

Spinning the hip-hop revolution

Free your mind with the freestyle flow of Mad Real Mondays, and the rest will follow



ROBY APPLETON

Rafe Pepin sprays graffiti on a tarp outside Sapphire Lounge. He often spray paints murals for Mad Real Mondays. The free event brings together DJs, lyricists, spoken word performers, aerosol artists and hip-hop fans for freestyle fun in a friendly atmosphere.

The microphone at Sapphire Lounge

might be open to anyone with something to say on Mad Real Mondays, but nobody touches it without talking to Tivis Landers first.

"Damn, there's a lot of people here for a Monday," he says to the hundred or so people crowding in front of him. "Don't you guys have to work or something?"

The 25-year-old MC drops the microphone to his side momentarily and looks out at the group of people gathered to celebrate underground hip-hop. "How many people don't like their job?" he asks the crowd. They respond with shouts and cheers, and a quiet laugh escapes Landers' throat.

The local group Thieves' Guild follows Landers onto the stage. They take the microphone from him, wait for the DJs to spin and then launch into their first of three songs. The Guild's two members take turns rapping about politics while bar patrons laugh and cheer the clever critique of the Bush administration. The two house DJs, DJ Wolf and DJ Royal, are situated above and behind the Thieves' Guild, but everybody else is on the same level. Behind the DJs hangs a bright mural made by Rafe Pepin,

who creates graffiti art. It spells out the occasion in big balloon letters: Mad Real Mondays.

Every Monday night for the past eight weeks, the Sapphire Lounge has been host to what it touts as a hip-hop showcase. Mad Real Mondays unites a community of local DJs, rappers, graffiti artists and independent voices, eager to finally have a venue for their art. The flyers advise those who enter: "Don't talk about it. Be about it."

"We listen to music all day, and then we rap to friends at a party or in a bedroom," says Landers of life before Mad Real Mondays. "Nobody had a way to get from there to the big stage."

Some acts have become mainstays, such as the spoken word of Loren Persley, the unwavering rhyme of Steddy P. and the frantic verse of Essential Self. Ultimately, the showcase provides an environment for budding performers to test their voices.

"Some of these kids didn't even know how to use a microphone, and they were coming out and getting on stage," Landers says. "They were hiding like hermits, and they just started coming out of the woodwork."

Landers identifies the four elements of hip-hop as DJs, MCs, beat performers and graffiti artists. Many Monday nights begin with Pepin painting a graffiti mural in front of the Sapphire Lounge.

"Graffiti is the visual element of hip-hop," Pepin says. "It doesn't get much love because it's illegal, but I'm going to try to legitimize it."

The aerosol art contributes to the underground ambiance of the showcase, which is enjoyed by a diverse group. Mad Real Mondays bring together all races, decked in blazers, dreadlocks, throwback jerseys, old-school tennis shoes, mohawks and argyle golf socks. Some shirts are tucked in, and some are knee-length. Their open minds unite them. A positive energy flows through the bar; there is no booing and no hostility.

This crowd generosity has become commonplace at Sapphire Lounge, an inconspicuous little haunt located below Gumby's Pizza on East Broadway. When the bartender, Melissa Bushdiecker, had the idea for a venue for underground hip-hop, she needed the help of someone more connected to the hip-hop community.

She called on her friend Landers of the local rap group 40 Thieves, and the two of them put the idea into action. Bushdiecker is a longtime friend of Scott and Robin Ayers, the bar's owners, so getting the OK from them was simple. She and Landers began promoting Mad Real Mondays through phone calls and word-of-mouth. They handed out 200 fliers at the Blackalicious show at The Blue Note on Sept. 10. It was the Saturday before the first Mad Real Monday, and the showcase has grown steadily since then.

"We've been getting new performers every night," Bushdiecker says. "Every week it's a new group. I see the same faces, and I see new faces."

"They were hiding like hermits, and they just started coming out of the woodwork."
— Tivis Landers

Those new faces sign up with Landers when they arrive, and he schedules them to open around 9:30 p.m. Anyone who wants a shot will get one, and the accepting crowd boosts performers' confidence.

There are usually six or eight performers in a night, and after they've gone, the microphone opens to freestyle rapping. The formality breaks, and the crowd, which becomes smaller as the hour nears 1 a.m., huddles closely. The musicians feed off their energy. Only those who performed earlier in the night or some previous night are allowed to freestyle, and the microphone moves among them. As the DJs spin faster, the lights seem to struggle to keep up. The show climaxes at this moment, and when Landers gets his cue from Bushdiecker sometime before 1:30 a.m., he shouts "last call." Reluctantly, the crowd shuffles toward the door; most of them will return the following week.

"This has exceeded all my expectations," Landers says. "If you can dance, if you can paint, if you can sing, bring it up here."

— CLINT CARTER

EVENT INFO

What: Mad Real Mondays
Where: Sapphire Lounge
When: Mondays, 9 p.m.
Cost: Free
Call: 815-7550