

THE POWER OF SOUL... ACCORDING TO RASHEED ALI

Sunday, 14 June 2015 19:05 Bill B



One of this year's most intriguing and truest soul album's is '1968; Soul Power' from "1968 featuring Rasheed Ali". The 18 track album is a serious attempt to look at the key issues that dogged America in the late 60s.... the Civil Rights argument, the Vietnam War, urban unrest and much more. The soundscape of the long player is an authentic recreation of the era of James Brown, Sly Stone and countless other 60s soul and funk luminaries. Little wonder that the album is quickly winning favour with serious students of soul and as its underground reputation builds, '1968; Soul Power' is all set to become one of 2015's biggest albums. Time then to find out more about its creator.... New York-born Rasheed Ali and of course his musical crusade as set out in '1968; Soul Power'. We recently caught up with Rasheed and began by asking about his background.....

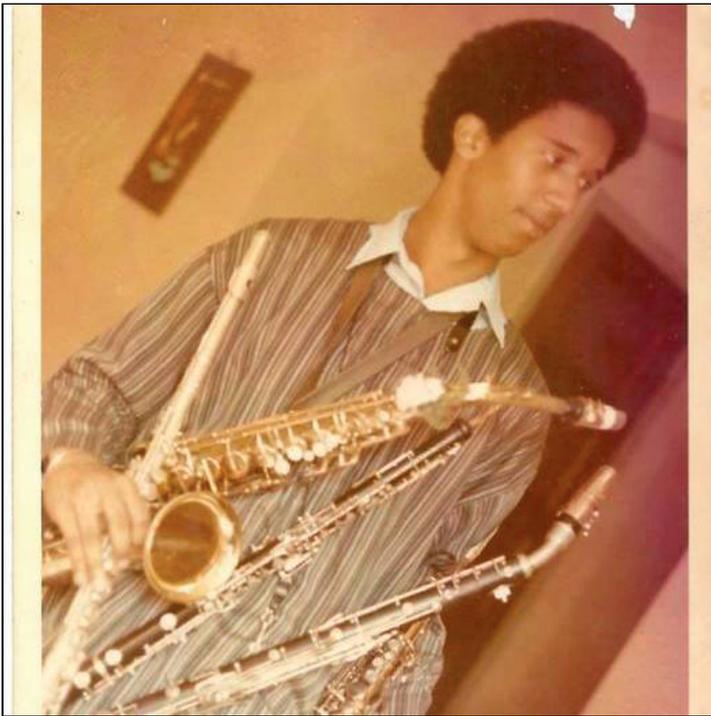
I grew up in a low-income housing project in New York City, in an area called San Juan Hill. It was a very interesting, tough little neighborhood. The jazz great Thelonious Monk lived on the next street over and I grew up with both his children. Knowing that Monk was a worldwide star hit home for me as a kid, when he was featured on the cover of Time magazine. Monk's sartorial elegance and iconic presence was a counterbalance to the sordid characters we had in the neighborhood: drug dealers, heroin addicts, serial criminals, etc. The cultural mix in my neighborhood provided me with big ears for music. Half of the people in the neighborhood were Black folks who migrated from southern states like South Carolina and the other half were people who migrated from the Caribbean; like my family. That meant I listened to Calypso, merengue, Bomba and Plena at home but I listened to Soul music with my American friends.

What kind of soul specifically turned you on?

WWRL was the Soul music station we listened to and it played the greatest Black music from all over. I realized early on that music could be regional in the US. You had the Philly sound, the dominant Motown sound, the Memphis Sound of Sam & Dave, the Chicago sound of Curtis Mayfield, the deep southern sound of James Brown and the New York sound of Kool and the Gang. I loved them all! I loved to dance and I loved to bang out the funky drummer beats of James Brown's funk on any hard surface.

Were your family musical in any way?

