think quickly, but also to make quick decisions. Constantly engaging in that process eventually makes you better at it, and in turn better at responding in emergency situations.

Kirkpatrick says that in a culture that is increasingly more accepting of hip-hop, rap battling is a great outlet. It may help with speaking skills, but there’s also a therapeutic aspect to the war of words that is battle rap.

“It’s my chance to vent,” he says. “It’s my chance to get angry, and my chance to express what kind of skill I’ve got in my writing—I love coming up with these patterns and wordplay, and just being able to show it off.”

Muhammad agrees.

“I get psychopathic when I’m on stage,” he says with a laugh.

With its fearless, braggadocious lines and verbal sparring, rap battling requires a lot of confidence and confrontation, which initially intimidated Kirkpatrick.

“I never used to like battling, because I was scared when people got in my face,” he admits. “Now, I’m able to take on the challenge. It’s a rush—that nervousness turns into adrenaline really quickly.”

Now in its third semester, the BattleRap club is slowly growing. In the fall semester, they performed at nearly every open mic night, along with other events, like the Greek community’s “ExCYtment on the Streets.” It has around 20 members, although according to Kirkpatrick, “maybe five of them can rap.” Kirkpatrick wants to get to a point where he can be the host, facilitating the battles of his members, instead of being the one who’s rap battling every time. Still, he is happy with its initial success and is looking for quality over quantity of members.

Along with the thrill of competition and performing, there are a lot of everyday benefits to battle rapping. Kirkpatrick explains that the improvisational component of rap battling improves your ability to think on your feet and improvise, and prompts continuous vocabulary expansion. The nature of rap battling means there are always challenges, which forces a rapper to continuously improve and work on their craft. The vocal acrobatics and fast delivery often found in rap isn’t just fun to listen to—it has real-life benefits for those that perform it.

“Try fighting fire with fire by lighting tires and pyres, like an eye for an eye? Or an entire empire!”

-MAC PADDY VS. DIRECT