

HIP-HOP WITH AKIL: THE MUSIC AND COMMUNITY THAT SAVED HIS LIFE

INTERVIEWED BY WIM LAVEN

Akil The MC of the Los Angeles based Hip-Hop group Jurassic 5 is an MC, Song Writer, Producer, DJ, Live Show Coordinator Youth Mentor & Hip-Hop Community Activist.

WL: I am here with Akil the MC, one of my favorite rappers from one of my favorite hip-hop groups, Jurassic 5, and we are going to talk about hip-hop and Akil's commitment to the hip-hop community.

You spend a considerable amount of time interacting with fans and the community via social media. You have a motivation to educate, can you tell us more about this service?

Akil: I see my connection—you know—from how I came into the game. Someone educated me on the different aspects of hip-hop and the culture and everything. I see the importance of relaying background to what we do. It provides purpose, giving people a purpose, and it answers, “why you do this stuff?” from the perspective of what got you started when you were a teenager. People do a lot of things because it's cool or a fad... but for me, you know, hip-hop saved my life.

I'm from South Central Los Angeles; I grew up in a gang infested area. Hip-hop was my life saver, my saving grace. Being educated to this culture saved me and now I feel like I have a duty to relay that message back to other people.

I had the chance to go to Cambodia because a promoter knew about me from Jurassic 5. I went from Thailand to Cambodia, and they said, “Man, there ain't a lot of money involved, but you'd be one of the first international artists to perform there.” ...

When I got there, there was someone who already knew me from Los Angeles. This guy learned to breakdance in Long Beach, when he got deported, he brought the hip-hop knowledge with him. Kids were like, “Yo, what’s up with that?” and “can you teach me?”

Kids in Cambodia wanted to learn, “show me how to do this.” He got kids off the streets, away from drugs and sex crimes. Some of these kids didn’t have shoes, they were poor.

He was saying, “I can take these kids off the streets and give them something to do...”

They came to learn breakdancing, but he would also teach English, math, and reading. Breakdancing, DJing, MCing, and doing graffiti were incentives.

So, I got invited to a hip-hop center in Cambodia all because of a connection I made at a KRS-1 show in Long Beach. It’s amazing!

As far as educating people, to real hip-hop, when we did the show, they saw it all, but they already had b-boys ... I thought, “here I am in Cambodia and the same thing is saving these kids’ lives, the same thing that saved me.” That connection, bring this into people’s lives, that’s my passion. My passion is to teach this force because of what it did for me.

WL: What are the elements of hip-hop?

Akil: DJing, graffiti, b-boying, MCing, and sometimes fashion, and technology... people start adding other elements and whatnot.

WL: So, I’m one of those add-ons. I think knowledge of self, self-knowledge...

Akil: Oh yeah, Knowledge. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, “Knowledge!” That’s one of the big main elements. See if you don’t know you can’t grow. So yeah, knowledge is the core element. It was the knowledge of self, and this was necessary for all the other elements and action. It was the knowledge that raised me.

WL: It saved your life, and it showed you who you were, so now you’ve got your commitment. It come out throughout your career, U.N.I.T.Y?

Akil: Part of our group is The Rebels of Rhythm, which I was a part of and then you had Unity Committee, which makes up Jurassic 5.

WL: I was trying to be clever, because “U.N.I.T.Y. do or die” are some lyrics, right? [Note for readers, this is a reference to “Concrete Schoolyard” a track on J5’s first album.]

Akil: Right, I got you.

The two of us spent 15-20 minutes going over details, lyrics, places and times. The idea that for so many alleys, the graffiti serves more like beautification... but in so many other cases the graffiti is gang affiliated. In some contexts graffiti is criminal vandalism, in others: “it is really keeping you out of trouble.”

WL: Part of the discussion of art ends up being: is art imitating life, or is life imitating art? Lots of people have blamed hip-hop and rap for motivating criminal activity.

Akil: Yeah, a gang member taught me how to b-boy, that was my introduction. Hip-hop transformed the gang element. But then drugs and money became a part of it. Changed the gangs and hip-hop, money is more alluring than spinning on your head at the beach or the mall, not for some change. For most of us it was not imitating life, it was escaping from it or to make sense of what we were going through.

