

Rakaa (Iriscience)

When you hear the name Rakaa (Iriscience) you immediately think of his brainchild, Dilated Peoples, the uber successful Hip Hop group he founded with fellow MC/ producer Evidence in the mid 90's. What few people know is that behind the countless number of records sold, sold out concerts around the world and music collaborations that would make just about any artist jealous, Rakaa is more than just a rapper. His passions run deep; stretching from visual arts to training Gracie Jiu-Jitsu to traveling the world as a highly sought after Host and MC, all in his spare time. He is also stealthily working on his solo effort, "Crown of Thorns" slated for release in 2008. And this won't be just another hip-hop album...

Born Rakaa Taylor in Los Angeles, California, Rakaa's earliest memories of hip-hop came in the shape of "Rapper's Delight," "The Message," "White Lines" and "Planet Rock." However, it wasn't until he heard Run DMC for the first time that he put it all together as part of a larger culture. "I was inspired by their raw energy," says Rakaa about Run DMC, "...their subject matter and voices, the clothes, the beats, the flavor... It just felt right. It still does."

That discovery launched him into the throws of the culture. Rakaa took to the Los Angeles Graffiti art scene painting with the Create To Devastate (C2D) crew (ironically meeting his future partner in rap crime at one-time Los Angeles Graffiti hotspot The Motor Yard), DJing with the legendary DJ Rob One (R.I.P.), writing poetry, freestyling, and even dabbling in a little poppin'. He was the definition of a Hip Hop renaissance man, soon joining the New York Hip Hop collective Rock Steady Crew as a Graffiti artist and MC. Helping in the initiation of their L.A. chapter, the L.A. Bomb Squad, he also helped start the West Coast chapter of Rock Steady Crew and subsequently joined the Universal Zulu Nation. "Being surrounded by many of the

pioneers of Hip Hop was like going to intern with the original architects of the game,” says Rakaa recalling those early days, “I was studying with the best and that’s exactly how I wanted to do it.”

As Rakaa immersed himself deeper into the culture, a chance meeting at the Hip Hop Shop, a local record store he worked at, sealed his fate. He reunited with Evidence, a young up-and-coming MC (and later, producer) from Venice, CA and their instant artistic chemistry moved them to jumpstart a group and inevitably a career together. Not long after forming what would become Dilated Peoples, they signed what Rakaa refers to as an "educational" major record label deal. After experiencing a series of setbacks, including the shelving of what would've been their debut album, they quickly worked their way out of their "quicksand of a deal"; making the decision to leave their record behind in return for freedom and independence from the label.

Soon there after they teamed up with Bay Area independent label ABB Records to release the now classic 1997 "Third Degree" (featuring Defari) b/w "Confidence" and "Global Dynamics”), catching the attention of Hip Hop fans everywhere. The success of the single sparked the next level of evolution for the group and with the addition of DJ Babu of the World Famous Beat Junkies to the fold a year later, the Dilated Peoples train has been unstoppable taking them through four critically acclaimed albums, multiple worldwide tours and studio collaborations with Black Thought and ?uestlove (The Roots), The Alkaholiks, Devin the Dude, Capleton, Kanye West and John Legend, among others.

As if being a member of a thriving Hip Hop group wasn’t enough, Rakaa still found time to pursue other ventures and passions. From the summer of 2004 until winter of 2007, Rakaa and DJ Babu toured the world as the classic yet progressive party-rocking duo, Expansion Team Soundsystem. ETS set off parties all over the planet, including much of the US and Europe, New Zealand, Australia and Japan, and were even able to capture their dynamic synergy on CD in the

form of the “World on Wheels” mix CD series. Additionally, Rakaa has: hosted corporate and private events worldwide, co-owned and hosted the legendary Nightlife parties with The World Famous Beat Junkies, worked in radio and television, done narration and voiceover work, done multiple speaking engagements for the Ethnic Studies Department at San Francisco State University, served as a regular panelist and host (and financial sponsor) of events for the Hip Hop Chess Federation, and served as host and MC for the Red Bull BC One B-Boy World Championships in Johannesburg, South Africa (2007) and Paris, France (2008).

With so much going on professionally, Rakaa turned to Gracie Jiu Jitsu as a way to stay focused and disciplined. Studying with the actual Gracie family in Torrance, CA, he has diligently trained in the “Gentle Art” for over seven years. “Gracie Jiu Jitsu is not only the most effective single fighting art and basis for this recent Mixed Martial Arts explosion, but the Gracie family has also welcomed me in and always made me feel at home. It is great self-defense, but also great exercise, stress release and community energy,” he says.

It’s been over 10 years since Rakaa helped to spark Dilated Peoples and, after a string of personal and professional hurdles, he prepares for the release of his debut solo album, “Crown of Thorns”. Although the album is far from complete, Rakaa sees this album as “a work in progress that pushes the boundaries of the DP sound and the impression of Hip Hop music in general.” The Alchemist, Da Beatminerz, Evidence and DJ Babu have already come on board to lend their talents to “Crown of Thorns”, with many more to be announced soon.

Whether it’s rocking a stage, writing insightful and provocative lyrics or dominating opponents in Gracie Jiu Jitsu, It’s clear that Rakaa seizes perfect opportunities to turn his passions into realities. He is a force to be reckoned with in any arena.