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IN THE CIPHER

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# A family reunion: A conversation with Greg Schick, co-editor and producer of the Trinity International Hip Hop Festival

**ABSTRACT**

*In this article, Greg Schick discusses his work with the Trinity International Hip Hop Festival. The festival evolved from a way to connect Trinity College with the city of Hartford, Connecticut, community to a platform for international hip hop artists and scholars to come to the United States and share their work.*

**KEYWORDS**

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*Global Hip Hop Studies* (*GHHS*) double issue 3.1 and 3.2 co-editor Greg Schick was a co-organizer of the Trinity International Hip Hop Festival from 2008 to 2022. The festival takes place annually at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut and features all elements of hip hop from international, national, regional and local artists. The festival is most known for its focus on non-American hip hop artists, scholars and organizations. Greg was interviewed by *GHHS* editor Murray Forman.

***Murray Forman (MF):*** *To get started, maybe you can offer a brief profile of how you came to the festival and what your continued role with it is.*

**Greg Schick (GS):** I really started digging into hip hop around the world in 2004 with World Hip Hop Market, a blog and online record store that I was running. In 2006, I stumbled across an ad for the first festival, but it was only a week away and I couldn't go. I attended in 2007 as a vendor and met the organizers. We had a lot in common and they asked me to help plan the next one. For several years, I was doing mainly PR and press. Ultimately, I started doing more of the bookings and logistics as a co-producer alongside the Trinity College student organizers.

***MF:*** *I'm thinking our readership might be interested in how the festival came to be. Can you describe the conversations that formed the foundational concept and how the founders were thinking about the festival before its actual debut in 2006?*

**GS:** The festival started with Trinity student Magee McIlvaine. From 2002 to 2005, he had been doing an underground hip hop radio show and organizing small local concerts, open mics and emcee battles on campus. Often, Magee was doing so much on his own or with help from his friend and fellow Trinity student Jason Azevedo. So, they were producing, hosting and DJing the events. They were doing about five events per semester with a $500 budget in the Underground coffee house on campus.

At the time, there was a lot of tension between Trinity students and Hartford residents. The college is predominantly students from white, wealthy families while the city surrounding the college is mostly lower income, immigrant and people of the global majority. There had been some issues with crime and racism that were concerning students. Magee found that the spaces where those tensions melted away and beautiful things happened involving people from all different groups were at open mics and these small concerts. A lot of students were trying to address these issues and this was something Magee and Jason felt helped. Magee was also exploring more international hip hop on his radio show, especially hip hop in Africa due to him spending a lot of his childhood there.

After Magee spent a semester in Senegal – where he also became involved with the hip hop community – he came back and connected with Ben Herson, the owner of New York-based African hip hop label Nomadic Wax. He booked a group of diasporic artists to perform on campus in the fall 2005. It was so well-received that Magee, Jason and Ben decided to create a larger event for the spring. They recruited a bunch of global hip hop artists, mostly living in New York City, some filmmakers and a few professors at Trinity College. So many people were interested; it swelled to a three-day festival!

***MF:*** *Trinity College has supported the festival all these years. What other kinds of outreach and collaborations were essential to the festival's success and sustained existence? What is it that the sponsors and other stakeholders are buying into or getting from the event? And is this something that can be replicated in other places, on other scales?*

**GS:** Back in 2005, international hip hop was so unfamiliar in the USA, but Magee managed to recruit the monetary support of every academic department, student organization and cultural organization on campus. And that is how it continues to the current day. Perhaps not every organization is involved every year, but it is really a cross-section of the campus community that backs the festival. So many years along now, it's a known quantity and we can create programming that specific groups are interested in supporting. There has also been support from the president's office and student government from the beginning. The amounts they contribute may fluctuate but they see the benefits of the festival. The college boasts about the festival in their marketing materials and to potential students. I've met many students who said they came to Trinity College just because of the festival!

This can absolutely be replicated and has been. Nomadic Wax also helped Amherst College (Massachusetts) organize a Hip Hop for Peace one-day event that ran for three years. I worked with Kennesaw State University (Georgia) department of African studies to create a conference that included lectures, panels, films and a smaller scale concert. It really takes a student or faculty member to drive it, plan it and find the funding. If I were starting from scratch, I would start small and plan a single event with a small budget and then build up. Start going to smaller events and connect with artists and organizers. There are so many hip hop artists around the USA who would love to speak or perform.

***MF:*** *How do you go about identifying global artists across the elements and connecting with them, inviting them to participate? How do you outreach, establishing trust and creating networks?*

**GS:** I had created a network of artists around the world from my time writing for World Hip Hop Market. Ben and Magee had also fostered large networks of artists abroad and diasporic artists in the USA. These networks were key to the early festivals. Magee and I both ultimately joined Nomadic Wax to work on music, film and live events focused on global hip hop. We produced showcases at South by Southwest (SXSW) conference and festival in Texas, CMJ Music Marathon in NYC, and the A3C Hip Hop Festival in Atlanta, all with non-USA artists.

