The Hip Hop Project is the dynamic story of a group of New York City teenagers who transform their life stories into powerful works of art, using hip hop as a vehicle for self-development and personal discovery. The film traces the evolution of this award-winning outreach program created by Kazi, a formerly homeless teenager turned youth mentor. With the goal of developing a principled group of young artists, Kazi creates a safe environment in which he challenges young people to express themselves freely and write music about the real issues affecting their lives.

The film looks intimately at the lives of Kazi and two of his students, Princess and Cannon, as they strive to overcome daunting life obstacles to produce a collaborative album. In a miraculous turn, Russell Simmons, hip hop mogul and long-time supporter of the project, partners with Bruce Willis to donate a recording studio to the Hip Hop Project. After four years of collaboration, the group produces a powerful and thought-provoking album imbued with moving personal narratives and sharp social commentary. In contrast to the often negative characterizations of hip hop and rap music, this is a story of hope, healing, and the realization of dreams. To learn more about the film, view the trailer, and hear more of the music, please visit pressurepointfilms.com

About the Filmmaker: Matt Ruskin

Matt studied film production at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts where he graduated in 2002 as a University Honors Scholar. In addition to his studies, Matt worked with mentor Darren Aronofsky during the pre-production and production of REQUIEM FOR A DREAM. While studying under renowned documentary filmmaker George Stoney, Matt produced and directed THE GLEN OF THE DOWNS, an award-winning film about the first international environmental protest in Ireland. Since graduating from NYU, Matt has been...
working exclusively on THE HIP HOP PROJECT with filmmaking partner Scott Rosenberg for more than five years. He is currently writing and developing several documentary and narrative feature projects.

**Things to think about BEFORE the Screening and Q&A...**

(For discussion in the classroom)

The history of Hip Hop is a complicated thing. People argue about where it originally came from. People argue about what makes it good, what keeps hip hop true to its roots and about what adulterates it and takes away from hip hop’s original message, meaning and purpose. No matter what people argue about, it is a fact that Hip Hop culture has changed the musical and cultural landscape.

Take a moment to think about what is positive and negative about your conception of the hip hop culture before you see the stories of the Hip Hop Project students unfold. The film illustrates Hip Hop as a tool for self-expression that young people use in their lives – to improve themselves, to move forward, to process what they have been through and where they are going. We want you to think about why you think that this does and doesn’t work – and about what your own tools for self-expression are.

**What is ArtStart?**

*The purpose of Art Start is to value and nurture the voices, hearts and minds of under-served children and teenagers and help them transform their lives through the creative process. We use a multi-disciplined approach to arts education that is centered on the kids and their interests, and equips them with learning, creating and communicating skills. Art Start instills in our kids the confidence to ask important questions, make independent choices, and pursue meaningful opportunities to share their ideas and dreams. Offered in a nurturing environment, our programs challenge each child to develop his or her inner gifts and acquire tools to succeed in life.*

**What is the Hip Hop Project?**

Most of the teens who come to the *Hip-Hop Project* are on the verge of dropping out of high school, are surviving on the streets or have just been released from prison. Hip-hop music is a second language to the youth, its rich poetry and rhetorical power inspiring their creativity and passion. The *Hip-Hop Project* taps into this passion by bringing students together with professionals in the music industry who help them write, produce, market and distribute their own collective hip-hop album. The proceeds from the album and all the related marketing materials they create, such as music videos, t-shirts and posters, go into a special Scholarship/Enterprise Fund set up for the students.

The project was formed in 1999 by Chris “Kharma Kazi” Rolle, who discovered Art-Start as a “last chance” alternative high school in New York City when himself a teenager. Recognizing the transformative power of hip-hop, Rolle designed the intensive program to give young people confidence in their abilities, as well as knowledge and skills they can use in the future.
Discussion Questions to think about BEFORE you watch the film...


✓ Do you think that Hip Hop culture has gone in a positive or negative direction since it’s inception (or since you became aware of it as a music form)?

✓ Do you like Hip Hop? Why? Why does or doesn’t this genre of music speak to you?

✓ Why do you think that the young people that participated in the Hip Hop Project thought that Hip Hop was the best way to express their ideas about their lives and opinions? Why do you think young people, in general, gravitate to this art form (be it graffiti, music/beat making, spoken work, breakdancing, etc.)

✓ You are in an arts program right now, right? What do you think you are getting out of the program you work with? Do you think you will be able to use the tools you are learning now later in your life? If so… how?
The History of Hip Hop
(Wikipedia)

During the early 1970s, it came to the attention of DJs that the percussion parts of music (the break-beat) were most popular for dancing. DJ Kool Herc and Grandmaster Flash both independently isolated and repeated these parts of the music for the purpose of all-night dance parties. The favorite types of music were traditionally the breaks from funk songs, often featuring percussion.

Rapping then developed as MCs would talk over the music to promote their DJ, other dance parties, or take light-hearted jabs at other lyricists. This soon developed into the rapping that appears on earlier basic hip-hop singles, with MCs talking about problems in their areas and issues facing the community as a whole. Melle Mel, a rapper/lyricist with The Furious Five is often credited with being the first rap lyricist to call himself an "MC."

