

It's Bigger than Hip Hop!
By
Mama Charlotte Hill O'Neal

*The word had spread. Not only had M1 of **Dead Prez** and Umi of **POW** arrived to East Africa but Michael Wanguhu and Russell Kenya, creators of the multi award winning film, **Hip Hop Colony**, were in town too! And everybody wanted a piece of the action!! They were on the tightest of schedules, a whirlwind tour of just a few days that would take them to the **Ukooflani MauMau Youth Center** in Dandora, and the sprawling, vibrant ghettos in Kibera; to the congested, tree lined streets of Arusha and fire lit nights under the stars at the **United African Alliance Community Center UAACC** in Imbaseni; to the slave forts of Bagamoyo and the hectic nightlife of Dar, as the filmmakers sought to record the connection between Mau Mau warriors of the 50's; Black Panther revolutionaries of the 60's; and Hip Hop activists of today.*

The following are some of my recollections:

I couldn't believe the size of the crowd gathered for the monthly WAPI happening in the parking lot of the British Council in Nairobi! There had to have been at least three thousand people, mostly young, mostly African, but a cross section and blur of browns, beige, black and white. And all of them...literally ALL of them were breakin' with the beat, fists pumpin' the air with passion and shouting the lyrics, word for word and without hesitation... *"It's Bigger than Hip Hop...Hip Hop...Hip Hop!*

I could actually feel the vibrating roar coming from those three thousand throats, tickling my toes and solidifying the air as M1 and Umi walked quickly through the crowd, to the space (no bigger than a king sized bed), that the overflow of bodies had left them. The brothers immediately got down to business, ready to teach...preparing to preach... messages of discipline, love, revolution, unity...sometimes cussing words that made me flinch, (harsh words for harsh situations); other times, soothing words that made me smile with the beauty and truth conjured up from the images. And through it all, the crowd of youth continued to recite with them, shout with them...word for word and beat for beat.

I wondered again, for what must be the thousandth time, why music and poetry are not used more extensively in the world's school systems when it is so obvious that it's one of the most successful and natural systems of learning that there is! (How many of you still retain and actually use, the ABC limericks we learned in nursery school, even from fifty years ago? I know I do!)

The next afternoon, we all boarded the private shuttle for the Sunday ride to Arusha. We were on the way to **UAACC** and an opportunity for the film makers to record the thoughts and history of former Black Panthers Mzee Pete O'Neal and myself; to witness the continuing legacy of 'the Party' embodied in the daily classes for Tanzanian youth, in the community service and outreach going on there at the Center; **and** to make some *dynamite* music in the PPP recording studio!

We wanted to get there by nightfall so Michael and Russell could film the traditional welcoming celebration organized for M1 and Umi at UAACC, complete with burning torches, drumming and singing.

What a time of *déjà vu* that afternoon safari from Nairobi to Imbaseni was. It was like being among my young comrades of more than three decades before, discussing the state

of the world, planning community service projects; loud laughter, intelligent debate, smell of fried fish, blasts of good music!

Dead Prez are *live!* You hardly ever even see them performing on television or even hear them that much on the radio...yet you can go to just about any corner of the world from Mongolia to Maji ya Chai, and find youth quoting them and jamming to their powerful words. Just like a raging wildfire, the messages that Dead Prez brings spreads by word of mouth...disc by disc. There is a Hip Hop activism that recalls the revolutionary spirit and message pioneered by Public Enemy over 20 years ago and focuses on building awareness and social change, (quite a difference from the *rap* videos that have taken over the television screens and airwaves of this planet with monotonous line-ups of gyrating bodies, fancy cars and garish *bling*).

It is the mission of Dead Prez and the few *conscious* hip hop artists out there, to provide “a voice for the voiceless” and use their music as “a vehicle for freedom”. Plainly speaking, people can relate to what they bring because they speak on everyday lives and universal hopes, disappointments, fears and the anger of youth who can’t get work and don’t have employable skills to do so. They speak on police brutality and corrupt governments. They rap about the drugs pandemic that has taken over so many communities around the planet; the lack of relevant education and opportunities that plague today’s youth...and the youth are listening.

Their time at UAACC went too doggone fast! It had been a jam packed three days of late nights; heart felt conversations and shared creativity...a historical gathering of artists that will forever live in my memory.

Before they left UAACC headed for another WAPI event at the British Council in Dar, Mzee Pete and I added our elder voices to the powerful music that was laid down in the PPP studio by Dead Prez, POW, Ukooflani MauMau, Kwanza Unit, Warriors from the East, Nakaaya and Watengwa.

On the track titled *Mapinduzi*, I advised “...*you got to be an example of personal responsibility, social responsibility, for your community, no matter where on this messed up planet you might be, you gotta make a change Y’all...make it personal...a Personal Revolution!*” **May our youth hear that also!**

Find out more about UAACC at www.uaacc.habari.co.tz