



Father/son rap duo Justus Preech offer positive hip-hop

Tommy McKissick, right, and his son, Ian, at Parade Plaza, with the Whale Tail Fountain in the background, in New London. The men have a new album featuring Ian's rap and Tommy's vintage soul sounds/production. (Photo by Dana Jensen/The Day)

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By Rick Koster Day staff writer

One of the first lessons in Songwriting 101 is how to write a "bridge," which is the musical section that breaks up the verse/chorus structure and often serves as a connector from the second chorus to the final outro of a tune.

"Bridge" is also a nice musical metaphor for local father/son hip hop act Justus Preech — though in this case it would refer to a segue from one generation to the next. The act comprises 25-year-old Ian McKissick — providing thoughtful, productive, up-to-the-minute, socially conscious lyrics, rhymes and flows — and his 65-year-old father Tommy McKissick, a multi-instrumentalist/producer who provides the backing beats and music.

It's an innovative and in-house spin on the typical hip-hop reliance on sampled background tracks — snatches of riffs, voices, beats or sounds lifted from previously released recordings by other artists, then melded together into a new sonic tapestry behind the flowing words.

But in Justus Preech, Tommy McKissick, who performed for years in popular New London soul, funk and versatile wedding bands like The Catch, ATM and Sugar and Spice, provides the sonic bedding in support of Ian's DJ duties. In that fashion, the need for samples is eliminated, and Tommy contributes freshly written and performed material using original vintage soul, jazz, and funk DNA often found as rap source material.

For his part, Ian McKissick, who studied piano and drums through childhood, has the vocal flow a well-reasoned and mellifluous professor, in a fashion that recalls Phife Dog and Q-Tip from A Tribe Called Quest, Rakim, or Black Thought from the Roots. And, by mutual insistence from both McKissick men, their songs contain no obscenities and focus thematically on real world problems, solutions, and cautious optimism.

The result has been two distinctive sounding Justus Preech CDs, 2017's "Medications" and "Welcome to My World," released last year.

"At the end of the day, with all the chaos going on, music is the one language everyone understands," says Ian in a recent phone call. "So, it's been gratifying and fun to work with my father on music that hopefully has some meaning."

Forging a style

A psychology graduate of Eastern Connecticut State University who's going for his masters, Ian works at the Montville Youth Center helping kids with socialization skills and homework. He was still in college when he told his father he'd like to try writing and performing hip-hop. To demonstrate his burgeoning skills, Ian asked Tommy to provide a beat so he could rap over it, and the impromptu pairing worked well enough that a partnership was proposed.

"I always had a love and admiration for hip-hop. It's the first genre of music that I ever really paid in-depth attention to, and I've always admired and loved the art of lyricism and discovering different artists and how they all can write and dissect the alphabet," Ian says. When it came to pairing his lyrics to music, he says, "It was natural to think of my father because he was the role model in introducing me to the world of music. My father and I are from different generations and do have different tastes in music, but we are able to come

together and share different ideas and critiques of music, which means a lot to me in my bond and relationship with him. By sharing ideas, we realize we have similar music tastes as well. I believe it was essential to me and him in the development of the close relationship that we have today."

From dad's perspective, Ian's musical ambitions were natural. But Tommy had some ground rules, too. He says, "I was happy when Ian told me he wanted to try hip-hop. And I was happy to help. At the same time, he had to take care of his education."

A South Carolina native who moved to New London in the early 1960s, Tommy graduated from New London High School and is fiercely proud of the community. His aunt was the first Black teacher in the New London school system, and the Bennie Dover Jackson Middle School is named for her. Tommy attended Knoxville College in Tennessee, majoring in biology and chemistry and on a partial band scholarship. He was known across campus as "the mad musician" for leaving labs to go to the music rehearsal rooms, but nonetheless took education seriously. After graduation, he returned to Connecticut and earned a masters in public administration from the University of Hartford. Along with a happy and ongoing succession of bands, he entered a career in social services, focusing on home care for the elderly. Though retired, he loves the work and continues to consult. And, of course, he continues to take joy in music.

