



GIRL POWER

JaHipster cultivates her inner artist.

SHE'S ABSENT HER TRADEMARK AFRO and high-heeled boots, but JaHipster's form is still unmistakable. Seated at a café near her hometown, the spoken word artist and Prince George's County native commands respect with her presence, a power that she's developed—physically, intellectually and spiritually—over the better part of a decade.

That growth as an artist and a woman, she says, taught her about self-worth, beauty and the value of poetic passion.

The oldest of four children, JaHipster, also known as Tonya Maria Matthews, was raised in what some would view as an idyllic bubble. Her family settled in an affluent area of Maryland where many African-Americans were doctors and lawyers. She went to a private school and became the valedictorian of her class. This, Matthews says, is how she thought life was.

Then she arrived at Duke University, unfamiliar with cliques and color lines. It was culture shock for Matthews, who says she promptly joined every black student group just to surround herself by people who looked like her. "One day, my blackness hit me in the face," she says. "I went from Pollyanna to Malcolm X."

She grew her hair out and embraced her history and culture, becoming, in her words, "simply authentic." But at no point during her Duke career did Matthews fantasize about becoming a professional artist. She studied engineering and was "on her way to six figures," soaking up literature and writing as a hobby in her scant spare time.

Her true calling didn't emerge until she began pursuing a doctorate in biomedical engineering at Johns Hopkins University. It was there that she became JaHipster, nurtured by the warm embrace of Baltimore's performing arts community.

Matthews' missives tackle everything from female empowerment and race to politics and war. Performing as JaHipster, her commentaries transcend cultures, ages and political persuasions. "It's very humbling and very scary to have someone looking at you and feeling what you're feeling that closely," she says.

Since her artistic emergence, JaHipster's performed in D.C., Baltimore and all points in between. She's taken the stage at local haunts such as Bohemian Caverns and has performed at events including the Prince George's County Harlem Renaissance Festival and the Capital Jazz Fest. A second edition of her poetry book, *Still Swinging*, has been released and a follow-up to her first CD is scheduled to debut in Spring 2006.

As JaHipster becomes more of a full-time career, Matthews is no longer wedded to the idea of putting her doctorate to work—though she admits it's a daily struggle. "The African American community still needs more black men and women as role models. It's not a small thing for a black woman with a Ph.D. to choose not to use it," she notes.

But in the end, she believes she can make a much bigger impact as JaHipster than she can as Dr. Matthews. "I'm just trying to do what I'm supposed to do," she says. —Andrew Noyes