

Christylez Bacon Southeast Native, World Emcee

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY DEIDRE R. GANTT

At 10 o'clock on a rainy Thursday night in July, less than a mile away from the DC-Maryland line, 23-year-old Christon "Christylez" Bacon tunes his djembe (a west African drum), guitar, and ukulele in preparation for his second performance at Marlow Heights Recreation Center. By his friendly, laid-back attitude, you'd hardly believe that this is his third performance of a very long day, which began with a morning show at the Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts in Vienna, Virginia, followed by a late afternoon appearance at Martin Luther King Library downtown. He's probably used to it by now: in addition to nearly a dozen shows during the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival and several appearances at Artomatic, the city's annual multimedia extravaganza, the Southeast DC native has hosted hip-hop poetry slams and performed at over 30 libraries and recreation centers in the greater Washington area this summer.

"I love going to neighborhoods because it's like meeting me and a couple of my peers when we were little, and just showing them some things," says Christylez. Since he spent the previous night playing selections from "Advanced Artistry," his debut album, he will spend most of this two-hour time slot teaching the kids how to make their own music. Before his session officially opens, he entertains them with an anecdote about choking on a chicken crumb while trying to beat box for a crowd.

"You ain't get embarrassed?" one boy asks.

"I was embarrassed," Christylez admits with a laugh, "but you know, you gotta play it off. One thing I've learned from the elders, from working in general, it's not that you fall, that you messed up – it's how you recover yourself."

Christylez has practically built his progressive hip-hop sound around this brand of optimism, which infuses mundane items like Kool-Aid with originality and finds the comedy in roach infestations. "I feel like my job with my music is not to help cats get depressed or be stressed out but to take their energy and redirect it in a positive way," he explains. "We should learn to laugh at ourselves sometimes. I think that's very therapeutic."

Although he currently lives in Petworth, Christylez spent most of his childhood in the Washington Highlands/Condon Terrace neighborhood. His lyrics often mention growing up poor, a reality that affects – and stigmatizes – many Southeast residents. "Getcha welfare check, getcha welfare check, I'm financially in decline with a mind of debt," Christylez chants in one song, using rhymes to paint a picture of waiting in line for welfare, teach listeners about the history of public assistance programs, and challenge popular stereotypes of welfare recipients.

Without money or formal training, and at times, without a stable roof over his head, Christylez still found a way to pursue his dream



Southeast native Christon "Christylez" Bacon blends acoustic guitar and other folk instruments with hip-hop lyrics about his life experiences.

of making music. “I’ve always been blessed with determination,” he says. “I was always encouraged, too, by my peers, adults, family members, mentors.” Although he lists Michael Jackson, Quincy Jones, British jazz/funk band Jamiroquai and go-go’s “godfather” Chuck Brown among his musical influences, his earliest exposure to music came from his mom, who DJ-ed parties and introduced him to music from several different generations. As hip-hop’s influence continued to grow, Christylez began to write his own rhymes and freestyle with other kids at school.

By seventh grade, he had saved enough summer-job money to buy “a little Radio Shack brand keyboard” and start making beats. His skills expanded during his studies at Duke Ellington School of the Arts. Even though he was a visual arts student, he became friends with the music students and jammed with them at lunchtime. “I try to cross-pollinate as much as possible,” he states. “It just helped open up my mind more to different types of people, different styles of music.”

At Martha’s Table, a Northwest agency that serves low-income and homeless families, he took a hip-hop writing class with Bomani Armah (of “Read a Book” fame), which helped him develop creative rhymes without curse words or insults. He even bartered with another community group, teaching children’s drawing classes in exchange for music lessons.

Two years after graduating from Ellington, he and Armah made the front page of the Washington Post’s Metro section for their participation in a Martin Luther King memorial concert. That exposure helped Christylez become the first hip-hop artist accepted into Strathmore Hall’s artist-in-residence program in North Bethesda, Maryland. In 2008, he made history again by selling out both of his required public performances. “That was

the start of some really nice things,” he recalls, including classes on the business side of music and a third concert at Strathmore, which blended a string quartet and horn section with break dancers and beat boxers. His residency also allowed him to meet Cathy Fink and Marcy Marxer, two Grammy-winning folk musicians, with whom he collaborated on “Banjo to Beatbox,” a children’s album released in June 2009.

Christylez attributes his success with so many different groups of people to his unique blend of grassroots consciousness and innovative instrumentation. “I carry with me stories that come from Southeast DC, experiences that no one else has because they don’t come from such humble beginnings,” he says. “I’m presenting a program that is totally different from what these arts presenters have seen.”

Back at the Safe Summer performance, Christylez’s gift for reaching these teens is obvious as his first song ends and he slow-fades a traditional djembe rhythm into a go-go beat. “They gravitated to him,” observes Samuel Baudy, coordinator of the Safe Summer program. “He was able to take what he already knew and incorporate it into what they like.”

Christylez says his main purpose during these visits is to promote diversity and cultural acceptance through music. “When I’m going to these rec centers, these libraries, I’m pushing that goal,” he says, “by getting some kids from straight up around the way playing some spoons as part of an old folk tradition that comes from the Appalachian Mountains.”

After the workshop, participant Dione McCall admits, “It shocked me when I found out that spoons could be an instrument.”

Soon, Christylez sets the djembe aside and introduces them to the ukulele. “A brotha’s definitely not from Hawaii, so this is what you get when you mix

that up,” he jokes and begins to beat-box over a traditional Hawaiian song, eliciting gasps, laughter and applause from the audience. “The instrument should never lock you in a box,” he tells them as he strums rock and reggae sounds from the miniature guitar. A few kids take turns sitting next to Christylez and learn to strum a few chords. Before long, the front of the room has turned into a four-man jam band.

“I had real fun,” says aspiring drummer Emmanuel Robinson. “We had to learn about new beats and we learned how to play the guitar.” By the time they finished, even the police officer on duty was beating out a rhythm on the back of a chair.

Christylez’ Home Study Kit Advice to Aspiring Musicians

“You gotta be on the grind, as they say. A positive grind. Don’t just learn how to play an instrument so it sounds good. Learn about the ins and outs. Study the history. Who played it before you? That gives you more insight and makes your playing better. Study different styles. Don’t box yourself in. Be exposed and open to a little bit of everything.”

Books to Get You Started

“The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Arranging and Orchestration” by Michael Miller

“The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Music Theory” by Michael Miller

“NOLO’s Music Law: How to Run Your Band’s Business” by Rich Stim

“Home Studio Clinic: A Musician’s Guide to Professional Recording” by Emile Menasche

Learn more about Christylez Bacon, including appearances, booking, audio clips and CD availability on his website, www.christylez.com. ★

Onstage during Busboys and Poets reading at Artomatic in June 2009.



Giving a quick ukulele instruction to one of the teens during a Safe Summer performance.



Spoons? Check. Djembe? Check. Jamming all through the night!

