

A Concerned Talib Kweli

Written by Westside ID496

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There's a track on hip-hop's politically charged rapper Talib Kweli's fiercely intelligent new album *The Beautiful Struggle* in which the college-educated rapper mentions, almost as an aside, the increasingly commonplace tribulations of black travellers. "Get searched on the plane/ Arabic first name," he observes pithily.

Has September 11, I ask, had that much of an effect? Only in America, it turns out. Some countries didn't need that kind of pretext to humiliate an innocent traveller long before the twin towers tumbled; countries such as Great Britain. The first time Kweli visited London, back in 1998, he was arrested at Heathrow, effectively, he says, for possession of a black skin.

"They made me take a piss test, put me in handcuffs, took me to the hospital and X-rayed my stomach for drugs," he says. "They were positive I was carrying drugs, and spent five hours trying to figure out where the drugs were. That happened way before 9/11." At the time, Kweli was visiting the UK with his friend and fellow rapper Mos Def, who subsequently commemorated the humiliation in a track called "Mr Nigger".

Part of the problem, he says, was he didn't know where he was staying or playing. These days, Kweli's better prepared when he comes to town. He knows he's playing Brixton Academy with Kanye West, and Wembley Arena with The Beastie Boys, and he knows he's staying at the Metropolitan, the trendy upmarket Park Lane hotel.

Kweli and Mos Def have been friends for years, living in the same area, making their debut 12-inchers for Rawkus at the same time, and subsequently joining forces as Black Star for one landmark album of conscious hip-hop - though few noticed it at the time.

"Hip-hop has always had every different type of aspect going on, but sometimes the media only pays attention to one little aspect of it," Kweli believes. "And at that time the media was only paying attention to the materialistic sort of hip-hop." Nevertheless, the album became a cult favourite. "I've put out albums that have sold more than Black Star, but the question I still get asked most is when I'm going to do a new Black Star album."

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The answer probably depends on when, or whether, the two rappers can find the time. Mos Def has developed a busy second career as a film actor, and, like Kweli, has his own albums to make (Def's latest, *The New Danger*, appeared a month ago). Along with their fellow Brooklyn-ite Common, they comprise the spearhead of the latest attempt to bring a little intelligence and political analysis to hip hop - or, more accurately, to use the medium in a more absorbing and thoughtful manner than has been the case for much of the last bling-obsessed decade.

The Beautiful Struggle has sold more than 200,000 copies in America - about as many as an Eminem album sells in its first few hours, but with the crucial difference that Kweli's album has sold without any radio play or video running on MTV. It's quite an achievement, particularly since it's probably the most provocatively political rap album since Public Enemy's heyday, stuffed with tracks that challenge preconceptions and seek to effect a deeper cultural change than merely tinkering with trends in sneakers, cars and guns.

The opening track, "Going Hard", contrasts the plight of the third-world children who make the sneakers and mine the gold and diamond bling worn by those "busy screaming "gangsta gangsta": all that talk is trite/ you already lost the fight/ if you don't know the cost of life". Mos Def and Common share observations on ghetto life in "Supreme Supreme" and "Ghetto Show" respectively, and Jean Grae adds her two penn"orth to Kweli's tribute to black women, "Black Girl Pain". Counterbalancing that are "Back Up Offa Me" and "Broken Glass", cautionary tales of social vampires and deluded girls who leave home with dreams of bagging themselves "a baller or thug" just like in the hip-hop videos, but who end up working in strip joints, feeding their drug habits.

"I have strong women in my life, and so I painted pictures of them in a lot of my earlier work," says Kweli. "But as I entered the entertainment business, I started to see women who were not as strong. There's definitely a type of person, man or woman, that targets successful people. The first half of "Back Up Offa Me" is about people who feel like, because you know them and you've become successful, that somehow you owe them a piece of your success. Then in the second verse, I thought, "who else do I want to back up offa me?" And sometimes, it's the women. Which is kind of unfair, because often I'm running towards them! But the song is sort of an affirmation for me to remind myself to be careful."

Unusually for a black American, Kweli claims to be neither Christian nor Muslim, and while he acknowledges the comfort and guidance it provides for many, he believes the Christian church may actually have held black people back in some ways - most recently the legions of black Christians who voted for Bush.

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On the title-track of *The Beautiful Struggle*, Kweli's frustration is clear in lines like, "You try to vote and participate in the government, and the motherfuckin' Democrats is acting like Republicans".

Kweli didn't bother to vote, which upset his parents. "My mother is a lifelong Democrat, and me and her argue all the time, because I don't vote," he explains. "We watched the debates, and I said, "George Bush won those debates". Sure, Kerry sounded more intelligent than Bush, but this debate has nothing to do with intelligence. It has to do with showmanship, with entertainment."

Sadly, the fact that someone as smart and articulate as Kweli doesn't bother voting indicates just how far the black constituency has become estranged from the political mainstream. As he acknowledges in "I Try" from the new album, "the hood need us, but rappers just ain't the right leaders". But why not?

"Because they're kids, a lot of people in the hip-hop community - or people that need to be led; they're just creative, and so they get put on these pedestals and asked to be leaders," he explains.

The demoralised, disaffected state of the black American populace remains a perplexing phenomenon for those who remember the social and musical developments of the Black Pride era; and for many, gangsta rap seems like a rolling-back of that hard-won emancipation.

"Those values, for some reason, did not get passed down," agrees Kweli. "People like myself, who were born in the Seventies, were using the terminology and attitudes that we see in the blaxploitation era we were born into, which exploited some of the seedier aspects of the culture. When your whole life, your whole neighbourhood, is looked at as the underbelly of society, you start to celebrate it, because that's where your family is. New York City is a shitty, dirty, rat-infested place to live, but I love it, because that's where I grew up, and where my family is.

"Similarly, we use the word "nigger" so often because we think, "if that's the epitome of what white people hate, then that's what I'm gonna be, and I'm gonna celebrate that, and make it my own." That's what gangsta rap is. The trick is to find the beauty in it, to celebrate it. You gotta make your life worth something."

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"The Beautiful Struggle" is out now on Universal; Talib Kweli supports the Beastie Boys on their UK tour beginning on 4 December