By the late 1970s a myriad DJs were releasing songs where MCs would rap to the beat. Popular tunes included Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five's "Supperrappin'," Kurtis Blow's "The Breaks," and The Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight". In 1982, Melle Mel & Duke Bootee recorded "The Message" (officially credited to Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five), a song that foreshadowed socially conscious hip hop.

Hip hop as a culture was further defined in 1983, when Afrika Bambaataa and the Soulsonic Force released a track called "Planet Rock". Instead of simply rapping over disco beats, Bambaataa created an innovative electronic sound, taking advantage of the rapidly improving drum machine and synthesizer technology. Many credit the sensation caused by the track as another defining moment in hip hop music and culture. The mainstream media began to focus on one of the greatest impacts of hip hop; instead of fighting with guns and knives, former gangmembers had a new way of battling — though break dancing, rapping, turntable mixing, and graffiti.

By 1985, youth worldwide were laying down scrap linoleum or cardboard, setting down portable stereo and spinning on their backs in tracksuits and sneakers to music by Run DMC, LL Cool J, the Fat Boys, Herbie Hancock, Soulsonic Force, Jazzy Jay, Egyptian Lover, Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde, and Stetsasonic, to name a few.
An interview with the Filmmaker, Matt Ruskin

✓ When did you first know you that you wanted to make films professionally?

I fell in love with the process of filmmaking while I in college and took a filmmaking class over the summer. Both the technical and creative challenges of visual storytelling were really exciting and inspired me to keep working at it. The next semester I transferred into film school.

✓ What was your first job in the film industry?

I worked as a Production Assistant on an independent feature film. The director knew I was studying film and gave me the opportunity to look over his shoulder a lot throughout the process. It was the best film education I received.

✓ In your own words, what is The Hip Hop Project about?

The Hip Hop Project is really a story about the human spirit – the desire to have voice and find meaning in our lives. In this case Kazi found meaning in his own life, by helping a group of young people find their own voices and heal in the process.

✓ Did you experience challenges when making the film?

Every day. There are so many changes associated with shooting documentary. There are technical challenges – following someone to school or to work with a four person crew. Also, shooting real people in their daily lives requires earning their trust. It can often be a long process and require a great deal of patience.

✓ Did you learn anything while making The Hip Hop Project that you had no idea you’d learn?

I learned a lot of things while working on The Hip Hop Project, but the thing that I was constantly reminded of is how enriching and fulfilling it can be to have a form of expression that you care deeply about.

✓ If you could go back and remake the film, would you do anything differently?

If we could go back in time, I would have started three years earlier when the program was created. Telling back story is really challenging and can often be boring.

✓ What do you hope that students will take away from watching the film?
I hope people leave feeling inspired to do something meaningful with their time and energy and contribute to the communities in which they live.

And finally, what are your words of advice to students interested in film?

If you love it, do it.

**After the Screening and Discussion**

Now that you’ve seen the film, here are some questions to think about and ways that you can keep thinking about some of the themes in the film, using art to express yourself and how you can get involved with programs in your area that can help you develop your chosen means of self-expression.

**Discussion Questions to think about AFTER you watch the film…**

- How do you think the students benefited from participating in the Hip Hop Project?
- How did you see Kazi grow throughout the film? Why do you think that as a result of working on the program – he seemed to benefit as much as the young people he was teaching?
- What were some of the issues that the youth portrayed in the film were trying to overcome? Do you feel that these issues are relevant to you, your friends and your community?
- Do you think that this type of project would have been possible with another art form? (i.e. filmmaking, the “rock music project”, the “ballet project”). If yes, why? If not, what is so unique about Hip Hop that makes it different?

**A short list of NYC arts organizations that serve young people…**

New York City is a city rich with opportunities for young people who have the itch to express themselves artistically. Whether you are interested in poetry, DJ’ing, painting, dancing, theater, filmmaking or almost anything else out there – you can find training for young people! We have included a short list of places to start your search for extracurricular art-making opportunities for teens, but you should do your own research! The internet has changed everything, and one of the big, big plusses is that you can find nearly anything on it. Make sure that if you have something you are interested in, you conduct an internet search and ask your teachers, parents and friends to see if they have any good information. GI Joe (do you guys even remember GI Joe??) always said… “knowing is half the battle!”

- Reelworks Teen Filmmaking (Brooklyn): [www.reelworks.org](http://www.reelworks.org) (Film!)
- New Museum: [www.newmuseum.org](http://www.newmuseum.org) (Graffiti!)
- International Center of Photography: [www.icp.edu](http://www.icp.edu) (Photography!)
- Urban Word NYC: [www.urbanword.org](http://www.urbanword.org) (Spoken Word/Poetry!)
Hip Hop Project Study Guide - UAMA

✔ Scratch DJ Academy: www.scratch.com (DJ'ing!)

Further watching/Films about Hip Hop:
✔ Style Wars
✔ Beat Street
✔ Krush Groove
✔ Bomb the System
✔ Hip Hop: Beyond Beats & Rhymes (PBS: Independent Lens)

Further reading/Books about Hip Hop:
✔ Hip Hop America by Nelson George
✔ Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop by Jeff Chang
✔ Rap Attack: African Rap To Global Hip Hop by David Toop
✔ Yes Yes Y’all: the Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-hop the First Decade by Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn