

Theodore Taylor

Female Speaker:

From the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

Rosemary Girard:

This is Rosemary Girard at the Library of Congress. Saturday, August 30th will mark the 14th year that book lovers of all ages have gathered in Washington, D.C. to celebrate the written word at the Library of Congress National Book Festival. The festival, which is free and open to the public, will hold evening hours for the first time ever this year in its new location, the Walter E. Washington Convention Center in Washington, D.C. Hours will be from 10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. For more details, visit www.loc.gov/bookfest.

And now, it is my great pleasure to introduce Theodore Taylor, who illustrated "When the Beat was Born: DJ Kool Herc and the Creation of Hip Hop." Centered on Clive Campbell, soon to be known as DJ Kool Herc, the book chronicles the beginnings of hip hop and its ability to create change. Theodore, thank you so much for joining us today.

Theodore Taylor:

Thank you.

Rosemary Girard:

Now, Theodore, what I think listeners should first know about "When the Beat was Born" is that, while it's a picture book, the content of it is so fresh, and can be appreciated by pretty much anyone spanning all ages. So, did you specifically have children in mind when you created the images for this book, or were you creating for adult audiences, too?

Theodore Taylor:

I guess it was a mix of both, given the subject matter, I think. Some adults might be interested in what's the content of the book is, as well. But I think the art style could be interesting to different ages.

Rosemary Girard:

I definitely agree. I mean, I saw your work, and I just thought it was so fascinating. Why do you think it's important for us to understand the history of hip hop and the impact it's had on our culture?

Theodore Taylor:

Well, it's kind of a -- right now, it's kind of a global culture, and I think it's good for people to get a better understanding of the origins of the genre of music and the culture. The forefathers of hip hop, mostly, their idea was to bring people together. Like I know Afrika Bambaataa had a song called "Peace, Unity, Love, and Having Fun," and I think a lot of people forget that in the hip hop genre. Yeah, and I think it's especially important for kids to realize what the culture is really about.

Rosemary Girard:

[affirmative] And I think that title that you just mentioned kind of says it all. And from what I've learned about you, I gather that you

also have a personal interest in hip hop. So, how has that culture impacted you, or who are some of your favorite artists?

Theodore Taylor:

Wow. [laughs] Well, it's been a big influence on my life for a long time. I know, back when I was a kid, I had a [laughs] a Mickey Mouse rap album.

Rosemary Girard:

[laughs]

Theodore Taylor:

And then soon after that I got the "Men in Black" soundtrack, which had a few of my current favorite artists, like The Roots, De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, Nas -- people I still listen to today. But I think the culture had an influence on my visual art, as well. I got really into street art around high school, which -- like graffiti, things like that. So, yeah, it's been pretty big for me. [laughs]

Rosemary Girard:

Right, well, and I was going to say your artwork seems to match the book and its content so perfectly. So, did you find this project based on your interests, or did the project find you?

Theodore Taylor:

It found me. They -- Roaring Brook Press, Colleen Beneval [spelled phonetically] and Katherine Jacobs -- Katherine Jacobs at Roaring Brook Press found me through my Flickr account, actually.

Rosemary Girard:

Oh.

Theodore Taylor:

[laughs] They -- but I think they hired me because I've been doing a lot of music portraits, and I also did a series of children's theater posters, and I think the combination of that made them think that I'd be a good fit for the job.

Rosemary Girard:

Well, you certainly were. And anyone who flips through this book can see that there's so much energy breathed into your illustrations. Can you tell us a little bit about that creative process, and how you brought DJ Kool Herc to life on paper?

Theodore Taylor:

Yeah. It was a, it was a long process. [laughs]

Rosemary Girard:

Right. [laughs]

Theodore Taylor:

Yeah. I looked up a lot of reference, did a lot of research online. It's hard to find a lot of photos from that era, especially of DJ Kool Herc when he was young. So, I looked up a lot of images of Jamaica in

the 70s and 60s for the beginning of the book. I also found a lot of reference for hip hop -- or actually disco, right before hip hop started in the late 70s in New York, like block parties and things like that.

Rosemary Girard:

Did you find it hard that it was -- well, number one, like you said, that you couldn't find too many early pictures of Clive Campbell, but just did you try to stick to portraying him in as much detail as possible? Or did you kind of take some artistic liberty with just portraying the culture in general, and kind of making -- or I guess, portraying him how you wanted him to be portrayed?

