

## Hip hop therapy

**Guest: J.C. Hall**

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### **[00:00:10] Meagen Gibson**

Welcome to this interview, I'm Meagen Gibson, co-host of the Trauma Super Conference. Today I'm speaking with J.C. Hall, a hip hop artist and social worker who runs the Hip Hop Therapy Studio program at Mott Haven Community High School, a "second chance" transfer school in the South Bronx.

In 2013, J.C. put together a professional recording studio to provide students the opportunity to engage in the therapeutic process through writing, recording, producing and performing their own music. The origins of the program are chronicled in the award winning short documentary *Mott Haven*, which showcases the effectiveness of this approach for addressing trauma in the wake of a school tragedy. As a result of its impact over the years, J.C. won a Jefferson Award for Outstanding Public Service in 2020.

J.C., thank you for being with me today.

### **J.C. Hall**

Thank you. I'm honored to be here.

### **Meagen Gibson**

So I would love it if you could start by telling us a bit about your personal history and how you thought to weave your work as a social worker with your love for hip hop.

### **J.C. Hall**

That's a great question. I guess how far back to go. Hip hop saved my life, and I mean that very literally. When I was growing up, I struggled a lot as a teen, and hip hop was one of the few lifelines I could really grab onto. Particularly in the music, listening to it I heard artists talking about things that, taboo subjects, things like mental health, addiction that it wasn't really okay to talk about or that people weren't very open about, there's a lot of shame about. And I noticed in these songs they were just very open, and it made me feel not so alone.

So that's what really gravitated me towards the music in the first place. But then actually engaging as an artist and participating in writing, there was something tremendously therapeutic about it that I didn't know at the time, that's what it was, I just knew it gave me a reason to get out of bed in the

morning, it allowed me to connect with others in a very genuine, real and raw way that there was never any other medium where I had had that experience.

**[00:02:18]**

And so I just took to it. And it was a way for me to structure and organize a lot of the madness swirling around in my head and a lot of the things I was going through and just a way to put it to a time ordered beat, find some order to it. And that was helpful for me.

And then I later was introduced to therapy. Initially, though, with therapy, I didn't take it very seriously. I would lay on my psychiatrist's couch and take a nap. That was pretty much the extent of my experience.

### **Meagen Gibson**

A rebellious way of engaging in therapy.

### **J.C. Hall**

Yeah, I was just 15 years old, I just went and there just wasn't any genuine connection, nothing against him, I don't know, I didn't feel like we had anything to talk about.

And so, fast forward a while, through my own journey through recovery and addressing issues and actually getting a solid therapist and really vibing with someone who was an incredible guy, someone I see to this day who also helped save my life. I started seeing a lot of these inherent overlaps, what was occurring through engagement in hip hop culture, and what was occurring within psychotherapy. I think I knew that on an intuitive level, or at least I acted as if, I might not have known it cognitively, but that's when I had something go on, I immediately went to write. I immediately went to write and record. It was instinctive.

And then I stumbled on my late mentor, rest in peace, Dr Edgar Tyson, I stumbled upon his work, and then that just revolutionized and changed the whole trajectory of my life. Because I majored in psych in undergrad and had no interest in going back to school for a master's, but I realized with a bachelors in psych there's really not much you could do. The best job I got was delivering pizza, which was a dope job, I could just listen to music all day, ride around and bump. It was great. But I wanted to do something more and happened to apply back at the one school, at the school I went to, Fordham, for social work. I heard they've got a good program, figured I'll just apply there, hopefully get rejected because it's a pretty good school.

Because part of me was like, I still want to be an artist. I want to pursue my own artistry, and I'm selling out if I go back to school and giving up on myself. I get in and I start having this existential crisis of, I don't want to be here. What am I doing? But I heard about music therapy. Someone mentioned that, and I was like, oh, great. So I start diving into, what is music therapy? How do I get involved? There's a couple of programs in the area, but I read that you have to know how to sing and play three instruments, like a guitar, piano. So I'm not trained whatsoever musically, so I wouldn't be eligible. So I was super bummed out. And a random idea popped in my head, let me cut out music and put in hip hop in the search bar and see if hip hop therapy is a thing. And I didn't think it would be. And boom, I entered it, and just a whole slew of articles are popping up like, evidence based research, and I just keep seeing this dude's name, Tyson Tyson Tyson. I'm like, who is this guy? I need to find this dude and move to wherever he's at and just pick his brain. I scoured everything he published, and it turned out he was teaching at the one school that I just applied back to, Fordham.

