

Art Review

Performing Arts Winner

Rapper Rachard Dennis conveys complicated feelings

Manuel Mendoza

In two previous performances for the Shreveport Regional Arts Council, hip-hop artist Rachard Dennis emphasized his gentle side, stage-whispering his life experiences and philosophical observations in a poetic, disarmingly low-key style. It was as if he were having a conversation with a friend at a coffee shop.

Dennis' brief 2020 appearance was charming enough to win him SRAC's Critical Mass 8 performing arts competition, entitling the rapper to an hour-long set in the council's Engine Room basement space in front of a live audience. Delayed by the pandemic until this fall, it was a revelation worth the wait as Dennis expanded his palette, including raising his voice when necessary without abandoning his quietly charismatic approach.

As at his other SRAC showcases, Dennis created a theatrical environment as a backdrop: a blanket-covered, bean-bag-type chair he never sat in, a plush toy animal wearing a pink hat and his trademark

desk lamp. He often rapped a cappella, occasionally bringing in a minimalist beat or recorded vocal for support.

Strolling back and forth across the black box, Dennis employed clever rhymes and mesmerizing repetition in a singsong cadence, see-sawing between anecdotes from his life and commentary on the lessons learned. Concurrently, he questioned authority, our penchant for self-destruction and other obstacles we face while also celebrating the pure joy of what it means to be alive.

God and the devil are almost constant presences in Dennis' spiritually informed point of view, but so is the everyday human drama, as he intoned in the opening number, "Blades of Grass":

Life used to pass me by/ Now I got different plans

That may be why/I was too shy to catch Christina's eye

At the Christmas Dance/6th grade Junior High.

Years later, he's a married man with a young daughter and a laundry room full of a certain hue, leading him to dub the first half of the show "Favourite Colour Pink." He outlined his upbringing in "Keith," named for his father, invoked predecessors from Marvin Gaye to Andre 3000 in "The Kornerstone" and during the second section, "7 Going on 8," threaded a hopeful needle in "Children of the Ghetto":

Children of the Ghetto flippin' on a mattress

Children of the Ghetto sleepin' in a casket

Children of the Ghetto thrown in a basket

Children of the Ghetto y'all are the masses

Children of the Ghetto don't worry bout yo blackness

You speak the way you speak lil' ghetto child that's yo accent

Children of the Ghetto you are the future

Used to be 3/5 now ghetto child you a ruler

Might need that .45 might even need that Ruger

But every ghetto child ain't gotta be a shooter

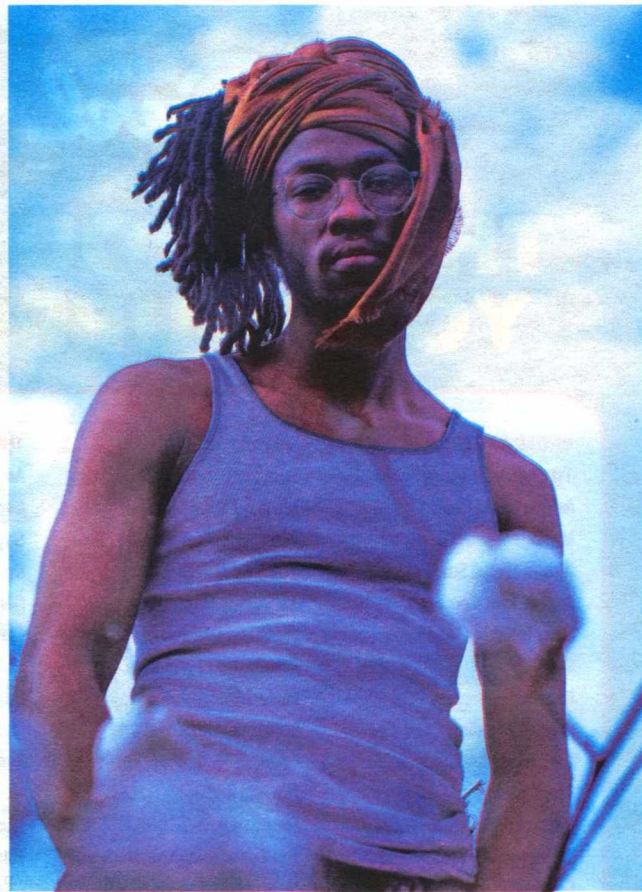
Dennis confidently knows who he is and what he thinks. Accused of being a carpetbagger, he announced in "Lost: In Translation Pt. 2" that it's not his birthplace or adopted hometown that matter but much older roots:

"They always ask, 'Is you imported?'"

"Like, 'You sho' you from Bossier? You sound like you from New Orleans.'

"Let's focus on what's important; My roots planted near the Jordan."

Taking artistic license by exaggerating to make his point, Dennis declared hip-hop dead, though the evidence on stage said otherwise. "I ain't got no party songs," he protested in this same vein,



even as his tunes turn celebratory. He's witnessed shootings and racial injustice, but Dennis also realizes that life is a gift. His ability to convey complicated feelings of both powerlessness and triumph is his.

Manuel Mendoza is a freelance writer and former staff critic at The Dallas Morning News. He has been an arts journalist covering music, television, theater and dance for 30 years.