

Artist as Leader: Donovan Livingston



Little did hip-hop artist and educator Donovan Livingston know that the six-minute address he delivered in 2016 at the Harvard Graduate School of Education’s convocation would turn him almost overnight into a national celebrity. The speech, written as a poem titled “Lift Off,” was published in 2017 by Random House, and video of that electric moment has by now been viewed over 13 million times.

In the intervening years, Livingston, now the Program Manager for Wake Forest University’s pre-college programs, has stayed true to the message at the heart of “Lift Off,” working to ensure that the nation’s educational system at all levels become more welcoming to students whose backgrounds, experiences and modes of expression have traditionally been undervalued.

In this conversation, Livingston, who is currently pursuing his doctorate in education, describes to Corey Madden the role that hip-hop has played in how he chooses to lead and why it is vital not only for hip-hop aficionados but for all Americans to embrace the art form as a cornerstone of contemporary American culture.

Corey Madden: Would you start by talking about how your upbringing and background influenced you as an artist leader?

Donovan Livingston: My parents were really big influences. I think it’s important to note that my dad and mom are both educators and very, very avid Christians. My dad is a pastor as well, and my mom is basically Jesus’ 13th disciple—never sinned in her life—and those sorts of values, the essence of that spirituality, sort of informed my upbringing. Definitely.

I'd always been curious about expressing myself in other mediums, so I always had an interest in hip-hop but wasn't allowed to listen to it. My parents would definitely veto me listening to the rap radio stations or watching videos or all that stuff, so I had to do everything in a clandestine sort of way.

I think these worlds came to a head for me in 2004 when Kanye West's "The College Dropout" came out. I was in 11th grade, so name a 16-year-old that isn't rebelling against their parents, right? So "College Dropout" came out, there were a few songs on there that were really special, particularly "Jesus Walks," which brought in gospel and these Christian undertones and made me feel like this was a place that brought my two worlds together. Also the song right after that, "Never Let You Down," was a great welcoming into a genre that made me feel as though I could make all the parts of my life come together in a beautiful way.

Corey: What a great story! So how does your hip-hop background influence how you work as a leader?

Donovan: Hip-hop helps me show up in different professional settings in a way that makes me feel comfortable to be there. I am often in spaces where there are either few men, or few men of color or few people that value hip-hop in the same way that I do. So, it shows up when I am in a meeting, and I hear something I like and I say "Yo, that's dope!" It's everything that has to do with the language, or my mannerisms or just how I engage other humans in a public space. I think hip-hop is a way for me to connect with people, and it shows up when I'm onstage and when I am off. And I know that when I walk into my office or walk into a space where I am doing a keynote, this may be this group's only engagement with hip-hop. So, I want to represent the genre in the most meaningful way I know how so that people feel compelled to ask more questions.

Corey: Authenticity is one of the things that hip-hop has given you, a sense of an authentic self that you can bring into the room as a leader.

Donovan: Most definitely, because that is what sustains us at the end of the day. I don't like not being myself, so rather than shy away or turn that off or code-switch, I try my best to bring those two things together.

Corey: Do you think that having performed so much also helps you as a leader?

Donovan: Oh, most definitely. The stage is home for me. To be in front of a community or a group of people, for me that is as comfortable as being in my own bed in a lot of ways. If I could take that comfort with me everywhere I go, it would invite me to be my most hip-hop self no matter where I'm at.

Corey: How does the creative process of writing hip-hop, performing hip-hop, and knowing hip-hop's disruptive qualities show up in how you lead others?

Anybody can write a verse or a song by themselves, but hip-hop really compels people to work together.

Donovan: Some of my fondest memories of undergrad are of absconding with my homies to the undergraduate library's underbelly in the basement where we had our audio-recording lab and we would just write together and create together. Anybody can write a verse or a song by themselves, but hip-hop really compels people to work together. I think in those songs where I am typically sitting in the room with the person that made the beat or having an open Google Doc with other artists that are featured on the song, I think that creative energy that you get from being in community with others helps me think about what is the best way to be a leader in a certain room, in a certain community. How can I engage as many voices as possible to achieve a common goal? The hip-hop sensibilities that I derive from collaborating with so many people have made me a better leader for sure.

Corey: You know, I came into your workshop as a 60-year-old white woman and I have to admit that I felt as naïve as someone could feel. I wasn't bringing any tools into that room at all. One of the things that was just great was that you found a way for us creatively to show up in that room by inviting us to invent a hip-hop name. I thought that was a great example of how your experience as an artist has informed how you lead. It's actually the practice of that art that helps you lead more effectively. That is really what you are doing with your whole career, isn't it?

Donovan: Yeah. That's my goal as an educator, to make students feel as though the colleges that they are going to, the plans they make for themselves after high school are places where they belong and can show up authentically.

Corey: Instead of having to do this complete code-switch where they have to leave themselves at the front gate.

Hip-hop has taught me how to be anti-assimilationist.

Donovan: Right. Hip-hop has taught me how to be anti-assimilationist, helping institutions adapt to the students that they are accepting. No student should have to sacrifice a piece of themselves for the sake of fitting in. I think hip-hop has taught me to be bold in that way.

