

Saul Williams The Power of Hip-Hop

Written by Mike the Poet ID2648
Wednesday, 24 May 2006 13:10 -

"There is no music more powerful than hip hop. No other music so purely demands an instant affirmative on such a global scale. When the beat drops, people nod their heads, 'yes,' in the same way that they would in conversation with a loved one, a parent, professor, or minister. Instantaneously, the same mechanical gesture that occurs in moments of dialogue as a sign of agreement which subsequently, releases increased oxygen to the brain and, thus, broadens one's ability to understand, becomes the symbolic and actual gesture that connects you to the beat."

Poet, musician, actor, Saul Stacey Williams, is a craftsman. The words above are from his latest work, *The Dead Emcee Scrolls*. After his film *Slam*, two studio albums, and now his fourth book, it's safe to say he has emerged as one of the most important voices of his generation. *The Dead Emcee Scrolls*, a strong collection of seven epic poems and seven years of journal entries, is his best book yet. Considering his track record, this is what we would expect from the man many call "hip hop's poet laureate." The work poses a lot of important questions: "How could an emcee not realize the power of WORD after being forced to serve a sentence?"

The subtitle of the work is *The Lost Teachings of Hip Hop*, and Saul waxes A to Z on the art form and its influence. One of his central themes is that hip hop "is our generation's opportunity to start from scratch." Check his insight: "No other musical form has created such a raw and visceral connection to the heart, while still incorporating various measures from other musical forms that then appeal to other aspects of the emotional core of an individual. Music speaks directly to the subconscious. The consciously-simplified beat of the hip hop drum speaks directly to the heart."

The work also allows us a chance to behold the birth of a literary giant. We catch a glimpse into the decade of Saul finding his voice as a poet, emcee, and artist. It's our window into his rite of passage. Like he says, "This book is a book that I have been waiting to finish since 1995. This is the book that finished me." Classically trained as an actor since age thirteen, it was at NYU where he began to get excited about exploring the relationship between the written word, rhythm, and movement. He started to write to fill the void between what he was hearing and what he wanted to hear. Experimenting with new forms of meter and stanza, he was a natural from jump street. As the son of a Baptist preacher, he was regularly exposed to church services containing strong and impassioned music. It makes perfect sense how he's put all his influences together.

He says, "I came to New York in 1994, having just graduated from Morehouse College in

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At-lanta, Georgia.... I was about to begin my first year in the graduate acting program at NYU. I was very excited. I had been planning my career as an actor my entire life, and everything was going exactly as planned. Because I could study drama in school, it was never simply a hobby for me; it was a professional choice. On the other hand, I had been rapping for as long as I had been acting, but rapping was never something I could study in school. It was extra curricular. I wrote rhymes between classes (and often during). I battled at lunchtime and recess. It was my favorite pastime."

"Time passed, and by the time I graduated from college I no longer wrote rhymes. I was becoming more focused on acting. Yet, the time that I once spent writing rhymes was now spent listening and critiquing hip hop. I was a purist. I saw my list of the top ten emcees as The List."

He loved hip hop with such passion that he took abstract emcee, Pharoahe Monche's, lyrics into his Shakespeare class to show his peers another side of poetry. Right around this time he and his cronies were exploring New York subway tunnels looking at graffiti.

That's where he found a can of spray paint that changed his life. He writes, "I picked it up. Almost immediately, I realized its heaviness was not the sort that one would expect from liquid. I then shook the can and heard a shuffle-like movement. I removed the top, expecting to find a spray nozzle. Instead, what I found was what appeared to be tightly-coiled pieces of paper."

These coiled pieces of paper are what Saul calls "The Dead Emcee Scrolls." Each scroll was written in a sort of graffiti-like lettering. He describes, "I began to uncoil the manuscript and soon found that it was not one long scroll, but several scrolled pages rolled together. The first page was the longest. I immediately attempted to read what was written on it and found that I could not make out the words. They seemed to be written with great care, yet almost appeared to be written in a foreign alphabet like Arabic, Sanskrit, or Hebrew."

At this same time he was told to keep a journal in his NYU Masters program. He started referring to the scrolls in his entries, and the two entities (Williams' journal and the Epic Poems) initially came together, and ultimately resulted in his latest book.

"Amethyst Rocks" was the first poem he translated: "I stand on the corner of the block slinging amethyst rocks. Drinkin 40s of Mother Earth's private nectar stock. Dodgin cops."

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The other six Epic poems are: "NGH WHT," "OM," "Sha Clack Clack," "Untimely Meditations," "1987," and "Co-Dead Language."

They are each powerful prayer poems, most well-known to long-time fans of his work. "I would spend whole days repeating phrases like mantras and jotting down the thoughts that came to mind as a result of them. I had been an emcee for years, but I had never written anything like this, and I certainly had never heard anything like it either. I repeated it in its entirety again and again. The wordplay, imagery, and content amazed me. It spoke of the power of the spirit, of overcoming oppression, of being of an ancient lineage. It spoke directly to me. I felt empowered by it."

This concentration is why his poems are so powerful.... Check these words from "NGH WHT:"

NGH WHT,

I represent the truth you claim to be.

