

## Abiyah: “Like a Curveball”

Abiyah, also known as Angie Rawers in her day to day life, has been a trailblazer for women in hip hop since she first ventured onto Cincinnati’s underground hip-hop and poetry scene in the late 90s. When we sat down at Iris Café to speak about her spanning and ever-evolving career, we began by discussing her innovator status.

**Polly:** Looking at your recent tours/festivals— *First Ladies Tour* (with Corina Corina), the upcoming *Ladyfest Dayton*, and your presentation in the Women in Hip Hop Track at last year’s Allied Media Conference to name a few—it’s clear that being a trailblazer for women in hip-hop is at the forefront of your artistic mission. What spurred you to take on this role (as a trailblazer)?

**Abiyah:** Related to hip hop, specifically, in the 90’s, it was kind of like the *Love Jones* era of poetry, so I went to a predominantly Black poetry spot downtown on 6<sup>th</sup> street and would read my poetry at the open poetry night, and, also, at that time, I was hanging out with a lot of local hip hop artists—all dudes, pretty much. Back then, in the late 90’s, if there was a girl around, she probably wasn’t rapping. She was like singing the “hook” [...] it was like if you look at that whole era—Ja Rule had Ashanti singing the hooks, like all these girls just singing the hooks. If there were other women in the circle, they weren’t singing or doing poetry they were just doing hooks—which is kind of like a secondary stereotypical role. And so one of my friends was like why don’t you put your poetry to music. So there were two producers at the time that were doing tracks for some of my friends I was hanging out with—G-Fresh and the late Skandal da Ruckus Man. So they made a couple of tracks for me, and I just did poems (over their tracks) [...]. We started there and then I performed those couple songs, with that whole clique of people, when we would do shows. A year or so later, I met NYC-based poet/producer Native Sun via an AOL email listserv, and he was doing an online radio show dedicated to “floetry”—a term he coined to describe the combination of poetry over beats—hip hop (beats), at the time, but applicable to any genre of music with a poetic accompaniment. The rest is history.

**P:** So who were/are your influences—both along the way and today?

**A:** Punk, new wave, alternative, golden-era hip hop, avant-garde, and reggae as far as genres [...] like Bad Brains, and the punk bands of the 80’s are a huge influence. Past and present artists who continue to be influences include Grace Jones, Exene Cervenka (of X), Santigold, MIA, Sister Carol and Queen Latifah, and electronica groups like Thievery Corporation.

**P:** That’s quite an eclectic mix—which makes sense because your beats transcend a singular attachment to any one genre. How would you describe your sound?

**A:** I would say my sound is like a curveball, because you don’t know what you’re getting next—it switches up—like a curveball in baseball. So really it’s curve, “the curve” genre. It encompasses everything. It doesn’t just have to be if you’re rapper (to fit in the curve genre). [...] If you are that “Island of Misfit Toys” vocalist or musician—that is curve; you can be who you want to be. [...] I think the definition of it would be, without being too restrictive, maybe three genres minimum. [...] And this choice (to be curve) is from the heart, it’s not being different for the sake of being different.

**P:** Do your influences give you permission to be “curve”—i.e. to push boundaries + blur genres?

**A:** I think so and I don't know why I was drawn to them because I grew up in the suburbs of Dayton, moved here (Cincinnati) for high school and was around pretty "white bread" standard stuff that wasn't anything extraordinary. But, in high school, I was able to go to punk rock clubs and stuff like that—(i.e.) other outside "the standard" events/experiences. I was always drawn to the underdog, the outsider.

**P:** With your affinity towards pushing boundaries, that—feeling drawn to what's outside of "the norm"—makes sense. Do you think this pull (towards "the outsider") comes from your "from the heart" desire to be authentic?

**A:** Yes, what I talk about (in my music)—things I know and/or have experienced—it's all authentic. And, I get bored easily [...] that's why I think I have such a vast array of (authentic) interests. I'm also a well-known poet in Cincinnati—I was in the all-female poetry troupe, Bitch's Brew (most performances took place at the Greenwich in Walnut Hills), and I'm also an all-vinyl reggae DJ at the Comet (every second Saturday—Queen City Imperial Soundsystem).

**P:** Do you find that keeping that range (of activities/interests) enriches each one of your "art forms"?

**A:** Oh, totally. I think the reggae/"DJing" definitely influences my song-writing. I do have that little dialect sometimes, even if it's on one line—like a Patois, Jamaican accent (in some of my songs).

**P:** Did you always want to do this work?

**A:** I definitely did not think I was going to do this! I was shy in grade school. In fifth grade the teacher passed out a "getting to know you" questionnaire—and she also asked, on the questionnaire, "Do you want to be called out to read out loud?" And I was like hell no.

**P:** (laughter) You read out loud all the time now (so to speak), so what helped you break through that boundary (that initial "hell no")?

**A:** I think having to get over myself to get up on the mic (when I first entered onto the poetry/open mic scene). I hear a lot musicians/performers say that "once you get on the stage then you can't stop." And you realize that "oh, this wasn't as bad as I thought." And, as time went on, people responded favorably, so I got a lot of positive feedback and encouragement—early on.

**P:** So you learned how to rock it?

**A:** Yeah, I learned to rock it (laughter). Yes.

Abiyah continues to push through boundaries (both her own and as well as cultural norms/expectations) of what it means to be a woman in hip hop. Like a curve, you can't quite pin her down—and this first lady of multi-genre beats wouldn't have it any other way. **For more information about this queen of hip hop, including news about her numerous upcoming events and projects, please visit: <http://abiyah.com/>.**

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