

## ARTIST OF THE MONTH

### KOKUMO

Described as not just an artist but also a cultural anthropologist and dub-griot. He uses his skills as a singer/songwriter and a dub-poet to capture his audience, whilst taking them on a cultural, spiritual and political journey. His multi-disciplinary skills as a performer have landed him roles in plays at the Royal Shakespeare Company and The Birmingham Rep. Theatre; and his work is currently being studied by Dr. Eric Doumerc, a French academic who is conducting an ongoing research on Black British Performance Poets with Caribbean heritage. Panther News Letter *ARTIST OF THE MONTH* is Kokumo. I hooked up with Kokumo to talk about him and his works...



**NSS:** Kokumo, thanks for taking time out to reason with us. Please tell the readers a little about yourself; where are you from?

**KK:** I am from a little district in Trelawny, Jamaica called 'Dutch Hill'. I can't tell you how it got its name but I've never seen any Dutch people living there. I'm from what you would call a humble background, didn't have plenty but never really gone without. I managed to finish high school and later moved to Kingston where I worked for the Babylon Shit-tem for 10 years after which I came to this country, to look for better as we Jamaicans put it! I also wanted further pursue a career in music, to try and overstand a bit more about the business sides of it. I think I'm still in pursuit, as the business of music is so elusive these days; it's very hard to capture. I'm a dub poet and songwriter, I rarely classed myself as a singer but I'll let you judge for yourself when you buy my album and listen to it. My work is considered very political? I guess because I write about conditions which affects black people and everything to do with black people is considered political. Personally I would like to think that my work reflects on our social conditions and says the things that evokes

and provokes a sense of consciousness as also plays on ones conscience. A friend of mines once wrote that I'm a cultural and social activist a true dub-griot! I think I'll settle for that.

**NSS: When did you realise your passion for music/poetry; what prompted you?**

**KK:** I was reflecting on that very question the other day and I realized that this passion started when I was in basic school (Play Centre) and I was involve in a little skit as they called it then, where my mother was invited. It was later prompted by the fact that I grew up around sound systems back in Jamaica and I developed the love for music and then much later poetry. It started to become serious when I started observing the social and political situations in Jamaica and on a global level.

**NSS: Are you a member of a writers group(s) or organisation(s)**

**KK:** Not anymore I full joy the concept of being dis-organized right now.

**NSS: How difficult is it for black artists to get their work publicised?**

**KK:** I guess it's difficult for black artists to even survive right now, much less getting their work published. In general I think most of the white owned publishing companies aren't really interested in what black artists have to say, as it doesn't satisfy their status quo, unless there are exploitative benefits to be gained by publishing such artist/s. and the few black publishers, if there's any, just don't have the resources to publish that many black artists. Plus there's no real movement for black artists to attach themselves to right now, e.g. in the mid to late 70's there was the need to championing black power due to racism and Thatcherism, that saw the rise to prominence the likes of Linton Kwesi Johnson, Steel Pulse and later Benjamin Zephaniah, that era has now passed and left a void in whatever was known as a Black Arts Movement. I think black people have gotten comfortable with what ever situations they're in, a Council job, a car on higher purchase, a mortgage until they reach 75, their faith in the chemist and a one way trip to heaven.

**NSS: Is there any writer, musician or individual who has inspired your work?**

**KK:** Not to name names really but I tend to draw inspirations from all my predecessors but I must give kudos to man like Oko Anoura, because without him there wouldn't be a genre of poetry called 'Dub Poetry'!

**NSS: What is your create process like; what happens when you first sit down to create a piece of work?**

**KK:** My creative process is an on-the-go process. I create when I'm walking, I wake up out of my sleep and start to write, therefore I think even during sleep I'm creating. But there's another side of the process, which is purely through observations, meditation and chaos.

**NSS: What discipline do you impose on yourself regarding schedules, goals etc?**

**KK:** I try not to impose any such discipline but I do believe that everything has a process in which they happen. I will complete whatever tasks in its given time but there's also the element of freedom that must be exercised when it comes to creating.

