

An Introspection: Get the Caravan Moving

Mic Crenshaw

Mic Crenshaw is a Chicago-born poet, emcee and cultural activist. In addition to being the lead organizer of the Afrikan Hip-hop Caravan in the United States, he is part of and involved in various organisations and projects, including the Hip Hop Congress, the U.S. Social Forum National Planning Committee and International Committee, Education WithOut Borders, as well as the non-profit community radio station KBOO. He is also the founder of Global Fam, a non-governmental organisation, which has blossomed into a production, promotion, artist management and education company providing mainstream entertainment that supports social justice activism. Together with DJ Klavical, Mic participated in the Afrikan Hip-hop Caravan 2013 and travelled from Cape Town to Harare. The following article is a reflection about cultural activism and his role and involvement in the Afrikan Hip-hop Caravan, in particular the experiences he collected along the road, travelling with the comrades.

Activism brought me to Africa for the first time in 2004. I went to a conference in Rwanda. I forged an alliance with African activists on the ground in Zimbabwe and Burundi specifically. We helped set up a computer center in Burundi through a network of activists there and donated computers and raised funds from the U.S. We used Hip Hop, specifically a show with Dead Prez, to raise the funds to ship the donated computers. The computer center is up and running successfully. Over 600 people have been trained in skills which have helped them land jobs and elevate their educational capacity as students, educators and even semi-skilled computer repair technicians (check out more about the Computer center at globalfam.org).

One comrade that I met at the Rwanda conference, Briggs Bomba, from Zimbabwe took my music back home from Rwanda with him in 2004 and introduced my sounds to local Hip Hop collectives, namely the Toyitoyi Arts Collective, which is part of the Uhuru Network, and Magamba Network based in Harare. Through sustained contact, I was able to play the *Shoko International Music Festival* in Zimbabwe in September 2012. That trip to Zimbabwe introduced me to the people who hold down Hip Hop cultural activism in Zimbabwe, at least some of the key players.

Two such individuals, Katja Kellerer and Biko Mutsaurwa, invited me to participate in the Afrikan Hip-hop Caravan (AHC) upon the condition that I contribute to the cause by helping to raise funds and support from the United States. They specifically wanted me to see if I could get The Coup and or Dead Prez to commit to headline the dates as well as get an audio recording from Mumia Abu Jamal endorsing the project.

Due to lack of major funders, The Coup and Dead Prez could not commit. Mumia was not able to record an audio address to play at the beginning of each show. However, I was able obtain a typed letter of support from Mumia Abu Jamal and raise enough funds to support DJ Klavical and myself for the first three-week leg of the tour.

The AHC tour itself was to be a six-week tour starting in Cape Town South Africa, move to Johannesburg, Harare (Zimbabwe), Nairobi (Kenya), Dakar (Senegal), and wind up in Tunis (Tunisia) for the World Social Forum. Artists would engage cultural activists, youth, students and academics as well as the general public for a week in each city in a series of events including performances and symposiums as well as media events.

DJ Klavical and I did a week in Cape Town, a week in Johannesburg and a week in Harare, before returning home to the U.S. The Caravan also visited Nairobi, Dakar and Tunis.

The Caravan was my introduction to Soundz of the South and the Toyitoyi Arts Collective, two radical Hip Hop collectives made up of artists and cultural activists from Zimbabwe and South Africa. When I say radical, I mean that they are anti-capitalists and anarchists. Cats have a root cause and critical analysis of the social conditions that exist on the continent of Africa historically and currently in their communities. Much criticism of the ruling party and their neo liberal agendas are clear as we drive by buildings named after both De Klerk and Mandela jointly.

Being from the townships in Harare, Jo' Burg, and Cape Town as were Anele, Words Of A Rebel Sistah, Khusta, Zanzolo, Biko, Kush, Thepo and Thiza, it was clear without a doubt that government barely serves the people if at all, police are deadly, and poverty and repression are far more real than the broken promises of political figures.

