

MAY 4, 2010, 9:00 PM

Darwin Got It Going On

By *OLIVIA JUDSON*

Olivia Judson on the influence of science and biology on modern life.

The lights go down. The room fills with music — a pulsating hip-hop rhythm. And then, over the music, you hear the voice of Richard Dawkins reading a passage from “On the Origin of Species” by Charles Darwin: “Whoever is led to believe that species are mutable will do good service by conscientiously expressing his conviction. For only thus can the load of prejudice by which this subject is overwhelmed be removed.”

So begins one of the most astonishing, and brilliant, lectures on evolution I’ve ever seen: “The Rap Guide to Evolution,” by Baba Brinkman.



Brinkman, a burly Canadian from Vancouver, is a latter-day wandering minstrel, a self-styled “rap troubadour,” with a master’s degree in English and a history of tree-planting (according to [his Web site](#), he has personally planted more than one million trees). His guide to evolution grew out of a correspondence with Mark Pallen, an evolutionary biologist and rap enthusiast at the University of Birmingham, in Britain; the result, as Brinkman tells us, is “the only hip-hop show to have been peer-reviewed.”

It is also, I suspect, the only hip-hop show to talk of mitochondria, genetic drift, sexual selection or memes. For Brinkman has taken Darwin’s exhortation seriously. He is a man on a mission to spread the word about evolution — how it works, what it means for our view of the world, and why it is something to be celebrated rather than feared.

To this end, he has concocted a set of mini-lectures disguised as rap songs. When he comes to human evolution, for example, he has the audience sing along in call-response fashion to “I’m a African” — a riff on an earlier song of that name by the radical, pan-Africanist hip-hop duo Dead Prez. The point of Brinkman’s version is that because humans evolved in Africa, we are all Africans: pan-Africanism meets population genetics. A few moments later, he’s showing a video of individuals of the social slime mold *Dictyostelium discoideum* streaming together while rapping about how cooperation evolves.

(*Dictyostelium* is notorious, in some circles, for its strange life-style. Usually, an individual *Dictyostelium* lives alone as a single cell. But when food is scarce, the single cells come together and form a being known as “the slug”; this crawls off in search of better conditions. When it finds them, the slug develops into a stalked fruiting body, and releases spores. But here’s the mystery: not all members of the slug get to make spores — and thereby contribute to the next generation — so why do they cooperate?)

[A Selection of Baba Brinkman’s Music \(CBC Radio\)](#)

It’s surreal stuff. But the clever part is that the show works at different levels. If you are up on evolution you will be amused by the in-jokes and amazed by the erudition. If you know nothing about evolution, you will certainly be entertained, and you may even learn something. (The delivery is so fast, and the material so broad, that it’s hard to tell how much will stick on one hearing; but for enthusiasts, there’s a CD. It’s good; I’ve been listening to it all afternoon.)

The lyrics are, for the most part, witty, sophisticated and scientifically accurate; and they lack the earnest defensiveness that sometimes haunts lectures on evolution. I spotted one or two small slips — a confusion of the praying mantis with the Australian redback spider (oh no!) — and there are a few moments of poetic license that a po-faced pedant might object to. Otherwise, it’s pretty rigorous.

Brinkman can’t resist taking a few pot-shots at creationists (“Darwin got it going on / Creationism is . . . dead wrong . . .”), and he devotes one rap to refutations of creationist arguments. But by and large, he proselytizes about evolution not by attacking its deniers, but by revealing the subject’s scope, from natural selection to the evolution of human culture and language. At the

same time, he teases the audience, sends up post-modernism, mocks himself and satirizes the genre of hip-hop, all with fizzing energy and spell-binding charisma. Like I said, astonishing.

I saw “The Rap Guide to Evolution” last week in Barnstaple, a small town in the west of England. But this week, Darwin got it going on for a few days at the [Bleecker Street Theatre](#), off Broadway. If you are in New York — go.

Olivia Judson, an evolutionary biologist, writes every Wednesday about the influence of science and biology on modern life. She is the author of “Dr. Tatiana’s Sex Advice to All Creation: The Definitive Guide to the Evolutionary Biology of Sex.” Ms. Judson has been a reporter for The Economist and has written for a number of other publications, including Nature, The Financial Times, The Atlantic and Natural History. She is a research fellow in biology at Imperial College London.

- [Copyright 2010 The New York Times Company](#)
- [Privacy Policy](#)
- [NYTimes.com 620 Eighth Avenue New York, NY 10018](#)