



NEWS

Rapper Jay-Z Brings Message to US High Schools - 2002-11-23

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Rap Star Jay-Z has a string of chart topping hits. His newly released album *The Blueprint 2: The Gift and the Curse* is expected by many in the music industry to be another success.

However, he's promoting the album in a unique way. Most artists at the height of their career would normally spend time playing concerts at large venues to further promote their music. But Jay-Z is actually visiting high schools coast to coast for his "Principal for a Day" tour.

Jay-Z kicked off his tour November 11 in Hartford, Connecticut. Since then he has been the unofficial principal in a handful of high schools. The aim is to promote his new album, as well as to encourage students to finish their education. In order for a school to be selected for this unusual project, students must participate in local contests, some of which involved writing essays about why they believe their school deserved a visit from the rapper. Local radio stations like Washington, D.C.'s WKYS, have been helping Jay-Z host the contests in each city, but the details surrounding Jay-Z's visits are kept secret.

Fairmont Heights High School in Capitol Heights, Maryland was a winner. At a little after 12:00 p.m., Jay-Z arrived at the high school in his tour bus. The school principal, Dr. Carolyn Blue, and the rapper exchanged a hug when they met for the first time.

Within minutes, Jay-Z assumed the role of principal, using the school's public address system. While many students suspected that something special was going to happen, Jay-Z confirmed the rumors.

"I'll make an announcement real quick. Jay-Z is your principal for the day," he said. "Everybody must be in class when they're supposed to be there. I've got detention slips right here. We might need a lot today. I'm gonna be around school today, checking in on some of the classes. I'm your boy Jay. I'm coming to check you out."

Rap star Jay-Z then began visiting classrooms, the lunch room, and finally the gymnasium to tell his life story, answer questions, and inspire younger inner city students to follow their dreams.

"You know growing up we never had anyone come to the school and nobody that we had seen on TV," he said. "I just want to show them that it's real. Jay-Z's not a myth. I'm a real person. I'll come down and I'll talk to you and you're going to be able to interact with me. I'm a guy that's from the same place they're from. I'm from the 'Hood'. I'm from the bottom. You know what I mean. And I made it to the top."

Like many stars in the recording industry, Jay-Z has had to persevere over the years to become successful, but he's had it tougher than most. He was born in 1970 in Brooklyn, New York and raised in a tough inner-city neighborhood. In school, Jay-Z was a promising student. He could read at a 12th grade level in the 6th grade, but lure of fast money as a drug dealer was too strong and he never finished his education. After years of pushing drugs, an incident that nearly took his life, changed him forever. In 1992, he left his life of crime to pursue a career as a rap artist.

When no major record company would offer Jay-Z a contract, he co-founded Roc-a-Fella Records just to get his music heard. His hard work eventually paid off and he managed to achieve mainstream success by the late 1990s. On top of that, Roc-a-Fella now markets a line of designer clothing and even produces movies.

While Jay-Z managed to overcome his dark past, he says he wants more students to complete their education and not make the same mistakes he's made.

"I'm a long shot. I didn't go to college or graduate high school," he said. "It's really more about following your dreams. You know, never giving up. Like I said, I'm the long shot. So they're going to need their education, they're gonna need that drive, they're going to need determination, and education, and will, and you never give up. I'm just here to help them with that. Hopefully, I can touch a couple of kids today with what I say and we'll see from there."

During Jay-Z's visit at the school, at least one student had a dream of his realized. During a question and answer session, Jay-Z fielded questions about life in the music industry, but one student asked if he could try out for Roc-a-Fella Records. With that, Jay-Z invited the budding rapper to join him on stage.

Jay-Z is clearly among friends here at Fairmont Heights High School. While rap music is extremely popular among young African-Americans, it has many outspoken critics. Some argue that rap artists glorify drugs, violence, and profanity. Some of Jay-Z's records carry advisory stickers to warn parents about the content of his music.

While Jay-Z says he's trying to send a positive message to high school students through his "Principal for a Day" tour, some parents and educators question whether he's the best role model for the job.

However, Detric Luck, an English teacher at Fairmont Heights, says she encouraged her students to enter the contest that brought Jay-Z to their school. While Jay-Z's music may be offensive to some, she maintains that he can have a positive influence on America's inner city youth.

"Many of these kids, they idolize Jay-Z," she said. "I know many might say that rap music is not good for children, in general, because of how it idolizes violence, and the misuse of women, and so on, and so on, but think about it. This is primarily a metropolitan area and these kids are exposed to a lot of violence and some of the things he talks about in his music. To be honest with you, a lot of these kids look at that as a way of escaping what goes on in their everyday lives."

During his current tour, Rapper Jay-Z spends his evenings performing concerts for some of the contest winners and special guests. The "Principal for a Day" tour concludes on Tuesday, November 26 with a stop in San Francisco, California.