My oldest brother went to the famous High School of Music & Art with future jazz greats like Billy Cobham, Eddie Gomez, Jimmy Owens and Larry Willis. My oldest brother provided me with my musical window to the world. He would take me to free jazz concerts at the public library and art museums. Those concerts were truly incredible! I heard Pharaoh Sanders, Yusef Lateef, Mongo Santamaria (with Roy Ayers & Hubert Laws in his band), Sonny Rollins and many others. In the home we had African drums, so my understanding that we were very different from Americans was as much based on music as it was on food and other cultural aspects. Both of my older brothers played the conga drums and I was drafted, from very young, to provide the basic foundation beat. I think my brothers knew that I had a keen sense of musical timing and vigor! I



must have been somewhere between 6 and 8 years old. So you see, I have these three rivers of influence flowing through me.

Did you have any formal music training?

My eldest brother had a few jam sessions in our house and musicians from his high school played in our living room. One friend played the flute and when he put the flute down I picked it up and easily produced a sound. All heads turned in amazement! My brother's friend felt compelled to leave the flute at our house for a few weeks. Eventually, my father bought me my first flute. I think I might have been 7 or 8 at the time. When I was "bussed" to an all-White grade school in the 4th grade, I started listening to the British Invasion music because all of classmates were rabid Beatles fans. I loved the Beatles, the Dave Clark Five, the Kinks and the Animals. It was a new sound and all the kids loved it. Even though I loved the UK music it all sounded like "guitar music" and I never imagined playing a guitar like some kids. My ears were so big that I quite literally loved all music!

My oldest brother facilitated my expansion because he had every kind of musical genre in his LP collection. Since I did have my own flute, it became my instrument in middle school. I was soon in the junior orchestra and I was too shy to go out for the lead flute chair, so I settled for second chair. We played Bach and Mozart and I wanted to be a great flute player like Jean-Pierre Rampal. Around that time I started listening to Jazz radio and John Coltrane became my idol, especially his radical, spiritual, modal music. It sounded aggressive, and I fully embraced the strong sense of "Blackness" in his music. Inspired by the freedom of avant grade jazz, I formed my first band (The Freedom Jazz Quartet) when I was maybe 11 and we played our first gig when I was 12 and we got paid \$40.00 each. I was in heaven; it was the first money I ever made on my own. We would all go on to play music professionally!

So your professional music career started early... what really called you... not just the money?

What called me to music was this feeling that musicians lived in their own universe that was immune to the nonsense. The noise of my own inner-city neighborhood disappeared when I practiced my flute and saxophone. I dreamed of traveling to far off places and playing in music festivals like my musical hero Charles Lloyd. Anyway was accepted to Music and Art High School and it was there, in the company of many future musical greats that I blossomed. I would start writing my own music on piano and take on more instruments.

When did you start your first band....?

Playing between classes I met a fantastic violin player named Noel Pointer and then an incredible drummer (Buddy Williams-today a world class musician). When the Black Students Union encouraged us to form a band to counter all of the classical music featured at the school's semi-annual concert: Natural Essence was born. The band would go on a journey that didn't end until we had our second recording contract expire 6 years later. The band was signed to Fantasy and Atlantic records and we played major music festivals, TV shows, and opened for a veritable who's who of musical stars in that whirlwind time. We used to rehearse at the Apollo Theatre and we were always in the company of giants. Being around greatness teaches you so much, the musical "gurus" in my life have been countless. I believe my greatest reward has been the learning; I am the musical sum of all these amazing Black musicians who taught me about real life.

OK.... tell us now how the 1968 Soul Power project happened....

In 2007, after a ten year musical run, I felt that I had gone as far as I could go with my then current projectRasheed Ali & Rain People... I'd recorded a total of 119 tracks, seven hours of music. I was empty and I felt that all I had to show for it was a small cult following for my work. I went back to college and I started a successful world music radio show. I loved my radio show and curated great stuff: all I did was listen to the world's music. I stopped writing music and hardly touched my keyboard. I played all this exciting music from



the African Diaspora but hardly any was from America. I wondered why did American music sound so dead? Why was I so bored with American music? Then I did a series of shows called "Africa in America" featuring James Brown and how his music changed African music forever. I became totally obsessed with JB and I wanted to carry on his legacy in some small way. I felt like music was dead because it had no soul and there used to be a time when Black music was called Soul Music. Suddenly, I felt a new desire to write and tell an autobiographical story through music. To return to a time when the music and world was kinetic and free flowing. The music came in buckets! This was the music I missed; they are vibes and songs from

yesterday brought back to life. I ended up writing three albums worth and I figured I'd call it the 1968 Trilogy. I wrote maybe 60 songs! I felt like nobody was writing NEW MUSIC for people of a certain age. Why must older heads only listen with nostalgia via old records? Why not make new music with the true spirit that you used to have back in the day?

