



## NALEDGE BRINGS HIS RAPPER'S BRAIN BACK TO ACADEMIA

Jabari "Naledge" Evans of Kidz in the Hall talks about his doctoral dissertation, incorporating hip-hop into education, the drill scene hacking the industry, and more.

By **LEOR GALIL**

Jabari "Naledge" Evans expected to spend April in a Chicago recording studio with Michael "Double-O" Aguilar, his partner in hip-hop duo Kidz in the Hall. They met in 2000 while studying at the University of Pennsylvania and formed the group in 2004. Their 2006 debut album, *School Was My Hustle*, came out on respected indie label Rawkus Records shortly before its demise; the duo's next three albums, ending with 2011's *Occasion*, were issued by Duck Down Records. Since then Kidz in the Hall

have been free agents, and in 2017 they self-released *Free Nights & Weekends*.

Evans and Aguilar have been working on a follow-up where and when they can—before the pandemic, they'd recorded five songs in New York and five in Los Angeles, where Aguilar lives. Their schedules have complicated in-person collaboration, which Evans prefers to trading files by e-mail. Aguilar DJs for Lupe Fiasco, and Evans is a PhD student and lecturer at Northwestern University; in 2016 he enrolled in the doctoral program at the School

of Communication, where he's also a research fellow with the Center on Media and Human Development.

Once Kidz in the Hall got famous, unscrupulous commentators weaponized their Ivy League origin story to suggest the group were somehow "inauthentic." It hasn't helped that their feel-good style has relegated them to the stereotypically brainy subgenre of "conscious hip-hop." But when Evans finished at UPenn in 2004, years before the duo broke out, he'd had his fill of school. "As we got closer to grad-

uation, I was like, 'I'm never doing this ever again,'" he says. "I'm gonna be famous at the end of this."

By the time *Occasion* came out in 2011, though, enough time had passed for Evans to have a change of heart about higher education. He enrolled at the University of Southern California in 2012, and two years later he completed a master's in social work. In Chicago, he got involved in youth-mentorship programs, volunteering at the Little Black Pearl Art & Design Academy in 2013 and working as a

## MUSIC

Jabari “Naledge” Evans  COURTESY THE ARTIST

teaching artist for music-education nonprofit Foundations of Music in 2015. That year he also launched his own music-focused nonprofit, the Brainiac Project.

The more Evans worked with kids, the more questions he had. How could schools incorporate specifically hip-hop-related music-making programming into their curricula? How could that encourage students to find creative voices they can carry outside of institutional environments? How can technology help them in that process?

Exploring those questions through a PhD program looked more and more appealing, and Evans applied to three Chicago schools. His time at Foundations of Music has informed his Northwestern dissertation, which is still in progress—it unpacks how young people of color engage with subcultures and how that affects their world outside music, with a strong emphasis on the role of technology.

Evans is also working on a book for DIO Press called *Learn Like a Rapper* and building on a separate study of drill and technology that he began last summer, while interning for Microsoft Research New England’s Social Media Collective. Anyone following drill since Chief Keef’s emergence in 2012 could’ve predicted it would end up the focus of academic interest, and Evans is hardly the only person to examine the culture through such a lens. *Ballad of the Bullet*, a new book on drill, technology, and gangs by Stanford University sociology professor Forrest Stuart, is being published by Princeton University Press this week. Evans has already crossed paths with Stuart in his research, but their approaches are vastly different.

I met with Evans in the fall because he wanted to interview me about drill, and our conversation also touched on his studies and his experience making music in Chicago. I’ve been curious about how his work has progressed since then—he’s still on track to graduate as early as 2021—and about how the emergence of COVID-19 might have affected his projects. Last month, I called Evans for a wide-ranging talk about his return to academia, his study of an art form he still creates, the nexus of technology and hip-hop, and more. Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

**Leor Galil: Why did you want to pursue a PhD?**

**Jabari “Naledge” Evans:** I started seeing the utility as I started working with youth. I started going to these meetings where I was interacting with people to try to secure grants; I ended up being in rooms with a lot of researchers for these situations, and I ended up speaking at a lot of schools. People would say that to me: “You might benefit from a PhD, when this is all said and done.” The questions I was asking were things they figured could be solved at that level of study.

