

A meeting with **Elmore Leonard** got hip-hop activist **Raoul Juneja**, otherwise known as **deejay Ra**, involved in promoting literacy.

Leonard has written a movie with a strong hip-hop theme, *Be Cool*, and as they talked, it occurred to Juneja that this might be a cool way to get more youth reading his books.

“We came up with our catch phrase, *Put down the gangsta rap CD and pick up the gangster fiction novel*. Seeing how students got excited with an Elmore book giveaway I set up, I realized we had started something interesting and it was worth pursuing through a variety of literary genres.

“Having worked as a deejay in music, comedy and film all through high school and college, I figured I was in a nice position to start getting more into educational, political and cultural aspects of those genres.”

Juneja tries to get books do-

nated by publishers into the hands of youth every month.

“I would say if fans have won a hip-hop book on a Canadian college radio station, it has likely been directly or indirectly through my program. We also send books out to a variety of international campus radio stations.”

Juneja also stops by a few schools or club events and does book giveaways and has set up internet literacy contests through his **Lyrical Knockout.com** web site.

Juneja, 26, does not think that young people aren't reading enough, he thinks they aren't reading as a choice – that they're being forced to read what their school board decides, and by the time they graduate they'll be quite turned off reading for pleasure. He believes that when books, music or film are placed within the formal education framework which deals with a classroom rather than an individual, they do not have the same positive effect as when youth absorb these forms of art in their own time.

Which is why he specifically promotes books which have movie and music connections such as those written by a musician, about a musician or for a musician.

*Put down the Bollywood DVD and pick up the South Asian novel* was

the theme of a radio PSA he recorded with *Mississippi Masala* actress **Sarita Choudhury**.

Considered “one of the entertainment industry's most vocal and effective campaigners” (*Film-Ink*), Juneja launched the **Jhumpa Lahiri** tribute, giving away her books in anticipation of **Mira Nair's** movie adaptation of the *Namesake*.

**Ilyasah Shabazz**, daughter of the civil rights icon **Malcolm X**, recor-

ded a radio PSA with him to commemorate the 85th birthday of *Roots'* author **Alex Haley**. Juneja also launched a **Mahatma Gandhi** literacy tribute with the support of **Deepa Mehta** and **Lisa Ray**.

He saw the release of the DVD of *Water* as the perfect time for North American teachers to re-introduce Gandhi to students and outline his contributions not only to India's independence movement, but also to **Dr. Martin Luther King** and the American civil rights struggle, as well as to **Nelson Mandela** and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa.

“At any given time, I'm reading parts of a dozen or so books, but I'm the same with DVDs and CDs, in part because of my work.

“I think this idea needs to change, that you need to sit down with a book as if you're in a relationship and not involve yourself with anything else until you've broken up with it in a sense!

“I feel that's part of the reason why it takes some people so long to read a book which they've had sitting at home for six months or a year or longer. They start seeing the likely few hours they need to spend with the book as a task like watering the grass, which naturally ends up being delayed as long as possible!

“Let's break this rule that you have to sit and read, doing nothing else for an entire night – why not multi-task and read half the book one evening, see half a movie at night, then finish both the next evening or even start a new book and movie? I think this actually helps as it gives you time to think about the art over the course of a few days, rather than rushing through it and then needing to read or see something again a few months later to remember it.

“I tell students that even if they have the television or music on in the background while they're reading, if that's what they need as the atmosphere then it's still a hundred times better than not reading at all.”

– SHAGORIKA EASWAR

## “Reintroduce Gandhi to students”



### RAOUL JUNEJA

With Lisa Ray and Deepa Mehta at the release of the DVD for *Water*