

MOXIE



SPEAKING IN TONGUES

TACKLING ASIAN STEREOTYPES ON THE YELLOW
TECHNICOLOR TOUR

"EXCUSE ME, AMERIKA, I'M CONFUSED. YOU TELL ME TO LIGHTEN UP BUT WHAT YOU REALLY MEAN IS WHITEN UP." JUST EMBITTERED AND CYNICAL LANGUAGE? HELL NO. NOT IF YOU'RE THE ASIAN AMERICAN SPOKEN WORD ART GROUP "I WAS BORN WITH TWO TONGUES."

They're at the Hothouse, on a Sunday afternoon, to kick off a tour that'll take them to Cali, up the coast, then on back to the Midwest. All in one week. The Yellow Technicolor Tour, they call it. Joined by the group "The PACIFICS," Two Tongues is about educating the uninitiated to the rhythms of Asian American hip hop and spoken word. In this performance, they're tackling everything from politics to race to stereotypes to marriage. It's edgy, it's loud, it's spirited, it's young. But don't mistake their poetry for meaningless rage. Because, like they're saying, it's all about the love.

"We have love for everybody in this room," says Two Tongues member Dennis Sangmin Kim, 23, who's been riffing and riling the crowd to make more noise. He's wiry, got a stubbly head, and has been hugging people in the room like a madman.

It's wall-to-wall inside this swanky, South Loop, color-splashed multi-arts center—a convergence of what many may consider to be a scattered, even anemic Chicago Asian community. Chicago, as the last U.S. Census so boldly pointed out, has a whopping 4 percent Asian population. But the turnout on this blustery, leafy October day is hardly half-assed. Their loyal following is out in force. And a whole lot of them are the youngish, hip, cargo-pants wearing, wildly streaked hair, superplatform shoe-stomping scensters.

Dennis, along with Anida [pictured above] and Marlon Esguerra, both 27 (the married half of Two Tongues), and an absent Emily Chang, hooked up three years ago. They started to hit the college campus circuit and the poetry slams and quickly caused a stir in the community.

On stage they're firing off their urban street poetry to the accompaniment of an upright bass and a turntablist. Satirizing wisecracks they've gotten over the years (like folks asking how long they've been in this country), Dennis and Marlon have the crowd laughing and cheering.

Two Tongues is deciphering what it means to be Asian in a hostile American setting where their culture can be appropriated by Madonna for her latest costume incarnation or demonized by hapless Long Duk Dong types on the silver screen. And even more so than that, as Anida says in "Excuse me, Amerika": "You wish to wash me out/ melt me in your cauldron/excuse me, if I tip your melting pot/spill the shades onto your streets/I DON'T WANT TO LOSE MY COLOR."

One girl in the crowd remarks offhandedly: "They're just saying what we've all felt and experienced over the years. Except they're writing it down and performing it." (*Jan Nguyen*)