

Las Gotas de Rap.

The insistent beat of Rap music throbs from a small house on a rain drenched council estate in Cardiff. Given that this is St. Mellons, the area demonised by John Redwood in his now-famous observations on its irresponsible single mothers, you could be forgiven for thinking that this blast of Hip Hop is just another case of noise pollution courtesy of disenfranchised youth. This is no arbitrary music session, however, but a collaboration between the award winning St Mellons rap group, The Underdogs and Colombian youth group Las Gotas de Rap, who are in Cardiff for the premiere of their **Rap Opera** prior to a European tour.

The two cultures were brought together by Steve Garrett, director of Community Music Wales, who identified parallels between the underprivileged street children of Bogota and those in Cardiff. Both suffer the deprivations of poverty, marginalisation, scarce resources and the absence of a positive structure for a decent future, yet they have succeeded in rising above these constrictions to achieve something positive.

“What they are fighting for is very similar, they all want a better life, although the situation for the ‘Gotas’ is much more extreme,” explains Garrett.

“In Bogota the relationship between young people and the authorities is very oppressive. Colombian society is extremely violent and much of the aggression is directed at the street kids. The Las Cruces barrio where these kids come from is one of the poorest and roughest in the country, and death is a part of everyday life.”

Unlike the testosterone-charged Rap coming out of the U.S.A., Colombian and indeed Welsh Rap is totally different.

“It’s street poetry,” says Steve Garrett, “it’s much more politicised than the commercial, packaged music from the States and it avoids that negative, macho, sexist stereotype. The ‘Gotas’ for instance, use music to express their strong feelings against the established order in Colombia: police corruption, military service, machismo, violence. Because of this they have become figureheads for other young people and they have a large following. For that reason also, a lot of people are against them. They feel threatened by a group who are challenging the status quo in a country where power is traditionally maintained by violence.”

Melissa is the only female member of Las Gotas de Rap. One of five children she shares a tiny house on the barrio with a large extended family. Her brother Kontent, also a band member, supplements the family’s paltry income by selling drugs. Performing and lyric writing has given Melissa a powerful tool, the means of achieving self-esteem.

“Without the group I would probably be like many other young women on the barrio by now, abandoned by my man and struggling to bring up three, maybe four children alone,” she says.

The Rap Opera is a collective collaboration between the nine ‘Gotas’, each one contributing a smattering of personal experience. Its pivotal theme, expressed

through music and dance, is violent death - something which is familiar to each of them. Yet it is more than a cry against oppression; the production delivers a message of love, tenderness and optimism.

The opera project has been coordinated by Patricia Ariza and Carlos Satizabal, who are well known in Colombia for their work in establishing creative opportunities for marginalised young people. Like Steve Garrett they challenge the notion that it is enough to feed and clothe disadvantaged children, opportunities for creative expression are equally important.

Both Las Gotas de Rap and The Underdogs have become role models in their respective societies and have used their influence to involve their contemporaries in educational projects.

"The Underdogs have been very successful in reaching the most alienated kids on the estate, the ones who don't go to school, who never attend the youth centre," explains Steve Garrett.

"I would get nowhere if I went out on the street and approached these youngsters, it needs the peer approach to bridge the gap."

At present there is no centre in St Mellons for groups like The Underdogs to jam, which is why they and the 'Gotas' are making music in the home of Roberta Farrell. Much of the credit for the success of the band should go to her. Since becoming the adult voice of The Underdogs, her home has become a nightly meeting place for as many as forty kids at a time. Not that she objects to the invasion. She is happy to see her own child and scores of other channelling their energies into a constructive project.

"While they are in here playing music they are not out on the streets doing nothing, or worse still taking drugs and stealing cars."