**[00:05:58]**

So it was the school I was about to be starting my program in, the one guy in the world who happens to coin this term and start developing the evidence base, happens to be a professor there. So that's how it all began. It was a series of very fortunate events. Had I never stumbled on his work, I don't know if I would have made that connection. Well, the connection was made. I don't know if I would have been encouraged to actually give it a shot, because you say stuff like that in grad school or in the therapeutic community in general, and it's not mainstream. So you have people side eye it, laugh. But here's this tenured professor who is legit and he's saying, no, this is real, that was enough for me to just, off to the races, and bring in my own work as an artist and try to provide those skills to the youth and provide them space to record and create their music how they envision it and how they want it.

So, yeah, that was a very long answer.

### **Meagen Gibson**

It ticked all the things I was hoping that you would talk about because it really helps provide us with a really good context moving forward before we dive in. And going back to your personal history, I imagine that hip hop and the way that you were relating to the music when you were young also gave you a way to talk about difficult things with other people without talking about them personally. I feel this way, it was, when this artist talks about this in this way, instead of can we talk about my feelings?

### **J.C. Hall**

100%. And that's super crucial I think. Initially when developing rapport, and Tyson wrote about this with Caroline Kobin, they have this dope 2006 article, they refer to it as 'third person self disclosure', where it's, initially when you're listening to a song and you have a way to discuss it at an arm's length, so it's not too personal, it's a nice middle ground where it helps get the foot in the door and begin the conversation where you can get a gauge of where an individual is, and what they believe, based upon their responses to the songs that they like or that you bring to the table.

And it's a great way to just fight against that shame, that inbuilt shame we all have around it where it's like, I can't say this but if I'm speaking about my friend, my friend has this problem. You know what I mean? My friend has it. When it's third person it becomes a bit easier and helps open the door to then develop that rapport and have that one on one direct self disclosure.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely, because everybody, regardless of their backgrounds or experiences, has had a moment where they've come to somebody that they trusted and whose opinion they valued and said something that they were going through and disclosed something tough that they were experiencing and had that person either reject them or shame them for it. It's an universal experience we've all been through.

And those experiences teach us, we shouldn't do that. When really what it says, when you grow and you become older and you have more experiences and more education and you learn that it really says more about them than it does about your experience. You're not, not okay, it's that they can't hold whatever it is that you're going through. But this third person self disclosure, huge part of that where you don't have to put the position on the other person of holding something difficult that you're going through because you're sharing something about your friend.

**[00:09:34] J.C. Hall**

100%. That's a great way to put it. I think it's also a bit of a litmus test in terms of, can this person hold space for me? Especially in terms of cultural relevance. A client might come in and see me and off rip before any words are spoken, anything, there's the automatic, chances are he is not going to agree with or view it the same way as I because we both have very different lived experiences based solely on the color of our skin, from our socioeconomic background. So to be able to come into a room and be able to see, the fact that you're even using it, that you're even bringing it, that this is now even deemed legitimate enough to bring into a therapy session, is off rip checking a box in terms of like, okay, I can drop some defenses, this individual is showing at least, whether they're of it or from it, they're showing a basic respect for it by even validating it to bring it into the space.

So I think even in that initial approach of just listening to music together and talking about it, there's a lot of that hierarchy, perceived or real, that gets dismantled off of that one very small interaction.

**Meagen Gibson**

And takes a level of skepticism out of the picture so that there's at least a greater level of perceived safety or they're entertaining the idea that this might be a safe space.

**J.C. Hall**

Yeah, but then you can show, the more you talk about it and engage, then they start to see like, oh, this person knows what they're talking about, or they have an appreciation for it, or they're involved in the culture in some way. And very quickly it cuts through a lot of those traditional obstructions and just blockages.

