



Art: Lawkena Maciver

## Artist Interview: Emma Lee

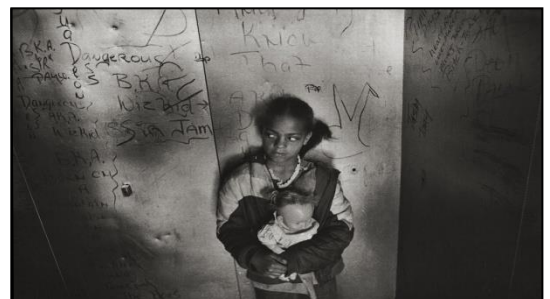
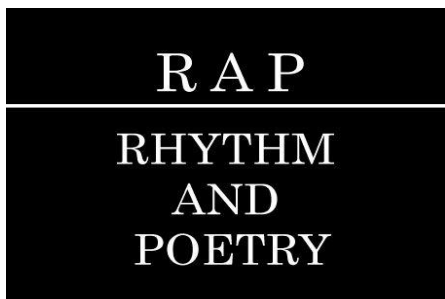
On the beginning of a new music and art career, activism, Black August, spirit animals and mosh pits.

By Kasim O. Gero with Emilia A. Ottoo, October 12<sup>th</sup> 2015

*Kasim O. Gero is currently housed as an inmate at the Patuxent Institution in Jessup, Maryland and is a writer, public speaker and coordinator for George Jackson University. Emilia A. Ottoo currently lives in Harlem, New York City and is herself. The posting and publication of these questions and answers are further confirmation of their consent to this interview.*

I understand that you're a dancer, singer, artist and MC. What do you think contributed to your versatility in art?

- "HONESTLY having what I have that's God, but me being the way I am...creativity was something I latched onto early to deal with a lot of things I was going through. I always had a lot on my mind and in my body since I was a child. Thankfully I made these outlets important and stayed always into something. Never wanting to be bored, idle or a slave to circumstance...I was also an only child so I got real good @ keeping myself busy. The common thread in everything creative is freedom. I think I've been looking for freedom in all the right places...hey that's pretty good! ☺ At a certain point I realized I was kind of good @ a lot of things and getting better/knowing more gave me more reasons to live. Art feels good."



We all saw you at the 'New Yorkers for Dance' shoot, how did it feel to be sought out to be a part of that event?

- "I'ma tell you for real it felt good as fuck. You know why? LOL seriously because it was a week before that when I was really depressed and feeling like I wasn't moving in life anymore. I felt disconnected from the experience of performing and that I was no longer a 'somebody.' Then I had a breakthrough and said 'you know what I need to move so I'ma move, I'ma just dance' and I learned a routine, filmed it and did

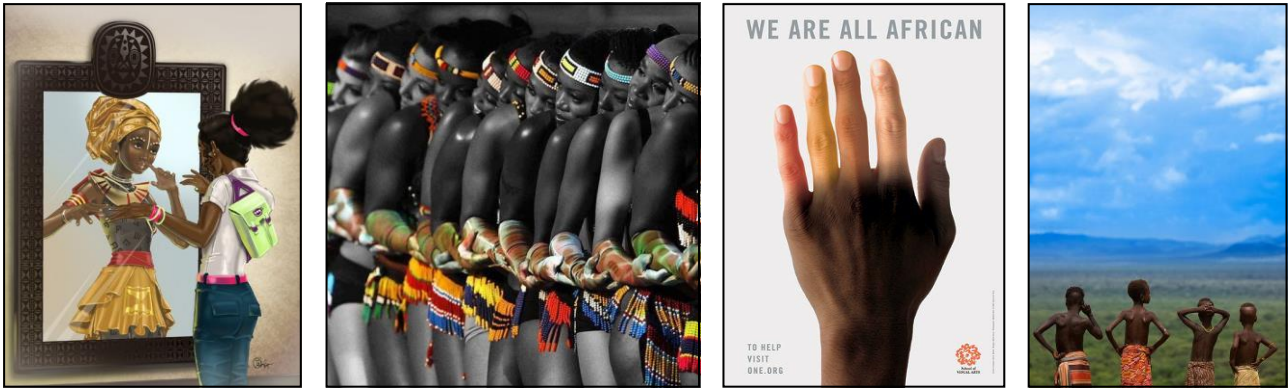
something I had never done before in posting it to Facebook...I got an overwhelming response and then Linda Walton from the *Harlem Arts Alliance* hit me up like ‘would you like to get down, I thought of you.’ I was humbled @ how swiftly the universe lined up for me. Though the posting and her reaching out weren’t related, I saw what it did there! Then I see that its legends, icons, professionals...and I don’t even have to dance, they just want my words?! Word?!?”



