

Interview: Hip Hop and Activism in Kenya

Moses Mbasu aka Buddha Blaze

Buddha Blaze is a Kenyan-based Hip Hop activist who participated and presented at the Hip Hop Symposium in Nairobi on April 17th, 2013. He is a well-respected writer, organizer and promoter of Hip Hop in Kenya and beyond and is the co-founder of WAPI, one of the biggest platforms for underground Hip Hop artists in Kenya. The following piece is an interview that a member of the Afrikan Hip Hop Caravan organising team and guest editor of this anthology, Katja Kellerer, held with Buddha Blaze via email in September 2013. The set of questions addresses a wide range of issues. In addition to outlining his personal involvement in Hip Hop activism and specific projects, including the Afrikan Hip Hop Caravan, the interview offers insights into Blaze's views and perceptions of local Hip Hop scenes as well as global Hip Hop culture.

When and how were you introduced to Hip Hop?

I was introduced to Hip Hop in my teenage years. I lived in Europe and when I was young living in a different culture, the only thing that could really connect me to the general society at the time was Hip Hop. I fell in love with it because it changed my view of life. Being a black kid living in a white country there was no aspect of European life I connected with. The only thing I connected with were the black kids from all over the world and the most common factor at the time was Hip Hop.

What does Hip Hop mean to you? What are the fundamental elements of Hip Hop culture?

Hip Hop to me is a way of life; it's a consciousness that guides me through my life whether I'm doing business just making life decisions. Before I listened to Hip Hop, I had lost direction; I had lost hope in life. The Hip Hop principles of love, keeping it real and community awareness help me make those decisions. For me Hip Hop was more than music because it made me a focused person, it put me in line. It pulled me from the depths of emptiness; it fixed me and made me into a better human being.

You describe yourself as a Hip Hop activist. What does this mean?

Hip Hop activist means always fighting for the understanding of Hip Hop culture: organizing Hip Hop meetings, events and initiatives, protecting Hip Hop artists and preserving the culture, as well as educating the masses about the culture. I hosted the first serious Hip Hop event in Kenya that put Kenyan rappers on edge. It was called Rap and Vibe. I then went on to manage the biggest Hip Hop movement so far in Africa called WAPI (Words and Pictures). This event has been the biggest platform so far supporting Hip Hop acts in the region. The big names in Kenyan Hip Hop now have come from this platform. Top Kenyan Hip Hop artists such as Octopizzo, Khaligraph, Rabbit, and Juliani

are all Hip Hop scholars that were elevated into the game by WAPI. This was the platform that first gave them a chance to perform. Hip Hop to me has always been about giving back and for me WAPI was the biggest giving back initiative I have ever participated in. With the overwhelming success of these artists in their own careers, I feel like I participated in their growth therefore being an activist against poverty and an activist of change. Their success leads to many families having food on their tables and going to school. I'm therefore directly responsible for the growth of a whole generation of families. That's what being an activist is all about, directly affecting people where it matters the most.

Are you part of any Hip Hop organizations or collectives?

Yes, I am part of a number of organizations. I was one of the founding members of one of the biggest Hip Hop movements in Africa, called WAPI, which took place all over Africa. We went to Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, Ghana, South Sudan, and even Zanzibar. WAPI has now also been enthusiastically adopted in Brazil. I'm also the founder of Nairobi Rapsody. Nairobi Rapsody is a weekly Hip Hop networking event in Nairobi. So far it has hosted lots of DJs and will keep moving higher. We started out as a DJ event, but it has grown slowly to cater for artist performances. WAPI stands for Words and Pictures and it was a movement that started in 2006; when there was a huge explosion of Hip Hop creativity in Kenya and on the African continent. There was a lot of underground expression at the time such as graffiti, MCing, DJing and fashion. All this energy needed to be mobilized to make artists earn a living from it in a formalized way. WAPI was that platform that brought all these Hip Hop elements together under one event and venue. We were given free support and performance space at the British Council in Nairobi and before you knew it, it became the most popular hangout spot in Nairobi. This was later formatted into a program by the British Council and I was contracted to go and create similar spaces all over Africa; in Ghana, Tanzania, Nigeria, Uganda and Zanzibar. The mission of WAPI was to create awareness for underground Hip Hop culture and industry and for the first time we had engagement with corporates, the big leagues, and artists started to be taken seriously and prosper. The movement has really helped the Hip Hop industry in Africa with highlighting the elements.