Even for me, I don't know if it's a class thing, I don't know, but my experience in therapy was very like, it felt very highbrow, and I felt like I was being spoken down to. There's a lot of academic language and I didn't feel like I could be my authentic self in that space, just based on the therapists that I've seen where it didn't go well, the way I perceived them. A lot of that was on me and projecting and all that, but the more we can do as therapists to help create a welcoming space and let clients know, off rip like, no, this is cool here, this is valid, it's very valid. And it's important that you feel comfortable to discuss in any way your experiences, whether it might be seen as taboo or shameful.

**Meagen Gibson**

And we're jumping ahead a bit in my agenda of things I wanted to talk about, but what you said just brings up what I was going to say about how, the beautiful thing that I love about kids is that they never want to think their way through stuff. Their bodies immediately want to go to movement or expression. We have to actually train kids how to think before they act or think before they express.

And so your methodology takes that into account. It's like, we're not going to come in here, and again, like you said, lay on a couch and beat in our brains about only thinking about what happened or thinking about what we feel or thinking about what we could have done. We're going to move, we're going to write, we're going to express, we're going to breathe, we are going to do all of those elements that kids are already so great at, but we're going to do it in this different context.

**[00:13:32] J.C. Hall**

Absolutely. And there's nothing wrong with the lay on a couch approach like that. The cognitive stuff can really be useful, but I think it's, even from a neurobiological perspective, in terms of engagement, you have to be able to meet the client where they are. And especially, exactly like what you're saying with kids and youth, if maybe it's more comfortable for them to express through dance, through rhythmic language. Because you might see rap as just language and think it's cognition, but because it's embedded within rhythm, it's tied into that musical part of us as well. So it's jumping into freestyling, or jumping into just rapping, or making a beat. It's a way, not only for it to be more engaging in a developmentally appropriate way, it can be a very grounding experience, it can calm down the central nervous system and then build up to those more cognitive levels.

So sometimes in therapy, especially for youth who have experienced a very large degree of trauma, to come in and attack from the higher order cognitive aspect of it is often just banging your head up against the wall. And it's not that you can't do that.

**Meagen Gibson**

It's just not the first place.

**J.C. Hall**

And working your way up.

Cathy Malchiodi, she calls it, I like the way she phrased it, it's a top down and bottom up approach, brain wise and body based. That's the terminology she uses. I really like that because it's not necessarily about one being better or greater than the other, it's just knowing when, and/or what level maybe the individual you're working with is at to try to meet them there, to build up or to build down. Some people are very cognitive, but they're not embodied at all. They can sit and recount the exact traumatic experience to you, but it sounds like they're doing a job interview, there's zero emotional connection. So sometimes working down and trying to get someone really embedded and back in their body and feeling is huge. It's a big part of the work.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. And I love that you named dropped Cathy. I actually just interviewed Cathy last week.

**J.C. Hall**

Did you? Dope.

**Meagen Gibson**

She's fantastic. And she talks about the circle of capability and being able to expand the sphere of capability of what you're capable of. And having difficult or exposure therapy but in just little increments here and there so that what we can tolerate, and how we build resilience, is by increasing that sphere of capability.

**J.C. Hall**

And slowly. Like slowly dipping your toes in and working out. Not jumping in. But you dip a toe in, it's warm, and slowly building out in all aspects.

**[00:16:41]**

And I think also, in that conceptualization, if I have it right she talks a lot about it. It's not just confronting the trauma or getting over the negative, it's like developing ourselves fully as human beings and expanding upon those positives and finding life purpose. All of that is really built within therapy as well, even though traditionally people might just think in terms of psychopathology, and just diagnosis this, negative negative. It's much bigger, broader than that. And it's important to keep that in mind. And I think that also applies to her conceptualization of that circle.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. I want to circle back a little bit.

**J.C. Hall**

I see what you did there.

**Meagen Gibson**

It wasn't on purpose. I wish I could be like, yes, you see what I just did. Sometimes that happens, but most of the time it's an accident.

**J.C. Hall**

It's magic.

**Meagen Gibson**

All intentional.

