



Michael Colen details the storied history of rap in Sacramento.

PHOTO BY MARIA RATINOVA

Sac-rapmento

Michael Colen is a rapper. He's also a math teacher, but that's another story. Colen lays down lines as First Degree The D.E., making the most of his warbly, throaty voice and a dramatic delivery. He's been at it locally for a few decades now, and has rapped with some big names: E-40, Tech N9ne, Mac Dre. A few years back, Colen realized the city's history of rap music was largely overlooked. He made it his goal to document the genre's early years in the River City, reaching out to artists and conducting interviews. What started as an idea turned into a blog, then turned into his book, *The History of Sacramento Rap: 1982-2009*. SN&R talked to Colen about the genre, the movement's local history and more.

When did you start documenting the history of Sacramento rap?

Well, initially I wrote a blog on it. Maybe four years ago, maybe three years ago. And I just realized, it's our number one commodity. The story was so rich, and people wanted to know. It needed to be written down. And there was only one person to write it down. So I wrote it, started writing, started interviewing people.

How much do people know about Sacramento's history with rap?

It's what people around the world know Sacramento for the most. That was the driving force of this book—was that if you go anywhere in the world and talk about Sacramento, the number one chance is you're talking about rap music.

And that's powerful, but it's the truth. It's been swept under the rug a long time. But

if you go to Europe, the continent of Africa, Russia, they're not talking about the Kings, the farm-to-fork ... they're talking about rap music. We have to embrace that. It's our history.

Did you come across any really interesting stories in researching?

I would say the number one surprise was the first rap group of all was from Sac: The Triple Threat Three ... So Russell Simmons came to town, came to Sac with the new group Run-DMC. They had just hit the scene. The Triple Threat Three, they turned the party out and got Russell's attention. They offered them a contract, but they had to leave and go to New York to live. And they turned it down. Two of them wanted to go, one of them didn't want to ... So they stuck together and didn't go. It's just fascinating to think—what if they would've just gone, and Sacramento rappers would've been dating back to the Run-DMC era?

What was it that made the rap scene fall?

During the rise, everybody was working together. Talent was doing talent, teamed up with business folks doing business. Everybody was working together ... Then the fall came ... when people thought they could do it alone, and everyone went off their own way. Artists thought they could do business, business thought they could do artists, and that was when the fall came. ... We fell off the map.

Is that still the case today?

Absolutely not. The re-rise came with the Mo'Nasty Lavish D thing—and that's the next book—but now, Sacramento is as big, maybe bigger than ever with them, and X-Raided getting released. It's back. □

Grab a copy of *The History of Sacramento Rap* at Colen's book reading and discussion at Underground Books, February 23 at 2 p.m., 2814 35th Street.

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