I had a realer conversation with a professor that’s at Northwestern, Aymar Jean “AJ” Christian. He broke it down to me: There’s not enough artists in academia. There’s a lot of people who speak about art, there’s a lot of people who research those worlds, and even people who have semi-access—there’s a ton of journalists that get into PhD work, and then they’re able to enter into spaces because they have relationships from their former jobs. But the perspective of an artist is different.

I didn’t realize what he meant until I got into pursuing a PhD. I have a different voice and a different viewpoint that I think isn’t in academia. He was like, “The fact that you went to Penn in undergrad and the fact that you have all this life experience, you’re actually a perfect candidate to be in our program.” All of my research—all of it—is driven by real-life situations and conversations with people in fields that I wouldn’t even have relationships with if I wasn’t in the trenches.

Seeing how our industry has changed, rapidly, I’m almost like an alien. I’m immersed in a world that I was raised into, but hip-hop changes every week. I’m realizing that when I talk to teenagers about what they’re doing to find audiences—what they’re doing to find out about themselves and forge friendships is light-years beyond what I was doing.

Both my parents are PhDs. If you asked my elementary school classmates or high school classmates, this was more the logical route than the idea of becoming an artist—I think that surprised people. I kinda took the long way home.

**If this is a long road back to academia, with your music career being kind of a sabbatical, how did that help you figure out what you wanted to do as a PhD student?**

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I figured out real quickly that the whole point of the PhD is to have some type of question that can only be answered with a dissertation. Right before—I would say 2013, 2014—I started doing mentorship work with youth that wanted to get into the music industry. I started working with a lot of arts not-for-profits, one of which was Foundations of Music. They had brought me in to be a guest speaker—somebody who was in the industry could observe the curriculum and go in and basically be like, “Yo, is this thing that we’re trying to do,” which is hip-hop-based education in CPS schools, “is it corny? Is what we’re doing correct?”

Seeing how, for lack of better terms, I was a nerd, I was always the kid who kind of had to be quiet about some of his intellect. There was nothing in the school offerings that drew out of me confidence—things I could use my creative mind with to combine with my intellect. Those are things I found, generally, in sports. But then I had this other side of me that was very intellectual and very inquisitive. Growing up in South Shore—it sounds crazy, but to intellectually flex, it was taboo.

Working with Foundations of Music, they were putting programs in elementary level that would have been a dream to a kid like me. Having been somebody that’s actually went through the process of getting a record deal, my first experience with hip-hop music was, like, being 12 in a room full of blunts and 40-ounces, in spaces that were super sketchy, and lying to my parents about where I was going. It’s crazy thinking about the level of danger and stupidity that was involved in finding my craft. What if you had the ability to just go to school, and there was a part of the day that you could do that?

There’s people all over the globe doing this work. Hip-hop-based ed is a hashtag that’s been used long before me. It’s been interesting doing this stuff retroactively, reading all of what I missed while I was a touring artist. There were people in ’94 and ’95 who were doing super dope, interesting work on hip-hop ed. Here in Chicago, you’ve got people like David Stovall, who’s at UIC—he’s one of the major people in the field—and people like Decoteau Irby, who’s also at UIC. Chris Emdin, who’s at Columbia in New York, he’s considered the godfather of hip-hop ed. But I think even the ways they look at it is different from me. To reel that back in, my work in Foundations of Music led to me wanting to help with their curriculum and do more intensive work.

## You wanted to focus on Chicago—but why media, technology, and society?

The youth I was interacting with—what they were doing is using the Internet. The more I realized a lot of the things they were able to do with super-duper constraints . . . I had to save money to go to a real studio; a lot of these youth are figuring out ways to put studios in their crib, to do beats on their phone. They’re utilizing these platforms that keep changing. When I was breaking in, it was MySpace; now we’re seeing the emergence of TikTok.

