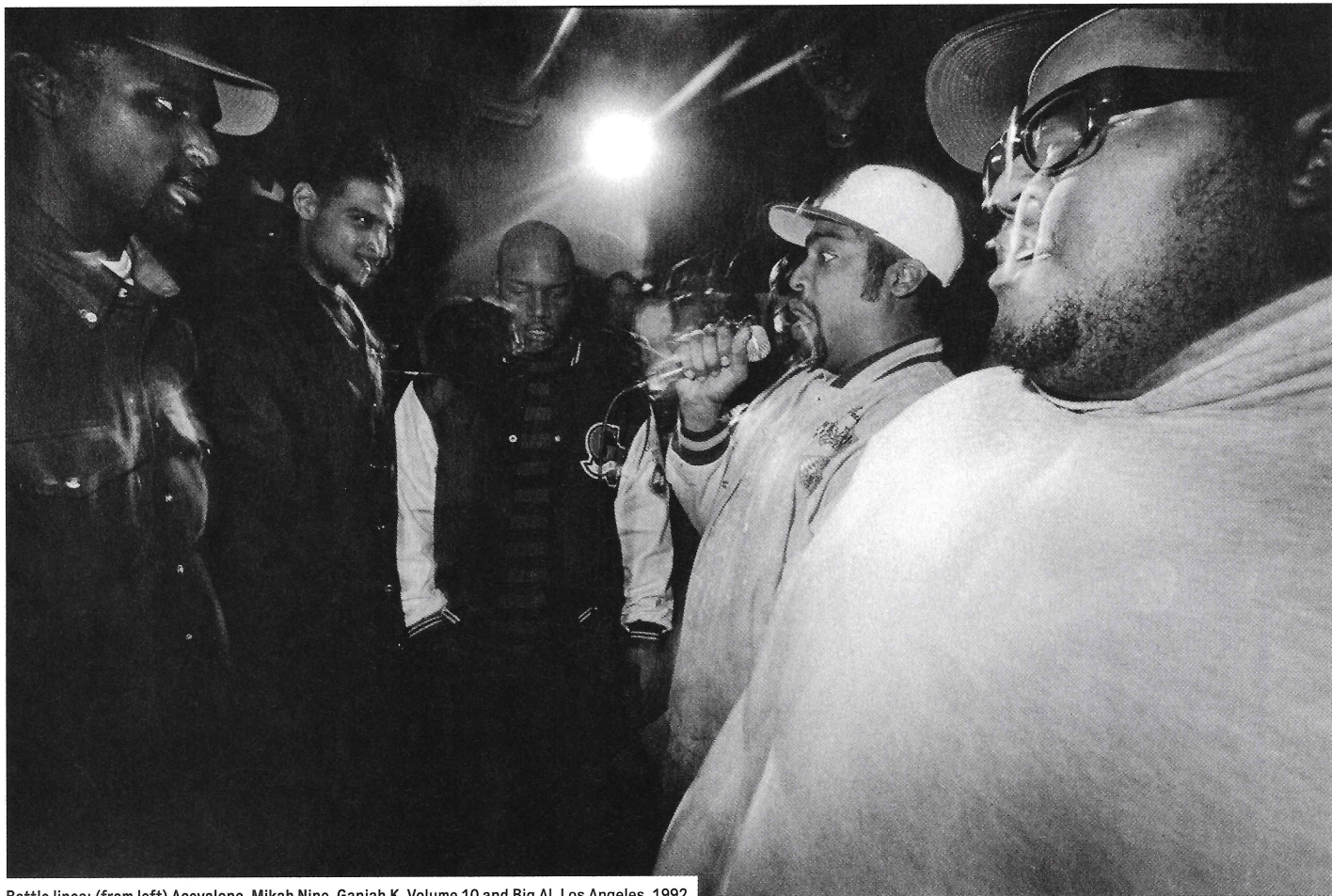


On Screen

Films & DVDs



Battle lines: (from left) Aceyalone, Mikah Nine, Ganjah K, Volume 10 and Big Al, Los Angeles, 1992

Freestyle: The Art Of Rhyme (Tenth Anniversary Edition)

Kevin Fitzgerald aka DJ Organic (Director)

Palm Pictures DVD 2014, 75 mins

It's a testimony to both the deftness and heft of Kevin Fitzgerald's *Freestyle*, first released in 2000, that there are certain nuances you can't quite pin down until you watch for a third time with the new commentary by the director, plus producer Youree Henley and cinematographer Todd Hickey, switched on. The film might be an unambiguous love letter to the art of improvised rap, but there are a few moments where you're not sure if it's just the featured rappers and assorted talking heads who have crossed the line from passionate exaltation of their subculture to smug dismissal of other styles.

