

A GRAND HANK PRODUCTION

# The Chemistry of RAP

By Junious Ricardo Stanton

Tyraine Ragsdale is a scientist, Grand Hank is a rapper. Ragsdale was born in Philadelphia on June 9, 1965, the same day as Grand Hank. Ragsdale is a graduate of the University City High School in West Philadelphia and a 1988 graduate of the University of Pittsburgh with a Bachelor's of Science degree in chemistry. Grand Hank got his start as a DJ in the rough environment of the Mill Creek Housing Projects at forty-sixth and Brown Streets in West Philadelphia. Grand Hank was an integral part of a rap group called *Grand Master Hank and the Punk Funk Nation*.

On the surface, these two young men seem to be worlds apart with diverse values and lifestyles. In actuality, Tyraine Ragsdale, the chemist, is Grand Hank, the leader of Grand Hank Productions Inc. and creator of the *Education Rap Lecture*.

Ragsdale is currently employed as a chemist for R.W. J. Pharmaceutical Research Institute, a Johnson & Johnson company in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Grand Hank hustles performances wherever he can. Ragsdale exudes self confidence, he's articulate, believes in education, self-respect and giving back to one's community. Grand Hank tells it like it is, raps to a slammin' beat and targets his message to urban teenagers.

As a teenager, Ragsdale got his start as a DJ with the Punk Funk Nation group in West Philadelphia. He left the group when he attended the University of Pittsburgh to earn a degree in chemistry. Ragsdale was able to support himself and hone his avocation while in college by using his skills as a DJ.

Ragsdale believes in setting goals and working hard. He possesses a strong spiritual foundation. Grand Hank formed a posse to plan and choreograph his routines, design future projects and formulate strategies to successfully market his "Education of a Nation" concept.

When Ragsdale returned to Philadelphia, he secured a job with Johnson & Johnson Pharmaceuticals as a chromatographer for medicinal chemists. His job responsibilities are to isolate and purify novel compounds for the manufacture of new drug entities.

An intense concern for the plight of his people spurred Ragsdale to get involved and join the movement to provide positive



**Tyraine Ragsdale is a chemist for R.W.J. Pharmaceutical Research Institute, a Johnson & Johnson company in New Brunswick, New Jersey. As a chromatographer, he isolates and purifies novel compounds for the manufacture of new drugs.**

role models and help reclaim our communities.

"In 1988, the killings and drugs were hot and responsible black role models were few," he recalls. "Bullets were flying and the males were just ducking and running. Nobody wanted to get involved. But somebody has to develop something positive that people can benefit from."

Grand Hank Productions Inc. was founded in April 1989, to produce material to stimulate life-affirming values and education by using rap to get the attention of teenagers and young adults. Grand Hank's messages do not contain profanity. Instead, he offers hope and practical solutions. In a tract on his cassette entitled "Education," Grand Hank tells his audience, "To save this nation we have to stress education. Knowledge is power. Parents are the ones who lay the foundation, whether good or bad. You have to give the child the knowledge they need to have. Encouragement and motivation have to come from home..."



**Grand Hank, the Hip-Hop DJ and scientist, (a.k.a. Tyraine Ragsdale), is leader of Grand Hank Productions Inc. and creator of the Education Rap Lecture. "The objective is to present a series of rap songs whose lyrics focus on the importance of science and education."**

The Ragsdale family is a closely-knit group. Joe Ragsdale, his father, owns his own maintenance and construction company, and his mother Shirley is an elementary school teacher. He credits his parents and his older brother Lamont for their influence and support in starting Grand Hank Productions and helping to get it off the ground.

From his experience as a DJ, Ragsdale observes that rap is the voice of today's youth. Realizing young people strongly identify with the art form, Ragsdale uses rap as a teaching tool and the rapper image as a positive role model.

"When I decided to have a rap program, I had to decide who was going to do it. At the time I wasn't a rapper. I was a D.J. I wrote all the material and tried it out using other talent but there was something missing," he says. "One night, I was in bed and the message came to me. 'You have to do it... You have the background, you have the education, you're from the environment, and you have the youth... You're not that much older than they are...' I started rapping and mixing beats on my own equipment upstairs. Then I tested it on my family and at a few parties, and people really liked it. It was different."

