

The Power of Music: Double Standard Lunar New Year Event in Chinatown
By Kyle Low

For this assignment, I went to the 3rd Annual Double Standard Lunar New Year Festival that took place on Saturday, February 12. This event took place in two areas of Chinatown around the Grand Starr Jazz Club. The first area was a free outdoor concert of Asian American hip hop artists, poets, and comedians. The second area was a party inside the club for persons over 21 that began at 7 pm. I first ate dinner with a fellow classmate, Heather Lee, in Chinatown and then walked to the Grand Starr Club to watch the various performances taking place. We did not go into the club.

1. What did you learn by attending this event? First, what did you learn in terms of issues facing people in communities? Second, what did you learn in terms of ways that learning and teaching occurs in a non-classroom setting? For example, at this event, how did event organizers “teach” participants? Which methods were similar to those used in university classrooms, and which were different?

I did not learn anything new in terms of specific issues facing Asian Americans; however, this concert was a great form of expressing personal views on the current issues that face this community. In this light, artists were able to share and express multiple ideas and emotions and the audience could respond, although not necessarily verbally. One artist especially, Denizen Kane – a Chinese American rapper – had many political raps, including one that called out President Bush and protesting the military actions in Iraq. The audience responded to his lyrics with cheers, calls, and applause. Many of the other rappers lyrics simply wanted to bring attention to the Asian American community as it is often ignored with messages like “we are here too, so take notice.” Comedian Raymond Park attempted to play and mock common stereotypes of Asian Americans; however, I did not really find his humor very funny.

I think the purpose of this event was not necessarily to teach people about certain issues, but rather to celebrate members of the community and for them to showcase and create awareness the talent the Asian American community possesses. In this sense, participants could learn more about the community and its members. In addition, this event definitely was not in a classroom setting, as the concert was located in a small alley next to the club. The “teaching” took place within the performances, such as the lyrics written and performed by the artists.

2. Learning in a community-based setting requires some students to participate in new activities, such as participating in picket lines or interacting with immigrant workers. By attending this event, did you do anything new?

I did not necessarily do something I have never done before, since I’ve been to many concerts and musical performances. However, this event was new to me in the sense that I spend little time in Chinatown – besides eating an occasional dinner – and I am very

unaware of the Asian American hip hop scene. This was the first time seeing and hearing all of the performers.

3. In preparation for attending or participating in this community event, what preparation did you do to better understand the issues involved? If you did no preparation, why not? How should you have prepared to better gain from this learning experience?

I did not do any preparation prior to attending the event. At the time, I did not think any preparation was necessary. This community event was a concert, rather than a picket line, where it would have been helpful to research what the workers were fighting for. However, reflecting back on the event, I think it would have been beneficial to have prepared somewhat. I should have asked around – either with classmates/other students or you – to find out more about the event, as I really did not know what this event was about or what to expect from it. The event caught me off guard in terms of its location and the setup. The concert area was a lot smaller than I had anticipated as I expected a large community fair type event. However, it was simply a small stage and sound system placed in the alley next to the Grand Starr Club with a small crowd surrounding it. I also think it would have been helpful to find out which artists were the main attractions to make sure I saw their performances.

4. Based on attending this event, what new ideas did you gain for expanding the ways that Asian American Studies can be learned and taught?

Asian American Studies can be taught through any form of expression, including music, comedy, poetry, and spoken word, and these methods are not often found inside the classroom. It can also be taught in any setting and by anyone. As I've said before, the concert was set up in an alley between a parking lot and two buildings with a crowd of mainly 18-25 year olds. The meager setup actually worked to the concert's advantage in that it reinforced a sense of realism in the hip hop culture and community. Hip hop often speaks loudest to the disenfranchised or low-income populations, the "streets." The small stage in the alley invoked a feeling of "we have something to say and we will say it wherever we want." A large, extravagant stage setup with lighting tricks might have seemed more professional, but it would not have gotten the same feeling across.

In addition, the power of music and spoken word is often more powerful than talking. People will come see a hip hop show or a poetry slam no matter what the theme is. This is not the same for a class or lecture. Those who love and follow hip hop will come no matter what it is about. In this sense too, it is very effective in spreading the message to new ears. Poets, rappers, and lecturers might say the same things with similar themes and messages, but if you make it rhyme and give it some rhythm, you can spread it to a larger audience.