

What's your take on the artist's duty to reflect their times?

GAB: "Being a writer, or any artist, is being an observer. When you see something that's blatantly wrong, you have to express something about it. Our role is to be observers and tell the truth."

There's a lot of consciousness in hip-hop right now, but there's also a lot of less socially conscious music as well.

GAB: "People are people and artists are people. You've got groups that are very politically active and that are making a difference. You've also got groups that are spiritually active and making a difference. And you've got groups that may be talking about a completely different thing. Every artist cannot be political or social. You're going to get the whole gamut, just like in the rest of humanity."

XCEL: "For us, our records, our music, has always been 100% a reflection of who we are and what touches us, and how we interpret that. We call that our complete truth. There are other people on this land that will tap into that. Out of all the turmoil that's in the soil, new artists rise up."

It seems like the range of expression for hip-hop and minority artists is more limited or scrutinized. How does this idea affect you?

XCEL: "It's human to put people in boxes. This is a political rapper. This is an underground rapper. It's like Gab was saying, human beings are multifaceted. As black men, there's no way to see what's going – especially as a father – and not be moved, and not be affected by it. My son right now is nine years old, so right now I'm trying to be very precise in the way that I help him develop his perception of the world. I have to be very precise in the way that I train him to talk to the police, to use these tools that he's going to need to navigate through the world. There's no way that cannot be a part of my art."

You crowdfunded 'Imani' recently through PledgeMusic. How was that compared to doing it the old label way?

GAB: "There's a lot of crazy things about social media. One of the positive things is being able to reach out directly to your fanbase. I think it's very empowering for artists. We definitely appreciate being able to reach our goal and have a crowdfunded record. There are positive things to labels, don't get us wrong, but it's always great to be in total control."

What was it like working with Zap Mama?

XCEL: "Marie is amazing on every level. I love the way her mind works. I was in the studio working on some songs that she was doing. We had the title track. Gab had written the hook. We were looking for the right voice for the hook. She loved it. She went in her zone and sent it back to me and it was beautiful. The first time I listened to it, I was like, 'Marie, this is incredible, but now we need an intro and an outro.' She hit me back and – no kidding – three hours later, she said, 'This is what my soul said to sing for you.'"

Fantastic Negrito has been coming up strong. How did you connect?

XCEL: "Fantastic Negrito, we had done a festival in Colorado. They played the day after us so we didn't get to check out the show. A mutual friend played his stuff for me. I thought, 'This brother is incredible and he's in Oakland too!' Long story short, he came to the studio,



and it was just instant. We did three or four songs in about an hour and a half. 'Love Is Gonna Save The Day' was originally going to be called 'Nieces And Nephews', and then Xavier (Fantastic Negrito) came in and started singing 'Love is gonna save the day ...' I'm like, 'That's it, go in the booth. Let's do it!' Certain people you just know you were supposed to work together and those two were two of those people. We were supposed to meet and create and what we created together."

You are playing with Kool Keith in Brooklyn. Will you be performing or working together more?

XCEL: "We've been longtime fans of Keith. He was in Dr. Octagon with our good friend, Dan the Automator. Hopefully this is the beginning of something."

Any chance we'll see either of them on 'Imani Vol. 2' or '3'?

XCEL: "You never know!"

Gab, how has faith figured in dealing with your diabetes and dialysis?

GAB: "That's a big part of the reason we named this trilogy 'Imani'. Sometimes in life things happen that are beyond you. Sometimes you have to work hard and you think you can't and you have to rely on a higher power than yourself, something greater to get through it. Things have been great, man. We're on the road right now. I do dialysis three times a week. We're going to Europe. I can do this all over the world. I'm doing everything that I did before I was on dialysis, still. We're also working on a documentary. I want people to know

that you can still thrive. No matter what the situation – diabetes, high blood pressure – it's a mind state. You can let it defeat you or you can let it make you a better person. I think when you go through something unexpected that affects you as greatly as this, you're in a unique situation, you have something unique to say and there are people out there waiting to hear it."

JORGE HERNANDEZ