Theodore Taylor:

I think I did take some artistic liberty. Like there's no pictures of him when he is a teenager, so I kind of had to imagine what he would look like as a teenager.

Rosemary Girard:

Right, but that's what makes a good artist, I guess. [laughs]

Theodore Taylor:

Yeah. [laughs]

Rosemary Girard:

So, what was it like collaborating with Laban Carrick Hill, the author of "When the Beat was Born"? Because I imagine that for the most part when you're doing, you know, your album art or some things like that, you're kind of working pretty much solo. So what was it like working with someone else who was creating the text behind your illustrations?

Theodore Taylor:

Well, I didn't -- I actually didn't have too much contact with Laban. We've emailed a few times, but I mostly worked back and forth with Colleen and Katherine at Roaring Brook to look over my sketches and things like that. But I enjoyed it.

Rosemary Girard:

That's great. And when did you begin creating artwork? Did you ever envision yourself illustrating a children's book?

Theodore Taylor:

Well, I've been drawing -- at least since elementary school, I've had a sketch book; I've been carrying around sketch books since elementary school. I think I started taking it seriously my senior year of college when my art teacher told me that I should go to art -- or that I should attend Virginia Commonwealth University to study art. I didn't expect to do children's books, specifically, but I think it's something I'd like to -- or I'm going to pursue [inaudible] in the future.

Rosemary Girard:

Wonderful. And you were the 2014 winner of the American Library Association's Coretta Scott King - John Steptoe New Talent Award. So, do you have any advice or words of encouragement for new or up-and-coming artists out there?

Theodore Taylor:

Yeah. I'd say to just not be afraid to share your work, especially online. The internet is going to be looking at your work. I know when I was in college they kind of frowned upon posting all this work on the internet, but I think it's really valuable in the way of kind of networking and getting attention.

Rosemary Girard:

Absolutely. I mean, I guess you're a testament to that, considering you were discovered for this book on Flickr. So that's a perfect example. And I know that, you know, art sometimes is one of those things that can be hard to break into, and I think it's probably easy to get discouraged. So, do you have any advice on how to, I guess, just be persistent throughout that creative process?

Theodore Taylor:

I'd say just draw, a lot. [laughs] I know there is, there's some things online that -- like this website called Sketch Dailies, where they put up a theme each day, and you have to -- or you can illustrate it if you want, but it just gives you an opportunity to keep drawing. But yeah, just draw a lot.

Rosemary Girard:

All right, practice makes perfect. And as you may know, this year's National Book Festival theme is 'Stay Up with a Good Book.' Is there a book you've read recently that you enjoyed recently staying up to read, or maybe in your case, some artwork that you really enjoyed staying up to look at? [laughs]

Theodore Taylor:

[laughs] Haven't been buying a lot of books recently. Jillian Tamaki has a book for First Second called "This One Summer," written by Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki, or illustrated by Jillian Tamaki. It's a graphic novel for, I guess, teenagers. First Second released it, and it's really great. So I've spent a few nights reading that.

Rosemary Girard:

Well, that's great, especially, I think, any fans listening who are planning on visiting the Graphic Novels Pavilion at the Book Festival, that's a wonderful recommendation. And are you working on anything right now? Are there any upcoming books or projects that your fans should know about?

Theodore Taylor:

Yeah, I'm actually working on three books for Shaquille O'Neal.

Rosemary Girard:

Oh, wonderful.

Theodore Taylor:

Yeah. They should be done by around March next year. I'm not sure when the release is, but I'm also working on writing my own books for Roaring Brook, the publisher of "When the Beat was Born." And I think we are

going to try to come up with a story focused on street art, kind of introducing kids to street art and mural, things like street art festivals, but that's in the works. So --

Rosemary Girard:

Wonderful. Well, we'll certainly be on the look-out for those, because I know how well your latest book has been received.

We've been hearing from Theodore Taylor, who will appear on Saturday, August 30th, in the Picture Books Pavilion at the National Book Festival at the Washington Convention Center. Thank you so much, Theodore.

Theodore Taylor:

Thank you.

Female Speaker:

This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at loc.gov.

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