Rhymes across time

“Hip-hop is layered prophetically, because you’re tying the past to the present.”

Jason Byassee interviews Shadrach Kabango in the September 2022 issue

Rapper Shadrach Kabongo, aka Shad (Photo by Justin Broadbent)

Shadrach Kabango, known as Shad, is a Canadian rapper. He has won a Juno Award for his music—the Canadian equivalent of the Grammys. He is also a journalist, having hosted the CBC radio show Q *and, currently, the HBO Canada documentary series* Hip-Hop Evolution*, which has won a Peabody Award and an Emmy. He has long spoken openly about his Christian faith.*

How do you think about the relationship between hip-hop and faith in your work?

I’m trying to make people feel better—to heal, to comfort. I love to be onstage and help people feel delighted, brought closer together. A phrase I’ve heard a lot is “complicating what’s been oversimplified and simplifying what’s been overcomplicated.” I see that as what I do: I introduce nuance and mystery, or I break things down and put them in direct, human terms. Hip-hop lends itself perhaps

better to the latter. It's a very frank and personal form. There are limits to what you can do metaphorically. People expect you to say what you mean; they expect it to make sense and be clear.

Play is a big part of what I do: playing with words, literally playing music. Play is how I stumble on meaning that I wouldn't get to any other way. Hip-hop comes from playing around with the music and technology, doing things they're not designed to do—that's how we get to meaning. Sometimes I have an idea, but a lot of the time I'm just playing and ideas come later.

Say more about how playfulness helps you write.

It's a way of getting unstuck. I hadn't written in a while recently, and I had no sense of direction. So I went for a walk, and then I started writing:

> In my junior high days of tearaways and tears
> I prayed, Holy Ghost, come scare away the fear.
> And around my love a barricade appeared,
> and a sword through the thick prepared the way to here.
> Though we never made it clear, I just serenaded peers
> And penetrated ears and dedicated years.

After that it started to flow.

How do you understand the ability of hip-hop to connect with an audience?

For most of hip-hop's history, you couldn't easily record. In high school I never recorded; all I could do was perform. What I learned is that it's all about creating moments and winning people over. Lots of rappers have a story about being in a battle back in the day. But you're not trying to beat the other person—you're trying to win the crowd. That's what it's about: their entertainment, sense of excitement, and surprise as you play with expectations and create moments.

That's how you write, too, thinking about the bar structure. A great line needs to land on the four, not the three—or if you do it on the three that might be an interesting surprise.

When you did rap battles were they completely improvised?

They were, back in the day. Now they're not anymore.

People can prepare for each other now—but you still want a *feeling* of spontaneity. So they leave room for something spontaneous or try to anticipate what the other will do and write something to that. But when I was coming up it was all extemporaneous.

What do you see as the relationship between hip-hop and prophetic speech?

Prophetic speech happens within hip-hop. We speak across the timeline. You'll hear a lot of scripture, references to history, references to previous hip-hop artists—none of that is strange in hip-hop. Hip-hop was built on sampling old music. Even the earliest hip-hop is layered prophetically, because you're tying the past to the present.

What I'm doing with my writing is partly speaking to the people right in front of me, speaking directly and connecting. But I also have one eye on something much bigger, trying to tell a bigger story. It feels like I'm following after something bigger than me or my own story.

How do you think the Holy Spirit is working in you when you're rhyming?

I feel the Spirit work in my joy. I don't always know where it's going, and then it goes there and tells me something. It often tells me what I need to hear, as much or more than the audience. When I first started rapping, if someone asked if I had a message I'd say no—but now it's clear to me I do. I say the same thing every album: "keep going." It's what I need to hear. I try to paint a picture of peace and wholeness.

I start each album thinking it'll be super different, but by the end I realize it's exactly the same thing.

Sometimes in preaching we have to say what people don't want to hear. Does that happen in hip-hop?

Not exactly, and I will tell you why: this craft is all about them liking you. It's the same with stand-up comedy. Norm Macdonald would talk about how you have to be the dumb guy up there. He went to great lengths to hide how smart he was, because no one likes a smart guy.

People come to hip-hop to hear hard truths, yes—to be challenged within the safe place of music, with something there to hold them aesthetically and rhythmically. But they have to feel like you like them; there has to be some spirit of generosity in the music. It has to be felt that this guy wants to be heard and understood, that he's being honest. Then they like the difficult stuff.

I need to insert myself into the story in a vulnerable way to be heard, especially when the content is more difficult, because if I don't have a stake in what I'm talking about, the music doesn't feel right. It's not a place where connection can happen.

I wrote a song called "Fam Jam" about the immigrant experience:

> When you're third world born and first world formed
> Sometimes you feel pride, sometimes you feel torn.
> My mother tongue's not what they speak where my mother's from.
> She moved to London with her husband when their son was one.
> One time after *Family Ties*
> I turned on the news and saw my family die.
> Pop said it's murder in the motherland
> And things about colonialism I didn't understand.
> All the things that shape a man and his mind state,
> A community income and crime rate.
> If times change, why my people still in dire straights?
> If it's a big world, show me where is my place in it?

My family is from Rwanda; I grew up in Ontario. So I'm talking about the genocide, but not in a facts-and-figures way.

Have you ever preached?

The one experience I've had preaching, I was surprised. One of the things I liked about it was the way you can speak on all these different levels, and it makes sense to the audience. They just get the form. It's like that with hip-hop: they understand when you're joking, being straightforward, metaphorical, when you're talking about right here right now or the eternal. Preaching is a weird form everyone understands: kind of an essay, kind of a poem, and they all get it.

The hardest part was thinking through who I am. Onstage I put my playfulness forward; I come out with a lot of energy. There may be moments that will be reflective or intense, but my first foot forward is the fun, the hype, the excitement, the humor. That just didn't feel right in preaching. I can't be a goofball first. I needed to show respect for the occasion, so I more or less read the sermon. But as I started to get more comfortable, I looked at people and had moments off the cuff.

How did your own performer persona come about?

I don't remember being conscious of creating a persona; it just happens when I'm in front of an audience. I love the absurdity of performing, of the human ritual of one person getting up and doing something in front of other people. That puts a smile on my face and in my brain. It's been like that since I was a little kid. This is a very silly thing we're doing. We are enjoying it, and I've prepared, but this is very silly. This is a silly, cute thing humans do that's not important. That's a different persona than when people meet me at the merch table after the show.

What do you do with an unresponsive audience, when it's not working?

I've taken two approaches. One is a calculation I make when I'm up there: Is this salvageable? If it is, I try to cut through the pretense. I'll tell my DJ to stop the music, and I'll try to really talk. If they're just stiff, I'll say, "Let's get closer together, let's come to the stage," or I might go down into the audience, cutting into whatever's creating the distance. I'll try to have a very human moment. I hope they'll say, "Oh, OK, this is a real thing happening. He's not just a detached observer, he wants to connect." That can shake them out of it.

Other times it's not salvageable. People don't want to connect that deeply. In that case I connect with my material, and I hope that through that at some point they'll choose to connect a little. Sometimes they want a distance, a little separation, don't want to come that close to me or each other or what's happening. I'll still deliver my material with as much conviction as I can, and then maybe they'll want to connect from a safe distance.

The author conducted this interview with the help of his students, in the context of a homiletics class.