

Shakespeare's brother

GIG

Akala

Hip-hop hotshots are much given to big talk, so when a rapper likens himself to Shakespeare, it sounds like another throwaway boast. What makes 24-year-old London rapper Akala's grand claim stand out is that it's backed up by niftily literate rhymes. Akala's material has regularly namechecked the Bard, from his breakthrough 2004 War mixtape to singles, including latest release Comedy Tragedy History, taken from his acclaimed second album, Freedom Lasso.

Shakespeare is a pointed contrast from the usual playas and Akala is quick to give props. 'All that "shake your t*****, bottle of champagne" rap garbage isn't even selling very well anymore,' he grimaces. 'On the other hand, Shakespeare's this one human being who managed to shape language 500 years in the future! He's the *highest-brow* example of what it means to be English yet, if you look at the subjects he represented, he's definitely an icon for me.'

Akala's raps, which are also marked by their potent electro production, are inspired by 'people, not objects – like, those indefinable nuances of the human psyche'.

When his freestyle delivery warms up, as brilliantly demonstrated by his live sets, it actually evokes the smooth force of a precision engine. Such lyrical drive emerged in Akala's teens; the younger brother of Ms Dynamite, he was forging his own reputation as a football star. He



Bard boy: The rapper is inspired by Britain's greatest playwright

admits, laughing: 'I got in trouble once, when I was playing for West Ham's youth team; I forgot where I was and started rapping on the pitch. Music was always nagging in the back of my mind.'

Despite his easy-going charm, you get the sense that he's stayed charged ever since – winning the Mobo award for Best Hip Hop Artist in

2006, touring with US megastars Jay-Z and Christina Aguilera, and taking hip-hop to the Far East with the British Council. While preparing for his latest shows, he's been developing a new mixtape, a format specifically designed to flaunt skills.

'Rap is unlike any other music because its battle culture is properly competitive, like athletics,' he

explains. He remains both focused on the future and fascinated by history. 'Hip-hop is an adaptation of Jamaican sound-system culture that was brought to the Bronx in the 1970s – and that in turn is an adaptation of an African culture of telling stories over music that's been going on since the dawn of time. Hip-hop doesn't belong to America –

it belongs to humanity.' It's a typical Akala observation: a pithy blend of confidence, substance and the belief that infinite variety isn't just a far-fetched dream. *Arwa Haider*

Tonight, Soho Revue Bar, 11 Walkers Court W1, 8.30pm, £6 adv, £7 door. Tel: 020 7734 0377. www.curiousgeneration.com Tube: Oxford Circus