If you can tell me a little bit about your school, set the context for us. We have a really international audience that comes to the Trauma Conference, and so set the context for me. Where is your school? What's the makeup of the school? What are the kind of experiences that the youth that you're taking through this program, what are they having? That kind of thing.

**J.C. Hall**

Yeah. So I work at Mott Haven Community High School. It's a transfer high school in the South Bronx. So it's a public school for youth who are overage and under-credited. So between ages 16 and 21. In New York State you have until 21 to earn your high school diploma or else you age out, and then pursue a GED or what's now a HSE.

So yes, it's youth who have slipped through the cracks of traditional public school systems, often because schools aren't necessarily built with mental health at the top of the priority. It's not taken into consideration to the extent, generally speaking, that I believe it should be. Especially understanding the correlation between academic achievement and mental health and mental wellness. But even having therapists in schools, imagine if that was a normal thing and a regular thing. Slowly but surely, eventually, hopefully.

But there's definitely lacking. And I think what ends up happening is some kids who might be experiencing or showing maybe certain behavioral problems or attention issues are slipping behind

and getting pushed aside and the disadvantage accumulates. So by the time they're in high school and it's like, a lot of them just stop going. And so they end up at our school as a second chance and a last resort before being like, all right, I'll just go get a GED. And it provides the opportunity to gain credits at a faster rate, so you can gain more credits a year and hopefully catch up to your cohort and graduate on time, even if it's not on time, graduate before you age out at 21, so you can get more credits per year.

**[00:19:57]**

So, I built a recording studio in the school back in 2013. It all started very organically. I started there as an intern with a laptop, just playing beats and rapping with kids in the back room. And the administration started noticing, these kids...

### **Meagen Gibson**

People wanted to hang out in your room.

### **J.C. Hall**

Yeah 100%. Kids who you normally couldn't even get to show up to school now are not only showing up, we can't get them to leave the building.

So they were like, something is going on here. And then them advocating and talking about a studio and like, can we get a mic? Can we get this? And then eventually just getting a once in a lifetime opportunity of a budget to build a very professional, great studio for the kids. And yeah, that was 2013 and just been going strong ever since.

And it's been incredible just having the opportunity to work with them, to record, to make beats and perform as well. The performance piece is big as well, like getting on a stage in front of their peers and their family and telling their stories, recounting their narratives.

So a lot of the youth, generally speaking the South Bronx is the poorest congressional district in the country. 49% of kids live below the federal poverty line. So we have a very high rate of youth who are living below, it's higher than the one in two. So youth are socioeconomically disadvantaged, homelessness, teen pregnancy, parents not in the picture, parents locked up, parents addicted to substances, all kinds of stuff with that stemming from the home. But then also a tremendous amount of gang violence, gun violence and being exposed to that, participating in that and all of those things creating this, I guess, as Dr van der Kolk conceptualizes, the idea of developmental trauma. Complex trauma but for children from a very young age, just exposed consistently.

And there was this dope study in Atlanta that showed that a lot of people living in inner city neighborhoods exposed to neighborhood violence are experiencing rates of PTSD at higher rates than war veterans coming home. So this stuff is very real. And then PTSD, being the single event, but complex, like this is ongoing. And when I'm working with a lot of these youth, it's not like these things have stopped. It's not like they're processing a past event. These are current.

So it can be particularly challenging because there's only so much any single one of us can do. But I think to start, just providing a safe space for them to come and just start to process some of that in an individual context, but also in a group context where there's that peer support, I think is a beautiful thing.

**[00:23:11] Meagen Gibson**

And going back to something that you said just a little bit earlier about how some of these youth get left behind. And I know that one of the things that I've been trying to work on with my own kids, and also in their school system, is the idea that every behavior is a need a child is trying to communicate. And so often in school systems, and you can speak to this as well, that what the focus is on is trying to get a child to change a behavior instead of getting really curious about what the behavior is trying to communicate about either the child, the way that the child fits in, in the classroom or in the school, what's happening in the child's home.

And schools are just not equipped, like you said, to go to that deep level of understanding. And so what happens is because we can't deal with and help with what the behavior is trying to communicate, the children get removed from the classes so that they're not an obstruction to everybody else's learning. Is that fair?

