



A. MELTON

Q&A Baba Brinkman

The adaptive lyricist

*Baba Brinkman is a Canadian rap artist whose award-winning show *The Rap Guide to Evolution* wowed UK crowds at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival during Charles Darwin's bicentenary year. As the show opens next week for a long summer run off Broadway in New York, Brinkman discusses rhyme, improvisation and scientific certainty.*

Why rap about science?

Science chose me. I have a master's degree in medieval literature and I had done a hip-hop show based on *The Canterbury Tales*. Mark Pallen, a bacteriologist at the University of Birmingham, UK, heard it and got it into his head that the next one should be a rap of *On the Origin of Species*. I took up the gauntlet. Science rapping is not the reason I got into rap, but I've found myself evolving into that niche.

Is it a comfortable niche?

Yes, science and rap go well together. Rap, in essence, is about speaking with conviction — and you can usually be certain of things that have been scientifically validated. I've upped my swagger since I've been writing about science. In my songs from five or

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six years ago, when I was immersed in the humanities, I was a big equivocator. Not that I'm trying to convey absolute certainty,

The Rap Guide to Evolution

BABA BRINKMAN.
DIRECTED BY DODD LOOMIS.
SoHo Playhouse,
New York.
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because science is about uncertainty and exploration.

Do researchers mind you talking about science with certainty?

I haven't had any scientists come after me because of this show. I've covered my bases — for each thing I mention in my raps I can point to the research that made me want to highlight that element. What is 100% me is the stylistic choice, the decision to expose this part of the research over that part. That is based on entertainment value. I don't have to rap about the formation of quartz crystals.

What's your favourite piece from your new show?

One that goes to the heart of the matter is 'Performance, Feedback, Revision', which each night contains a freestyle improvised rap (see go.nature.com/ubvkdz). The point is that

mutation is similar to artistic improvisation. Without that randomness, it is difficult to create new material that goes in surprising directions — and leads the charge on the evolutionary development of the artist, or the organism. I dramatize the evolving process by having an unscripted rap that the audience can see is happening in real time. I never know what it's going to be.

Can you give a sample of the lyrics from the non-improvised part of that song?

"Yeah, you're just a phenotype, performing all the genes inside / Living things only seem designed, 'cause you can't see how they've been revised / And the feedback lies in evolution's brutal gaze / Either you have babies who have babies or get booed off stage."

What are you going to tackle next?

There is interest in a rap guide to climate change, which would be a good challenge. Converting people to looking at how evolution works and accepting it as a reality is an intellectual battle that is worth fighting. Accepting anthropogenic climate change as a reality is an important social and political agenda to lend my weight to. But it looks like there's going to be a Rap Guide to Business first. New York University's Stern School of Business has expressed an interest in commissioning me to summarize its MBA programme. ■

INTERVIEW BY KERRI SMITH