

## **ARTIST OF THE MONTH**

While ‘Toasting’, ‘MCing’ or ‘Rapping’ in the dancehalls during the mid to late 1970’s, to present day live performances, it has been evident that Moqapi Selassie recognises and acknowledges the power of Father God in his life. His lyrics whether written or improvised freestyle, continually give honour and glory to the creator. I linked up with Moqapi to reason with him and about his works...



### **MOQAPI SELASSIE**

**NSS:** Greetings Moqapi and thanks for taking time out to reason. Please tell the readers a little about yourself; where are you from?

**MS:** I was born and grown in Birmingham, England. I was born in Sorrento Hospital in Moseley and grew up in the Small Heath area. My parents and seven of my brothers and sisters come from a place called Gibraltar in St Ann, Jamaica. Me and my two younger sisters were born here. I went to Tilton Road Infant and Junior School and then went to St Benedicts School. After junior school I went to George Dixon Grammar School for Boys. Er...what else do you want to know or is that all right?

**NSS:** Yeh that’s cool. When did you first realise you wanted to be a poet/writer? – What prompted you?

**MS:** From a young age I always liked reading and writing; and as children, me and my sisters, we used to make up stories, bedtime stories and such like. When I was at school I used to like doing compositions. It was at school that I first started writing poems and I can remember having to read my poem out to the rest of the class. When I was at George Dixon I wrote a poem that got published in the school magazine but that was just like a one off thing. I didn’t think at that time that I would become a poet or anything like that. I mean

being a poet or a writer wasn't seen as a job and I suppose even now it's not seen as a job. The type of poetry I wrote then is different from the poetry I write now. So to answer your question what prompted me to be a dub poet I would say, the works of Louise Bennett, DeeJaying on sound systems, Linton Kwesi Johnson doing his thing and ones like Mikey Smith. In fact, I started performing by accident even though I n I know that there are no accidents, right?

How it happened was that I used to be in a band called Kibir La Amlak. We had a show to do at the Hummingbird and we didn't have enough equipment or songs ready to do the performance, so we decided to bring some hand drums, a bass and put some of my poems to music and go and do the performance and that's how I started.

**NSS: Which authors have you felt inspired by in particular?**

**MS:** Going way back I can remember seeing a documentary once on James Baldwin, the Black American writer. At that time that fascinated me, because I never knew that there was such a thing as Black writers. I was about ten or eleven at the time and it just seemed out of this world, like having a Black King of England. I was going to say a Black President of America but watch yah nuh; times have changed a whole heap. At that time you rarely saw Black faces on the television so to see a documentary on a Black writer: *Wow!* Yes, so James Baldwin and ones like Amiri Baraka, poetically Miss Lou, of course, and then the early Dub poets and Deejays. Also I must add *you*. I mean I first attempted writing a novel (it was my first and only attempt so far I might add), way back and I left it and then a few years later your book *Bad Friday* came out. The joy of that happening was that it could be done and it was done by someone I grow up with from around the way and just up the road.

**NSS: Nuff respect. What inspires you to write?**

**MS:** Inspiration comes from the Most High, from life situations and things that are happening in everyday life. Things that affect the African race, nation, community etc. In one of I rhymes called "*Dub Poet Lekka Mi*", I describe the role of the dub poet; I write, "*wi a taak bout di great blak man an ooman who fite an die fi wi libarayshan; wi a taak bout blak peepul kondishan way dung ere ina babilan; wi a taak bout troots an rites an tings dat a gwaan ina wi evriday life...*" so that's what I think the poets role is, to write about the joys and the pains of Black life.

**NSS: Seen. Did you used to be in a sound system? – Tell us briefly about those days.**

**MS:** Yes. Back in the day I was in a sound. It was what youths at that time did. It was like part of our cultural upbringing. In those times as Black youths we were into music in a big way. It was either ones were in to reggae music or soul music - those like I n I who were into reggae music built sound systems. I started out collecting records and my cousins used to do the same. After a while we decided to build a sound. The first sound I was involved in was called *Earthquake* from out of *Small Heath* and then after that I was in *Jah*

Shanti Sound. Earthquake was the first sound I held the mike and chanted lyrics. In Jah Shanti sound I selected and also deejayed on the sound. I was also involved in Goodwill International Sound which was the Ethiopian World Federation Incorporated 111 Sound. Nowadays you and you don't realise what it was like back then pertaining to sound systems – every road in the “ghetto” areas had sound systems and on weekends Blues dances could be found in the area.