**J.C. Hall**

Very well put. Spot on. The focus being primarily attenuating behavioral issues and just trying to clamp down on that and then putting a band-aid on the cancer and then like, all right, if that stops, it's okay, but what was really underneath all that?

And then there's also the quiet kids slip through the cracks, the ones who maybe are more dissociative and they're more quiet and aren't the ones throwing desks at teachers and breaking windows. And just because they're quiet and aren't causing trouble doesn't mean they don't need services. But unfortunately, those are the kids who slip through the cracks.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. Because we all know that there's outward expressing people, there's naturally, I'm going to express outward, and then there's people that retreat inward. We're split down the middle in my household so I totally understand that.

I absolutely hear you when you say that the quiet ones as well, there's a whole storm going on inside there. And we share the same dream that there would be social workers and therapists at every school in the country for sure. I hope someday that's the case.

**J.C. Hall**

Same.

**Meagen Gibson**

So I want to talk a little bit about the power of narrative because we know so much about narrative. And how does narrative fit into hip hop and what you're doing with the people that come into the studio? How is that giving them a tool when they are out of your studio? That kind of thing.

**J.C. Hall**

I mean, the narrative piece is huge. And the thing about hip hop and MCing is it's a narrative art. It's a storytelling art form. It's born out of a tradition, the West African griots, these traveling poets and orators. And then the African American tradition of signifying and boasting and toasting. It's born out



of these very deeply rooted traditions that are narrative based, this beginning, middle, end type thing. So there's a hero's journey embedded within the structure itself.

### **[00:26:27]**

And most hip hop songs that have canon at this point, and have the greatest longevity, are telling stories and following these narrative structures, and the descent into the underworld, and then rising up and finding some sort of lesson in that, and then being able to disperse it to the community. A lot of that is an undercurrent in hip hop and it's just built within it.

And I think narrative therapy is a huge overlap with hip hop therapy in that sense. It's a very culturally relevant form of it. It's one thing to have youth sit and write it out, but if rapping is what they like and what they like to do, then it's just a much more tailored approach for them to apply those same principles, tell a story through the rhymes and maybe reconceptualize their circumstances or where they're at and their trajectories and where they want to go through a culturally relevant medium, something that they've grown up with, that they cherish.

And then in terms of trauma work, I was saying this with Cathy the other day, there's a lot of overlap with Judith Herman and her three stages of recovery from trauma. The idea of first establishing safety, which rhythm is very useful for doing. Whether it's through the music, through the movement, the bopping, the rhythm built within the words themselves, built within the poetic meter of it. Then you have the telling the story, the retelling, that's the stage two, which you're doing in a rhyme. You're doing that in rhyme, you're telling your experience. And then the third one is connecting, reconnecting with others in society. And that occurs in the telling and in the performance piece. There's something tremendously empowering about sharing it in front of a group of peers, something you've been through and how much stronger you are because of it. Something that maybe you were so ashamed of, you never would have told a single person about prior. But now it's at a point where you are utilizing this as a source of strength, as opposed to a source of shame.

And I think the impact of something like that, and even in my own personal experience with things that I air out in my own music, the impact cannot be underestimated. That's like bringing those secrets to light, those secrets that keep you sick, so to speak. And getting applauded for it can be tremendously, tremendously empowering, validating, and a way to, not necessarily, it's not like it never happened, it's not like the trauma never happened or it's never going to happen again, but at the very least, to confront, to make it hold a lot less of that emotional weight. Or maybe the thought of it doesn't immediately send you into a downward spiral. Now there's another cognition that you can link with it. I'm more positive, yeah but that made me this. It doesn't make it okay, but I got this from that. Which is, I guess, the essence of the hero's journey or a narrative approach.

### **Meagen Gibson**

And I also imagine that there are definitely examples of where, not only are they getting applauded, and you can speak to this as well, but where even beyond just applause is like, thanks and gratitude of like, what you said helped me realize that I wasn't alone, that I wasn't abnormal, that other people had shared experiences that I had. Especially around even specific instances at the school, or that people in the neighborhood have experience where they're like, I didn't realize I needed your words and your music to help me feel what I had been through about that thing.