The hero of the eastern sky, the storm's eye,

westerly. Rough, rugged, raw, eternal law

recited over beats. Some poetry to oversee

the dance floor and the streets."

In his third book, *Said the Shotgun to the Head*, the ramblings of his poetic character are greatly

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inspired by Beat poet Bob Kaufman. Kaufman was a "literary Ol' Dirty Bastard" as well as a man too amazing to sit still. All of Kaufman's published work was collected by Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. They would go into his apartment and gather all of his stray poems, and their efforts are the only reason any of Kaufman's work is in print.

Like Kaufman's, Saul's voice screams for order in a time of madness. Saul has always been a master of coded language. In a rare moment of disclosure about his work, he says, "Yes, it's a little abstract, and I apologize for that. But considering the fact that it's being put out by MTV books, I couldn't just write, '@#%\$ YOU, MR. PRESIDENT, AND YOUR NEO-COLONIALIST VIEWS,' in big letters and not expect Mr. Viacom to...." Well, you get the picture. Saul is the trojan horse. Depending on whether you care to read between the lines, the book is a profound work that can be as deep as you want it.

In September of 2003 at the Troubadour in West Hollywood, I saw Saul freestyling poems off the New York Times headlines: "New York Times/White Collar Crimes."

In a venue where legends like The Doors and Zeppelin played, Saul was joined by none other than Zach de la Rocha from Rage Against the Machine on drums, Money Mark from the Beastie Boys on the keyboard, and Serj from System of a Down blazing chords on the electric sitar.

Saul improvised with wild abandon, reading from Ginsberg's Howl, Ayn Rand's Atlas Shrugged, Tupac's book of poems, The Rose that

Grew From Concrete, and various dog-eared books and journals that surrounded him on stage. A sea of vibrant faces composed a cosmopolitan, intellectual, and multicultural crowd. It was a who's who of LA's underground. Indie rock, hip hop, Birkenstocks, and dreadlocks. Saul brings them all together.

The stories Saul tells between poems are just as powerful as his explosive poetry. His down-to-earth persona adds to the meaning of his work. Saul is so comfortable on stage that you feel like you're hanging out with him sitting on a couch. His antenna is up and broadcasting to America. He is in the "cairos" –the supreme moment of the now. He's one of the only performers that could make a standing-room-only crowd at Santa Monica's Temple Bar sit down Indian style.

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He rocks bookstores and nightclubs equally. Music is a major part of the inspiration. Influences like Tricky, Nas, Portis-head, Radiohead, Bjork, and Outkast can be heard in his sound.

During his several years in New York he was "rushing around and breaking ground." He was making independent films, Slam and Slam Nation, acting in plays, and winning poetry slams with cohorts like Beau Sia. When he moved to LA in 1999, he slipped in under the radar. Life in Los Angeles gave him time to "break bread."

Nonetheless, he's been busy—touring often and still finding the time to record two albums, write three books, and hang with his two children.

Saul is intrigued with the possibilities that exist in the unknown. This is why he was actually excited to see Bush stay in office. He knows that before it gets better it has to get worse. To him, Bush was a sign that things will soon be better. "Bush is like a whitehead. All the toxins are there, but soon it'll be gone. After a whitehead there is always bloodshed."

Just like after a bad storm, flowers bloom, and the clouds are gone. "Society is evolving. We are much more evolved than our leaders, just like most of us have evolved beyond our parents."

And just when it seems he takes himself too seriously, he makes fun of himself. He writes about his book, "It doesn't come with any of my famous hand gestures but it's a sure winner. It doesn't feature Beyonce, Sean Paul, or Redman, but there are cameos by Moses, Jesus, Buddha, Kali, my ex-girlfriend's uncle, and lots of sexy people."

Saul wants to "plant a poem in your dreams that will blossom into your morning prayer. TODAY is the day that the fine print becomes legible, and we delete everything but the words written in red. God has perfected his moonwalk and is having a high-pitched showdown with the King of Pop right now! "

All across America, poets, musicians, and artists are digging deeper to produce incredible work.

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It isn't just in LA or New York; there is a national movement. Saul has been out on the frontlines observing this and pushing the frontiers. Saul's trailblazing galvanizes everyone to participate. He says, "If you wanna see the new now, our bright new future, go spend a night in LA's underground clubs. See the Seattle underground, the Cleveland underground, the Chicago underground. These are the days of the local band."

Saul knows the pulse of the times in a real way. He has had a recurring role on UPN's "Girlfriends," toured with the Mars Volta, been on HBO's "Def Poetry Jam," and toured hundreds of colleges and bookstores. The spring and summer seasons of 2006 have Saul touring over thirty cities for the book and more than a dozen shows with Nine Inch Nails. The new remix of his single, "Black Stacey," features NAS.

By injecting consciousness into popular culture, Saul Williams is a rare voice in these times. Simultaneously, he is not so holier-than-thou that he doesn't have the capacity to understand people's individual journeys: "And I acknowledge the wit and savvy of all you hustlers that had to do what you had to do to not be broke. Now, let's do what we have to do to not be broken.

Let's learn to love again: our mothers, our children, ourselves. And let's let that love resonate through our music."

Please visit www.saulwilliams.com for more information.