

DATEBOOK

Hip-hoppers get their game on. Chess, that is.

By Eric K. Arnold
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

So a platinum-selling hip-hop producer, a chess grandmaster, the world's most famous turntablist and a Brazilian martial arts specialist walk into a community center. . . .

No, it's not the beginning of a joke, but a sample of what you might find at a Hip-Hop Chess Federation event.

On a recent Saturday, the HHCF held Hip-Hop, Chess and Life Strategies 2 at San Francisco's Omega Boys Club. Part tournament and exhibition, part symposium and panel discussion, the event attracted a great mix of ages and cultures.

"I like chess. It makes my mind go good," said Will Spain, 6.

"I thought these people were so fabulous, so dynamic," said his mother, Leah.

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Photos by PAUL CHINN / The Chronicle

"Hip-hop is a lot like chess. It's about competition and refinement."

ADISA BANJOKO, the "bishop of hip-hop" and co-founder of the Hip-Hop Chess Federation

Adisa Banjoko, whose father taught him chess as a kid, plays a game with his 8-year-old son Ayinde in a Fremont park.



Federation sees links among chess, hip-hop, martial arts

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From the chess and martial arts worlds came former U.S. junior chess champion Josh Waitzkin, the subject of the 1993 film "Searching for Bobby Fischer." Waitzkin also has won several tournaments in the martial art tai chi chuan.

But the presence of hip-hop luminaries such as Paris, T-Kash, Casual, Phesto, Balance, D. Labrie, and Boots Riley, not to mention multiplatinum producer RZA of the Wu-Tang Clan and all-world turntable titan Q-Bert, made the intellectual exercise of chess seem more cool than nerdy. Which was exactly the hope the HHCF, an organization founded earlier this year by Adisa Banjoko and Leo Libiran, had going into the event.

Banjoko, an author and journalist known as the bishop of hip-hop, has been enamored of chess since his father taught him the game as a kid. In his two-volume series of self-published books, "Lyrical Swords," Banjoko (who also blogs for SFGate.com) juxtaposes interviews and essays on his three favorite passions in life: chess, martial arts and hip-hop (not necessarily in that order).

Banjoko says chess has long been on the periphery of hip-hop, having occasionally figured in the lyrics of rappers like EPMD, Public Enemy and Wu-Tang; additionally, the "grandmaster" title applied to legendary DJ Joseph "Flash" Saddyler can be traced back to martial arts and/or chess lore.

Martial arts' connection to hip-hop is well-documented, most notably in the Wu-Tang canon (their first album, 1993's "Enter the 36 Chambers," borrowed its title from a Gordon Liu flick), but also in the work of Eastern philosophy-influenced MCs like Afu-Ra and Jeru the Damaja.

Before the founding of HHCF, however, pop culture parallels between hip-hop and chess were



PAUL CHINN / The Chronicle

Adisa Banjoko is author of two "Lyrical Swords" books, in which he expounds on his three passions: chess, martial arts and hip-hop.

slight. One of the exceptions was the 1994 movie "Fresh," an otherwise typical urban crime drama set to a rap soundtrack, including several RZA-produced Wu-bangers. The "Fresh" protagonist, played by Sean Nelson, was an inner-city dwelling, Waitzkinesque child prodigy forced by circumstance to apply his chess skills to the game of life. A decade after "Fresh," Wu-Tang member GZA teamed with Cypress Hill producer Muggs to release an album called "Grandmasters," which, as its title suggests, is full of chess references.

With his "Lyrical Swords" books, Banjoko says, "I was really trying to connect those dots between hip-hop and chess." The connection is more natural than one might think, he feels. "Hip-hop is a lot like chess. It's about competition and refinement."

Banjoko was preparing to undertake a film project about hip-hop and chess, to be titled "64 Squares in a Cipher," with DJ Mike Relm, but Relm went on tour with the Blue Man Group. So instead, he reached out to Libiran, a graffiti artist and chess aficionado. Together

they came up with the idea for a chess-themed organization that would utilize hip-hop as an educational tool for youth, especially those from the inner-city.

"Chess is, for a lot of these people, an intellectual dirty secret," Banjoko says. "It's in itself a mental martial art," proven to improve math skills and reading comprehension. Banjoko says it's also "a proven tool for uplifting minds," as well as "a way to enrich kids (spiritually) without religious dogma."

Banjoko says he's "tired of a lot of the insanity being pushed as hip-hop," and speculates chess could be a nonviolent way to settle conflicts between rappers.

"A big part of this is me being a father, too," he adds. The HHCF's first event, held last February in San Jose on a budget of \$63, was a success. Interest quickly generated in both the hip-hop and the chess worlds, and several influential players got on board with the HHCF, including Waitzkin, Ubisoft (publishers of the popular "Chessmaster" video game series) and Chesspark.com.

