

Hip Hop Davey D Breakdown Radio Interview w Sista Souljah

Written by Davey D ID4573

Thursday, 11 December 2008 10:13 -

The first time I met Sister Souljah was back in 1989 when she rolled through the now defunct New Music Seminar in New York City and set the place on fire. There was a historic panel discussion featuring Chuck D of Public Enemy, film director Spike Lee, Singer James Mtume and if memory serves me correctly music exec Bill Stephany also sat on that panel. At that time we knew Souljah as Lisa Williamson and she was no joke. Fiery, articulate and uncompromising, she was one of those folks who made everyone step up their game.

She was the type of person who you wanted to be riding alongside you because there was no way she was gonna lose. She proved that during this panel discussion. The conversations that took place that day were heated. Mtume was a source of controversy because several months prior he had gone on the radio said something about rappers and sampling and how it was not a cool thing. This prompted a response from the group Stetsasonic who released a song called "Talking All That Jazz" which took Mtume to task. The Stets crew showed up to the session deep as it was first time the two parties had met. Anticipating more controversy, folks were pleasantly surprised as Mtume eased tensions by backing off the harshness of his initial statements and clarifying what he meant. He noted that he was a fan not an enemy to Hip Hop.

Spike Lee was the man of the hour because his movie "Do the Right Thing" had dropped and set off racial tensions in New York. That day Spike was bold and brash and seemed to relish the storm that surrounded him and his movie. He pulled no punches as he explained that he felt his movie and the issues it raised was the "right thing" and that it was high time folks dealt with the issue of race head on.

A few months after later New York's simmering racial tensions would boil over with the shooting death of Yusef Hawkins in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn.

Public Enemy was the biggest rap group at that time with Chuck D making folks quiver as he talked about his disdain for Elvis in the song "Fight the Power". That afternoon he spoke eloquently and laid out a 6 point platform that he said would take Hip Hop and industry to new heights. There were a lot of folks in the room that day that took notes and launched their careers using Chuck's advice. The tenet of his speech was centered around importance of positioning oneself to be a presenter of music and not leaving it up to others who did not love or respect the culture. He who controls and defines the music has major power was Chuck's mantra that afternoon.

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Like I said the panel was on tilt, but the person who really rocked the house was the lone woman on that panel Lisa Williamson, who at the time was unknown to folks outside of New York, but known to many of the rappers in the room. If memory serves me correctly, I think fellow journalist Harry Allen described her as a raptivist. That day she gave an impassioned speech about the importance of NOT allowing "media middlemen" get in the way of the social, political and business dealings of Black people. She talked frankly about people outside the community coming in and playing folks off one another, by sparking conflict and redefining our issues and pushing their own agendas. She talked about how Black folks needed to communicate directly with one another and not let people come between us. At that time she named off several music industry executives including Lyor Cohen and Cara Lewis.

She said, "If your name is Eric B you don't let Cara Lewis come between us you come talk to me first because I'm your sister... The middleman will beat us every time". Her remarks were riveting and for many in the room prophetic as many of us would have our own challenges with middlemen who would come into our midst and divide us if we didn't support or agree with their ideals and outlooks.

Sadly Public Enemy would be the first of many who would weather such a storm over remarks made by Professor Griff who was accused of being anti-semitic

Fast forward 19 years.

Lisa Williamson is now Sister Souljah, best selling author, scholar and most importantly still an uncompromising community activist and organizer. She's still the type of person who makes you straighten up your shoulders and step up your game when she enters the room. You step up, not because you're intimidated or brow beaten, but because her energy is infectious and you simply can't help yourself.

I caught up with Souljah the other day when she touched down in the Bay Area to promote her new book "Midnight" which is the prequel to her book "The Coldest Winter Ever". It's her first book in 8 years and has got a lot of people buzzing as they were left wanting to know so much more about the character Midnight. We talked at length about her book, the process she underwent when writing and what sort of things she wanted to convey. Souljah noted that nowadays she finds it easier to get life lessons across through her works of fiction versus real life narratives.

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She bristles at the notion of her being the jump off of what the industry now likes to coin gangsta /urban lit. She explained that there's no jumpoff and that Black folks have been writing and reading forever. She's a writer and a good one at that who produces material that is captivating to an audience that is often underserved and discounted. She doesn't dumb down her material or compromise on the quality of work. She strives to give her audience the best she has to offer and hates that there are those who feel that as a writer who is popular amongst this underserved audience that she has somehow compromising her talents. We also talked about whether or not the stories were true about her and Will Smith's wife Jada Pinket Smith were working on a movie for "Coldest Winter Ever"

She gave us the full 4-1-1. She said she is still working with the Smith's on making her book into a movie. She says she has plans to make sure all her books go to the big screen. She also talked about the importance of people owning their intellectual property. In 2008 with all the new technology around, owning your creations is more important then ever. "Get your business straight", she said.

That point would be reiterated later that evening before a packed house at Eastbay Church of Science in Oakland as she told the audience how HBO agreed to make the movie" but then backed out at the 11th hour after she and Jada had done all sorts of leg work including penning a screenplay. She noted that HBO backed out the deal, retained the movie rights to her creation and for the most parts were making no moves to go forward. She talked about how she had to shell out 300 thousand dollars to buy back her rights and how she learned a hard lesson. Now she owns everything outright and won't make such a mistake again. She told the audience to make sure they always understand their value in the larger scheme of things.

