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Talent to crow over

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O'Jay Vanegas was 21, a time of transition in any culture.

He'd been living in Desert Hot Springs since age 5, when he and his family moved from Los Angeles. He hung out in the hills among the crows because he didn't have many friends.

"There were always crows around," said Vanegas, 33, "so I sort of befriended them.

"There's a duality to the crow. On the one part, it's a scavenger. On the other part, it's about death. I've always had the ability to be in tune with the afterlife and the crows were the bridge to the eternal."

Vanegas, of Mexican and Navajo descent, says his dreams have brought him knowledge since childhood.

When he was 21, he realized it was time to pursue his dream to become a hip-hop artist, to educate people about his culture through the medium Ice Cube called the radio of the streets.

Nakai means Mexican in Navajo, so he became Nakai Tha Blkcrow with a mission to spread Native hip-hop in songs such as "Lightning Strikes."

"In '95, I came out as an artist," he said in a booth at Flaherty's Bar and Grill. "I had the epiphany to be Nakai Tha Blkcrow.

"I camped out over night, looking for a vision or something. There was a thunder storm - and that's where the 'Lightning (Strikes)' comes from - and there was just a crow there the whole time."

Vanegas graduated with a double major at California State University, Northridge, in fine arts and Chicano studies, in 1999. He worked in case management at a mental health clinic in Palm Springs and substituted for two years at Palm Springs Unified School District.

He was hired as the director of education at the Agua Caliente Museum a week after 9/11/2001. He still teaches Agua Caliente culture at the museum.

He's always had a dual passion for Native studies and hip-hop, but he didn't see a path for his passions until that epiphany.

"I was thinking this way in 1991-1992," he said, "and I thought I was crazy."

But other Native American hip-hop enthusiasts in Arizona and New Mexico were thinking like him. The Native American Music Awards began in 1998 and by 2001, they had a category for Native hip-hop.

"There is a whole movement of Native hip-hop," he said. "It's very popular now (but) it wasn't

until 1998-'99. It just blew up out of nowhere. I'm glad I'm one of the first because I get respected."

Vanegas has performed around the Southwest with a Los Angeles hip-hop collective, INNERNATIONAL Crew, since 1995. He was featured on "The Rizing: Best of Native Hip Hop" on Living Proof Records in 2004, but says, "Nobody in Palm Springs knows about this."

Now he's performing hip-hop with the local Soul Tribe and playing in the rap-rock band Evident, which grew out of a similar group, Monstro-X, that won a local battle of the bands.

Vanegas wants to create a local scene for both types of music.

"We've been plagued by (lack of venues)," he said. "It seems that once we get something going, something happens and then it disappears."

The Sound: Nakai Tha Blkcrow's latest CD, "Lightning Strikes," features production Israel "IzRock" Andrade and cuts by DJ Odyssey. His samples create a Native spiritual feel to match his lyrics, but his rap sounds urban and freestyle.

The lyrics: Nakai says in "Lightning Strikes":

"Me and my mind be searching like every time, pushing to the ultimate level, electric disciple, from the kingdom of Bam Navajo and Mexican clans! Tongva, Cahuilla, Kumeyaay - we bird dance!

"It's a Black Crow prance and stance in which I form and shape through the eyes of an elder, we should try to emulate, debate or criticize, institutionalized in this hip-hop vibe in which they try to buy in a Westfield Mall. I'm against y'all, who mix rap in a trendy look."

Goals: Vanegas would like to gain national acclaim as Nakai Tha Blkcrow, but says he'll never abandon his mission to teach Native American culture.

"Once it's 5 o'clock, I'm back to Nakai Tha Blkcrow," he says. "To me, that's not a job, that's my passion. Native culture in general, that's my passion. So, I'm always going to be involved with that and I'm always going to be involved with music."

Where to see and hear him: Nakai Tha Blkcrow will perform Dec. 13 at La Estencia, in the old Devane's in Indio, as part of a Thursday night series called Well Rooted by Aesthetic Arrest.

You can find his CD at the trading post in Palm Canyon on the Agua Caliente reservation.
