

# Message has strings attached: Work hard for what you want

By: Alison Mayes  
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His stage name, Wil B, sounds like it's from the rap realm. His baggy clothes and ball caps suggest the same.

## Theatre Preview

### Black Violin

Friday and Saturday at 7:30 p.m.;  
Jan. 30 at 4 p.m.  
Tickets \$13.60 at 942-8898 or  
[www.mtyp.ca](http://www.mtyp.ca)

But Wil B is a classically trained viola player. With homeboy violinist Kev Marcus, he mixes highbrow with hip-hop in genre-busting performances influenced by composers from J.S. Bach to Jay-Z.

The Florida duo, known as Black Violin, performs school and public shows -- recommended for ages 10 and up -- at Manitoba Theatre for Young People from Thursday through Jan. 30.

In terms of rubbing shoulders with stars, they're probably one of the best-connected acts ever to hit the MTYP stage.

One of their big breaks came in 2004, when they accompanied Alicia Keys at the Billboard Music Awards. Since then, they've toured the world as an opening act for the likes of Akon and Wu-Tang Clan, and worked with stars such as P. Diddy, Kanye West, Fifty Cent and Aerosmith.

They're bringing along a DJ and a hip-hop drummer, Jermaine (Beatdown) McQueen. Improvisation and friendly competition between the "duelling" viola and violin are part of the show.

Wil B, 28, was born in The Bahamas and immigrated to the United States with his family when he was about 11. Speaking by phone from Fort Lauderdale, Fla., he says he probably would have taken a negative path if he hadn't been encouraged to develop his musical talent.

"It kind of shakes me inside just to think about . . . what I might have been into, if I didn't have music to motivate me to do better things," he says.

A school security guard who had been a saxophone player heard the 14-year-old Wil B drumming on tables and told him he should join the school band. The boy tried to sign up as a sax player, but was accidentally put in the string program -- a mistake he now calls a blessing. He made an "instant connection" with the viola and never looked back.

He and Marcus, now 27, met at the Dillard High School of Performing Arts in Fort Lauderdale, an inner-city public school where acceptance was by audition. Both later won full music scholarships to universities.

One of Marcus's professors gave him a tape of an influential, hard-swinging African-American jazz violinist named Stuff Smith. It changed the pair's lives, making them realize they could synthesize all the styles they loved: classical, jazz, R & B, hip-hop, even reggae and gypsy.

"(Smith) made us think, 'Wow -- you can honestly do whatever you want with this violin.' He played with such soul, such enthusiasm. We couldn't stop listening to it. It was a huge influence."

The pair named themselves Black Violin after Smith's final solo album, released shortly before his death in 1967.

Their own self-titled CD came out in 2008. The album cover is a drawing of an African-American boy playing a violin while walking a tightrope over a city street.

It's an image that implies a confident balancing act between genres, says Wil B. It also suggests that music has lifted the boy up. "He's very comfortable. He's not afraid. He loves music. He's not down below (on the street), where all the violence can possibly be."

In their shows for young people, Black Violin's message is to find what you love, then work your butt off to succeed at it.

"Look, we're doing something that no one would think would be possible," he says.

"Whatever you're doing, do it to the fullest. Whether it's music, or you're an English major or a chemist, or you love computers, think outside the box and set your own direction."

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