

FEATURE INTERVIEW

Talib Kweli

‘GETTIN UP’

Interviewed by Melissa ‘Alemain’ Vozzo February 2006

Being teased on my daily commute through West London, stopping and staring at promo posters walled up under bridges like a film set, my patience was persevering. Still a week in tease-town to endure as the approaching UK release of PS2’s ‘Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure’ (designed by Mark Ecko) was leaving steam all over London with its undercurrent promotional respiration. Contents Under Pressure debuted nationwide in the UK on 17 February 06, and I must confess that while Hip Hop fans doubling as PS2 enthusiasts will be thrilled about the urban feast for the senses, it’s the main character of the game that captured my interest. I spoke with Brooklyn’s own Talib Kweli last September about his role as ‘Trane’, and his pursuits over the past year.

It was only logical to add Talib Kweli’s solo albums to my collection, preceded by his partnership joints with Mos Def as ‘Blackstarr’ (1998), and DJ Hi Tek for Reflection Eternal (2000). My first live encounter with Kweli fetched back to the year prior to our interview. Frequenting London only a few times a year, I make it mandatory to not miss a breath of what New York native Talib Kweli has on offer. In June 2004 he played 3 sold out nights in a row, and I craved at least 2 on the calendar. My last hip hop wish came full circle when on the 3rd and final show a boisterous bereted figure parted the crowd and jumped up on the stage, grabbing the mic off Kweli. The individual quickly alleviated securities concerns by announcing “my name is Mos Def, and I’m here to support my brother Kweli”. Greeted by deafening shrieks of support, I began to meditate on how exceptionally fortunate I was to have been in the audience that evening to share a piece of hip hop history. I knew I wasn’t exaggerating when supporting act Beatnuts returned to the stage and grabbed the mic to salute to the fact that they’d been waiting for years to see Blackstarr together on the one stage. Taking urgency over all other questions in my interview I rushed to ask Talib whether he had arranged that impromptu appearance from Mos Def, or whether he was as surprised as the rest of the audience that night. He kindly set the record straight with fond recollection and a shy Kweli smile.

“I knew he was going to be in town that day. Mos has a habit of jumping on stage whenever he feels like it, so we always have a plan of how we were gonna do it. He’s like ‘oh yeah yeah, no doubt’ and then he just jumps on the stage when ever he feels like it. So we said aight, next time we had one guy over here (ushers left) and one guy over here (right), we’re gonna stop him this time getting on stage in the wrong song. So what he does is he cut through the middle of the audience and comes through 2 songs deep. He does his own thing. It’s always good”.

Unlike Grand Theft Auto which flirts with Hip Hop by means of sound track, character vernacular and scenery, Ecko’s Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure(TM), is the first truly authentic video game based on urban culture and graffiti art. *“I’m the voice of the main character in the game, Coltrane. The game is about graffiti and respect for graffiti culture”* explains Kweli of his animated alter ego. While some of Hip Hops biggest names can boast fragrance or clothing lines to their credit, Kweli has made his own slice of history as the first MC to voice a lead character in a PS2 game, leaving his own unique footprint on the billion dollar Playstation empire.

Athens ‘Get By’ and ‘I Try’ boasting production brilliance from (larger than life itself) Kanye West, brought undeniable attention to Kweli’s solo albums ‘Quality’ and ‘Beautiful Struggle’. However, light must be given for the sheer volume of artists who shared in his solo journey as collaborators. Mos Def, Black Thought, Pharoah Monch and Bilal showing out on his first solo effort, with John Legend and Mary J Blige in the credits for album number two. Collaboration with long time associate DJ Hi Tek who also produced a tracks on ‘Beautiful Struggle’ is perhaps what I’m so curious about. Given their unparalleled chemistry, I wondered if I was pushing my luck to want to see them together again, maybe even live? I was compelled to query Kweli on whether this was on the cards.

“Hi Tek ain’t never toured with me but once. He don’t like to tour, that’s the whole thing. Hi Tek prefer to stay in the crib and make beats, and I think he should cause he comes up with lotta hot beats”.

Gushing about the eight pound baby boy who carries his name, track ‘Joy’ (from ‘Quality’) is an ode to his partner bearing his child. Parenting brings change, not excluding the artist Kweli. *“It hasn’t changed my journey as an artist, but it’s made it more relevant and important that I pay more attention to my career instead of just doing it for the love”.* Attention seems unavoidable for Kweli at the moment. The general controversy of its release, from legal battle with Mayor of New York (who attempted to axe Ecko’s open air exhibition featuring urban works of art by 20 renowned graffiti writers) to the games retail ban in Australia, has of course propelled PS2’s ‘Getting Up’ into cult status. With the forthcoming attention granted as the voice of animated graffiti soldier ‘Trane’ Kweli’s name has accompanied every news feature since the games US debut. It’s no secret that the media beast is always ready to tear into hip hop culture, and I was curious to know whether the voice of ‘Trane’ was concerned about the media attempting to misconstrue his integrity as an established hip hop artist?

"I always make sure that I set the record straight about how I see myself, as opposed to what the perception is".
Despite the climate of controversy surrounding him at the moment, life isn't all serious for Kweli who was only too pleased to humour me when I bigged up his coitoured bright orange leather jacket. Does London apparel please the eye of this consistently stylish New Yorker? *"Yeah London got great shopping, ya'll charge too much. I'm paying with pounds not dollars, so it's like 'get that insignificant, ain't worth nothing dollar outta here'. It don't even have no standard".*

Kweli's currency has a high conversion rate, dollars and sense. An emcee making history as a pioneer PS2 voice character makes a lot of cents!