**NSS: Do you write full-time?**

**MS:** I don't call myself a writer per-seh. I'm a creative practitioner so I do poetry performances and poetry performance workshops in schools. I recently wrote and performed my one man show entitled *Blackheart Man* and am presently writing a play with the working title “*Ketch a fiya*” (Catch a Fire). Also I've just finished a Lottery Heritage Project on Rastafari Heritage entitled Rastafari Roots and Development. So yes I do work full time but it's not writing full time. I do different projects.

**NSS: Do you have or set a schedule when you are writing?**

**MS:** No I don't have a set schedule when it comes to writing. I'm the original lazy writer and so I write as and when I need to. So I'll write late night early morning or in the day, anytime really. Pertaining to poetry, I'll use the voice recorder on my phone to catch vibes when they come and then work on them later.

**NSS: What subject/s do you like to write about?**

**MS:** As I stated earlier, I like to write about issues concerning the Blackcommunity, locally and internationally. So I have poems about Obama's election, Swine Flu, Hurricane Katrina, Love Poems, Gun Crime, and the Lozells Riot here inna Birmingham...  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Iqk8arzNjI&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Iqk8arzNjI&feature=related)

**NSS: What kind of research is involved with your work?**

**MS:** It depends on the topic. I will check the newspapers and the internet to ensure I've got the facts and then I'll put I individual spin on it and write it up.

**NSS: What is your creative process like; what happens when you first sit down to write?**

**MS:** Well this depends as I usually have a notebook and I'll jot down vibes on different topics as and when they come and then when I feel that it's time to write now, I'll just go for it. So when I sit down to write there's usually something there already to build upon. Concerning the writing of my one man show I wrote and the play I'm writing, I make an outline and plan out how I see it will go and then write to that.

**NSS: Do you impose a discipline on yourself regarding schedules, goals etc?**

**MS:** Yes, I work out when the lifeline (deadline) is and work out what I need to do to get the work done and then get it done. So even though I say that I'm the original lazy writer I make sure that I get the work done on time as not to do so can be detrimental.

**NSS: Are you working on a current project(s)?**

**MS:** Yes. At present I'm on the Critical Mass Playwriting Course at the Drum which is a project to get Black and Ethnic Minority (I cyaan tek dat phrase yuh see!!) Writers to write plays which if they are good enough will be put on at The Drum, The Belgrade Theatre in Coventry, or the Royal Court Theatre in London. Another project I'm involved in is the Rastafari Heritage Project which I'm just finishing off, where I did research into the Roots and Development of the Rastafari Community in the West Midlands. Also, I'm editing a documentary on the Jamaican Poets and currently touring the *Blackheart Man* one man show.

**NSS: What projects have you worked on previously?**

**MS:** Phew! How far do you want I to go back? I work now and then on the Birmingham Book Festival's Write On Project which places writers, poets and playwrights into schools to do workshops. I've worked with Learning Links International doing poetry performances supporting Yasus Afari on his tours. I completed the Sankofa Project which was an Individual Grants for the Arts Project where I went to Jamaica (October 2008) and The Gambia (February 2009) to carry out Research and Development into the African Oral Tradition. This involved studying Jamaican Drum riddims and Storytelling. I also filmed and interviewed some Jamaican poets. In the Gambia I learnt some African Drum riddims and worked with a Griot and collected some Mandinka stories. From June 2008 to November 2009 I was a part of the effort to establish a Rastafari Studies Centre at the University of Birmingham and worked on providing information on Rastafari for the Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education. Oh, yes, I've also worked on the Rastafari Heritage Project which I've mentioned earlier. I think that will do.

**NSS: Moqapi, it's been a pleasure reasoning with you. May our creator continue to bless you with more positive vibe gems from your pen. Is there anything else you would like to say in regards of advice and encouragement for potential budding writers?**

**MS:** Yes, of course. I would advise potential writers to write, write, write. Learn the craft of how to write poems, novels, plays, short stories, whatever genre you want to master. Just do it. Give it a go. "*Nothing tried; nothing done.*" as my mum used to say. So yeah, go for it. I would also encourage each and everyone to persevere. If you want to fulfil your potential - persevere. Success might not come overnight and yet if you stop before

getting there it might be waiting around the corner. So stick at it. Yes, I think that's it. I Give thanks for the opportunity and Jah bless.

**NSS: Jah bless; and for you readers, here's a likkle someting extra from Moqapi. Just click the link below and enjoy...**

**<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DVqPI-LlzJc>**

**Log on next month and meet another *ARTIST OF THE MONTH* here on *PANTHER NEWSLETTER*.**