

JASIRI X: CONSCIOUS HIP-HOP INFLUENCER

by

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Jasiri X and volunteers on set of “Jordan Miles” video. *Photo by IHood Media.*

Socially conscious hip-hop has been an influencer of rap since the culture’s early years.

“I was at [South by Southwest](#) (SXSW) when I heard about Trayvon. I couldn’t enjoy myself,” said Pittsburgh’s socially conscious hip-hop artist Jasiri X. “But I wanted to capture the intensity of that moment.” Jasiri, 35, was able to capture the mood in those last moments of Trayvon’s life before an over-zealous Neighborhood Watch member gunned him down. His [song](#) was released in collaboration with [Color of Change](#), an online advocacy organization started by former adviser to President Barack Obama, Van Jones.

“I feel like... you can either be radical or assimilate, and I feel hip-hop prevented me from assimilating. It really kept me grounded in my consciousness; who I was.”



Jasiri X. Photo from craveonline.com

Started from the bottom

Jasiri Oronde Smith grew up on the south side of Chicago, an area notorious for its gang violence. His father’s gang involvement forced the family to move to Monroeville, a suburb of Pittsburgh. And while there, Jasiri was called a racial slur for the first time in

his life. His first reaction was to use violence, but his mother directed him to fight intellectually, not physically.

“My first reaction to that kind of racism was to punch someone in they [sic] mouth,” Jasiri said. “At that point, my mom’s very clear that was not going to be how I was going to move forward.”

He credits his mother as being an early influence by introducing him to the civil rights movement through its champions [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), and [Malcolm X](#).

“But also, for me, hip-hop was a very big influence. Because of the environment I was in, it made me want to seek out hip-hop music that spoke to what I was going through.”

With those inspirations, Jasiri began writing. He joined spoken word groups and open mic events, often performing at one of the biggest outlets for artists—the [Shadow Lounge](#), what Jasiri calls the “home of hip-hop in Pittsburgh.”

“For us [local MCs and rappers], we all met at Shadow Lounge,” he said. “The relationships that I found there with other artists and producers; and I might have done 70 shows. It prepared me for when I began to do shows in other places.”

Back to the Beginning

Political anthems have long been used to bring awareness to social issues in the world, going back to the 1960s with Sam [Cooke's](#) “A Change Is Gonna Come,” to Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young’s “[Ohio](#).”

Two artists with the most influence on hip-hop music were Gil Scott-[Heron](#) and [The Last Poets](#), who inspired a new generation to use their words intellectually to fight back against an oppressive system, creating a new genre of music. They used their poetry and music to caution others after the assassinations of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and [Robert F. Kennedy](#); and countered the politics of that era, giving rise to some of the most politically [conscious](#) acts of the genre: [Public Enemy](#), Afrocentric rap group [X Clan](#), and [Dead Prez](#).



Chuck D. Photo from dmcworld.net

Today, from artists like [Talib Kweli](#) come a new rush of political anthems and songs for fighting against the system. Chuck D of Public Enemy once said the words Melle Mel wrote on Grandmaster Flash’s “[The Message](#)” 35 years ago still applies: *Don't push me, 'cause I'm close to the edge/I'm trying not to lose my head.*

Like his consciously aware predecessors, Jasiri sparked a [flame](#) with his inaugural [song](#) “Free The Jena 6,” a reference to the six Jena High students arrested and charged with attempted murder and conspiracy after another student was beaten in a school fight rooted in racial tensions.

His style of rap, though raw, has garnered much attention. Jasiri was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from Chicago Theological Seminary in 2016 for the spiritual and political awareness he's shared on songs "Justice For Trayvon" and "[Strange Fruit](#) (Class of 2013)."

The conference was held around the same time [Freddie Gray](#) was fatally injured while being arrested and transported by the Baltimore Police Department.

"[I told the panel] the music I'm going to perform has some language in it, and I'm going to say it," [Jasiri](#) said. "Because I feel like, in this hour, I have to say it the way I wrote it."

The panel listened and agreed that the message needed to be heard.

Giving Back

Co-founded with [Paradise the Architect](#) of X Clan in 2006, [1Hood](#) Media Academy was created to address violence within and against Pittsburgh's black community, providing an artistic outlet for local youth. The organization helps bring



Paradise Gray and Brother J of X-Clan.
Photo by Bill Wade of [post-gazette.com](#)

local artists and activists together, using their art to raise awareness of social injustice affecting their community and communities across the world.

In 2010, the [Heinz Endowment](#) and [Pew Research Center](#) conducted a [poll](#) on how the media portrays black men in Pittsburgh, and found that of 2,225 front-page news stories, 198 specifically featured African American men and boys; fewer than one in 10 articles. Of those findings, for print media, 36 percent of the articles featuring African American men and boys focused on crime. On television, 86 percent of stories featuring African American men and boys focused on crime.

Phillip “Big Phil” Thompson, local DJ, and drug and alcohol prevention counselor for the [Young Men’s Christian Association](#), volunteers with the “[Manhood 2.0](#)” program, which offers high school boys facing disciplinary action an alternative to out-of-school suspension, discussing respect, nonviolence, and healthy sexuality.

“I’m real leery of about who talks to [the kids in our community], and real leery about their agendas” Mr. Thompson said. “When people come in to talk to our kids, they only bring in guys who’ve been locked up. Why do they think our kids will only listen to people that have been in [prison] for 12 years?”

“I volunteer to show them that there are black men who’ve never been locked up. Give them something else to think about.”

Like Mr. Thompson, Jasiri and his crew wanted to change the outlook for young black men in the community and to give them a more positive reference or role model of what a black man is.

“We started to, not only be advocates to start walking the streets at night in Homewood, but we also became advocates of victims of police brutality.”

“When the political climate changed it kind of allowed [1Hood] to get more support,” Jasiri said. “We’re about to launch an art of this academy that’s intentional about the intersection between the arts and activism... Affirming where I see black creativity.”



1Hood Day Hip-Hop Celebration. *Photo by Leah Loves That, 1Hood Media.*