Otto Brand Artivism is the name of your nonprofit. What is ‘artivism’ exactly and what propelled you to create a nonprofit around its concept?

- “‘Artivism’ was in my experience originally coined by my mentor and creative godmother Dafina Roberts, who’s a fabulous dancer, choreographer, writer and filmmaker by the way ☺—ahem but she coined it to us during our time together in the nonprofit known as *Impact Repertory Theatre*. This, my family and incubator of 12+ years is a performing arts company which tours and a leadership training organization that’s in the business of positive social change. Our flagship rehearsal days were typically 6+ hours of back to back workshops, exercises, building sessions, community service, creative labs and practicing for shows. The org was founded by 2 men in particular, Jamal Joseph (Sr.) a former member of the Black Panther Party, Panther 21 and also a director, writer, poet and filmmaker. And Voza Rivers, a legendary icon with strong roots in the Black Arts movement and is also a businessman, chairman of the *Harlem Arts Alliance* and head of *New Heritage Theatre*—the oldest Black nonprofit theater in New York. We’ve taken our roots, passion for activism, political education, quality of life and limitless artistry from ‘Harlem to Hollywood’ (even Bulgaria!) and really changed a lot of lives by being artists and activists. I remember a visitor once asked if we could make *Impact: Israel!* ☺ Say whaaaat?! LOL...but so Jamal ran with Dafina’s word ‘artivism,’ I fell in love with the united concept because of how powerful it was and how much history was behind it. Being both has gotten me to experience things I could have never done just being one or the other. And it made my voice, my mind, my connection to things stronger. I wanted to create a habitat for artivism to be concentrated, developed, celebrated and supported. I also wanted to add things like financial education which is crucial to quality of life. I wanted to create something that’s a generational nod to those roots while embracing the present and how global we are now. Lastly it’s been a way for me to connect to the African continent which is important to me. It’s funny because Jamal once

told me he almost went into healing and wellness practice, then decided he could do a lot more healing through a powerful film than one person at a time. And this is a legend we're talking about! Activism is the perfect concoction of reform, radicalism and renaissance. If creativity is freedom and knowledge is power, activism is revolution. Damn I'm coming up with good ones today! Really when we touch things like housing, entrepreneurship, land—it's a building thing. I'm happy to explore that kind of building not boxed into the ivory pillars of nonprofit-social work."



I understand you're from The Continent, Uganda to be specific. Do you feel like your artistry displays a link to your connection to home?

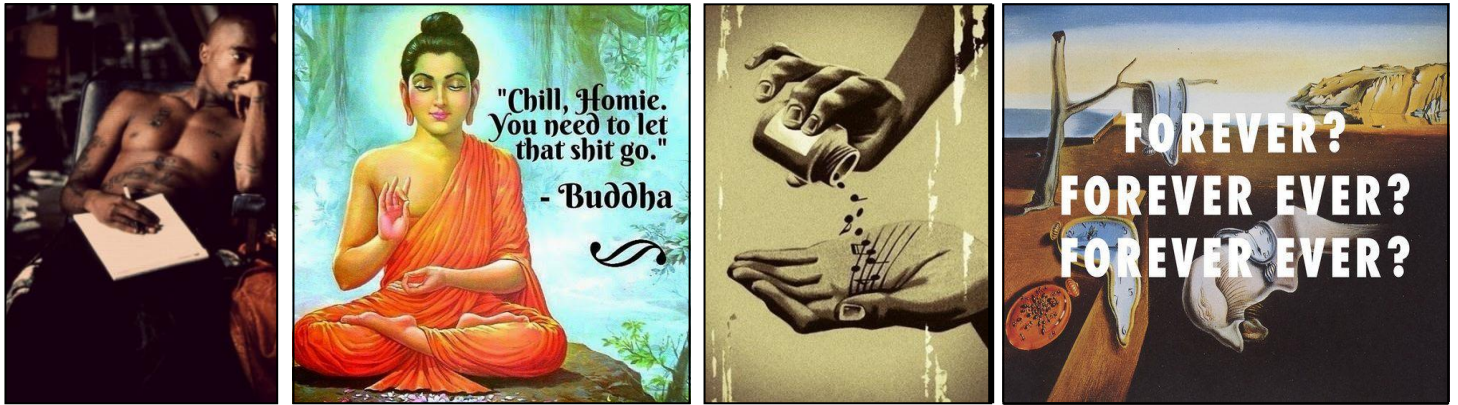
- "That's a great question Kasim, you're pretty good @ this...LOL. You know my first instinct is 'hell to the yea,' especially a place like Uganda there's so much music, dance, singing. Hip Hop culture really manifested deep, activism grew organically if not as its own weapon. But on second thought I think art itself is an eternal link to Africa, the birthplace of all society and the founder of a lot of the culture that's made its way around the world. Really cool though I heard the drum originated in Uganda—I was like for real?! People been telling me I have incredible rhythm for years, I had to wink @ Africa for that every time. Extra though is my lacking\* connection to home that I think comes through just as much since I still haven't been back since a baby. The feeling of separation, at times helplessness, loss, the tension of overlapping worlds, the pulse that's always there, the anger, youth, wisdom created from going through things alone, the collective conscious even if you're not knowing everything exactly. The power you feel in your blood, the example of true, natural roots. Fun, sun, ferocity. My art is a constant salute. Art and activism also been meaningful in getting Africa through a lot of traumas so I always feel that."