### **[00:30:38] J.C. Hall**

Absolutely. And I think that's the biggest piece, especially from peers. It's one thing for me to applaud them and say, hey, great job, but at the end of the day I'm not going home to the same neighborhood they're coming from. But now a group of their peers coming up, and there's just so many instances that I can think of where an individual shared something and after the showcase or after they heard the song, the MP3, people are coming up to them, people that they maybe weren't associating with before or weren't necessarily friendly are coming up and saying, hey, hearing you talk about that, that really just struck a tone to me and was more helpful than I could ever express. Which is what hip hop was to me, what attracted me to it, that's inherently happening with it. There's something about shedding light and airing out your dirty laundry.

And then the way the community comes around it because, at the end of the day, there's someone else who's experienced that, very likely. And I think the support from that is encouraging. Then they're like, I was super nervous about sharing that and then I just had five people come up to me and say, I've been through the same thing. Thank you for having the courage to stand up there and talk about it. You're inspiring me to talk about it or to make a change in my life. You hear something like that once and it's game over. That is so enlivening, and it's a beautiful thing, and it encourages them to keep going.

### **Meagen Gibson**

And I'm sure it takes something that's super personal and vulnerable and makes it a tool for helping other people. It brings them from just being about them to being about a bunch of other people that they can positively impact or just relate to and resonate with.

### **J.C. Hall**

Absolutely. And that's stage three, reconnecting with society.

And I think there's something, this author has a dope piece about this. There's something within African storytelling traditions where the emphasis is very much on, the storyteller and the witness cannot exist without the other. The witness holds as important of a role as the storyteller. It's not just preaching out into a void. And creating that communal relationship and dialogue. And you can see it in hip hop in the call and response element. Like the kind of give and take, like when I say, 'ey', you say, 'oh', that very give and take, going off of each other, feeding off each other.

And that's very reflective of how groups of people work in general. So it's very symbolic in that sense. And I think that can be very encouraging. And maybe people who are traditionally more antisocial, that's the wrong word, but maybe more shy or not as likely to approach people, now it's a moment where you can see, oh, this is bigger than that. It's bigger than just the music. It's bigger than just the performance. There's something underneath all this that can be replicated and brought out into the "real world", quote, unquote, when I leave here.

### **Meagen Gibson**

And you brought up something else I wanted to say which is that, for those shy kids in that performance element. I did an exercise with a bunch of kids in Northern India a few years ago, college students, where they had to do a performance. And the way that that brought them together way more deeply because they said, this person is super quiet, and I thought they were a snob. I thought that they hated all of us. It tore down all the assumptions that they had about one another, about what

they thought of each other or what their stories were or how their stories built who they were and what was important to them. It just tore it all down.

### **[00:34:33] J.C. Hall**

That's a great point. Very important point. Because we need each other. I think community is the essence of a lot of healing, at least from my social worker systems lens. Community is essential. And especially if it's something that's going to last after treatment is over. After the relationship, the therapeutic relationship ends. It's lessons taken with them.

I think that occurs as well with the rapping and finding a way to, because great art, a great rap is finding a way to articulate yourself. And it's not just to say it with a monotone, 'yeah I was walking down the street and then I saw', it's to really engage and perform. It's like the art of execution. And those are skills that you're practicing in the booth that are then transferable into the real world, whether it's a job setting, making friends, going on dates, whatever it is that involves any sort of social interaction.

So it's like a culturally relevant way to dive into some of these essential life skills in general. But even in terms of things like mindfulness or meditation or breathing techniques, those would be very hard to sell to the youth that I work with. If I'm sitting them down and I'm like, 'all right, sit and breathe'. But if now I'm speaking to them about when you breathe in your diaphragm, you can get a lot more words off. You can open up your vocal cords and hit certain tones, hit certain notes. So now it's developing a relationship with, okay, what am I breathing in my belly versus what am I breathing in my chest? And being able to notice. And then now it's like, it's the same skill, it's tailored to something that they're actually interested and want to do.

Same with mindfulness. Describe the street to me. Describe this person to me. Don't just say, 'this person is like', give me something tangible. What are they wearing? What does it smell like? What do you see? Effective creative writing is calling on the senses. It takes the listener and puts them right where you are. And essentially that's mindfulness. Being aware, being centered, being aware of exactly what's occurring, taking in little details. So transferable skills in the realm of healing.

