Tupac and the Revolutionary Shakur Family Interview with Bilal Sunni-Ali by Kalonji Jama Changa

When some people hear the name Bilal Sunni-Ali, they think of the world renown musician from the Legendary Gil Scot-Heron's Band. The Group that brought us the Liberation Classic, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" and appeared on stages and screens around the globe, including a Saturday Night Live Special with the Late Comedy King, Richard Pryor. When others hear the name Bilal Sunni-Ali, they think of the Black Panther from New York who was a co-defendant in the United States vs. Dr. Mutulu Shakur case. The case that was known in the Revolutionary Community as, "The Republic of New Afrika vs the United States". In this case, the state was claiming that a "Criminal Enterprise" existed and that they were a part of it. They claim the "Criminal Enterprise" was responsible for what they called bank robberies, armored truck robberies, murder of policemen, wounding policemen, kidnapping policemen, kidnapping prison guards, etc. The defendants were charged with 31 different counts. Some of the charges were in conjunction with the liberation of Assata Shakur.

What follows is an interview that took place at the office of the International Committee to Support Imam Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin (formerly H.Rap Brown).

Bilal lays it down about Tupac and how the Shakur Family came about.

Kalonji: What is the Origin of the Shakur Family which Tupac was born into?

Bilal: The Shakur Family is a family from the East Coast, the head of the Family was El Hajj Sallahudin Shakur. We affectionately called him Abba, which means Father. He was physically the father of two of the Panther leaders on the East Coast, Zayd Malik Shakur and Lumumba Abdul Shakur. There were very few of us in the Movement that had fathers in the Movement. El Hajj Sallahudin Shakur was an associate of El Hajj Malik Shabazz (Malcolm X), he was a member of the Muslim Mosque Incorporated and also a member of the Organization of Afro-American Unity. He made Hajj one year after Malcolm. As we were coming up Abba was at the top. We aspired to be like him. I became closely associated with Lumumba Abdul Shakur and I began to refer to El Hajj Sallahudin Shakur as Abba, too. As if he was my father and Abba accepted that. He accepted all of us who related to him, as his children and he was a father to us as much as he could be. He gave guidance, he gave us an understanding because he was a

Muslim, he gave us an understanding of what it meant to be Muslim, as far as standing up for justice. For advocating justice and for fighting for what was right for our people. He had an understanding that anyone who is oppressed like this regardless of who it is, Muslims need to fight for them and since it is us ourselves, then for sure we need to be involved in as much struggle for our liberation and organizing as possible. A lot of people just saw religion as a way, not to be in the struggle. He gave us the understanding that to be in Islam, was the way to be in the struggle. He was also a Pan-Africanist, he worked, had property and lived part of the time in Africa. The family had property and business in Ghana and he was a business man. He taught us all to be self-sufficient. He had money, he showed us you could hustle, make money legally, and still he didn''t have to let the United States Government know what his personal business was. That was a very important lesson we learned from El Hajj Sallahudin Shakur.

Kalonji: How did the Shakur Family spread?

Bilal: Abba was our father. There were many people on the east coast who were involved in not only the Black Panther Party, but other organizations around at that time that gravitated towards El Hajj Sallahudin Shakur. The Shakur family is all of those young brothers and sisters who were involved in struggle, not all were Muslim, but the majority were Muslim. It may have been at one time maybe 50 of us. A lot of people who weren''t part of the Shakur family, the police would refer to them as Shakur anyway, because it was a big group and the influence was felt by many people who were not a part, but wanted to be down with us. Afeni Shakur, joined the party and then she was married to Lumumba Abdul Shakur for a few years. They were both part of the New York 21 case. So when she married Lumumba Abdul Shakur, that made her part of the Shakur family, then she legally changed her name to Shakur. Even after her and Lumumba broke up, she kept the name. Later on her and Mutulu Shakur were married. Mutulu Shakur was a younger brother in the same area where they lived in Jamaica Queens, who had adopted the revolutionary lifestyle when he was about 14 or 15. He was a legionnaire. He was involved in the first big shoot out at New Bethel Church in Detroit. At the Second Annual Convention of the Republic of New Afrika. There was a shoot out when the police assaulted that gathering. Mutulu was one of the legionnaires at the time in the military forces of the Republic of New Afrika, that was responsible for and actually defended the lives of many of our leaders that were there. A lot of them owe it to Mutulu for his level of discipline in saving their lives. Baba Herman Ferguson and Mama Iyaluah Ferguson were directly protected by Mutulu when things broke out. These are some of the figures that were members of the Shakur Family. Three of them that I named were directly involved in Tupac's life.

