

WORDS, MUSIC GET MESSAGE OUT

# DJ fights for human rights

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**I**t's an interesting bookcase, what with Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King and the Dalai Lama sharing shelf space with Spider-Man, Bruce Lee and Tupac Shakur.

It's a little odd, at first, seeing these titans of history sitting side-by-side with span-dexed superheroes, a martial arts movie star and a late rap singer known for having a somewhat forceful edge to his lyrics.

So odd, in fact, it makes you wonder what kind of person this Raoul Juneja fellow really is.

But then, that just might be the point.

*'Instead of celebrating my birthday, I was up 20 hours in a row just writing and saying to myself this is what I have to do to get me out there.'*

A casual conversation with the DJ/producer/journalist/commentator/activist makes it clear he is one person who defies any attempt to place him in a conveniently labelled slot.

He remembers, for instance, the time he was mistaken as Muslim by someone who had just met him; when another friend, a fellow Sikh, heard about this, he told Mr. Juneja it was an insult worth fighting over.

"And I was like, 'What?'" he said.

"He could have called me Christian, Muslim or whatever ... it makes no difference to me."

He was born in Mississauga, but his parents, both Indian-born immigrants, moved to New York City when he was a baby.

For the next 10 years, he was an average child of immigrant parents living in a typical middle-class neighbourhood, but even at that young age, he remembers the strong influence the city's hip-hop scene had on his developing views.

It only makes sense; New York City, after all, is considered the birthplace of hip-hop, the place where African-American youth first put their poems and social commentaries to a beat that soon found an audience hungry for the raw honesty of their music.

"Then my dad decided things were getting a little too crazy in the States with some of the gun laws and the drug laws and stuff like that and he thought maybe it would be better for everyone if they came back to Canada," he said.

Settling in Thornhill, the young student remembers his first two years in school here as "the worst two years of my life", thanks to the not-so-warm reception he received from some of the kids in his school.

"Some of the Caucasian 'cool' kids didn't like where things were heading when they saw me slow-dancing with a white girl who had also just moved to Thornhill from the States," he said, explaining how he received his first concussion.

"Needless to say, I was extremely cautious around Caucasian girls the remainder of that year."

High school was no picnic, either. While the harassment lessened, he freely admits he hung out with a rougher crowd in his final years and even failed OAC

calculus twice.

What saved him, aside from his passion in hip-hop, was the attention of teachers who introduced him to the great works of English literature (*Hamlet* is his favourite) and history, exposing him to the thinkers and leaders who spoke to his burgeoning passion for human rights.

"I'm worried about the next generation, the ones who don't have the OAC year," he said.

"If I didn't have those English and history and political science courses, I think I would have been gone completely. I wouldn't be doing anything positive."

University was the next logical step and so he was accepted into Western's business program, but switched to media studies soon after

impressing the college radio station's program director and ending up with his own hip-hop show before his first-year classes started.

*'Any race, any culture, any religion ... if they're trying to make a change, I'm with them.'*

His work with the college's media outlets was soon getting him noticed in Toronto, putting him in the awkward situation of telling his journalism teachers he couldn't hand in assignments on time because he had other deadlines to meet.

Today, at the ripe age of

23, the man known as DeeJay Ra to his listeners divides his time between bringing hip-hop to the masses via his company, Lyrical Knockout Entertainment, and lending his voice to the human-rights debates that concern him.

A definite highlight of the past year was landing on the *Globe* and *Mail*'s op-ed page, using his space to denounce a men's magazine's "humorous" depiction of Mahatma Gandhi getting a beating and the *Apu* character on *The Simpsons* TV show as examples of how South Asian people are in danger of becoming the 21st century equivalent of the black minstrel characters of the past.

While he says he received hate mail "from just about every *Simpsons* fan in the world", he has no regrets

about speaking out.

"Instead of celebrating my birthday, I was up 20 hours in a row just writing and saying to myself this is what I have to do to get me out there," he said.

"I was really happy with how it came out."

It's hard to say where life will take him next, but one thing is certain: No matter where he goes, he will continue to use his words and music to ensure everyone is heard.

"I know the people are out there, so it's just a matter of getting out there and connecting them together," he said.

"Any race, any culture, any religion ... if they're trying to make a change, I'm with them."