There were always events around people standing up for justice in the face of the ruling party's policies and police violence. The leaflets for events were on counter tops, the reports overheard in casual discussion. Marches, demonstrations, concerts. One comrade ran a pirate radio station from his flat in Soweto. While there, we witnessed one comrade hand another a coveted transmitter to more effectively broadcast over pirated frequencies.

Khayelitsha is a black Township in Cape Town. Soweto is a black township in Johannesburg. We went to both places and were able to break bread with local Hip Hop collectives that were connected to the AHC. Racial politics and history were constantly being discussed by everyone.

In one instance, after our first show in Cape Town (after flying for over twenty-four hours and dealing with fatigue, excitement and jet lag) a fellow artist attempted to engage me in a discussion about the concept of "post racial" society. It was clear that the idea of post racialism was a farce that made him angry and that I, being from the U.S., should have something to say about this. There is a parallel set of illusions and harsh realities between post-apartheid South Africa and Obama America. People are aware of the contradictions. In South Africa you can still feel the internalized apartheid that keeps people segregated despite the official end of apartheid. Both Colored and Black communities had their autonomous Hip Hop acts and organized bodies that did not always have solidarity. What solidarity there was, was a work in progress. The historical access to relative privilege coloreds have had over blacks is at the root of a lot

of resentment. The real racial oppression experienced by both adds complexities to complexion.

In the townships forced eviction of masses of landless people is common. Some forms of direct action include blocking freeways with bon fires and building dwellings on the freeway. Housing issues and landless peoples' movements are ongoing and have a long history of community organizing and direct action. The people who have nowhere to go are constantly being attacked violently and displaced by municipal governments and their authorities and thugs for hire. One of the largest and best-organized coalitions of people fighting forced eviction in the townships and settlements across South Africa is Abahlali baseMjondolo (check them out at www.abahlali.org). DJ Klavical and I met with some of their members in informal gatherings, thanks to local activist Jared Sacks who housed us.

One of the questions that constantly ran through my mind was how did a white minority displace so many hundreds of millions of indigenous Afrikans, and sustain ownership of the vast material resources and wealth of a country, a continent? It's undeniable, palpable, psychologically devastating and emotionally draining to witness this level of white supremacy and capitalism. It sharpens a global perspective on our conditions at home. I get regular emails from Abahlali. It's true that as we speak, people are being violently displaced for trying to live, trying to breathe, to exist.

There were ten to fifteen of us as a core group of individuals collectively executing shows, radio interviews, classroom visits and Hiphop Symposia at cultural centers and schools. We rocked shows with local support in each city and regional support from surrounding cities, communities and countries. Hearing emcees and spoken word artists spit in Shona and Xhosa mixed with English is especially dope. Xhosa is an indigenous African language that sounds complex and percussive with its clicks. The clicks further intensified the marriage between the voice and the beat and added another level of depth to the songs. I am aware that there is reclamation here in this process. It is an act of revolutionary decolonization when Africans rhyme in native tongues.

The shows were dope. The opportunity to reach an audience across the ocean and on another continent from where I live was and remains essential. The cultural exchange of information, inspiration and ideas, music, dance, language, beats, rhymes, political orientation and so much more beyond words was and is profound. The results of this exchange will continue to grow and develop in predictable and unforeseen ways for years to come.

The highlight of the experiences for me was the Hiphop Symposia. The Caravan was conceived as a means to engage audiences, artists, academics and cultural activists in a discussion that assesses the role of Hip Hop in transforming consciousness and thus changing society itself. This question was explored thoroughly, but not fully enough at each symposium. This seems a contradiction and it is. This is just the beginning of a process, a part of the whole, a recent aspect of an ancient continuum. If we consider the implications of taking an artform and culture spawned by Africans in America and provide a platform for Afrikans globally to engage all humanity on the

questions directly related to our collective destiny, we have begun to grasp at the root and the potential of what the Afrikan Hiphop Caravan is. I am proud to be part of this experience.

Ultimately the vision is to develop this project to its most functional level. There needs to be ongoing touring on an autonomous and collaborative level and financial support generated through various means so that the Caravan becomes established as a global institution rooted in Afrikan Hip Hop.