It was a rebellious stage. Every element was rebellion. Spinning on your head—you’ll break your neck. You’re going against society, nature, your body, whatever... You’re scratching a record... my dad was a DJ, he’s like: “don’t touch the needle!” Scratching was definite no-no. Graffiti and rapping were like: “what the hell are you doing!”

I’m trying to make it to where it’s digestible and stuff you know so every aspect of hip-hop you know even knowledge of self and stuff you know the society wants to Dumb you down, so where you don’t know yourself and stuff... All of the elements of hip-hop are embodied in rebellion.

WL: Do you see your art as a kind of intimate closeness in the hip-hop culture?

Akil: Oh yeah, it's like a fraternity we have a bond. People have a common cause and that is what brings them together. Whether it's crime, drugs, or something to cruise to... in some form of unity, unified force doing something together.

...teamwork makes the dream work and stuff like that. Every group that I've been involved in has had this brotherhood and camaraderie with the people I'm with. It plays a big part. In LA there were different functional social lifestyles; people were rude boys or mods, preppy or in gangs, but all were still a part of the fraternity. Not everyone was, but everyone could be a part of it.

We had this special type of bond, like you see somebody on the street, and they dress a certain way, and you know they are into hip-hop. They talk a certain way, and you are immediately connected. So yeah, this element of brotherhood and closeness and intimacy; you get intimate with those people that are like minded.

WL: In rap music there's kind of a legacy of sexist and misogynistic lyrics, but I would say J5 broke that mold and treated women more respectfully.... Some of your songs described intimate partnership in more loving way, right?

Akil: Um, it just, was a reflection of life... what you're saying, the art imitating life aspect. So, you have dysfunctional parts of society and relationships between people. It was always relationships playing out, the music was real lives playing out.

In my life, I grew up around a majority of women, showing women respect comes straight out of the women I respect in my life. But there have also been relationships that were not respectful and they also needed to be talked about.

In the hood certain women would get you robbed, or were catty, or were going to burn you—sexually or something like that—so different people brought reality up. But now there are people who go too far, it's too much, its extra, and people are just doing it for no reason.

I would say that for J5, that was never our thing. The majority of us were married, so that that's not gonna be my my theme of what I talk about, so the song we did do, "Thin Line," was one of the songs about relationships. It's close relationships... somebody that you could go out with; something relatable... I wrote the hook to that, I wrote it based upon how people have

close relationships but struggle with crossing the line and messing up a friendship. It exists in relationships but wasn't really explored, I wanted to explore that.

[The hook for "Thin Line:" We been friends for a long time, a very close friend of mine
Love you like you was mine, but respect a thin line
I love you like you was mine, think about you all the time
Very close friend of mine, but respect a thin line]

WL: Everybody's fallen in love with Snoop Dogg, he is commentating for the Olympics and grown men are reminding their mothers: "I got grounded when I bought his CD." Hip-hop has completely embraced and engaged parenthood. There is no shortage of songs where fathers are expressing their love for their children. Family time is front and center, you're a proud father, what do you think about this intimate part of life being brought into the art?

Akil: As opposed to, like you said, other people are rapping about being in gangs and now we've got a lot of people writing hit songs... hit tracks that talk about their love for their children. Yeah, I mean, you know, stereotypically it's always been the thing: black men are not there for their children. That wasn't the case for me or for most of my friends. It just wasn't the case.

There are people missing their fathers, some people have that story, but most people I know don't. You can't regurgitate that story when it isn't your story. But it's kind of become the opposite.

So, I'm 54, me and Snoop Dogg are about the same age. Our generation, there's nothing like 70's kids—we've seen everything. Now we just want to be there for our kids. That... just main essential stuff. I don't want to portray the stereotype.

WL: Naught by Nature's "ghetto bastard" still exists, but its not the only story?

Akil: No, no, no, no, it's a whole other set of dynamics. The intimacy of people learning about black culture, because I understand where hip-hop comes from. This is the core, you see it on display more, because this is our culture now, so it is the hip-hop present.

Lots of lifestyles are on display. Trailer trash perspectives, poor white people, are a part of it now too. In the past white rappers had to sound black or emulate that experience, but now everyone is telling their own story. Eminem he gave you the experience of his upbringing, his dysfunctions, but I'm like, "no black person would cuss out their mom and put it on a record," you know what I'm saying? Like that's no something we do, right? So, yeah, yeah, different experiences, different stories.