In a phone interview, Waitzkin, 30, explains the connecting principle between chess, martial arts and hip-hop as the concept of "flow." It's "easy to say but not easy to convey," he says. When performed at a high

level, the flow of hip-hop "is so similar to the flow a martial artist or chess player would experience," he says.

Waitzkin reiterated this idea during the HHCF panel discussion, noting that chess is purely mathematical only in its initial stages — it becomes more intuitive once mastered — adding that after he took up martial arts, his "flow" on the chessboard improved considerably.

Sporting a leather crew jacket from Quentin Tarantino's "Kill Bill" (RZA scored the film), Wu-Tang's Abbot coolly noted the subtle, seemingly abstract connections between the 64 squares of the chessboard and the 64 trigrams of the I-Ching. He mentioned how watching martial-arts films on 42nd Street in Manhattan led him to study Buddhist philosophy and eventually Shaolin martial arts, and said chess is a big part of his life. "I'm making a new Wu-Tang album right now," he says. "I have my MPC, my NV8000 and my chessboard."

The Wu have "always incorporated chess into our music," RZA says just before his showdown with radio personality and DJ Kevvy Kev. In fact, one of the group's first videos, "Da Mystery of Chessboxing," was shot on a chessboard set. He believes there's a lot of potential in what the HHCF is doing. "My goal is to make this popular, as well as lucrative."

Others agree there's a big upside. "I think it can go huge," says Kevvy Kev.

"This is unique," says Ubisoft brand manager Phil Shpilberg. Noting that his company has sponsored youth chess competitions in the past, he says, "Our angle is to get kids to play chess. To the extent that their favorite artists are involved, that's a good thing."

Chesspark.com co-founder Patrick Mahoney, who flew in from Florida to be at the event, says, "I don't think there's a limit" to how large the HHCF could be. Mahoney says in just six months, his Web site has "built up a global audience" of online chess players — many of whom are young kids. Hip-

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JOSH WAITZKIN,
former U.S. junior chess champion

hop, he believes, "can help break the stigma of chess as a dry, old man's game."

Local efforts also seem encouraging. Casual, who's been playing for 17 years, recently started a chess club at Youth UpRising, the East Oakland youth center where he works. The game's popularity "is growing in the inner city," he says, a trend he thinks will continue.

Yet while Ubisoft felt strongly enough about the HHCF's mission to donate products at the Omega Boys Club event, Shpilberg says he's cautiously waiting to see just how big chess's emerging urban market is before fully committing to sponsorship. Rather than the result of a well-executed viral marketing campaign, he hopes "it's more of a pop phenomenon that's happening organically." Still, he says, "If it was just a one-event thing, it wouldn't be something we'd be looking at supporting."

In just a short time, the HHCF has garnered considerable buzz both stateside and overseas. Banjoko and the organization already have been featured in XXL, Allhiphop.com and the Chess Drum, as well as on a Swedish Web site (www.mittischack.se); the press release for the May 19 events was translated into Russian and posted on a Russian hip-hop site (www.bigrap.ru), while links to new blog reports and reviews are being posted daily on the HHCF's MySpace page.

"At this point, I'm speechless at what has happened," says Banjoko. The HHCF's immediate plans are to host events around the country in major cities similar to the local event, beginning with Los Angeles.

Banjoko says he's already gotten offers to take the organization to Spain and Malaysia. When he and Libiran conceived of the idea for the HHCF, he says, "I thought I was onto something." After the success of their initial events, he says, "to say the mission was accomplished is a huge understatement."

That came through loud and clear at the Omega Boys Club event. As DJ Malcolm Marshall spun hip-hop classics from a turntable set up in a hallway, some of the local rap celebs even stopped to play a game of chess or two. Meanwhile, Gumby, a practitioner of Brazilian jiu jitsu and Webmaster of www.onthemat.com, represented the martial arts contingent, and motivational speaker and author Orrin Hudson presided over a mini-seminar on how chess helps with life strategies.

At the event, rappers faced off mano-a-mano not in a microphone battle, but seated at tables, looking at each other across chess boards. Some went so far as to engage in a little verbal jousting. Casual won easily against an admittedly rusty Balance, boasting, "You see the way I'm slapping the pieces down, it's like dominoes." Despite the defeat, Balance remained undeterred. "I'll get a rematch," he promised.

Waitzkin, reportedly playing his first match in three years, warmed up by taking on Banjoko's 8-year-old son, Ayinde, then opposed four youngsters simultaneously, before challenging one of RZA's disciples. Chess clock in hand, Q-Bert paced around excitedly, polishing off an also-rusty journalist before taking on another of RZA's crew. The most heated action, however, was the battle between RZA and Kevvy Kev, a long contest that featured almost as many dramatic moves as the climactic fight sequence in "House of Flying Daggers."

Kevvy Kev eventually won (the DJ later admitted "it could have gone either way"), but the real winners were the excited young folks of varying creeds, colors and economic backgrounds who eagerly soaked up the ambience.

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