Who is your biggest influence in life, music and art?

- "Wow Kasim so we're gonna go there with it huh...nah LOL OK, aight that's a tough one because I'm constantly inspired. So let's see, biggest, the biggest. I'ma 'think big' on the question and tell you like this. My biggest influence in life is people that have an idea, or a gift or vision of something and struggled-hard-to see it become reality. That word struggle can be subbed out for 'hustled, believed, manifested or willed.' Triumph after trauma is my biggest influence in life. In music my biggest influence is people who



have music in them. It's something in their voice, words, it's in their conviction, it's relentless, it's something you feel, it seems effortless though a lot of energy goes in. In art my biggest influence is emotion. Seeing something and immediately you feel it or you don't. Or it grows."



In your music, do you find people can find something they can identify with?

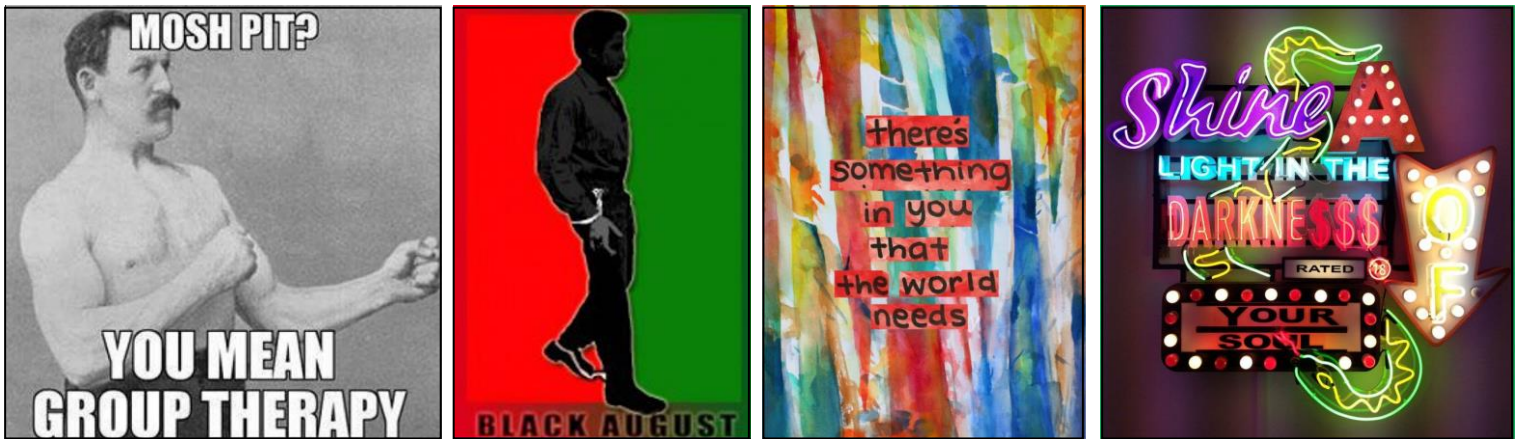
- "Well everyone says yes right because they're trying to sell records or push content, and I dig it. But really hell if I know if people will identify. I just know that my music is from the heart or from a vibe, an emotion. True stories, random thoughts on the human experience. Real will always recognize."