How did you put it all together and how did you manage to craft that wonderful 60s/70s sound.... who were the other musicians?

Well, I think the music of 1968 is just authentic to my life. One day I realized that I was listening to all this derivative music being made by young DJs sampling older records and younger musicians emulating an older sound. It all made me feel cold, I felt that much of it sounded "good" but it lacked an authentic soul. For me, this sound you talk about is the emotional language that I grew up with. My musical lexicon cannot be denied because I cannot unlearn my own experiences. For better or for worst, at some point an artist has to say: I'm from this time and place. As much as a musician can stay hip and relevant, at some point you realize where your truest power resides. I put my fingers on the keyboard and they took me back to 1968. I'm a player; it was easy to return to my youth on my instrument. In order to tell the 1968 story I had to limit the sounds to the sounds we had to work with back then. For instance, I used to play Fender Rhodes and Wurlitzer pianos back in the day. I had to record real tambourines and cowbells. I dusted off my flute and saxophones and an old bandmate, Ron Taylor, recorded the trumpets. Having spent years as a horn player: I think I get a natural sound from the metal. Basically, I just went deep into my imagination and aural memories to hear the past.



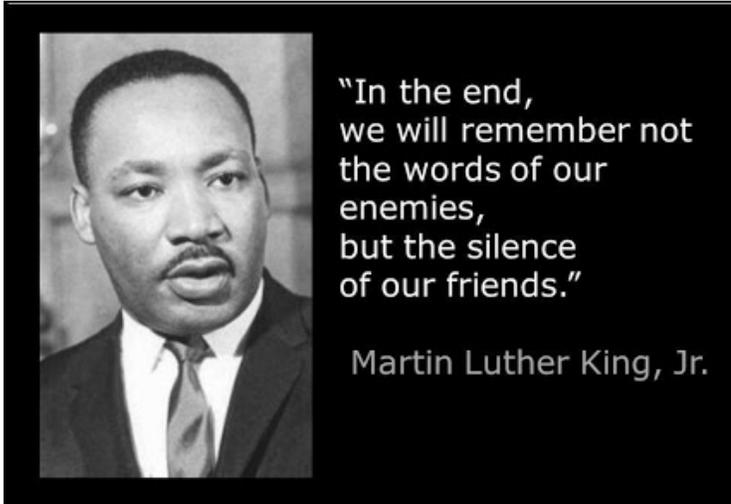
And are you the vocalist?

Yes, I sang all of the vocals using a very simple Shure SM-58 microphone with barely any processing at all. I wanted everything to sound raw and as close to a pure sound as possible. I am very happy with the sonic results I got; a certain unprocessed, organic clarity. I was a little afraid that people would think I couldn't sing because that old microphone sounds thin! I also went for a wide dynamic range that was prevalent back in the day: not trying to make the album sound hyped or artificially loud. You might have to turn things up like you had to when you were a kid. But, I think that's cool!

Lyricaly now..... Are we meant to view the lyrics from the perspective of the dark days of 1968.....? Or are your commentaries relevant today?

That's a great question! I wanted to write the songs from inside of my memory, of how I felt back then. I

didn't want to write down the reflections of an old head. If you really listen, you will hear that I don't have the fully realized notions of somebody who has answers and conclusions. When I was a kid, in this era, I had no answers. It was my intent to get others to ponder their own life trajectory and get them to question their own past, present and future. I think that those of us who know history realize that there was a fulcrum that tilted around 1968 and in many ways we are still living some of the resulting societal imbalances. Unfortunately, most of the ills I describe have not abated and some remain identical to their former selves. I did a hip-hop radio show just after the Baltimore unrest and the young DJs were amazed by my lyrics and especially the music videos that I'd created showing Baltimore 1968. They thought I was a Nostradamus or something!



**"In the end,
we will remember not
the words of our
enemies,
but the silence
of our friends."**

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Lyrically some of the things you sing about are covered in Gregory Porter's '1960 What'... do you know the song... did it influence you..... musically though it's a far cry from your sound.

