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Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Raashan Ahmad: From Altadena to the World

Mike Sonksen · Wednesday, September 17th, 2014

The Altadena-raised M.C. Raashan Ahmad has travelled the world over the last 15 years and become well-loved in the process. Originally beginning his career with a group called Mission after moving to Boston, they changed their name to Crown City Rockers in the early 2000s. In addition to the albums he has recorded with the Crown City Rockers, he has also released four solo albums. Now living in Santa Fe, New Mexico, I recently spoke with him about his action-packed journey.

The group Mission began when he moved to Boston in the late 1990s. It was the first time he was away from Southern California and he soon began collaborating with live musicians from the Berklee School of Music. It was a dynamic period of self-discovery, meeting musicians and experimentation. He remembers, “The basement parties and jam sessions were always filled with musicians who we’re excited to jam with M.C.’s. It was my bootcamp as an M.C. Ciphers with other M.C.’s and musicians who now play in amazing bands all over the world set the stage for me understanding collaboration and performing and communicating with musicians.”

They were originally called Mission, after the Mission Hill district of Boston where the band members lived when they first started. Keyboardist Kat Ouano—a Kansan enrolled at Berklee—joined the early Rockers, along with Moe Pope, who split MC duties with Raashan (“[They were] as fluid as Q-Tip and Phife,” remembers DJ Josh One). Pope eventually left the band, and Crown City’s lineup included beatboxer and producer Woodstock, the bassist and producer Ethan Parsonage (a.k.a. Headnodic) and the drummer Max MacVeety. They changed their name after a potential lawsuit from the ’80s British band called the Mission U.K. and relocated to the Bay Area.

[embedvideo id=”fXtJRv36ttU” website=”youtube”]

The group’s first album “One” was released in 2001. “That record and time captures my story beginning as an M.C.,” he shares. After generating a significant street buzz, they began touring small clubs around the country and eventually moved to Oakland. Over the next few years, they quickly became Bay Area favorites and played dozens of shows in San Francisco, Berkeley, Oakland and eventually Portland and Seattle.

“Oakland influenced me on how to hustle and really work my music as an independent artist,” he says. “The history of independence in Oakland is long, and as an M.C. watching the Living Legends, Hieroglyphics, E-40, Quannum and Too Short and countless other artists who all made successful careers using their own branding and smarts really showed me the importance of finding

my originality and my lane and making it bigger and better.” The history of activism and heavy community in the Bay Area also deeply influenced him. “From the Black Panthers to the hippies, the fight for human rights and freedom that stays heavy in the air of Oakland really affected what I speak about in my music as well.”

In 2004 the Crown City Rockers released the album “Earthtones.” The jazzy live instrumentation of the band melted seamlessly with Raashan’s buoyant lyrics. In songs like “Heat,” they generated a musical frenzy harkening back to early 70s free jazz like Miles Davis or Pharaoh Sanders. Shortly after the album dropped they began touring across not only America but the world. Crown City Rockers as a five-piece band had a similar feel to The Roots but with their own unique sound. As noted before the group came together in the vicinity of the Berklee School of Music so all of the players were classically trained. As they began touring in places like Europe and Japan they evolved into a family. He adds, “We have all travelled the world and literally grew up with each other. Our relationship is literally one of laughter and tears (both tears of joy and pain). We all hope to make more recordings.”

In recent years they have not had a chance to record as much or tour together as the members fell into different jobs and started having children. The band never broke up and they do plan to record and tour more, but as of now they are all spread out geographically. In the interim, over the last 7 years Raashan has recorded four solo albums and in between raising his son, he continues to tour. Raashan’s first solo album “The Push,” is one of the records closest to his heart. “It was the first time I dealt with real personal issues that heavily affected me” he says. “My mom’s passing from Cancer, My son being born, and finding my way through all of it. It changed the way I approached music and brought honesty and vulnerability to my art.” His ability to be open and vulnerable he also credits to his childhood in Altadena.

“The balance of the nature and small town feel and at the same time being so close to the rest of L.A. that the world sees on postcards and movies gives a unique perspective on life and a great sense of balance,” he says. “I feel like growing up in Altadena keeps you grounded and closer to nature. Even if you’re not hiking in Eaton Canyon or Chaney Trails, the environment grabs you and connects you to the importance and beauty of nature.”

His musical taste is also eclectic. Raashan’s dad was a D.J. so many of his records came from looting his dad’s collection. He lists a few of his major influences, “Artists like John Coltrane, Gil Scott Heron, Sade (Love Deluxe), Billie Holiday, Prince, Al Green, Taj Mahal, Johnny Cash, Nina Simone, De La soul, A Tribe Called Quest (Peoples Instinctive...), Sweet Honey in the Rock, Bjork (Homogenic), Nas, Ice Cube (Amerikkas Most Wanted), Ravi Shankar, Jimi Hendrix, Rakim (Paid in Full).”

Following the release of “The Push,” he began touring even more heavily, especially internationally. As much as he’s travelled the world he always takes Altadena and Pasadena with him. Before he moved to Boston, he started rhyming in local clubs like “the E-bar in Pasadena where I would watch the older cats rhyme and study how they held the mic and the crowd and the energy.” Years later he found himself using those same techniques in clubs 5,000 miles away.



He notes, “Even if we don’t speak the same language as soon as someone beatboxes we start rhyming and the love flows in. I’ve had ciphers in Sarajevo, France, Japan, Brazil, Kazakhstan,

Australia, Germany, Indonesia, Africa etc and its always love when I'm connecting through Hip Hop.“ While he was backstage in London he met Radiohead and Thom Yorke. He also remembers “being in Algeria, Africa and finally sleeping after days of travel and being woke up by the most beautiful Morning Prayer resonating through the city.” Other memories include, “performing in front of thousands at different festivals and literally fighting off tears mid set because I can't believe how blessed I am to be there.”

His most recent solo album “Ceremony” reflects his gratitude and uplifting perspective. His next project set for early next year is the first in a series of Collaborations with different bands in different countries. He says, “With all the travel I do I wanted to do more than just go somewhere perform and leave. I wanted to connect and document the exchange of ideas and music and culture in a broader way. Long story short is I go with a band and record for about 10 days in a certain country. Then connect with other vocalists, videographers, dancers and painters from that country. Kind of like Miles Davis ‘Sessions’ meets Guru’s ‘Jazzmatazz.’ It’s a real different approach for me but I’m almost finished Volume 1.”

Though he’s not ready to announce which country yet, his next trip is to Columbia later this month where he will be collaborating with the National Orchestra and a D.J. from France. He also has some shows lined up across America and Australia where he will ring in the New Year. He will be releasing his new project in Spring 2015 and touring more once the record drops.

Raashan Ahmad is a dynamic spirit that remains rooted in the old school hip hop tradition while still pushing innovative and progressive ideas transcending standard categories or genres. His longevity reflects his ability to continue to reinvent himself. Nonetheless as much as he evolves and travels, he always remains the same humble and hardworking artist from Altadena.

Photos taken from [Raashan's blog](#).

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