

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Three Crowns for Def Sound

Mike Sonksen · Thursday, November 5th, 2015

The poet, MC, activist, radio show host and fashion designer Emmanuel Ricketts is also known as Definitive (Def) Sound. A lifelong resident of South Los Angeles, his new album, *Kings of Neon*, is being released in November. Ricketts is a renaissance man that has accomplished a great deal in his 31 years of living. His versatile skillset is emblematic of the emerging 21st Century Angeleno creators and this is why he performs all over Los Angeles. Most recently, he's been onstage at the Ace Hotel and the Museum of Contemporary Art. He is very much at home in each of these spaces. "To be a 21st Century Angeleno means to be a contemporary human, to be contemporary is to be current," he says. "We are the wave and the current."

Over the last decade I've seen Def Sound perform his work live many times and with each passing year, he's only gotten better. His complex wordplay melts genres and his stage presence is dynamic while appearing effortless. Before breaking down any further the particulars of his progressive style, the specifics of his Los Angeles upbringing are important to understand in order to comprehend what makes him the man he is. We recently took a crosstown drive to a few of his favorite LA sites and he told me how it all started.

The Ecosystem



On a rainy and humid July day, Def Sound and I drive down Central Avenue, up to the Crenshaw District, around Culver City and back to Downtown LA. He begins by telling me about his father's lifelong spiritual practice. Ricketts spent the majority of his childhood between Jefferson Park and the Crenshaw District. He also grew up in the church and his parents are both very involved. His father is originally from Panama. Ricketts explains more, "I grew up in the Seventh Day Adventist Church. The church is where my parents met. Church was the ecosystem for my entire upbringing, I mean my parents named me Emmanuel (means God with Us)."

"My father told me he had a dream on the plane ride over to Los Angeles from Seattle that he saw my mother and that he knew exactly where he would meet her," Ricketts recalls. "The dream told him to go to 54th Street Church on 54th Street in Los Angeles. The first time he went he ended up seeing the woman in his dream, my mother, and after a year and some change of dating they married and actually ended up 13 years later moving three blocks from the 54th Street Church so they could be closer to the church they served in."

His father would often open up their home for "potlucks," to all that were hungry for a warm plate

and good conversation. Just about every week, there were different guests breaking bread with them. “I was raised vegan by my parents,” he says. “My mom made her own cheese and butter as a vegan chef and even teaches cooking classes on the side. My parents believed that no one should suffer in order for you to live.” His parents’ good cheer and generosity continue in Ricketts and these qualities are obvious in his ebullient personality.

His parents’ consistent example of warmth and grace were foundational to his development. In addition to his reputation as a spiritual leader, Ricketts’ dad is well known across South Los Angeles as a generous business man. “My father was a real estate broker and owned a Century 21 on Crenshaw and he often hired young people from our church and gave them their first jobs,” Ricketts says. “I was raised with a deep desire to give and water the spiritual fruits I was blessed with. My dad often said to me ‘You are talented, where is it from though? Who gave it to you?’ I was forced to answer and ask myself this question often. My father always asked me the right questions. I’m still answering them. I knew my talent didn’t just come from thin air, but I also believed God doesn’t only listen to Gospel. How could something so infinite be so limited?”

Everyday I am a New Artist



This idea of no limits on creativity is why Ricketts does not define himself as strictly a poet, an MC, DJ or designer. He is all of the above and then some. “If anything I am redefining myself,” he says, “because every day I am a new artist. I believe present day Los Angeles is the contemporary incubator for what’s next in the art community worldwide. I think our way of living is spawning a new wave of thinking. We’re not afraid of change. There’s a shift happening and I’m living in its belly being reborn daily.”

Similar to many other innovative artists, he creates the type of art that he wants to read or listen to. After all, necessity is the mother of invention. He explains, “My music is an extension of my imagination and my attempt to create things I would enjoy if I didn’t create them. Def Sound aka Definitive Sound isn’t just my name, it’s my daily goal. I have created music, poetry, clothing and DJ’ed under this name with the same goal.”

He recently started a weekly portable podcast called “KDEF RADIO” which can be found on Kdefradio.com. He features a brand new design with every show. He has now had over two dozen episodes and more than 14 guests that range from college professors, performance artists, MC’s, video directors, soul singers, producers, and even barbers. “I come to each artist in their creative environment and we exchange music and stories on the air,” he shares. He wanted to create a platform where he could share his friends’ music and stories while still enjoying himself.

The Paradigm Shift



Def Sound sees himself as a part of the paradigm shift. “I think it is important to get people used to buying directly from the artists,” he explains. “I created the designs around the idea of my next album ???’s.of.Neon. ‘???’s’ symbolizes the word ‘King’s.’ Three pyramids equals one crown. Neon is highest potential, with this record I am seeking to attempt my highest potential by being as bright as possible. Brightness can only be measured in our darkest moments, when we need it the most. They told us to stay black, I’m telling us to stay bright.”