I hate to admit this, because I might sound unhip, but I just got turned onto Greg's song about a month ago! Yes, maybe we drank from the same well since my album starts with the King assassination for sure! But the short answer is: absolutely not! I guess I should remind that when you begin recording an album, in my case three albums, you really don't pay much attention to the world. It's a very cool song indeed and he is a wonderful artiste.

What would you suggest is the key song on the album?

Another difficult question to answer. I'll try ... but I have two sons and I can't choose between them either. "Burn Baby Burn" surely kicks things off and sets the tone that children were gradually brought to total disillusionment. John Kennedy's assassination really started the cynicism amongst the youth but 1968 had the assassinations of King and Robert Kennedy to totally tip things over the edge. "Black Power Revolution" is the most autobiographical and therefore is a key for me on a personal level, as I was involved in the movement. It serves to anchor the moment for Black folks who grew up during those times.

There's also a great love triangle song ... 'Not My Baby'..... were you inspired by the Maxine Brown 60s classic 'Oh No Not My Baby'?

Well, yes...throughout the album I drop little phrases, like a secret code, similar to insider clues about pieces of iconic songs, people and places to help bring it all alive. The original "Not My Baby" was one of my all-time favorite songs indeed. My song is about a guy who returns from Vietnam and he is, like so many boy soldiers, emotionally unfit to handle disloyalty or infidelity. I never wrote a story song like this one before: I'm quite proud of it. It is a song with characters who are composites from my life, I actually cried after I sang it through and listened back the first time. My childhood was marked by sad occurrences like this one. I didn't have enough time in the song to explain the Vietnam angle so I put it in the music video for the song. It's not 'left of center' as some might think; it actually fits the overall 1968 story line.

When did the album come out and where is it available?

The album was officially released on April 4, 2015 on the day that the musical story begins. The day Martin Luther King was assassinated. It's available primarily as a digital download on iTunes, Amazon, Google Play and CD Baby. We recognize that our older audience wants physical CDs so in the UK; Soul Brother Records is now our distributor. Our super special item is our Limited Edition DVD-CD Set: as we have 18 music videos for each of the 18 songs on the album! The videos have garnered acclaim as they represent a new form of music video; a sort of musical-documentary style using archived footage from the 1960s and early 1970s. The visuals allow people to really go back in time via the 1968 time machine. I'm exceedingly proud of the films because I've also spent the last 11 years as a film editor and I had a chance to combine my talents. We call the companion DVD: 1968 A Living History Through Music. We might even offer them separately if people want it like that.



What next for 1968 and Rasheed Ali?

Well, honestly my dream might sound a bit silly to some but I'm hoping I can be a Jimi Hendrix of sorts in a small way. I mean Jimi came to the UK and they understood him implicitly, 1968 seems to be catching on in the UK much faster than in the States. So, maybe that means I'm supposed to take the 1968 band to the UK. We shall see I suppose, it's really up to the music listening public to decide my fate on that account! Besides I'm a performing musician, I'm 10X better live than on record. I love making people dance while I play; there's no better high.

And what about the long term?

Well, I honestly believe that the next two installments of the 1968 Trilogy are totally jamming! For 1968: Soul Power! I had to pick the best songs to set things up, so people would begin to wrap their heads around this idea. My mission is to create a space where the youthfulness of the spirit resides for all those old heads who were being left outside the relevance of new musical ideas. My hope is that after the first installment I would have hooked some people into this really cool vibe. There is more and even think it gets better. Like any artistic pursuits, my vision for 1968 gets clearer every day.

How can we find out more?

I am a social media crazy. I've cloned the essence of 1968 but expanded it in many directions. We have our website www.1968soulpower.com which serves as a hub for all our media. We've got our own YouTube Channeltoo, our 1968 featuring Rasheed Ali band page on Facebook, and all other social media networks.

Finally, in just a couple of sentences tell us why we should all go and investigate your music!

If you're an old head, I guarantee that 1968: Soul Power! will resonate with you. It's not nostalgia, it's new music to incite your soul. I want people to watch the 1968 film because it will spark you to see your youth again. If you're a young head, you can learn about something you missed, a special era in history that you can learn from and groove to.



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