During our interview we built upon a number of topics.

She talked about President-elect Barack Obama and what his victory means to us as Black people. She broke things down as she explained that Obama has a job to do as president and that it doesn't have much to do with the day to day job each of us have to do to uplift our communities. She went into detail about this. We also touched upon Obama's background as a community organizer and how that measured up to the work she has long done as a community organizer who worked with and still works with homeless youth.

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Souljah talked at length about how we should understand that all of us have jobs to do. All of us have a place to fit in. She talked about how we should not be lured into the trap of celebrity worship where we expect a rap artist to suddenly come along and craft a bill or get knee deep into work details that are required to be an effective community activist. She said we often put the wrong expectations upon people and then are left disappointed when they don't come through.

This discussion then led to a larger breakdown about leadership in the African American community and the current state of Hip Hop. With each topic Souljah kicked some keen insight that will leave many re-adjusting some of their concepts.

As we talked I realized that over the years and with all the topics we've discussed in interviews from politics to Malcolm X to relationship advice, I never got the background story that prompted her middleman remarks during that 1989 New Music Seminar panel.

She explained that as a young activist at 19 years old she was doing a lot of work with homeless kids and spending what little money she had on those kids. She talked about how she met LL Cool J and came up with the idea of doing some sort of fundraising concert for the youth. LL wanted to make sure she was on the up and up and sat down with the kids sans Souljah and got the scoop. Once satisfied that she was sincere he agreed to do a concert and not charge her so she could raise funds for her summer camp. This was the start of good thing as soon a number of other artists joined in and added to the lineup. Souljah soon developed a reputation for doing these big concerts at the Apollo Theater in Harlem where some of the biggest names in Hip Hop would come donate their time while she charged a high ticket price that was aimed at all the so called uptown ballers. 100% of the money went to the kids.

Souljah explained it was the perfect marriage. At the time everyone was under 21 and all who participated was excited at being able to contribute their talents to something that was overwhelmingly positive. This was all going down at the height of the crack era where you had young Black people who had been written off by society. It was astounding to critics and enemies of Black people and Hip Hop culture to see young people doing for self and pulling themselves up by their proverbial boot straps and not looking for handouts. People were helping build up their communities. Many of the artists who participated did so gladly because they saw the immediate benefits as that the money raised not only went to Souljah's camps but would also help spark after school programs for the youth in many of the artists own hoods.

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As Souljah's concerts became legendary throughout New York she started to get some outright haterism from industry executives. Frustrated because she had violated no laws and the artists she tapped were in compliance with their contracts, they saw her concerts as something that was cutting them out and therefore a problem. Souljah had eliminated the middleman and went directly to the artists where she leveraged her friendships by highlighting everyone's mutual interests to help out the kids in the neighborhood.

Industry folks worked overtime to find ways to undercut Souljah including going to some of those popular rap artists and threatening to mess up future financial earnings. Souljah noted it was a cold game and quite eye opening to see outside forces could come into the hood and economically strong arm some of our best and brightest stars. One by one folks caved in fearful of economic reprisals. She noted that many weren't the soldiers she had thought they would be. Many did not live up to rhetoric and science they kicked in their songs.

Souljah went on to note that many didn't come directly to her to explain their concerns. Instead industry execs inserted themselves into the equation insisting that they would handle all dealings including bookings for Souljah's concerts. The artist would no longer perform for free and in fact they were being priced out of the market. The end result was her being pressured and eventually written (black balled) out the picture.

A-List rap artists doing a free concert in New York-a city with more than 8 million people was apparently a big problem. Several years later Souljah's formula to help fund community organizations would be replicated by commercial radio stations around the country who would have major rap stars come through and do free Summerjam, Wintetrjam and every other type of "jam" concerts for charity. The coldest part about this is while some of the gate receipts would go aid a few community groups, many of these stations would make up to a third of their yearly budget in behind the scenes sponsorship money for these megajams. So almost overnight, these huge rap stars went from helping fund community social programs in their own neighborhoods that were being systematically under-funded by the then Reagan and Bush administrations to helping fund the portfolios for investors and media moguls to tunes of millions of dollars. The platforms of these media moguls would later highlight harsh stereotypes that would far too often be used to demonize us and put us in bad light. Souljah's recounting of these incidents were sobering as we can see that in way too many instances the same tactics are used today with similar results.

It's with this backdrop and understanding that Souljah's remarks to the audience about owning your own, building institutions and us respecting and loving one another take on heightened meaning. The fact that after 15 years of marriage she and her family still hit the road attending

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all her lectures is a testament to her understanding about how we should strive to keep ourselves firmly rooted.

It was a pleasure chopping it up with Sister Souljah. As I said she's inspiring and full of insight. Her new book Midnight is one that she says she put her heart and soul into and is her favorite work to date. She noted this is the type of book that will hopefully help us grow and become better men and women..

This interview also weeves in excerpts from speeches that Souljah has given in the past as well as a reading from her new book Midnight...

Enjoy

Davey D

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