**NSS:** **What is/are your current projects?**

**KK:** What I have at this stage is a bunch of ideas which I'm trying to get out of my head but I'm thinking of going into the studio to start work on my next album also putting together an anthology of poems I-inspired by my recent trip to Brazil and a tour entitled: "A Dub Poet's Journey" - Mission to Brazil vol. 1.

**NSS:** **What do you think it takes for a person to be successful in your chosen vocation?**

**KK:** I used to think it was hard work and dedication but I now realized it takes a Simon Cowell to give you a break? Seriously though, it depends on how one measures success. Is it about getting rich or staying true to your art form. Success today is based on getting your face on television not about talent or the quality of your work? That's the crucial one must asked one's self. I think success for me is to remain true to my work, without compromise; hopefully my children will reap the benefits.

**NSS:** **Does your work enable you to travel; if so, where have you visited?**

**KK:** Yes, it has that capability which I now need to focus on more now. I have being fortunate to travel to the States, Ireland, Jamaica (if that counts?) and recently Brazil.

**NSS:** **For anybody who is interested in viewing or listening to your works, how would they find you; how do you promote yourself?**

**KK:** Welcome to the power of social networks, like MySpace, Face Book! My work is available on most download sites, [www.cdbaby.com/kokumo](http://www.cdbaby.com/kokumo) iTunes.com, Amazon, Rhapsody and I have a not so brilliant website, [www.kokumomusic.com](http://www.kokumomusic.com), so if anyone want to build me a site for free, I welcome it!

**NSS:** **Finally is there anything else you would like to add in respect of advice, encouragement and uplifting words for the readers and budding talent?**

**KK:** Just believe in self first and what you do, work at developing your craft and don't try to get caught up in the hype of distractions. Be willing to learn and continue to develop. Don't view your art with a get rich quick mentality as it foster the notion of compromise. Stay true to what you do and what you do will support you.

**NSS:** **Thanks again Kokumo for taking time out to reason with us. May our creator continue to bless and inspire the I with more gems from your pen. Log on next month and meet another *ARTIST OF THE MONTH* here on Panther News Letter.**

### **Read more about Kokumo:**

Kokumo appeared at international festivals such as Calabash Literary Festival and Glastonbury. He has worked alongside many key organizations and local authorities, which includes Birmingham, Sandwell, Walsall and Stafford to name a few. He has also delivered workshops, performances and seminars for Prisons, Arts and community organizations, colleges and universities in the UK, America, Jamaica and Brazil.

Kokumo's multidisciplinary skills as a performer have landed him roles in plays at the Royal Shakespeare Company and The Birmingham Rep. Theatre. He also appeared at The Tate Britain, The Poetry Café London, BBC Radio 4, B-Spoken Word, BBC WM, Robert Beckford Show and the colourful face introducing Benjamin Zephaniah at The Drum, in his T.V. documentary, "*This OBE Is Not For Me*".

Kokumo has being commissioned to write and perform for organizations such as Oxfam International Birmingham, Arts Council England, West Midlands and BBC WM to mark the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the abolition of the Slave Trade in The British Parliament.

His written works have being published in numerous magazines and online journals. His most recent appeared the "RED" anthology, featuring contemporary British writers from African and Caribbean background, published by Peepal Tree Press and *dialogue – a magazine for cultural literacy*, No. 2/Vol. 3, edited by the late Dr. Roi Kwabna. In 2007 he released his debut album, '*Writing's On The Wall*', which is considered to be a significant piece of work to emerged out of a pre-colonial era of Jamaica.

Kokumo's work is currently being studied by Dr. Eric Doumerc a French academic who is conducting an ongoing research on Black British Performance Poets with Caribbean heritage. This has resulted in two full length interviews, "Life In Dub" and "Dub Poetry Explosion" for the BBC, with an anthology to follow.

When one considers the magnitude of this achievement then you get the idea of how powerful and engaging Kokumo is. One can receive no higher accolade than to be esteemed by your peers academic and otherwise. He regards himself as a man on a mission doing what was purposing chosen for him to do.

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