

PERSON OF INTEREST DAWN-ELISSA FISCHER

The potential of hip-hop

By Johnathon E. Briggs

Dawn-Elissa Fischer has crisscrossed the globe, exploring how young people around the world use hip-hop as a tool for political empowerment.

A founder of the National Hip-Hop Political Convention, which held its second biennial gathering in Chicago this summer, Fischer has studied the role of hip-hop in political organizing throughout the U.S. as well as Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Senegal, South Africa, Sweden and Tanzania.

Fischer, 29, also is the youth and education coordinator for the Hiphop Archive at Stanford University and teaches courses at Laney College in Oakland, including "The Politics of Protest: Is Hip-Hop a Social Movement?"

Q: How did hip-hop influence your own youth?

A: When I began to find my own voice as a youth, it wasn't necessarily The Last Poets or even Bob Dylan, but it was hip-hop that vocalized my [sense of] social injustice. I was born in 1977. So hip-hop became the soundtrack for my political organizing, beginning in the '80s.

At that time, it was very in-your-face, black-nationalist and cultural-nationalist rhetoric in much of the music that was out: X-Clan, Public Enemy, even works from N.W.A., MC Lyte and Queen Latifah. Then there would also be these sorts of "don't give up" messages. That sort of mantra inspired me as a young person.

Q: Is hip-hop a social movement?

A: I continue to ride the fence, sad to admit.

Q: What would it take to convince you that it is?

A: If you would have asked me this in 2004, I probably would have been very fixed in saying that hip-hop was a social movement. That was following what [social movement theorist] Charles Tilly puts forward as the W.U.N.C. theory. Basically, if something is a social movement, it has a cause that's wor-



AP photo for the Tribune by Mark Schiefelbein

Dawn-Elissa Fischer has studied hip-hop's role in political organizing in the U.S. and elsewhere.

thy—that's the W—people are united, there's a large number of people and they're committed to the cause.

Q: What has changed your opinion since 2004?

A: After traveling around the United States helping to set up local organizing committees in preparation for the 2004 National Hip-Hop Political Convention, I felt that I definitely saw large numbers of people who were united around what seemed to be a worthy cause, and they seemed to be committed. However, now that it's 2006, I've reassessed the worthiness parameter. I definitely see hip-hop being a salient force in regards to raising the level of race and class analysis. However, until we begin to seriously engage gender and sexuality into that equation, we are not realizing its full potential.

Q: Is there any progressive hip-hop out there?

A: There is a hip-hop cultural movement that is feminist, anti-heterosexist, such as the Deep Dickollective here in the Bay Area. But as far as the national movement as a whole, for example, when you look at our 2004 National Hip Hop Political Agenda [education, economic justice, criminal justice, health and wellness, human rights], gender and sexuality were taken off the original document.

Q: How do youth in other parts of the world use hip-hop as a tool for political empowerment?

A: Many scholars have this sort of "grass is greener on the other side" view of hip-hop in other countries. Like there's more "real" hip-hop in other countries; it's more political. I think that hip-hop is pretty much the same in this country as it is in other countries. If you go to the right communities, you'll definitely see people who

are doing very progressive work, particularly using hip-hop to resist race and class [divisions] in their countries. However, I don't necessarily see sustained work in the field of gender and sexuality anywhere in the world.

Q: What is the most common misconception about hip-hop today?

A: Hip-hop is blamed for being particularly misogynist. A valid argument that people give is, "How much more misogynist is it than mainstream rock music or a beer commercial?" That's actually an argument that I used to give. But now that I'm a little bit older and I'm a parent of a young male, I actually feel a stronger sense of urgency that we have to do better.

—An edited transcript

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GIFT:

reporter and the author of "A Treasury of Great American

linked to that ghastly traffic accident in which six children

legal loans of the Teapot Dome scandal.