I've heard your [mosh] song about the slain prison militant and George Jackson's comrade, Hugo Pinell. What compelled you to make a song about such a figure, and do you think people will see it as provocative?

- "Thanks for asking about that Kasim. Compelled was exactly the feeling...it's crazy because you can feel really helpless about a situation like his. But hold up, let me back it up and first say *Rest In Freedom* to him and much energy to those behind the wall. Hugo's murder in prison, after so many years of an unbroken spirit—came this past August and coincided with my first commemoration of 'Black August.' In the midst of me fasting for the first time, doing revolutionary studies and being actively engaged, he was killed. I had also started reading 'Soledad Brother' @ the time and was stuck on Jonathan Jackson Jr.'s point that state control has 3 main forms: denial, self-censorship and imprisonment—especially political imprisonment. I was tripping watching all the forms manifest around this one life. To the point where he's not even human enough to be mourned in many eyes. All for using his own mind to get to the truth. He wasn't a saint, much like the rest of us. He spoke clearly, he thought critically, he was intelligent, real and had a lot of heart. I thought about how it could be, not being able to touch or see or speak to the people you love for years on end. To be made an example of because of past mistakes, and people's false perceptions. I was a little stunned that we can add Hugo's murder to the list of insane events, rebellions, murders, and triumphs of August since the 1600s. I didn't want his life and name to die with him. A lot of crazy fucked up shit happens in the name of 'correction' and I believe it's something we should stay alert to. The more positive and proactive we can make products of the prison system let's do it. It's a reflection

of the same authority that governs our ‘safety,’ food, education and social services—not to mention foreign affairs.

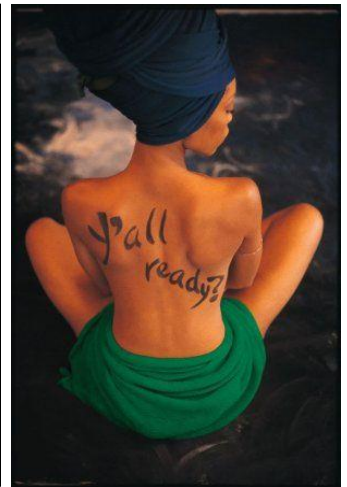
- Provocative...I find his life, story and the issues they spark hella provocative. When you watch interview footage of Hugo (whatever you can find) the tone of his voice, the swag of his words, the conviction in his body—that shit is provocative. The idea of a mosh pit, of organized chaos, of unified emotion, of moving ‘or being moved on’—you get it. So again, hell if I know if people will feel it whether they knew him or not. But I know I did right by him and the situation. Can’t wait to perform it live for real!!! RIP Yogi!!!”



This past August you fasted for what is known as Black August. What made you decide to do something like that and can you tell us what it’s all about?

- “This is the part where I’m supposed to be ‘professional’ and act like we didn’t talk about this endlessly or that you weren’t a big influence on me doing it...ahem, yea I thought to myself ‘self?—you’re not as revolutionary as you could be, you need to get your mind right, you need to get grounded, you need to re-dedicate your activist spirit and focus your purpose.’ I said ‘damn self you really bout that life huh?’—and around this internal conversation an interviewer who-shall-rename-nameless \*coughs\* was preparing for it, not to mention I had seen and read about it for a long time but had no idea it was an actual process. I decided to do it to challenge myself, get connected with like-minded energy and as a salute to what rarely gets celebrated if known at all. Black August is a commemoration of revolutionary soldiers, leaders and events that highlight the militant, strategic, intelligent, and sacrificial struggle for liberation of oppressed people. While we reflect on the past we also put our minds in the present and realize our struggles and sacrifices are not in vain. And that our discipline, self control, choices and movement are power. The process is a 31 day fast, some days all day fasting as well as exercising, studying, building with others. I also watched films, reconnected with some elders, shared information through my writing, creating and social media. I was really not feeling the idea of fasting @ first, I never wanted to experience prolonged physical hunger again. But once I chose the gains over the fears/what if’s and decided to go for it full embrace it was incredible for me. Couple days were really hard but I always made it. And once Hugo was

killed that was extra motivation. The best part about Black August aside from the clarity it brings you is that you're not alone doing it. Being that it started by California prison inmates you got people in and out of prison, and possibly all over the world doing this. It's like we're all saluting each other and manifesting this spirit even though we're all different walks of life. Black August is not giving up, not giving in, and remembering why not. Being a young woman it felt extra powerful doing it. People usually equate discipline and fortitude with men and boys, but not only did I kick ass in that department, I found beauty in myself that nothing else could have shown me. Shout out to the Queens out there ☺! And to Erykah Badu for her words on fasting saw that on YouTube."