And it's a great way to present it, or even introduce the concept in a way that it's relevant to something they're trying to accomplish or something they hold important. Because it's all the same stuff. It's just in different clothing.

### **Meagen Gibson**

And I imagine once they've got that practice down as well, as you start practicing something like that, then as you're walking through the street you're walking through your neighborhood or you're walking to school or wherever you go, your mindfulness increases because you're subtly, you know that you're looking for like, well, what's the light like today? And what's so and so on the corner doing and wearing? And what is the intonation of their voice? And do I hear birds? Is the snow crunching under my feet? They're actually more aware because they're subtly, subconsciously collecting information for further expression later.

### **J.C. Hall**

Absolutely. And then you can even branch into the mindfulness and discuss deep breathing, because now you're familiar with the breathing techniques necessary for an effective vocal performance. Now,

when we're going to perform and get on a stage or even just in a booth. But also that can calm you, that can slow down your heart rate, that can help center you. Feel that. And now it's like, oh, okay.

**[00:38:34] Meagen Gibson**

Now I've got a process to go from super activated, like something has just happened. Now I have the process. I know what to do. I know I can write about it. I know I can talk to somebody about it. I know that I've got a beat that, either my friend is doing it or I'm going to make it myself. I'm going to record it on my phone, and then I'm going to transition that narrative into an expression. I've got a process now that I have an agency around.

**J.C. Hall**

Absolutely. And I think it's something they've intuitively been doing for a long time. And just like I was, and like the people who first birthed hip hop, it was this intuitive thing where even if it didn't have the name on it, therapy or healing or wellness, it was an expression of that. It was an outgrowth of trauma. It was a form of post traumatic growth.

And I think all I'm trying to do in the work with them is to help provide some skills to help further enhance what they're really already doing and provide opportunities to further explore that. Because it's one thing to be able to write and rap amongst your friends, but it's a whole other experience to record that on a mic. And then it's a whole other experience to put that song out, if that's what you want to do. A whole other to get on a stage. There's a lot of opportunities that can further amplify this inherent therapeutic effect that we're already inherently getting by engaging in the art.

**Meagen Gibson**

And further test and practice your ability to hold all that and sit with the agitation that might come up at those various levels of expression and vulnerability.

**J.C. Hall**

Absolutely. And I think when you understand what's going on behind the scenes within your body more, it only can make it a more effective tool.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. So if you were talking to, we have a really varied audience of attendees at the conference, practitioners, parents, teachers, physicians, and if you're talking to them at home, what are the simple things that you would tell them to incorporate into their interaction with kids, with youth, that can take these principles and apply them to how they're interacting with kids?

**J.C. Hall**

It's a great question. I would say meet them where they're at. And so even if you're not a therapist, say a parent, for example. I feel like each generation, when parents were growing up, they were always told their music was not good music. It was bad music. And then the children then become the parents and perpetuate the same. And generationally that's just how it goes. And I think maybe trying to stop that in your own personal life. Just take a second. You might not like the music. You might not relate with it. You might not even understand it. But if your child, or someone you care about, that

you're working with is resonating with that, it's your responsibility to try to understand and appreciate why. And the majority of that is going to be you simply asking.

**[00:41:53]**

Even for me, growing up on hip hop, there's a lot of new music I don't know anything about. These kids are constantly bringing in songs. Sometimes I can't even make out the words, and I need to ask them like, tell me what's being said. What about it is touching you? What's drawing you to it? And maybe it's just a beat, and that's cool. Maybe there's a certain line. So really asking because we can make a lot of assumptions. And it's easy to just assume if they're listening to that kind of music, when maybe they just like the beat and they don't agree with what the person is saying. Or there's lines in it that are speaking truths to them in a way that they haven't been able to articulate, and trying to ask them to try to articulate. How exactly are you identifying with that?

