

# 'History of Hip Hop' Professor at Duke, Harvard

by: David Menconi | The News & Observer of Raleigh



Patrick "9th Wonder" Douthit, a Grammy-winning producer of Beyonce, Mary J. Blige and other stars, poses in his office on Duke's East campus in Durham, N.C. Douthit has carved out an intriguing career as a hip-hop academic. (Chuck Liddy/The News & Observer via AP)

**DURHAM, N.C. (AP)** —One day this past spring, Duke University's "History of Hip-Hop" class turned to current events. Grammy-winning rapper Kendrick Lamar's latest album had just been released and was about to debut at the top of the charts, so students were discussing their takes on it.

Class co-teacher Patrick Douthit — better-known as Grammy-winning producer 9th Wonder who has worked with Jay-Z, Erykah Badu, Beyoncé with Destiny's Child and many other musical A-listers — let the students in on a previously top-secret detail about Lamar's album, "Damn."

"I have something to tell y'all," Douthit/Wonder told the class. "I worked on the last song, 'Duckworth.'"

The students' response was pretty much universal — whoa — as Wonder explained how he'd been sending beats back and forth with Lamar's team before the album emerged.

"During the semester, before the album came out, we had no clue he was working on that," said Jason Fotso, a senior who took the class that semester. "It was amazing to get that historical perspective from somebody actually embedded in the music industry. That was some fascinating background."

Wonder gets most of his attention for the names on his studio resume, including Mary J. Blige (her 2005 album "The Breakthrough," which won him a Grammy), Drake, J. Cole (who grew up in Fayetteville), Ludacris and more. And yet his academic resume is just as impressive.

Wonder's on-campus career began more than a decade ago at his alma mater, N.C. Central, teaching hip-hop courses that were equal parts history and how to break into the industry. From there, he has gone on to teach and do research at Duke, Harvard (subject of the 2014 documentary "The Hip-Hop Fellow") and the University of Pennsylvania, as well as the Smithsonian and the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Not bad for someone who never actually got a college degree.

"It's to the point where, if I get a Ph.D in anything, it will be the first of its kind," Wonder said with a laugh. "No, I never

did get the degree. I'm what you'd call a professor at practice. So I'm kinda building the curriculum as I go along."

That's pretty much how it works if one is in an unconventional field.

"It happens in every field and medium of study," Wonder said. "There was not always a Ph.D. in jazz studies or African-American studies — or even psychology or psychiatry. Somebody had to develop that. Slowly but surely, this has become my life's work, whether I want it to or not."

Wonder still runs his label, Jamla Records, and recently signed a teenage vocalist from Charlotte named Reuben Vincent. He's busy at both Central and Duke most semesters. One of his Duke classes this fall is hip-hop cinema, involving discussion after viewing movies like 1991's "Boyz n the Hood." For the final class project, each student devises a plot, cast and soundtrack for a proposed movie.

Come spring, Wonder will teach a class at Central about the business

side of hip-hop. That class is anything but a feel-good, you-can-make-it-if-you-try experience, however.

"You know the saying: 'Once you see how the sausage is made, you might not wanna eat it,'" Wonder said. "Some of the stuff is heartbreaking, shows kids just how manufactured some artists are. We know about it in the industry, but we don't want to ruin the fantasy. So we don't talk about it much around people who aren't in the game."

But even though the class is as likely to discourage as encourage anyone's dreams of a music career, he'll probably have a full house.

"I try to show the ins and outs of how the industry works," Wonder said. "That can be empowering, or discouraging. It's that way with anything — music, movies, sports, the media, whatever. It just breaks down to how much you're willing to take. A lot find out the hard way they're maybe not willing to take as much as you need to."

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--- Martin Luther  
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