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Local television show serious about local talent

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Other than the sound of Veronica Underwood's voice, everything was quiet inside the small New York Cafe Theatre at 501 Armstrong St. in North Philadelphia.

The audience of 30 young adults who came to one of the first showings of Frank Bey's talent competition sat on the edge of their seats. They were in a trance as Underwood sang her song.

And after Underwood finished her rendition of Chaka Khan's "Ain't Nobody," the crowd of patrons jumped to their feet, applause

drowned out the few last words to her song and the whispering and chattering began.

"I was surprised," . . . "This is going to be good," . . . "Who's up next?" dominated the noise.

It appeared the audience in the small, poorly lit theater was surprised to see such talent come out of a fledgling production company.

But finding the kind of talent that talent scouts have overlooked is exactly what the producers, Frank Bey and Rodney Smith, aim to do.

"The idea started here about two years ago," said Bey. "I was the talent coordinator for the City of Philadelphia for Amateur Night at

the Apollo . . . We were taking acts back and forth to the Apollo every Wednesday and I had a 12-year-old young lady named Aretha . . . she was raw talent, she was very good and I took her up and she got booed and she collapsed in my arms. And after that, I realized that we needed a different type of vehicle to give exposure to talent in Philadelphia."

"Get It On" was born out of that experience. The talent show is taped live every Wednesday evening. It is now a one-hour program on Channel 7, airing on Friday nights from 12:30-1:30 A.M. Judges from the music industry as

well as local celebrities evaluate the talent in front of a "live" audience.

In addition to the talent segment, one portion of the show will educate aspiring artists about the music business and another will showcase Black music history.

The informational aspect of the show is an important one. Bey is a professional drummer who played with groups like the Delfonics and saw firsthand how artists are taken advantage of.

He talks about having hit records but seeing no royalties, of whole groups sharing one hotel room and of having to argue for payment after a performance.

"Artists trying to get in this business should really understand this is a very tricky business," Bey explained.

"They should understand contracts and percentages, mechanical royalties, publishing rights, so they know what their rights are."

Three winners are announced at the end of the show. Those winners return the next week to compete against five new contestants.

This continues until an eventual "square-off" contest determines six semi-final winners who will compete in a grand finale for more than \$50,000 in cash and prizes.

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Some of the acts include girl singing groups, male a capella groups, dancers, actors, comedians. But Bey's specialty is to find unique talent, the kind that raises eyebrows and causes whispers.

Such was the case during one taping when Tyraine Ragsdale, a/k/a rapper Grand Hank, took the stage and started rapping to the crowd about education.

Ragsdale, 26, of southwest Philadelphia, has a bachelor's degree in chemistry and works at one of the leading pharmaceutical firms in the Philadelphia area.

Finding him on stage with a crew and a "boom" box is exactly what teen-agers wouldn't expect.

And, he says, that's exactly why he does it.

"Most children look at education as something for nerds," he said following his act. "I have a commitment to youth."

It's acts like Grand Hank that Bey and his staffers hope will bring fame to the company. His goals for the show and the company are clear.

"Basically to give (talent) the exposure and also attract people from the music industry down to see how talented Philadelphia is," said Bey.

"I think Philadelphia is one of the richest cities in America in terms of talent (but) with no avenues."

"Philadelphia (had) this reputation that you had to leave Philadelphia and go to New York or L.A. to start to make it," said Smith.

"As (Bey) mentioned he was doing that for two years, taking our talent somewhere else just so they could make it. That was our main objective — just to keep the talent here so they could realize that if they go on "Get It On" people can see them, they can get some exposure in their own city and not have to go somewhere else."

Auditions are held on Mondays from 5-8 P.M. at Amos Recreation Center at 16th and Berks streets.