And trying to even the playing field a little bit, just level the playing field a bit, try to meet them on their own turf. Let them be the expert for a moment, even just once. You can still show us that you're a source of expertise and that you have certain knowledge about certain stuff, but it's definitely important at times to take off the expert hat and just sit back and ask, because that's tremendously inviting and also just lets whoever you're speaking with, child, client, whatever, that you care what they have to say and you're willing to really listen.

**Meagen Gibson**

Because the goal isn't that you agree with the music or that you even like the music, it's that you express that you want to understand why they do. What it is about the music that is so resonant with them.

**J.C. Hall**

Yeah. Because the thing, when people used to tell me like, 'oh, rap, that's not real music, that's this or that's that', and teens, especially like this, we identify with genres of music, like whole styles of dress and fashion and movement, or the punk stuff. Teens embed so much of their identity within what they're listening to. So when you tell someone that their music is not good, you're telling them they are not good. That's how it's perceived.

**Meagen Gibson**

That's how they hear it.

**J.C. Hall**

Yes. And that just shuts off all communication. Because why would I want to listen to someone who's telling me they don't, or it's just defeating and it makes them not even want to try to stand up for themselves and advocate for, 'no, this is why it's good music'.

**Meagen Gibson**

And I think we can all say, especially now that the two of us are adults, and I can tell you I'm not listening to the same albums that I was listening to in high school. We grow, our experiences grow and we change and it's just that this music is helping me at this particular place, feel and get a voice and feel the emotions that are important to me right now about this place in my life.

**[00:45:03] J.C. Hall**

Absolutely. And yeah, that more generalized use of hip hop for healing. And if anyone else is interested in that, non clinicians, I would recommend Dr Raphael Travis is a G. He wrote the book *The Healing Power of Hip Hop*. And he talks about a spectrum of mental health strategies. We have self-care, which is what's occurring when we're listening to the music ourselves. And moving into prevention, early intervention, treatment, longer term care.

And I think it's a very important conceptualization, because sometimes people could be like, oh, I'm not a therapist so this doesn't apply to me. Or I am a therapist so this doesn't apply to me, whatever. I think it's important to know there's different levels of engagement, even on an individual level, and that hip hop intersects at every single level, so you can get in where you fit in, whatever is applicable to you. Utilizing hip hop culture, if that's what resonates with whoever you're working with, is a very important tool, I would say, to have in your toolkit. Especially hip hop is, I believe, the number 1 genre globally now.

A lot of people, whether you identify with it or grew up with it or not, a lot of people are identifying with it. And globally, not just in the US, like they're break dancing and now it's going to be in the Olympics, the next Olympics. They're tagging up walls in Seoul, El Salvador, I mean, it's all over. There's something within it that is speaking to the human spirit and the human experience in a way that maybe other things are not. But the fact that it's even doing that, it just highlights it as such a crucial tool that we all could be using that I think has been overlooked for far too long.

**Meagen Gibson**

What a great way to end. J.C. Hall, thank you so much for being with me.

**J.C. Hall**

Thank you. This has been a pleasure.

**Meagen Gibson**

Thank you. How can people find out more about you and your work?

**J.C. Hall**

I would say to check out [hiphotherapy.com](http://hiphotherapy.com)

It's just a site I made for my late mentor, Dr Tyson. Check out his work. Just such an awesome dude and brilliant clinician researcher, practitioner.

And, I would check out *Mott Haven* if you want to see what some of this work looks like in action, it's a short documentary. The new one should be coming out soon called *Haven in the Booth*. It was shot right before the pandemic set in. Really excited about that, because I think it gives people an opportunity to see this more theoretical stuff in practice and really see what it looks like. And my hope is that that's useful for people in terms of trying to replicate or do something similar.

So, yeah, [hiphotherapy.com](http://hiphotherapy.com)

**[00:48:05]**

And if you're interested to find me on socials, if you do Instagram and all that, I'm [@fenyxny](#). I spell Fienyx a little weird, but that's my artist name and you can DM me there, email me at [hiphotherapy.com](mailto:hiphotherapy.com) either/or. I'm definitely open to building and connecting and would love to hear from all of you.

**Meagen Gibson**

Awesome. Thank you so much. I can't wait to see the follow up documentary.

**J.C. Hall**

Dope. Thank you. I really appreciate this opportunity for real.