Personally, I grew my network online the most. I researched hip hop in different countries, bought the music wherever I could, and then emailed the artists to ask for interviews. I connected with a lot of amazing people that way. I fostered a lot of those relationships and met with the artists (or booked them) when they came to the USA. Some of them I helped apply for visas to get in the country. I really believe in creating relationships and that has served me well for seventeen years.

As Ben and Magee moved on, the festival organizers began putting out open calls for submissions every fall. We might get 60+ submissions from musicians, dancers, graffiti artists and scholars. Combine those submissions with my network and we could craft a festival with more than a dozen events representing all the elements of hip hop.

I will admit that most of my connections were MCs and DJs. We have collaborated with some Hartford area organizers as well to help recruit the dance community and graffiti artists. As the festival has evolved, we now have a robust group of community organizers partnered with student groups who bring all their networks together.

***MF:*** *Can you comment on how the festival seems to be committed to establishing a balance between pioneers or veterans of the culture and new, rising artists from across the elements?*

**GS:** Zee Santiago was the student who took the reins from Magee for the festivals in 2007–09. He realized there needed to be some sort of organization on campus to support the festival and other hip hop events. So, he formed the Temple of Hip Hop at Trinity College, based on the principles of KRS-One's organization. Zee was an MC from NYC and had a strong connection to the roots of hip hop. He started to bring in legends like Grandmaster Caz, Grand Wizzard Theodore and Pop Master Fabel. From that point on, the organizers tried to create an intergenerational connection with students, the community and the legends. DJ Tony Crush (fka DJ Tony Tone of the Cold Crush Brothers) also lives in the Hartford area and has been involved in a lot of festivals. It's great to see the younger generation so excited about someone like DJ Kool Herc.

Meanwhile, hip hop evolved and many new, young talents arose. Every new group of student organizers brings in their own flavours and favourites which help us stay current. Last year we had Dave East headlining our concert. Recently we have had artists like D Smoke, Oshun, Taylor Bennett and Joyner Lucas. The blending of generations of performers across the elements makes the festival nearly as unique as the fact that we celebrate so many non-American hip hop artists.

***MF:*** *Have you seen any sustained or enduring networks as a result of the festival over the years? Do you have a sense that participants stay in touch and work together afterwards?*

**GS:** This is probably one of the greatest successes of the festival, in fact. Not only have we created a platform for international hip hop artists to be seen and heard, but they connect at the festival and continue to work together. We have had artists record songs together. We have had presenters and performers travel to other countries to perform there. Bocafloja has taken a bunch of great artists he met at the festival to Mexico to perform with him.

One of the proudest things I have done was help organize a cultural exchange to Russia. Sergey Ivanov is a Russian Ph.D. and avid hip hop organizer who has written extensively about the history of hip hop in Russia. He presented at the festival in 2016 and then asked me to help him organize a group to come to Russia to present. We took two MCs, two dancers, one college student and one faculty member on a seven-day trip to three cities in Russia where they danced and rapped and recorded songs. This is not the only example but one of the biggest ones.

***MF:*** *Part of the Trinity Festival mission and what makes it so important is the commitment to social justice initiatives and progressive knowledge building. It seems that everywhere in the world where hip hop exists, this aspect is also part of the culture. Why do you think hip hop is so well-suited to addressing these issues?*

**GS:** From its roots, hip hop has been the voice of the voiceless. Hip hop is about making something out of nothing. I think people around the world can relate to having nothing and struggling. It's also a youth-driven culture; so, young, dissatisfied people can get into it, create, dance, write and be heard. It's like an amplification of your opinions and something that can't be taken away by those in power. That's why you see hip hop amplifying the message of the Arab Spring revolutions, Ukraine in 2014 [for more, see pp. 137–43 in this issue], the political partyY'en a Marre in Senegal [for more, see pp. 111–19 in this issue].

But it's also about building up individuals and communities. Again, young people are attracted to hip hop dance styles, graffiti murals, DJing and MCing. When communities are underserved by the government or other official organizations, the hip hoppers create programmes that do serve the people. Hip hop can simultaneously speak to oppression, grow community and enhance individual self-worth.

***MF:*** *The expression 'hip hop nation' seems to have lost some of its lustre, but it was at least for a while a key term for a generation of folks, employed to describe a relatively unified trans-local and global hip hop sensibility. Can you address this notion of the 'hip hop nation' in the context of the festival? Does the term still have any resonance or relevance for you?*

**GS:** It absolutely resonates with us. The festival has always been multi-generational, local and international. Attendees describe it as a family reunion, even if it's their first time there! When KRS-One attended, he said of the festival, '[t]his is Hip Hop […] because we were greeted with love'. The festival both fosters community and is itself a community. We see children grow up year after year at the festival. We break bread and talk about social and political issues, history and the future. It's this community and these conversations that are needed. We all see ourselves as part of the 'hip hop nation'.