I was like, “The questions that I’m now thinking about have to involve technology.” I also wanted to be able to enter spaces where I could hear what people who create these technologies were doing. I did a talk at Spotify in Boston this summer. Ten years ago, they would’ve been placating me as an artist. Now, I’m more coming in with questions about society, not necessarily industry. I’m still asking questions about how youth create careers—I’m still doing that—and I’m also asking about the utility of the technology itself, and where they see it going.

One of my mentors from undergrad, Dr. James Peterson, he’s a hip-hop scholar who studied under Dr. Michael Eric Dyson—who’s the real godfather of all of this. He was telling me, “You can have some of the same ideas; you just have to flesh it out and translate it to academic-speak. Once you do that—once you get that validation of those three letters after your name—when you enter into the room, the access opens up different. There’s a journey for you afterwards that I think will be exciting for you.”

Being an academic, you’ve got to always be curious, and that’s something that is relatable. As an MC, you’ve gotta always be curious, because you can’t sit in the same spot. I can’t be “School Is My Hustle” Naledge no more. I’m 35 now, I’ve got a child, I’m sitting here thinking about marriage, but at the same time I’m struggling with “How do I leave this old life behind that made me Naledge?” That’s what my music is about now, so there’s an evolution.

The questions that I came into the program asking had to do with hip-hop-based education, its utility, and how do we bring the informal into formal settings. Through this study it’s pivoted, and I’m now thinking about “How do drill artists get big off YouTube?” I’m thinking about why, in Chicago, there’s an infra-

structure that’s building through the Internet, more so than in other urban enclaves. I’m thinking about how DJs during this time of COVID-19 have been innovators in relational labor, and what does that tell us about the future of work? And what could small startups learn from how hip-hop artists bootstrap, time and time again, and innovate time and time again?

I don’t think I was even ready for this type of rigor, academically, when I was 23. I was smart, but I wasn’t mature enough—I didn’t have the life experience. I pursued a dream I had that drove my passion.

Kidz in the Hall gained traction at a weird time, where the Internet was really the wild west. I was just talking to Andrew Barber about that: “Yo, there was a point where we would do such impactful things that were getting views that no one was monetizing.” Labels didn’t really understand, like, “How does that translate to sales,” which is laughable now.

I used to tell Vic Mensa, and I think I told all the guys that I interacted with that were younger than me, when they were on their way up—I sat with all of them and told them they had it, and I told them things that I made mistakes with. I had hunches that they all were gonna be big on some level, and I think that’s a part of my legacy too. It’s a reason why I think mentorship on all levels and having a good ear for music is always gonna be a part of my legacy. As I got older, I realized it was up to people like me, Mikkey Halsted, GLC, Rhymefest, the Cool Kids—it was up to us to work in tandem with guys like DJ RTC and Andrew Barber to build what now has structure.

The program at Northwestern was fitting, because it was interdisciplinary yet broad—broad enough, yet allowed me to find my focus. Northwestern is like being on Def Jam as a rapper. It’s basically giving me a ton of resources and the ability to walk into a room and say, “This is where I’m studying,” and people respect it.

Going through the tenure track, I might not be able to stay in Chicago. But I’ll never not have ties to Chicago. The research that I’m doing, I have so much access here because of my ties—that’s something that’s gonna get me a nice jump-start thinking about this first book. And then also thinking about this second project that has emerged from doing interviews with artists—it started off thinking about the drill scene.

I talked to people like David Drake, Andrew Barber, and some people at Columbia Col-

lege who were doing a documentary—they gave me some access to interviews with people like Young Chop, Spenzo, Big Homie Doe, and King Louie. These people were around me, but because the music they were making was so different from mine, I wasn’t understanding their genius.

That’s another project I’ve been thinking about. How the aesthetics of drill—the whole violent nature of it, and the way it’s tied to the criminal activity that goes on here in Chicago—have branded drill. When really, the branding of drill should be around the fact that these kids from marginalized communities found ways to use cell phones to hack the industry. That’s the story, and that’s the story I want to tell.

## How does studying media as an academic—and being in spaces with youth who are shaping the way new technology is used—influence you and your art?