Kalonji: What about Assata Shakur, where did she fit into the family tree?

Bilal: Assata Shakur became part of the family when Abba adopted Assata like he did the rest of us. It wasn''t through marriage, a lot of people who were attracted to our lifestyle of work and our style of living, accepted the name Shakur. Formerly she was known as Joanne Chessimard, she became part of the family. Around the time of her arrest, that's when I first remember her using the name Assata Shakur, in ''73.

Kalonji: At what point did you personally come in contact with Tupac Shakur?

Bilal: When he was an infant. I used to give flute lesson to two of his first cousins and I would listen to their poetry, but i would never hear anything from Tupac in his early years. It caught me totally by surprise, him becoming a star. I remember we were in the house and my children were playing this music and it had all this cussin'' in it and I said '' Who the fuck is that?'' and they said, '' That's Tupac daddy'', and I said '' I don''t give a fuck who it is, turn that shit off''. Listening to my response, I was thinking well damn, if that's Tupac and I''m upset at what he is saying I said well, I can''t be upset, I need to change my style, because I can''t say I''m upset with him, because obviously he got part of that from me. I heard myself respond like that and that's what really made me pay attention to Tupac as an artist. I guess when you move around a lot, some kids in the family you miss. I just missed his talent til'' it was later on. He dug me as a musician. I didn''t realize that til'' he became a star, and he asked me to do a Sound Track for him, for a story he and his brother put together called Thug Life. Even though I hadn''t paid attention to him, he had heard my music all his life.

Kalonji: So you were involved in the Soundtrack?

Bilal: I became involved in the soundtrack and then I became more involved in having discussions with him, whenever I could. He was on the right track, a lot of people say he wasn''t. A lot of people don''t pay attention to his music, so when they listen to it they say, '' oh it's all about'' killing people, but if you really listen to it a lot of the negativity, it's a commentary on it. He actually denounces it and points to a better way in most instances.

Kalonji: How did he relate to the Elders in the Family?

Bilal: Tupac as a person was very respectful. I remember times seeing Tupac places where I didn''t even notice him. Then I would see somebody stop, turn around and give me a hug and it

would be Tupac. Being in the business myself, I would be on a lot of sets that he would be coming to and he would always see me and give me props and tell people who I was in relation to him and his family. So a lot of young people would have respect for me, just based off of how they saw Tupac treating me.

Kalonji: What do you think of Tupac as an Organizer?

Bilal: As an organizer, I think he was very good and influential, particularly around those things that were gang related. People often accused him of creating gang warfare. He was the type of person that can walk in any hood or turf and get props. People would listen to him. He had that gift to be able to move around in a manner that we needed. We needed someone to move around and talk to young brothers in the street and in every area. Because he had grown up in different areas. A few months here, a few months there; he was rooted in Harlem, in the Bronx, in Baltimore, in Oakland, California, any one of these place he could call home. He knew the industry life there, he knew the street life there, he knew the gang life there and he was working, he wasn"t just hanging out partying. He was explaining to young people what it meant to have a set of values. Tupac was a Kwanzaa baby from birth. I remember the first Kwanzaa ceremonies that were celebrated in this country, he was there, as a baby and as a youth. He had a very keen understanding about what the whole struggle was.

