

Rising death toll gives birth to R.I.P. songs

Friends are recording songs to ease the pain and mourn the loss of young black men, such as the four shown above, violently cut down.

ABHI RAGHUNATHAN

Published August 15, 2006

ST. PETERSBURG — The killings of young black men are a terrifyingly ordinary part of daily life in this city.

Families eat dinner wearing T-shirts with the faces of the dead, and church groups march while carrying photographs of murdered men. Mothers throw annual “Rest in Peace” parties on the anniversary of their sons’ deaths. As one teen says, they “want to remember the day he entered Heaven, not the day he was born.”

Recently, the death toll has spawned a new type of music in St. Petersburg: “R.I.P.” songs, perhaps the most searing chronicle yet of the city’s violence.

“There’s so much pain on these streets,” says Dana “Short Fuse” Harrington, 33, a rapper who is helping local kids turn their hurt into songs. “Maybe if kids ... hear this music, they’ll know what it’s like.”

Such songs are spreading in cities across the country, experts say, driven by two factors: Young men who keep dying violently, and technology which has made it easy for teenagers to record songs at their computer and share them with dozens of friends through Web sites like MySpace in just a few hours.

“This is the other side of the gangster story,” said Murray Forman, an assistant professor of communications at Northeastern University and co-editor of the Journal of Popular Music Studies. “These kids are really shaken by the loss of their loved ones, their friends, and they’re using rap to make a tender testimony.”

In St. Petersburg, teenagers like James “Baby Boi” Peoples, 17, are turning to Harrington, who runs a rap group and record business called South House. He helps them record song about their friends.

Last month, Peoples scribbled some rap lyrics during an R.I.P party for his murdered cousin, a 15-year-old gunned down in 1998. Friends and relatives wanted “to remember the day he entered Heaven, not the day he was born,” Peoples said

Two days later, Peoples learned he had lost two more people close to him. Kenny Walker and Maurice Jenkins died when they sped away from sheriff’s deputies July 27 and crashed in a cemetery. Like Peoples, they had rapped about slain buddies.

Peoples decided to use the words he’d written for his cousin to honor his dead friends. He called Harrington, and in just a few days South House recorded two songs.

Now they blast from stereos and serve as cell phone ring tones in Midtown neighborhoods.

It's a savage life. You never know when your time's up. ... On my knees asking the Lord to bring them from the dead. So I can say goodbye, so I can be at peace. I guess you served your purpose, I guess you had to leave.

— “Damn I Miss My Dawgs,” South House Song About Kenny Walker And Maurice Jenkins

Harrington grew up in the church. His father Charles preached on the first floor of the family home — a living room that had no furniture other than benches and a pulpit. He credits his upbringing with giving him enough drive to win the state wrestling championship in the 112-pound division as a junior at St. Petersburg High.

Everyone figured he would win another championship, and colleges dangled scholarships. But Harrington says he got a big head and blew it by falling into the street life of petty crime and drugs. He dropped out of high school, did stints in jail, and seemed destined to become another statistic.

About 12 years ago, Harrington walked out to the back yard and put a gun to his head. He asked God for two reasons not to pull the trigger. Immediately he thought of his 1-year-old son and another unborn child on the way.

“It was enough to make me think — I can't let you win this one, Devil.”

Harrington began working low-wage jobs — cook, tree cutter — and rapping with a few friends. They formed South House about nine years ago. They put out their first album in 2003, and recently opened a concert by Juvenile.

The streets gave them plenty of inspiration. They lost more friends every year. Some were shot, others died in car crashes. One buddy became so depressed he jumped off the Sunshine Skyway Bridge.

The gritty life has aged Harrington. His body is tattooed with the names of loved ones who have died. He has a mouth full of gold teeth, and a gravelly voice that trembles just a little when he rattles off the names of lost friends.

A few years ago, Harrington began seeing another generation begin dying young — just like the friends he grew up with. A group of local churches calculated that 85 black men have died violently in the past five years.

South House began recording the “R.I.P.” songs several months ago as tributes to the slain youths. When a local youth dies, word spreads quickly, and his friends gather with Harrington and other local rappers to record a song.

Harrington puts them on an album that he gives away.

Pac Man, a song about Antonio Roberts, a 20-year-old shot and killed last year, begins by slowly recounting the ones left behind: He was somebody's homeboy, he was somebody's brother. He was somebody's father, someone was his mother.

South House has produced four “R.I.P.” songs so far and put out three albums.

Thomas Frantz, a psychology professor at the State University of New York-Buffalo, said music is a way for friends and family to release their sorrow when a loved one is killed.

“There is that chance that what (the song) does can glorify the one who has been killed,” Frantz said. “But ... one can only hope that the legitimate cathartic feelings the music invokes are more beneficial for those grieving.”

Denise Swisher still cries when she hears the song Mr. P-Nut, a tribute to her 18 year-old son Forbes Swisher. He was shot and killed this year when someone in a crowd drew a gun and began firing.

“The song helped keep him alive for me,” Swisher said.

I just buried my nephew Mike-Mike six feet in the dirt. Now my homey P-Nut's gone that s--t done really hurt. Lord forgive me for my sins but I didn't mean to curse. That's just the way I was feeling when I wrote this verse. Tired of seeing all my homeys hauled away in the hearse.
— “Mr. P-Nut,” South House song on “The Message”

Like other “R.I.P.” songs, “Mr. P-Nut” is now part of the city's soundtrack. Peoples says his former classmates at Boca Ciega High hum it in the hallways. Other give it shout-outs on MySpace pages.

Harrington sells some albums in corner stores, but gives many others away. He dreams of a getting a contract from a major record company. He muses that in some ways he's preaching, just like his father. “I feel like I'm spreading the word too,” he said.

He rents space for \$40 an hour at a studio in a strip mall in the northern part of the city. That's where he worked recently on the song Damn I Miss My Dawgs, the tribute to Walker and Jenkins, the two who died in the car crash.

He opened a door marked with the names of some of the slain youths and walked into a dimly lit, black-walled room. He said a prayer at a microphone, then began rapping.

At first, the lyrics had a line mourning that Walker was dead and could no longer rap with South House: It'll never be the same again without your voice so R.I.P.

But it didn't feel right.

So Harrington took out his verse, and added a clip of Kenny Walker himself, his voice mourning the number of slain youths from the song Mr. P-Nut.

Boy we got to stick together we can't stand to lose another one.

Harrington then shouts “R.I.P.”

Times researchers Caryn Baird and Angie Drobnic Holan contributed to this report. Abhi Raghunathan can be reached at araghunathan@sptimes.com or (727) 893-8472.

© Copyright, St. Petersburg Times. All rights reserved.