Can Hip Hop be used as a tool to mobilize for social justice?

Hip Hop is a tool of social justice and has been used in that way many times. My movement, WAPI, has taken many young people off the streets and has created a great future for them. That's social justice. In 2008, when Kenya had an uprising, I did a peace concert and had young people professing peace and an end to the warring. That peace moment that happened during WAPI was used as a sign to show that young people were united while politicians were the real culprits of violence and war mongering. I have used Hip Hop to spread messages of hope, peace and change. WAPI gave young people a sense of pride that wasn't there before. There was no time before where a group of young

people was given this much attention, protection, and leeway, as they were given at WAPI. The youth felt safe there and the movement protected them. Therefore these artists and young people always felt that WAPI was their voice of reason and would use it as the tool of engagement with the streets, the media and so on.

What is the current socio-political situation in Kenya and how does Hip Hop relate to it?

Kenya has come from a dark place politically, an era in which freedom of speech was not guaranteed. When Hip Hop came into the picture all that did change. Hip Hop gave the youth a chance to express themselves in a way that no other medium had done before. That freedom of speech was visibly participated by the Hip Hop community and it was won. The political situation is at crossroads now and Hip Hop has been at the forefront of fighting for political awareness and consciousness. Hip Hop is responsible for fighting the old mentality. In the old days of Africa young people were not allowed to question their elders even when the latter was obviously wrong. Hip Hop was the first time that young Africans could openly criticize their elders. Even though Africa had won so called freedom from its oppressors, it seemed as though the African leaders themselves had also become tyrants oppressing their own people. Ukoo Flani's songs always reminded Kenyan youth that the freedom that our forefathers (Mau Mau) had fought for had been compromised by greedy leaders. Hip Hop changed the way young people reasoned with their elders in Kenyan and has created a respectable communication chain. Young people's voices are now more respected than ever before and the elders know that the young have a big part to play in democracy and development. Check Ukoo Flani's critically acclaimed song - '*Angalia Saa*' which means 'Look at the Time.'

What is the state of the Hip Hop Scene in Kenya?

Hip Hop in Kenya is still at its infant stage but a lot is moving in the positive direction. There's so much potential. Every hood has a studio and people are yearning for more. Initially it started off with a major bang, with groups such as Kalamashaka, Ukoo Flani Mau Mau, and K South, but with the influx of too much bubblegum music it lost a bit of its luster for a while. With movements such as WAPI, the community found its legs again and is coming back to life. The next big African Hip Hop star will come from Kenya.

Is there such a thing as 'Afrikan Hip Hop' and if so, how would you define it?

Yes there is definitely such a thing called African Hip Hop and that is true Hip Hop done by Africans and addressing the various problems afflicting Africa. Before this, there was a struggle for identity but with time Africans have found a way of fusing their sounds and lyrics with global Hip Hop culture. Hip Hop done by Africans has to find its rightful place on the global scene. By creating its own identity, sound and agenda African Hip

Hop has become a major force to be reckoned with and has created a booming industry with endless creative avenues.

How and why did you get involved in the Afrikan Hiphop Caravan?

Being a practitioner and investor in Kenyan Hip Hop industry, I was contacted by the organizers. I'm always willing to support Hip Hop initiatives globally and in my own country because it's a community thing. The Hip Hop community in Kenya is not that big so whenever there's anything concerning Hip Hop happening most of us will either be personally invited or will be the ones facilitating the event. In fact the only reason I didn't organize the Kenyan leg of this initiative is because I was held up at the International Hip Hop Festival at Trinity College so I couldn't make it back to Kenya on time to organize it. This is a great movement to unite the Hip Hop community globally. For me it always feels great when I connect with other Hip Hop minds doing different things in the name of the culture. Whether at home or abroad, I love the energy that Hip Hop organizers exude and I always feel at home when working with new Hip Hop people. The Caravan is a meeting place for different cultures, styles, people and music and highly I appreciate being involved with it.

Hip Hop is a global movement with its roots in New York's Bronx. How can it be utilized to address local struggles?

Everywhere you go you will find this subculture and because Hip Hop has been adopted as a social movement it always begins with the community. This is by associating and plugging into what the community needs and what opportunities are out there for the people. Hip Hop is a voice of the community. Every community regardless of where it is needs to make hip hop work for that community. That can be done by localizing the message so the community can feel like they belong to it. Artists need to educate themselves on what Hip Hop has successfully done in many communities worldwide.