Corey: How did hip-hop inform how you decided to become a leader?

Donovan: Hip-hop really pulls things out of you that you didn't know were there. I didn't know I could rap in front of an audience. I didn't know I could rap in front of an audience of my peers or open for artists that I enjoyed listening to. I didn't know I could do those things with confidence, with poise, with personality. I didn't know I could hear my voice on a microphone and have it resonate with other people who I may have never met.

I have always approached my leadership in a way that makes people feel comfortable enough to express themselves in their most authentic fashion.

Because of the multimodal nature of hip-hop—given that it's a space for dancers, for breakers, for DJs and turntablists, for visual artists, graffiti artists and that sort of thing—because it has so much for so many people, I have always approached my leadership in a way that makes people feel comfortable enough to express themselves to their most authentic fashion. For me, the MC,

it is the lyrics, the words that sort of get me going, but for somebody else it may be embodiedness, their ability to dance and move.

When I think about the way I teach or the way I interact with my students, I always try to incorporate different elements of movement, visual aesthetics, poetic aesthetics, just tap into students' potential so that they too can see parts of themselves that they didn't know were there.

Corey: One of the things that we're interrogating here at UNCSA is why do arts conservatories reserve the Western canon and put it in a higher position than the art forms that are in many cases indigenous art forms of America? I notice that one of the things you are advocating is, "Hey, you know, hip hop is a very vibrant art form that has been made by the people of America and has propagated all over the world. Why is it not recognized as such?" You're asking the question in the higher-education system, but I think it is a legitimate question to ask in the conservatory system as well.

Donovan: Certainly, certainly. Higher Ed is my background, but I have worked in K-12 spaces in helping students transition from high school to college. Thinking about "the canon," hip-hop isn't what we would consider as a Western society to be a refined or Art exists in tiers, and so hip-hop is not on the same tier as your Mozarts and Beethovens of the world. Whereas, if you ask me, a Nas or a Rapsody or a Lauryn Hill are very much in the same canon as Shakespeare. You can't tell me that Slick Rick isn't an elegant storyteller.

And so it takes some reframing on the part of the institution to place value on these cultural forms of expression that are indigenous, that are from non-white countries, to show the students that these other forms of expression have value. Not only do they have value in education spaces, but they have value in their own right. I want to help institutions start that process of reframing the way we regard indigenous art.

Corey: What is the hardest part of being an artist leader for you?

Donovan: The hardest part about being an artist leader for me is trying to make hip-hop matter to people who have no relationship with it, who have no interest in it, or only see the commercial representation of hip-hop, the misogyny, the commercialism, the mistreatment of women or degradation of women, or the hyper-masculinity. People will see that and automatically shut down. Making hip-hop matter to everyone isn't necessarily the goal, but I do want people to walk away from an interaction with me with a newfound respect for hip-hop as a means of cultural expression. That's always a challenge especially when you get invited to speak someplace and nobody else has the same sort of upbringing or cultural background or even the same musical tastes as you. It's an art of meeting people where they're at. I have been fortunate enough to be in places where hip-hop might not necessarily be at the forefront of people's consciousness, but I can insert it in that way.

I think about "Lift Off" in particular, when I graduated from Harvard in 2016 and had a chance to do the graduation speech to represent my class. It might not seem like what I was doing was hip-hop, but that is exactly what it was. It was taking a moment where I knew I would be onstage, where I knew I would be representing to a larger audience and using it to not only

critique the institutions we were graduating from but to spit or perform in a certain way that made people reimagine or remix the way people thought about a graduation speech. Some people call it a speech; I consider it to be a spoken-word poem or bars, if you will. But at the end of the day it's a chance to reclaim a space that wasn't historically designed for myself or people like me and to communicate our ideas through an authentic cultural form of expression.

Corey: What was it like to have 13 million people see it and to gain that kind of influence? One of the main things that leaders develop is the ability to influence others, and you influenced 13 million people!

Donovan: It was surreal! At that moment I thought I was just talking to my class and everybody who was outside under the tent that day. I have said this in other settings before: I worked really hard for those years leading up to that to be able to have that moment, so when that moment did arrive, I could talk to 13 million people. Starting this journey as a spoken-word artist and hip-hop artist in 2003, 2004, is what prepared me to be able to step onto a big stage like that and command it in such a way where I could be confident. Because I've had moments where I was booed off the stage, I've had moments where I stuttered or forgot my lines. Or I'd be in freestyle battles where I lost and couldn't get out another phrase. Having all of those experiences prepared me to be able to own that moment.

If you are unable to command your own voice and own your own cultural identity ... , it is hard to command and influence.

As a leader you hope to be able to wield some semblance of influence, but I think if you are unable to command your own voice and own your own cultural identity, no matter who is watching, it is hard to command and influence.

Corey: What needs to change to encourage more hip-hop artists to step up and lead?