He's putting out the ???'s.of.Neon. project on his newly formed audio-visual company called "Y E ? W H A T E V E R." Thus far his team over at Y E ? ?W H A T E V E R is comprised of himself and the visual visionaries, Leila Jarman and Mike Leisz. "We are going to be attempting to change the way people consume music," he confesses. "I can't say too much about it, you'll just have to see it." He is preparing to begin shooting a documentary in 2016 and is also compiling poems and status updates into a book project he calls, "Treat.Her.Like.Water."

Ricketts does his part to spread consciousness. "The gradients have become radiant," he says. "People are seeking to increase their level of living whether that's going vegan, yoga or going to Agape. We are all seeking more. Los Angeles is a dream for many. I didn't realize it till I dated someone determined to make it here, I've always lived here so 'making it' was a foreign concept to me. Los Angeles can be a green screen for some and green lawn for others."

Ricketts comments that the biggest visible shift he's seen in his adulthood around Los Angeles is taking place Downtown. "It used to be a ghost town only inhabited by the homeless and factory workers," he remembers, "now it is the place to be. Once again gentrification rears it beautifully ugly head and says hi. I think it's a great idea to make DTLA more livable but I hate they don't want us there? Things get better but can't afford to see it get better around you. Why can't everything be tight for everybody?"

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New Consciousness

In his childhood his mother would often take him to Ms. Gooches (which is today known as Whole Foods), Around this time he started to realize that all of the Ms. Gooches, Wild Oats or Trader Joes were located on the Westside of Los Angeles. He wondered why they were not around South LA. "Usually the answer I was told was because people on my side of town didn't have the money to shop at such places," he remembers. "Another fear injected lie was that if they did put a Whole Foods in my neighborhood nobody would shop there, because people aren't into quinoa or tofu." He finds this ridiculous, "What is this, the dark ages?" After realizing this, he decided early on that part of his mission would also be to spread culinary consciousness.

He highly recommends Simply Wholesome on Slauson and says it was one of the first natural food venues in South Los Angeles. He adds, "I highly recommend a tasty visit to Stuff I Eat on Market Street in Inglewood. I used to believe we needed these companies to break down their infrastructures and move locations into the hood because it's straight up racist and classist to only cater to the Westside." He would even utter a little pun, "They won't give us Whole Foods! ONLY the Sprouts!"

Now he feels like they can keep it over there. "We need to build our own that caters to our own," he says. "I would like to invest in creating an equivalent to Whole Foods or Sprouts that becomes a chain on the Westside, South Central and the Eastside. Why be limited? Why can't we all eat like the kings we are? I say kings because women are kings as well." He is ready for innovation in vegan cuisine. "Let me know when they drop vegan ox tails," he says. "I've never had ox tails in my life! I'm highly interested in what that would be like even down to the sauce flavor."

Self-Discovery & Self Reflection



As noted at the beginning of this piece, Def Sound can be found all over Los Angeles. When he isn't performing a musical set in Downtown, Venice or Hollywood, he might be onstage mixing records at a nightclub or ripping a poem at Da Poetry Lounge or on the air at his weekly radio show. He has also made a number of popular YouTube videos and appeared on recordings with the KCRW DJ and producer, Anthony Valadez. His new record is his magnum opus up to this point.

The new release is his third album and the one he has spent the most time planning and crafting. He's split the 12-song collection into two sections of six songs each. The first half is called "Kings of Neon," or as he likes to write it, "???'s.of.Neon." The second half is called, "Sierra.Neone." The first half features, "a higher tempo of music you can dance and thrash to and 'Sierra.Neone,' features songs you can live through." He tells me, "'???'s.of.Neon.' is the instinctual and 'Sierra.Neone.' is the intentional."

He created these dual projects as one vision over the course of three years. He explains further, "'???'s.of.Neon. is self-discovery of what your potential is and 'Sierra.Neone.' is self-reflection of the source of that self-realization. '???'s.of.Neon.' is the design and 'Sierra.Neone.' is the texture. '???'s.of.Neon.' is the wave and 'Sierra.Neone.' is the ocean. They need each other." Over the three-year period he was crafting the project, the music changed and he changed a lot as well. "The more I played it the more I started to understand that they were too much to digest in one setting," he says. "Not everyone wants a buffet of sounds so I broke it down for your listening pleasure with no GMO's. The guest chefs include J*Davey, Kadhja Bonet, Nikko Gray, Blu, RC, Lykta, Alex Isley, and Zack Sekoff. All family, all neon."

Def Sound considers himself a liaison between mediums, generations and genres. This is why he performs, designs and hosts a podcast. In the last few years a few of his songs have been played on KCRW and he has also done a few shows in Europe and in venues beyond Southern California. A few of his videos have also gone viral and he was recently featured by the highly respected AfroPunk collective. Def Sound carries on the grace and humility his parents taught him while simultaneously pushing a progressive 21st Century platform. This can all be seen and heard in "Kings of Neon."

(Photos by Sinziana Velicescu)

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