

Cuba: Welsh 'scratching' in Havana



It is estimated that around 1,000 rap groups exist in Cuba, and 53 of the most popular ensembles from all over the island met with 20 groups from abroad, including Wales, in the 9th Havana International Hip Hop Festival in early August. Rap and Hip Hop are growing in popularity in Cuba, and these music forms are said to be more popular now among the young in Cuba than the traditional Salsa and Son, and they speak directly to the younger generation about the issues they care about. This annual festival is organised by the Hermanos Saiz Association of young Cuban artists, and the Cuban Institute of Music. The aim of the festival was to show the chief elements of Hip Hop culture - turntablism, breakdancing, graffiti and emceeing, or rapping - and it attracted a great deal of national and international comment in print and internet media.

With the help of the British Council in Cuba, and in co-operation with Community Music of Wales and Wales Arts International, two young Hip Hop DJs from southern Wales showed off their 'scratching' technique to Cuban rappers. Robert Stagg and Joel Lipman of the Welsh group 'Optimas Prime' demonstrated their DJ skills using a dual turntable in a 'scratching' technique - a category of 'turntabling'. This technique is as yet little practised in Cuba, but much admired. Their performance at Havana's Casa de Música Galiano was to a capacity audience, who applauded the dexterity of the DJs and the creativity of the music.

During their stay in Havana, Rob Stagg and Joel Lipman made a recording at a TV studio in Havana for the 'Cuerda Viva' popular music programme to be broadcast nationally in early September. They also made full use of their time to play in jam sessions and record with top Hip Hop bands in Havana, such as 'Eddy K', and to sample the variety of Cuban hip hop recordings.

The link with Wales goes back to a visit to Havana by the same DJs and two directors of Community Music Wales in March this year, supported by the National Assembly of Wales, in the context of an agreement on cultural and educational exchange signed between the two countries in 2002. The British Council in Cuba together with the Arts Council of Wales Lottery Fund helped make it possible for one of the leading rap groups in Cuba - 'Eddy K' - to perform at the 'Compass Point' Urban Music Festival in Cardiff in July this year.