Ragsdale took his work to a recording studio and they cleaned up the sound. Soon afterward, he began producing his own cuts.

"As a rapper, I serve as living proof that education works, that

the environment (society) may make a prediction about someone, but it is the individual who will ultimately determine his or her destiny."

The Educational Rap Lecture is a synthesis of his experiences, both as a Hip-Hop DJ and a scientist, coupled with his desire to educate, inspire and positively influence urban youth. It is a combination of rap, lecture and audience interaction designed to promote the importance of education, science, black history, and self-respect.

Explains Ragsdale, "The objective is to present a series of rap songs whose lyrics focus on the importance of science and education. For example, in one of the songs entitled *Afro-American Scientists*, we scroll through a list of black scientists and their inventions. At the end of the song, we quizz the students on how much information they have retained by letting the students answer the questions."

"Another song, called *Things Africans Did*, talks about all the science and technology that came out of Africa that is not being acknowledged by the mainstream," he adds.

Grand Hank has performed in various places: on local television and radio stations; in elementary, middle and high schools; in concerts throughout Philadelphia, New Jersey and Delaware; for the International Association of African-American Music's convention; and the National Council of Negro Women's Black Family Reunion.

In addition to the lecture circuit, Ragsdale and his 19-member posse/support group of accountants, attorneys, marketing and technical personnel, have branched out into promotion, distribution and marketing of their ideas.

Last year, they participated in the Black Expo USA shows in Philadelphia, Atlanta and New York where they were well received. Ragsdale has formulated a 5-year plan that is slightly ahead of schedule. Last year, Grand Hank Productions appeared at 15 schools. This year, they will triple that number. The business also plans to branch out nationally in 1993.

An astute businessman as well as a visionary, Ragsdale wants to diversify into a multi-media company. The business already handles its own bookings and markets all the products.

Ragsdale and his Grand Hank Productions are accepting bookings for their "Education of a Nation Tour" and concerts for schools, church groups (they include spiritual messages in their raps), and fraternal and civic associations. Contact Grand Hank Productions at 1821 South 58th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19143; (215) 724-5260.

## Connecting Science and Life

Minority science and math undergraduates at the University of Rochester (UR) are being paired with area minority high-school students in a challenging tutoring program, called "Americans for Preparation in Technology (APT)."

The high-schoolers study problems associated with an ongoing University study to find alternative energy sources in underdeveloped nations. "So far, response has been quite positive to this combination," says the project director, Ben W. Ebenhack.

APT is a unique collaboration between an engineer and a sociologist. The program was designed by Ebenhack, a petroleum engineer, and Dr. Karen Fields, founding director of the Frederick Douglass Institute of African and African-American Studies.

Ebenhack, a Postdoctoral Fellow at the

Douglass Institute, believes one reason many high school students are weak in math and science is that they don't see its connection to the things in life they do care about.

The idea behind APT is that, with help from a role model, high-schoolers will learn real-life applications of math and science and be stimulated to go on to study those topics in college.

Dr. Fields points to one important distinction in the program. "We're not remediating, but challenging. Our strong intuition is that all students do better when they can connect math and science to something that exists."

That connection is with the UR's Access to Hydrocarbon Energy for African Development (AHEAD) Project, an on-going study supervised by Ebenhack to find alternate energy sources in Third World nations.

Ebenhack, who is a petroleum engineer, says this type of problem is more stimulating than typical math problems.

Besides teaching students math and science skills, the program also expands their vision of what they can become as adults by pairing them with tutors who are themselves minority undergraduates from the university. The tutors in turn are provided with mentors of their own, drawn from the ranks of retired teachers and advanced students.

"In order to broaden horizons for young people, it's important for them to see themselves doing different things," Ebenhack says. "This way they see the continuum from what they are learning in high school through college studies working on applied research, and to the job market in the future."