In that spirit, Tommy says, "I'm glad Ian and I agree on a positive message. There are political overtones in the songs, but what Ian is writing are words that are good for people to think about. And no expletives! I told him, 'If my grandchildren can't listen to it, I ain't doing it.'"

Once Ian committed to working on hip-hop as an art form but onboard with his father's insistence that a college degree was a priority, Ian mostly focused on music during holiday breaks or vacations, or if he had any spare time between classes that wasn't devoted to study.

"I quickly learned it's very therapeutic to have art as an outlet," Ian says. He laughs. "I also learned immediately that, when I started out, what I was writing was not the best thing ever. I almost thought, 'Maybe I should leave this to the professionals.' At the same time, I was enjoying articulating my thoughts — and it was also exciting to know that, when I got home, my dad would have some great music we could work with in a professional studio. That was a big enticement, too."

The process

Tommy, who continues to write and perform his own music and with the bands Shades of Joy, Undivided and Mpossibles, says it was and is challenging and fun to work in the context of rap composition. He records most of the Justus Preech music himself, layering each instrumental track on ProTools — always recorded live; no punch and paste overdubbing — until he builds a complete song.

"Sometimes I might get slightly ahead or behind the beat," he says, "but that's OK. It's got that live energy and spontaneity" that Tommy feels is lacking in the computer-generated backing tracks of contemporary rap and pop music.

And though Tommy did the bulk of the instrumental performances himself, he proudly describes a family atmosphere that was enhanced over both albums by contributions from instrumentalists and vocalists from past and current bands, including Andre Danford, Lillian Cook, Burt Coburn, and Tom Perrone.

For both albums, Ian has recorded most songs in one take to mirror his father's live feel. He says the content helps him keep a natural narrative flow, and across almost two dozen songs on "Medification" and "Welcome to My World," Ian's delivery comes across with assurance and sincerity — as opposed to a feel that someone was cutting and pasting line by line to ensure sonic perfection.

There's plenty of variety in terms of subject matter — from gun violence to spirituality, the shallowness of contemporary entertainment to the need for positive thinking, and equality to the value of dreaming — on tunes like "Lifewontwait," "Peace 'n My Dreamz," "No Ya Ya," "Preech," "Deuces," "Beautiful Disaster," and "War with Words."

Together, the McKissick's respective talents combine in a fashion that impresses.

Something to offer

"The melding of (Ian's and Tommy's) two styles is virtually seamless," says bassist Coburn. "They have a deep mutual respect for each other's art form. Ian shows a great reverence for his dad's large talent but throws in his own strong musical ideas. And does all this while staying true to his own vision. And Tommy makes sure the focus is on the words, and the music must be strong but supportive rather than overbearing or overpowering."

What are the McKissick's hope for the music? Truth told, Justus Preech have no big dreams of stardom or riches. The process, the message, and the possibility that even a few people will hear and enjoy their work is pleasing.

"You know, we're promoting this music just through Facebook or our own website," Tommy says. "You can find it on all the platforms. We don't have the capital for aggressive marketing. We just wanted to put it out there and see what happens, and we've had some nice reaction. Who knows? But it's been rewarding."

Ian expands on those thoughts. "The music business anymore is just about what makes money and not about quality," he says. "That's a shame. Hip-hop worked too hard to get the respect it earned over time. Now, it's all about girls and money and drugs and image. I like to believe we're exploring more than and that my lyrics are open enough that listeners can apply their own feelings and interpretations."

"It's enjoyable just to be able to work on this on our own time with our own creative control. Would I love it if it all blew up into something big? Of course. But as long as my music helps one or even 10 people, it means I did something right and good in this world."

How to listen

Who: Justus Preech, the son/father hip hop duo of Ian and Tommy McKissick

What: The CDs "Medifications" and "Welcome to My World"

Available: All major streaming platforms, Amazon.com

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