

Hip-hop takes a big place in African-American culture

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ABINGDON —

Any cultural and political history of African-Americans in the United States has to include the latest chapter about what's become a worldwide phenomenon: hip-hop.

So when selections from the Detroit-based Black History 101 Mobile Museum go on exhibit Feb. 12 at Bradley University, expect to see hip-hop memorabilia sharing wall space with letters by Booker T. Washington and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad.

Also expect to hear from one of the key players in the 30-year evolution of this major cultural form: Richard Griffin, better known as Professor Griff, the spoken word artist and member of Public Enemy, whose 1998 album "It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back" made Rolling Stone magazine's list of the 500 greatest albums of all time.

Professor Griff is a friend of Khalid el-Hakim, who organized the Black History 101 Mobile Museum, and frequently accompanies the trailer on its journeys to college campuses. Although the trailer won't be in Peoria, 150 artifacts from its 1,500-piece collection — items that also include racist memorabilia such as a Ku Klux Klan hood — will be displayed from noon to 7:30 p.m. at the Michel Student Center ballroom.

El-Hakim, a middle school social studies teacher and a Detroit native, started the collection when he was taking a sociology course. Back in 1991, el-Hakim's professor, David Pilgrim, had started a museum at Ferris State University called the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia.

"He used to bring back racist artifacts from the museum, and we used to talk about race in his class," el-Hakim said. "It just really sparked some deep debate and discussion about race in America."

Soon, el-Hakim was collecting his own racist memorabilia and branched out to collecting everything that had to do with the African-American experience in America. He bought a trailer from his mother and uses it to take the museum on wheels to schools across Michigan. The project excited Professor Griff, who said he was eager to help.

“When he came to me with the idea, I was like, wow, that is brilliant,” Professor Griff said. “Because I’ve dealt with young people for a long time, and I know it’s difficult to get people to go to the library or to a museum.”

Among the items are letters from Rosa Parks, Booker T. Washington and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, head of the Nation of Islam — items that reveal the wide variety of leadership and philosophies that have dominated the African-American community.

Some of the objects are grim: A 1935 flier from the NAACP shows a crowd of white people surrounding the body of man who had been lynched. The flier was part of the group’s campaign for anti-lynching laws.

El-Hakim found many artifacts in antique shops. Collecting them wasn’t always easy. Two prized positions of notorious KKK leader Robert Miles — a white hood and a scrapbook full of news clippings detailing bombings he had been involved in — were purchased by el-Hakim at an estate auction attended by white supremacists in Howell, Mich.

“I saw people with tattoos that said ‘white power’ and ‘KKK,’ ” el-Hakim said. “I was the only African-American there besides a buddy of mine who went with me to make sure I was all right.”

Hip-hop also will be represented thanks to el-Hakim’s personal involvement in the movement: For a time, he was a manager of hip-hop artist Proof, also known as DeShaun Dupree Holton, who was gunned down in Detroit in 2006.

Professor Griff, meanwhile, will talk about the cultural legacy of “It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back” — and about the importance of understanding history.

“I think what the museum spells out for the average white person is, ‘Wow, I never knew about black people’s contribution to history or music,’” Professor Griff said. “If a black person walks through, it’s, ‘I never knew that these things took place. My history is as valuable and rich as anyone else’s.’ So we all benefit from it if we let our guard down a minute.”

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