Kalonji: Who was Geronimo Pratt in relation to Tupac?

Bilal: Geronimo Ji-Jagga was his Godfather. Geronimo was very influential in organizing youth. He was in the joint out there when the Bloods and Crips started. So when the first few members started going to jail, he knew them because when they would come up thru the jail, they would come up under him. He knew a lot of the shot callers on the West Coast and 9 times out of 10 he knew the parents of these shot callers. Most of them became Panthers or were affiliated or part of the community that was enlightened by the Panther Party. A lot of people that were in the street tribes came out of the loins of people who were revolutionary.

Kalonji: Do you think his death was an assassination or some random act of violence?

Bilal: There is no way that I can ever think it was a random act of violence.

Kalonji: So do you think it was an East Coast, West Coast beef?

Bilal: A lot of that East Coast- West Coast stuff, was the police. The same thing was done with the Black Panther Party. We never had any animosity with anyone just because they were from the West Coast and we were from the East. So it's ridiculous to even suggest that people accepted that. But when people see it printed so much and then read it in print over and over again, just like when you hear someone saying it over and over, they began to believe it and they began to internalize it. I don''t even see that there was an East Coast-West Coast beef for him to be caught up in the middle of. If there was, I welcome someone to explain to me what that East Coast-West Coast Beef was. I know that during the Panther Party it was nothing. It was purely something that was made up, that was an attempt to get us to go at it with each other. An effective attempt, I had Comrades who were killed by close Comrades because of this. But it was nothing that any of us could point to and say, we don''t like the West Coast because of this and we don''t like the East Coast because of that. It was all contrived. If you examine the origination of the Bloods and the Crips you find a lot of it was contrived and they were made to fight each other. If you examine what they all are based on from their groups, they ain''t got no beef with each other. The way they were organized they shouldn''t have any beef with each other. That's what the whole Crip thing was about, following in the foot steps of the revolutionary organizations to stop gang warfare amongst the youth. That was a heavy priority in organizing the original Panther Party. A lot of our recruitment was done and a lot of political education was given to the gang members.

Kalonji: Why would there be an interest in assassinating Tupac from a political standpoint?

Bilal: He represented so much unity in the fact that he could associate with all the people that the forces that are against us wanted to keep fighting, amongst each other. He was clear through his actions that it would stop and they didn''t want it to stop. Just like Martin Luther King, he represented a way where people can come together peacefully. So you say, " Why would the FBI murder someone who wanted peace?" Because they don''t want peace. If they wanted peace, they would have protected Martin Luther King, they wouldn''t have killed him. They don''t want unity in the hood. They don''t want peace in the hood. They want continued strife, because that's how they make their money. The more people go to jail, more money is made. It's more than just the prison itself, it's on the stock market, people invest in it. Prison industry, you can tell your stock broker put $50,000 or $100,000 on the prison industry, because that's growing fast. I want some of that. And because it's growing fast, stock holders began to demand certain things, so it can keep growing fast. One of the things they demands is more people locked up. So if you got unity in the community, if you got peace in the hood and people stop slingin'' in the hood, then you ain''t got no reason to lock people up. So take one person that's responsible for

that and assassinate his character and then you assassinate him, then people are confused about his character. They become confused about his character, further confused about his character assassination and even more confused about his actual assassination.

Kalonji: For people who wanted to learn more about Tupac's legacy what do you suggest?

Bilal: I would encourage them to see the movie The Resurrection of Tupac Shakur, better yet buy it. Because that is his legacy. It is in his own words, the narration is in his own words. It's not about anyone talking about what they feel about Pac. For people who doubt or are confused about what I have said, they should see that movie.

Bilal is currently the Coordinator of the International Committee to Support Imam Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin and has a radio show on WRFG radio in Atlanta, Georgia that airs on Fridays at 5:30 pm. He is also still a touring musician.

Kalonji Jama Changa can be reached at: therawintellect@yahoo.com or www.myspace.com/kalonji_ftp