Perhaps it's just a matter of perspective. Certainly *Freestyle* makes an engaging case for the value of freestyle rap on its own terms. It sketches in the briefest glimpse of historical context with stock footage of John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Muhammad Ali and James Brown, but the real meat is mostly original footage from the 1990s documenting parallel scenes centred around South Central Los Angeles's Good Life Cafe and Washington Square

Park in New York's Greenwich Village. The interviewed MCs talk about how much hard work they put into developing their skills. Supernatural tells us he's an avid reader of dictionaries. MC Hymnal avows, "You can't freestyle if you don't know anything", and Juice defends himself against charges of pre-writing his freestyles by explaining, "Some cats can't think quickly, they can't comprehend anyone thinking quickly".

All of which would be nothing if it wasn't for the payoff. Abiodun Oyewole of The Last Poets talks about how "hiphop was born from the need to exorcise the rage" because "when you create from the anger you start to heal yourself", where others couch it in more spiritual terms. Rapper and teacher Toni Blackman, founder of Freestyle Union, talks about a properly functioning cypher as being "on its next-level spirituality". Noted DJ and former label boss Bobbito sees it as analogous to his experiences as a breaker, where "I was in that spiritual context of taking chances".

Thankfully a fair bit of evidence supports such raptures. There are fierce battles in renowned spots: PEACE at the the parking lot of the Good Life, Mos Def in Washington Square Park. There's the look of utter dejection on Supernatural's

face when Craig G has the crowd chanting their approval of his beatdown at the NYC Seminar of 1994. The viewing experience, of course, is nothing like being at an actual freestyle. How could it be? Quite apart from the tinny camera sound and the nature of edited highlights, there isn't a whole bunch of stuff. The hilarious crud. The moments where the crowd thins and there's nothing much going on for ten minutes because everyone's elsewhere before necessary ass is kicked and everything's flowing again. Here the godawful is relegated to El-P's poor showing in the bonus features.

But there are also a few moments where the film makers' biases start to chafe. There is no voiceover on the original feature; contrasting viewpoints are given fair time. It's a credit to the film's evenhandedness that it takes Organic's endorsements on the (recently recorded) commentary to make these biases explicit. "The goal of writing is to make money, to mass-produce records and mass-produce songs," opines one unidentified rapper (in yet another car park) at an edition of the B-boy Summit in LA, as if this were self-evidently immoral. "The goal of freestyling is to throw something out once and you can never do it again," he adds. "That's what makes it free." Switch

lanes on the audio and Organic emphatically agrees: "That's exactly my philosophy."

If any genre roundly destroys the notion that capitalist music should necessarily be second rate, it's hiphop. So *Freestyle's* bias can seem obnoxious or endearing, depending on your distance. Thankfully, on this DVD version at least, it tends to the latter. At a few points it's noted that this is not the same cut which has been shown at various film festivals down the years, nor is this one definitive. You have to wonder if earlier versions would have been brave enough to embrace Organic's admission that "We're actually countering the whole thesis of the film here, a little bit", as the film cuts: from rapper and MTV personality Sway Calloway self-righteously dissing corporate rap; to both freestyle virtuoso Juice and freestyle dunce Boots Riley of The Coup saying that recorded evidence is what really matters; to footage of Notorious BIG on a street outside a grocery store in Bed-Stuy at the age of 17, rapping his ass off. The irony that arguably the best freestyle performance here comes from a pioneer of corporate rap music doesn't undermine anyone, but provides a welcome counterpoint. Richard Stacey