

Singing you your rights

Your politics class just got a whole lot more interesting



**SHOHN BOOTHE
(A.K.A. RIKOSHAY)**



MELANIE DURRANT

50 CENT IS our Malcolm X. Madonna our Gloria Steinem. For today's youth, music icons are the new political figures, albeit in a watered-down form. Malcolm X's theories of violent revolution are simplified into 50's lyrics of aimless violence, while Madonna's brazen sexuality of old reads like a footnote to Steinem's politics of female empowerment. Yet, musicians are looked to as the conduits of society's most pressing messages.

Enter the 411 Initiative for Change. Established in 1999, this not-for-profit organization reinforces the connection between youth and contemporary forms of art, including music, dance and the visual arts and uses that link to empower youth in the political/social arena.

"I know when I was a teenager I didn't really care what the politicians were saying," explains Anita Wong, co-founder and director of programs, "but I would care if Sarah McLachlan was saying it. So, getting these messages said through a medium that is identifiable, relevant and interesting to young people is the strategy to use these days."

411's current strategy is *The Barbershop Show*. Featuring Canadian hip-hop artist Shohn Boothe (a.k.a. Rikoshay) and

soul singer Melanie Durrant, the production, which will tour Canadian high schools between Oct. 17 and Dec. 9, uses skits to introduce discussion related to human rights education. The performances are bolstered by a curriculum that teachers can use in the classroom.

411's approach fills in the information gaps that can be left by an artist's public declaration of support on an issue, through its follow-up curriculum and through its website www.whatsthe411.ca, which raises the question of how much responsibility artists should take for raising global awareness.

"I think that we all have the responsibility," affirms Boothe. "I understand the whole side of: 'I just make music. I don't want everything else that comes with it.' But the reality is everything else does come with it."

Even if today's musicians are reluctant role models, the reality is that in this age of fast information, their quick proclamations are what the youth heed.

— CHRISTINE CLARKE/DOSE

The 411 Initiative for Change tour begins today at Parkdale CI in Toronto. It will visit various high schools in many cities, including Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, Halifax, Calgary and Winnipeg.