We're looking forward to you releasing your mixtape in the near future, what can we expect from your introduction to the game?

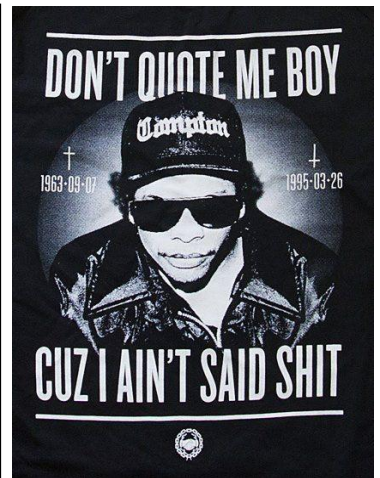
- "☺ I'm really excited about releasing music! A lot of life was lived in a short time so when it happens it's gon be really special. But let's see, what can y'all expect?? I look different, I love Hip Hop, I'm a music head. I'm street, militant. People tell me I have a strong energy, I like spiritual things. I'm all woman, LOL ☺ I like to move, I like art. It's gonna be special. I don't even know everything that's gonna happen but I want to add to the game, re-invigorate people's walk and talk. With great music first and last, and quality in everything. I gotta tell you though Kasim as excited as I am to write, spit, sing, dance, create—bringing it on that stage is something I visualize constantly. The game will not be getting just another rapper, or rapper-singer, or weird pop star thing. I'm coming to be felt, not just seen or heard."

Before we close out, if you could say something to someone, what would you say and who would it be? Alive or dead?

- "Ooooooh Kasim taking it there a-gain!...OK, OK ummm. Well if they're still alive then it could still get said so I'm not even gonna use the living on my answer. But damn this question is wack...LOL! Nah it's just so many people not with us and only about a trillion zillion words in the human lexicon...OK aight I'ma gonna throw a dart. Phyllis Hyman—an incredible jazz singer, entertainer and businesswoman—



one of my favorite vocalists not to mention spirit animals ☺, committed suicide during her career and was going through a lot even though she was gorgeous, healthy and financially secure. I want to tell her though she felt lonely she wasn't alone. I full respect how she talked about putting our wealth back in our communities, she inspired so many to this day, and I really appreciate her existence. And all the men who missed out on her were insane! I hate the thought she died possibly not knowing this, and possibly thinking it was something wrong with her. It was us Phyllis! It was the world, you were perfect as we would ever see love. *Rest In Beauty*. But damn Kasim this question really? I got a rolodex of dead I gotta holla @ so, aye did what I could. Tupac what up my G??? You see we moving out here. Che I did not know you played the guitar! Selena, queen you got the whole world singing in Spanish. Your hips never lied and your smile gives me life. Shakespeare have you chopped it up with Hip Hop artists yet? George Jackson, always. And thank you. Mary Lou Williams I know it was hard, thanks for giving us everything you did. My brother Travis, I love you and meant everything I said. My grandfathers, sorry I never met you, hope you've been feeling me. Sandra Bland, always. And thank you. I'ma let it live right there Kasim, you see how I'm flowing."



In closing, what do you want the world to know about Emma Lee? Give us something to hunger for.

- “Ha...Kasim. Exhale, well...if they've read this far then they can probably tell a lot about 'Emma Lee' already. But for the record I guess on top of and including all the music, movement, visuals and services I have to give—is that my energy is rich. People might be drawn to my body, mind or creativity, people may judge, discredit or try to weaken me. But 'they'll never count me among the broken [wo]men.' If anything, I was here. Dark, lovely and fiercely. And I always leave things better than when I found them.”

“Thank you for interviewing me I really appreciate you. Even your wack questions were good—haha!

Be well and keep going.” – Emilia A. Ottoo

“PS. \*wink\*\*”