Beyond the festival, the student organizers graduate and take their hip hop attitudes and experiences into so many areas: law, activism, community planning, social service, artist management, teaching. Having members of the hip hop nation shaping neighbourhoods and communities is the real power to change the world.

***MF:*** *Despite the many commonalities and approaches to hip hop that help us to define it as a culture, on a global scale it is also characterized by its many variations and nuances. What are some of the stronger forces that allow different artists to vibe, collaborate and build together. And, conversely, what are some of the barriers that can and do inhibit or restrict cross-cultural collaboration?*

**GS:** The biggest inhibitor is distance and money. How can we get to another country or how can we bring those people to the USA? Visas can be difficult to get into this country, especially for young people from the Global South. The process is expensive. Flights are expensive. These are things that keep us apart. For every artist who attends the festival, there are ten–twenty more who want to attend but cannot.

One might think that language is a barrier, but we celebrate different languages. Dance doesn't care what language you speak. Music, beats, beatboxing: these things are universal sounds. Art is universal. Music, dance and art are the through line of hip hop culture and the things we all share.

And then it's the little nuances that make individuals interesting. It's why we share. We had some breaking from Cape Town, South Africa, attend the festival a few years ago. They combined traditional Zulu dance moves with breaking. It was so fresh and unique, like nothing we would ever see in Hartford. We had a crew of beatboxers from the Czech Republic [for more, see pp. 57–61 in this issue] at a couple of festivals and some of them didn't speak English. But the other artists kept pulling them onstage to vibe with them during their sets. It's people who love hip hop, doing hip hop together.

***MF:*** *We've seen over the past five years or so, a tightening of the USA borders and restricted mobility around the world. How has this impacted the festival? How has it impacted hip hop culture more generally, in your view?*

**GS:** We tried to bring a group from Egypt three times starting in 2017 and the visas were a nightmare. They were denied the first year and the next years they didn't receive approval until after the festival was over. There's also been a chilling effect of artists not wanting to come to a country that is openly hostile to Muslims and immigrants. Even on the planning side, we started shying away from artists we thought might have trouble entering the country.

***MF:*** *COVID-19 also created some real hurdles and yet human resilience was often amazing. The festival was cancelled in 2020 and went virtual in 2021. Were there any valuable lessons to take away from the experience?*

**GS:** The 2020 festival was designed to be our huge fifteenth-anniversary event headlined by Big Daddy Kane and a slew of international artists and speakers. We were all crushed that it was cancelled only three weeks before the event. In 2021, we had the opportunity to do something unique with an online festival. Suddenly, it didn't matter what country people were in, performers or fans. We had a line-up of artists that we never could have brought to Hartford due to cost or visa issues. Creating these alternate avenues of including people from all over the world really should be a model for festivals and not just ours.

Of course, we cannot assume that everyone in the world has access to the internet or a high-speed connection to play videos. Also, I didn't feel the local Hartford connection was as strong as the in-person festivals. I think the future of festivals lies in a combination of in-person and virtual elements.

***MF:*** *Now that you're in the Atlanta area, has this changed your perspective on the festival which has such an established base in the USA north-east region? Is Hartford's relative proximity to NYC an appealing factor for international artists who might want to visit hip hop's ground zero?*

**GS:** I have been in Atlanta the whole time! I am originally from Nebraska and spent ten years in Chicago after I graduated college and then moved to the Atlanta area in 2005. The festival started in 2006. I've been to Hartford so many times, it's like a second home though. Our Nomadic Wax team has always been spread between NYC, Washington D.C. and Atlanta. Of course, anyone with ties to hip hop wants to visit the birthplace of the culture. In fact, most artists flying into our country come into NYC before coming to Hartford. We have been able to set up a lot of events with artists in those three other cities, as well as Boston, with international artists. Those were the areas in which we would create small tours for artists to perform and speak at colleges.

## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Murray Forman is professor of media and screen studies at Northeastern University. He is author of *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop and One Night on TV is Worth Weeks at the Paramount: Popular Music on Early Television.* He is also co-editor of *Hip-Hop Archives: The Politics and Poetics of Knowledge Production* and three editions of *That's the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader.* In 2003–2004, he was awarded a US National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship, and he was an inaugural recipient of the Nasir Jones Hip-Hop Fellowship at the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research, Harvard University (2014–2015).

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Greg Schick is an event and media producer focused on hip hop culture outside the United States. Since 2004, he has written about, filmed and created events for artists and scholars from more than seventy-five countries. From 2008 to 2022, he was a producer of the Trinity International Hip Hop Festival in Hartford, Connecticut. In 2014, he co-produced the One Mic: Hip Hop Culture Worldwide festival at the John F. Kennedy Center for Performing Arts in Washington, DC. Schick has a Bachelor of Journalism degree from University of Nebraska–Lincoln and a master's degree in theatre education from the University of Northern Colorado. Schick currently lives in Atlanta.

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