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## Music meant to have a message

Injustice fuels the lyrics of Toronto hip hop group

George Bush, 9/11, Mike Harris topics that inspire action

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If the name — The Dope Poet Society — leaves you a little baffled, the lyrics should not.

"It's not a war on terrorism/It's a war of terrorism/The old imperialism/You know money is the reason/America is killing for oil/Not for freedom."

Now that they've made themselves perfectly clear, via their recently released single "War of Terrorism," here are the details: The Dope Poet Society, a Toronto hip hop crew producing a fiercely independent and doggedly political record label out of a ramshackle storefront in the Junction district of Dundas St. W., is a little different than most rap groups.

"I wish I *could* just rhyme about parties and love, you know?" says D, the group's defacto leader and public mouthpiece, his long, unruly dreadlocks tumbling past his shoulders. "I like to have fun. I like to chill out. But that's not what's going on right now. Injustice gets to me, and I feel like I have to stop everything and stop this bullshit that's going on in the world."

This, now, is the point: Since the mid-to-late 1990s, hip hop has blossomed into a \$1.6 billion heavyweight that drives the music industry, largely on the popularity of artists flaunting their high life of parties, sex, fame and wealth.

But for the DPS, it's a squandering of the music's visceral power. Since 1995, the group — these days comprised of lead vocalist D, DJ Spinister, BellaDonna and Sage — has been recording and releasing albums on their own label, Justus League Records, attacking anything from the former Tory premier ("F-- Mike Harris") to the emerging surveillance society that allows corporations to keep tabs on people through their buying habits.

Writing, recording — and most importantly, releasing — songs quickly became urgent when the world descended into the swirl of chaos and destruction initiated by 9/11.

The long lag time of album production suddenly seemed glacial. So on Sept. 11, brimming with adrenalin as the World Trade Centers fell, the DPS wrote and recorded "911: World Trade," an urgent, thudding condemnation of American imperialism, and put it on its Web site shortly thereafter. Other songs followed, most recently, "War on Terrorism," a damning admonition of the U.S.-led war on Iraq.

"It's journalism," D says matter-of-factly, kicked back in the airless, black-walled bunker at the back of



VINCE TALOTTA/TORONTO STAR

For hip hop artists The Dope Poet Society - from left, DJ Spinister, BellaDonna, D and Sage - music should challenge and inform. "It's journalism," says D.

the Toronto Hip Hop Cultural Arts Centre, the name of the group's Dundas Street storefront. "An issue will come up and bang, we'll put a song out right after the event. That's something that in the past nobody has been able to do."

It's in this tiny, windowless space that the group records all its songs, and packages them for Web release. Staped to the wall are images of some of the group's heroes, the progenitors of the conscious hip hop movement, such as Public Enemy.

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**'I think hip hop is one of the most powerful art forms that exists. It is the evolution of revolutionary music'**  
***Dope Poet Society frontman D***

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And indeed, the notion of rap's ability to act as documentary — a report — is deep in the form's roots. Chuck D of Public Enemy once called rap "the CNN of the streets." In the late '80s, The Dope Poet Society would not have stood out for their deep political convictions. Rappers such as KRS-One, Queen Latifah and Chuck D had raised the anger of street reporting — rap's genesis, enraged, true-to-life accounts of life in the inner city — to political comment. During the first Gulf War, Paris rapped about a Black Power killing of "Bush Killa," George W. Bush's father. "Iraq never called me `nigger,'" he rapped. But as hip hop culture slowly morphed from one of cultural expression to mainstream commodity, the message changed. Artists for whom empowerment and injustice were rap's priorities were pushed to the fringes and labelled as `conscious' rappers, replaced in the main by glamorizations of the thug life, with its sex, drugs, cars and fame.

Consider a recent blockbuster hit, Nelly's "Hot in Here." An intoxicating, irresistibly compelling beat is the framework for Nelly's message: "It's getting hot in here/So take off all your clothes."

Compare that to a small sample of the DPS's lyrics in "War on Terrorism," which will be released on its album *ProIntelPro* next month, and the schism crystallizes: "When they commenced, they never showed the horror they caused/Or the total of the lives that are lost/Hundreds of thousands of people dismembered and burned/But with these images the media is never concerned."

The DPS is hardly alone in rejecting the commercialized turn that hip hop has taken. Chuck D of Public Enemy has retreated from the major labels to work independently.

Talib Kweli, a rapper based in Brooklyn, offers this bleak observation on a recent single, "The Proud" written about 9/11: "People broken down from years of oppression/Become patriots when their way of life is threatened." Others, such as dead prez and the Coup, or even Hamilton's own Warsaw Pack, embrace the notion of rap's political potential.

But they remain the minority. For the DPS, that's a huge departure from what the music should be. He offers, as an example, his perceived ethos of Def Jam, perhaps the biggest hip hop label, which counts among its stable Toronto rapper Saukrates.

"Is Saukrates going to come out with some conscious thing denouncing the war? I don't think so. Why not? Not because he doesn't have the ability to make a compelling song. But he's signed to Def Jam, and what does Def Jam want him to put out? Not that shit. Keep the people wanting to buy more shit — stay drunk and high and feed into consumerism."

There is an obvious frustration to D, at a potential that's lost, or at least dormant. But his passion is unwavering.

"I think hip hop is one of the most powerful art forms that exists. It is the evolution of revolutionary music," D says.

"When people say hip hop has changed, and hip hop is not what it used to be, well, that's not true. It's just

that that shit ain't hip hop. You can pervert it as much as you want, but all you have is the perversion. The real thing is still there."

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