Donovan: Very good question. When I hear that question I think about, where is hip-hop? When I say that, I think about how hip-hop is markedly absent from a lot of schools and a lot of curricula. Inserting hip-hop in educational spaces is important to encouraging students who understand the world through hip-hop, express themselves through hip-hop, perform it themselves—whether it be turntabling, graffiti, breaking, MC-ing, whatever it may be. Students need to see representations of their culture in new places. They'll get it on the radio on the bus ride home, they'll get it on the walk or in their talks with their friends, they'll get it outside of the classroom, but what will it take for us to be bold enough to insert it in the classroom so students can see that it's OK pursue that piece of themselves in a scholarly way? Hip-hop and the Academy and hip-hop and education are often at odds, but it's for that reason I think it needs to show up in schools even more. Because if students don't get it in school, they will get it someplace else.

I think at least within the context of school we could wrestle with the complicated nature of how hip-hop regards women or sexuality or hyper-masculinity and all these other problematic elements that make people turn away from it or not see it as a valuable teaching tool, when hip-hop is indeed a great space to not only critique itself but the world as well.

Corey: That's great. It makes me think about how powerful and disruptive comedy, for instance, is in our culture right now. And there are other examples of artforms that were considered outsider forms — jazz for instance. These are really deeply powerful cultural expressions, and having false barriers between the forms and what we have named and claimed in the systematizing of education doesn't necessarily help us when we see something really vibrant coming up.

At the Institute, we are interested in noticing and examining that we keep artists at the edge of society especially in terms of leadership. Why do these new vibrant forms get pushed back? Why are we so afraid of them? It doesn't really make sense from the point of view of how our culture moves forward.

Donovan: Definitely. There is a reason that Socrates in "The Republic" was pushing back against the presence of poets in the great society or in the conception of the just city. Poets and artists are like change agents or disruptors; they make us wrestle and contend with realities that we might not necessarily be ready to wrestle with.

Corey: I'd love to just finish up with, what advice would you have liked to have received when you were starting out?

Donovan: I don't know that I necessarily would have wanted any advice to deter me from the path that I did travel, because I think it's the reason why I am here having this conversation with you today. If I could give any piece of advice to anybody who is an artist or is in proximity to artists or is the parent, guardian, or mentor to an artist, it would be to create spaces for them to feel affirmed and validated in the way they choose to express themselves. It can be difficult if it is misaligned with your religious beliefs or your personality or the values that you have been raised with, especially as an adult. But sometimes it takes these adults who sacrifice a lot or care a lot about the kids in their lives, it takes those adults' belief in their children or those that they mentor or serve to really make the difference to inspire a student to continue to do the same things or continue to boldly use their art to critique and create the world that they want to live in. If you are an adult who's in proximity to a young artist, please, please, please do everything you possibly can to equip them with resources. Equip them with the time and the care so they continue to nurture their craft in a way that makes sense to them.

Corey: Thank you so much.

Donovan: You're very welcome. This was great.

Epilogue

Whether working with students to better their lives, focusing on his studies as a PhD candidate, or spinning hip-hop and spoken-word verses, Donovan Livingston embodies the artist-leader who translates his skills in magnificent ways. Lessons we can take from our conversation with Donovan include:

- **Embrace your gifts.** Carry your abilities as an artist into all walks of life. It provides self-confidence and serves as an invitation to others to embrace diversity of thought, ability and culture.
- **Embrace community.** One of the most powerful gifts of the arts world is learning how to work in and navigate community. Carry that muscle memory forward to leading others and creating an environment of shared possibility.
- **Embrace who you are.** Trying to be something else comes across as disingenuous. Leadership involves walking the line between visionary and vulnerable. Find your balance between both.
- **Embrace being a change agent.** Maintaining the status quo means you'll get what you pay for. Lead others to create positive change, bringing in new ideas, cultures, and styles to elevate what is possible.
- **Embrace courage.** We have to be open to stretching out of our comfort zones to allow situations to improve, others to grow, or projects to succeed. Be willing to let others shine in ways that work for *them, their gifts and their talents*, not just for you. That way, everybody wins.



Donovan Livingston
Spoken Word Artist & Educator

Donovan Livingston is an award-winning educator, spoken-word poet, and public speaker. In 2016, his Harvard Graduate School of Education convocation address “Lift Off” went viral, reaching over thirteen million views and prompting Hillary Clinton to praise, “It’s young graduates like [Livingston] who make it clear that America’s best days are still ahead.” Since his pivotal speech, Livingston has been featured on CNN, NPR, BBC, “Good Morning America,” and in news outlets across Europe, Australia, India, and South Africa. His convocation address was published as a book by Spiegel & Grau in 2017. A believer in the enormous opportunities that education provides, Livingston inspires students, educators, and communities with his conviction that every child has the right to “lift off” and achieve their dreams. Drawing on personal experiences as well as scholarship, Livingston examines the role of hip-hop and spoken-word poetry in student experiences in higher and postsecondary education. An impassioned and dynamic speaker, he incorporates creative elements—such as spoken-word poetry and audience collaboration—into his lectures. Livingston has earned master’s degrees from Columbia University and Harvard University, and is now a doctoral candidate at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro. He lives in Winston-Salem, North Carolina with his wife, Lauren.