

B-Boys and Buckeyes: Dr. Jason Rawls’ Journey From Hip-Hop to TEDxOSU

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By Brie Blevins

It is July 1988 and a group of young boys were sitting around a boombox on the south side of Columbus listening to an emerging genre: hip-hop. A song began with a drumbeat over an electronic bass line being updated with turntable scratching and talk box ad-libs. The song, “You Gots To Chill” by EPMD, pulled in a young Jason Rawls with its new spin on the familiar rhythm of ZAPP’s “More Bounce to the Ounce,” and he was instantly hooked. It was the beginning of his ascent to his career in music and, later, academia.

“It just clicked for me and I fell in love right then and there, and I’ve been tinkering with music ever since,” Rawls said. Rawls, known in the music sphere as J. Rawls, is a hip-hop producer and current Ohio State lecturer in the Department of African American and African Studies who spoke at the TEDxOhioStateUniversity event “Currents” on March 4. Rawls gained prominence in music for his work with Mos Def, Talib Kweli and Domo Genesis, and now teaches The Art and Politics of Hip-Hop at Ohio State.

Rawls’s interest stuck with him as a college student at the University of Cincinnati. He said this is where he got his big break after meeting and becoming friends producer Hi-Tek. This propelled his career forward through his connections to popular rapper Talib Kweli. “One day Kweli says ‘We’re doing a project with [Rawkus Records], and Mos Def is going to be on the project,’” Rawls said. “He said ‘Why don’t you submit some beats,’ so I gave him some music...and that changed everything.”

That project was “Mos Def & Talib Kweli Are Black Star,” released in 1998. Rawls did two songs for it: “Brown Skin Lady” and “Yo Yeah.” “That’s when I started doing music for all kinds of different people because I started getting a reputation,” Rawls said. Due to his increased work and changing status, Rawls made some money off of his music. “I was able to do it for a living for a little bit, but it wasn’t at a point where I wanted it to be,” Rawls said. “I started out as a computer programmer when I graduated from college. I was not thinking about [teaching], and my cousin looked at my personality and was like, you should be a teacher,” Rawls said.

He was initially against the thought of being an educator, but was looking for ways out of his job at the time. “First of all, they don’t make enough money, and I’m not dealing with bad kids, but I hated computer programming so much and it was so unfulfilling that I tried it,” Rawls said. In his first week, he taught fifth grade at a charter school on Columbus’s east side. During a call home to a parent, an unlikely moment made Rawls realize he was in the right line of work. “The parent was on the phone and she said ‘Look, from 7:30 [a.m.] to 3:30 [p.m.], he’s your problem.’ Click. That’s when I fell in love with teaching, because that’s when I realized that kid needed me,” Rawls said.



From then on, Rawls has worked to make a change in the classroom by building relationships with his students, which he said hip-hop has helped him do due to its prevalence in youth culture. To bring hip-hop into the classroom, Rawls went back to school to get his master’s degree in education from Ashland University, and later got his doctorate in education from Ohio University. Since then, Rawls has been working at different universities in Ohio to implement his music-based curriculum, including courses like the one he offers at Ohio State.

Rawls has also remained an active participant in Columbus’s vibrant hip-hop scene. “I make sure I try to stay current with the young people and find out what they’re into,” Rawls said. “I can help bridge the gap and help teach about some of the older stuff and why that’s important to the new stuff.” Local rapper Jahwar Glass, who goes by Illogic, became acquainted with Rawls at the University of Cincinnati, where Rawls helped Glass with his music. They even collaborated together on a project titled “We’re On Top (#OhioTakeOver)” in 2011. Glass, now back living in Columbus, said Rawls is an asset to the city that helps keep the hip-hop culture alive through his constant participation in DJ sets and working with new artists. He said this helps to set him apart. “He’s friends with everyone, and he’s very supportive,” Glass said.”He definitely reaches back a lot and brings up some of the younger guys, and he keeps the scene thriving. His place in our city is unmatched. He’s like the glue a little bit... even if we don’t like each other, everybody’s cool with Rawls.”



It is because of his experience in music and education that Rawls was chosen to give a talk at the TEDxOSU event in Mershon Auditorium on March 4. Heema Vyas, the director of content for TEDxOSU, said Rawls’s in-class engagement with students and his dedication to blending his two passions are what stood out in the selection process. “How passionate he is now about implementing his previous experiences into how other educators can better relate with their students and better engage with them, we thought that was really interesting,” Vyas said.

Drew Polito, a member of TEDxOSU’s Content Committee, coached Rawls through his presentation. He said Rawls is a naturally charismatic presenter who knows how to connect and share ideas with students, which he said will translate well to the audience. “He brings such good energy,” Polito said. “He’s not teaching you, he’s talking to you...that really made him stand out to us in the application process and will serve him very well.”

Moving further into his career, Rawls said he is going to continue with music. He continues to experiment with other genres by incorporating the sample-based hip-hop production he is known for. To this day, Rawls said his goal is still to push of the idea of hip-hop culture being accepted in higher education and other circles. “I came up in a time where if you were hip-hop, that was something you kept quiet,” Rawls said. “My goal is to keep pushing it as far as we can go.”

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