

Rhyming Like A Girl

Toni Blackman's Improvisational Hip-Hop

MICHAEL GALLANT

It's an exciting time for Toni Blackman. Not only is the New York hip-hop artist, educator and writer in the final stages of completing a new recording and book project, she's also collaborating with rabbis, bishops and imams to meld the worlds of rap and spiritual meditation. Add to that her constant collaborations with artists she has met around the globe as the U.S. Department of State's first-ever hip-hop American Cultural Specialist, and it's a wonder that Blackman can get it all done.

An award-winning performer, Blackman began her experience as a cultural ambassador in 2001, when she traveled to Senegal and Ghana, conducting workshops on hip-hop culture and music. Since then, Blackman has toured Southeast Asia as a participant in the Rhythm Road program through Jazz at Lincoln Center, taught and performed in Botswana and Swaziland, and collaborated on a video project in the Democratic Republic of the Congo that focused on battling violence against women.

In the United States, she works to empower women through her own initiative called Rhyme Like a Girl.

"It started in 2002 as me wanting to go into schools and communities, find young girls who rapped, and give them training and support," said Blackman, "but it became a collective where I train young adult women who then go out and represent the power of hip-hop culture in its feminine form."

Blackman and her colleagues appear at summits for young women, including events hosted by *Essence* magazine and the Girl Scouts. The Rhyme Like a Girl program gives young women performance experience that they might not get any other way.

Central to Rhyme Like a Girl's mission is showing girls and women that rap can be something powerful and personal, rather than just music heard on the radio. "Rhyme Like a Girl brings in women who have been trained to rap like masters, and a lot of the young girls we perform for have never seen a woman rap like that," said Blackman, whose own verses are often introspective:

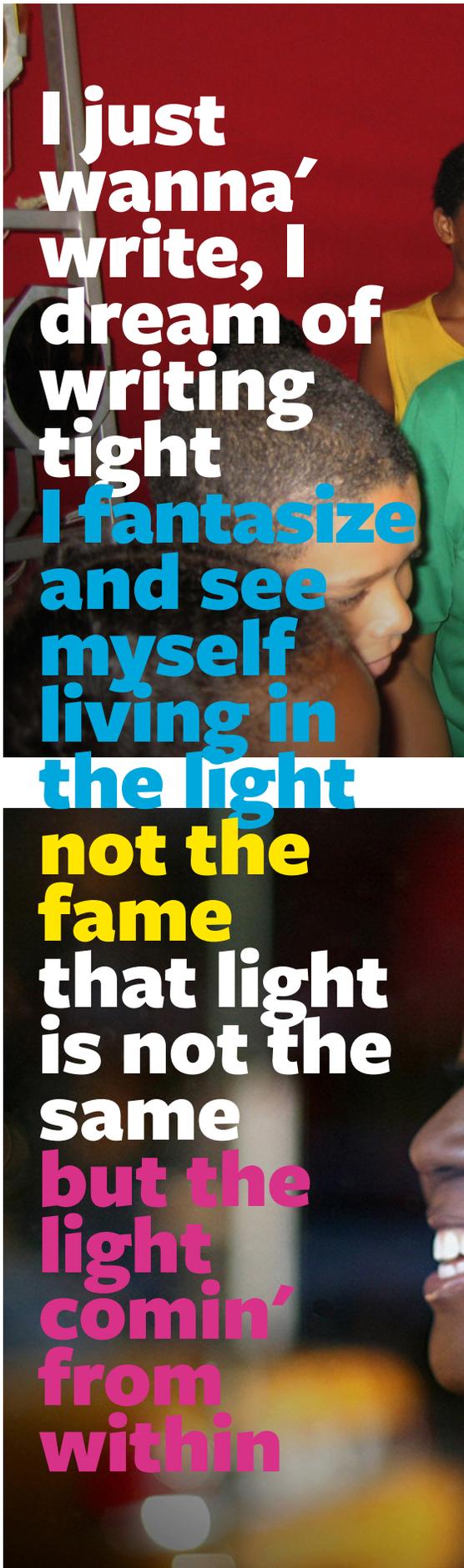
*... only treadin' water when swimming is the goal
sit upon the rock but I can't find the roll ...*

*so you ask how I'm doin' and I say fine
in one day I done lied for the ninth time*

"To them, it's an eye-opening experience to witness the power of women who can rap improvisationally, in the moment, with the same mental dexterity that any guy could. ... They can do it, too."

Trinise Crowder, a New York hip-hop artist and educator who performs under the name AtLas', has been active in Rhyme Like a Girl for six years. "We teach confidence, self-awareness, honoring your voice and knowing that what you say matters," she said, "but we are able to include other social and community messages as well." For instance, Rhyme Like a Girl promotes financial literacy and anti-bullying.

For AtLas', Blackman has been more than a colleague. "Toni is selfless and an inspiration," she said. "She is willing to help you hone who you are as a person and artist and not force you into her idea of what you should be." ■



I just
wanna'
write, I
dream of
writing
tight
I fantasize
and see
myself
living in
the light
not the
fame
that light
is not the
same
but the
light
comin'
from
within



Toni Blackman raps with Afro Brazilian youth drummers based in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil.

 Listen!



Unconventional Influences

When it comes to crafting her own rhymes, Blackman’s influences are wide, ranging from R&B singer Marvin Gaye to folk artists.

“I was deeply influenced by both jazz artists and hip-hop innovators like KRS-One and Rakim, but also by great authors like Paul Coelho, who wrote *The Alchemist*,” she said. “I like listening to thinkers and entrepreneurs who really work through problems, people like Howard Schultz, who founded Starbucks, and Cheryl Dorsey, the president of the Echoing Green foundation.”

“I’ve always done things that haven’t been done before, I’ve always had to seek my own path, and I’m always seeking stimulation,” she said, laughing. “I find inspiration in people who embody that in their own lives and work.”

Improvising Across Borders

Toni Blackman sees a movement building among young rap artists around the world and hopes to bring her own improvisational wordsmithing to a worldwide jam session.

“I’ve been in conversation with the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s education department about possibly creating a global, digital cipher to help nurture that movement.”

In hip-hop culture, the word cipher (sometimes cypher) refers to a gathering where artists take turns rapping improvised lyrics. Ciphers normally happen in person, but Blackman hopes to expand their scope with the help of video conferencing technology.

“I have people in other cities and countries waiting for us to connect, build a circle, and conduct a freestyle workshop, and we will all do it together digitally,” she said.

Blackman has already led hip-hop themed video conferences that included participants from the United States, Israel, Slovakia and beyond. “I’m excited to do it again, on a larger scale, and just see if it works!” she said.



CARSTEN FLECK
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