The hip-hop community has a message about criminal justice.

Paul Butler, Professor of Law at George Washington University, shared that message with the University of Florida community during the CSRRR’s Spring Lecture on April 12, 2004.

“The hip-hop community is divided on most issues. But it is united on one: criminal justice. And if we listen to hip hop, we can have a criminal justice system that works better, is safer, and treats people more fairly,” said Butler, who teaches and writes in the areas of civil rights, criminal law, and jurisprudence.

Using a boom-box, Butler played samples of popular hip-hop music ranging from Nelly’s “Nellyville” and Tupac’s “Dear Mama” to Nas’ “If I Ruled the World” throughout his lecture. As Butler played the songs, the more than 80 members of the audience, comprised of UF administration, faculty, students, and community members, nodded their heads with the beat. Many audience members even lip synched along with the words of the songs.

The hip-hop community, Butler argued, is representative of the community most affected by and most often subject to the criminal justice system. Therefore, the perspective of this community is valid and valuable.

Butler contends that the hip-hop community views the criminal justice system as a rite of passage that does not punish deviant acts but that criminalizes systemic problems like poor education and poverty. Imprisonment is also overused. As a result, the criminal justice system is not viewed as a deterrent.

Butler went on to explain that the hip-hop community has three main views about how the criminal justice system should be reformed.

“First,” Butler said, “people who harm others should be harmed in return. Second, criminals are people who deserve love and respect. Third, communities can be destroyed by both crime and punishment.”

Arguing that the hip-hop community would advocate weighing the costs to the community against the need for punishment, Butler stated, “the hip-hop community would use prison sparingly.”

“And since sixty percent of the consumers of hip-hop culture are white,” Butler said, “the message has the opportunity to seep through to the larger community.”

All they need to do is listen.

Professor Butler’s lecture was based on his recently published article, “Much Respect: Toward a Hip-Hop Theory of Punishment” which is available at 56 Stanford Law Review 983 (2004).

Jill Mahler, 2L Levin College of Law
From left to right: Dean Robert Jerry (Levin College of Law), Provost David Colburn, Paul Butler (George Washington University), Professor Katheryn Russell-Brown (Dir., CSRRR)