

A 'Gathering' of talent

■ Will Power's one-man show crystallizes the black experience for men by using theater, hip-hop and old-fashioned storytelling.

By **MICHAEL PATRICK WELCH**
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Griots kept the traditions and history of African people alive through the centuries with oral and visual storytelling. Performance artist Will Power combines hip-hop, history and histrionics for a 21st century version of the griot in his one-man show on the attitudes of black men, *The Gathering*.

In one scene, called "The Jam," four jazz musicians speak through their instruments to a young MC, warning him that the negativity and commercialization of hip-hop will take it away from black culture the way almost all forms of music have.

In "The Court," Power flips from character to character — from a smack-talking hothead basketball player, to a promising yet humble rookie, to an old-school sportsman — in a demonstration of the dynamics of players on a public basketball court.

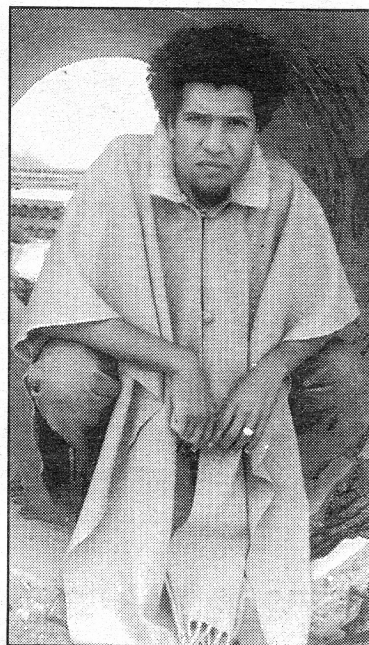
Power, a 29-year-old native of San Francisco, spent summers as a youth in New York, taking in shows with his grandparents.

Those experiences, coupled with the hip-hop that Power absorbed living in a primarily black neighborhood, led him to start the group Midnight Voices. Power was the MC and "artistic director" of the group, creating skits, costumes and other theatrics not often seen in hip-hop.

Midnight Voices was a socially conscious outfit, says Power by phone from St. Louis. "Hip-hop was a way to deal with your problems through dancing and rhyming. Then crack came into the neighborhood and people who were carrying knives started carrying guns."

The change in climate is reflected in the didacticism of *The Gathering*. Although there is an underlying social message, the characters are as funny and boisterous as any Def Comedy Jam.

"The traditional theater crowd is respectful," Power says, "But I want there to be a dialogue between myself and the audience during the performance. If you



Publicity photo

Will Power's one-man show plays tonight through Sunday.

feel like, 'Hell naw!,' then say it."

Along with his rap and rhyme delivery, Power tours with a DJ who segues beats and jazz riffs between skits to give *The Gathering* a traditional hip-hop edge. "I like the choppiness and the loops," explains Power.

By the end, you will feel you have seen a cast of a dozen in a social drama, a spoken word poetry event, stand-up comedy and a hip-hop concert, all in one.