On a very superficial level, it just keeps me knowing what’s current, and then how I fit within that. That’s been helpful to know. If you were a regular guy my age, the only way you would figure out what’s current is to talk to your child, or to be where children are, and that’s not normal—unless you’re a schoolteacher, unless you’re a DJ, unless . . . I have homies like Joe Freshgoods, who owns a streetwear shop—he’s interacting with youth all the time. He’s driving what they think, but he also is hearing what’s on the undercurrent all the time. That’s kind of the position that research is giving me. I’ve been in CPS classrooms seeing what youth are interested in.

There’s the unicorns of the hip-hop space, like, the Chance the Rappers and the Drakes, who are able to enter anybody’s conversation, be themselves, and people accept it. But then there’s people like me, Little Brother, and Talib Kweli—we step outside of those conversations that people are used to from us, and it gets awkward. So we have to figure out new ways to reinvent ourselves that are palatable—that’s what’s been interesting to me.

## The way we have to use technology during the pandemic is so radically different. How has that affected your day-to-day, and affected how you think about your dissertation?

Now, with everyone having to go remote, I’m doing just as much education on the technology itself. I’m teaching a class right now in

Northwestern's School of Professional Studies, which is adult learners continuing their education. So now I'm dealing with, like, the mother of three who works at the hospital, who is pursuing a degree, and has never used Zoom before.

Scheduling has become different; the university sent people home, so some people aren't in Chicago. So now we have time scheduling that is different, in dealing with undergrads at least. You become more than a teacher. You become somebody who has to create energy as well, because people are in a state where they're unable to necessarily focus on the task at hand, and that's been different and difficult. When you're in a classroom, you can sense your audience. Part of the whole lecture process is being able to feed off the energy of the people that are in the room, and so that becomes detached and weird; it feels like you're just talking to yourself.

They say writing a dissertation is already social distancing. I was already annoying my girl, 'cause I sit for hours in front of a computer, writing, and she's like, "Are you done?"

And I'm like, "I don't know." This thing is never done. The writing of the dissertation has been about 14 months, but technically I've been doing this project for four years. I've been sitting in solitude, writing and reading.

**You've been working on your dissertation for 14 months, and you've already come up with a follow-up, which is the drill study...**

The only reason I was able to do that was 'cause I got an internship with Microsoft last summer. I was in Cambridge—they have a group called the Social Media Collective. All they do is think about research; they have this internship program, and the only rule for the summer internship is you do something that's completely unrelated to your dissertation. So it forced me to find another project.

I collaborated with a scholar there that I looked up to, basically; I was working with a lady by the name of Nancy Baym, and her expertise is on online fandom and the ways in which artists relate to audiences through digital means. She knew nothing about the


hip-hop space, and so we collaborated on a paper that led to me thinking about drill. But if I hadn't had that internship, I wouldn't have had the time to think about it.

I also got to interact with a professor named Forrest Stuart. He'd done a couple of public-facing things—he'd had an article in *Chicago* magazine. He studies drill more from a criminology standpoint and surveillance, thinking about how these online interactions spill into the street, what that means, and how police surveil that. He found some of the same things I found—like the ingenuity with the technology—even though I'm focused more on the industry, because that's just more who I am and my background. But the ability to collaborate with tenured professors when I'm a student is super cool.

One thing that that experience gave me is I had to get up in front of machine-learning people, economists—people who were doing vastly different things than anything I was studying—and explain to them why what I'm studying is important. That was very valuable, because the questions they're gonna ask are

way different than what somebody who even remotely has an interest in hip-hop would ask. I learned how to frame my work during that summer. It's like a taxi conversation—if somebody asks you, "What do you do?" Now I think I figured out how to explain that. It's like these youths, who were marginalized, have been able to become walking startups, so to speak. How does a startup that bootstraps itself and is working on a lean budget compete with conglomerates? And these youth figured that out.

All my work has dealt with the implications of technology on race, access, and learning and workplace development. So when I'm talking to an economist, and I'm talking about what artists like Keef and Durk do for Chicago's economy, that's how it's palatable to them.

I love getting in front of people, finding out about their life, immersing myself in their world, and trying to translate that. It's not a feeling that can equal making a song, but I've found that it's a close second. 

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