

Zulu Nation From Gangs to Hip Hop Glory by Davey D

Written by Davey D ID3109

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First thing we wanna do is offer up our congratulations to Hip Hop's oldest and largest organization, the Universal Zulu Nation. They are set to celebrate their 29th Anniversary this weekend (November 8-10) where they will be paying tribute to soul music and funk music God fathers, Sly Stone, James Brown, and George Clinton. They will also pay tribute to Hip Hop's seminal figures Kool DJ Herc, Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa. For those who are unfamiliar with the Zulu Nation, they began as an organization founded by Afrika Bambaataa at Stevenson High School in the Bronx. Back then it was simply known as "The Organization".

Bam who once lived the gang lifestyle and was a Gang Lord was trying to change his ways and saw the newly formed group as a way out. Bam who was known for reading and staying up on the teachings of Elijah Muhammad and other African American leaders, changed the name to Zulu Nation after watching a movie of the same name that told the tale of the well known South African tribe. Bam was inspired by their resistance to Dutch settlers. As Hip Hop became popular, the group became known as the Mighty Zulu Nation and as later the Universal Zulu Nation.

The story behind the evolution of UZN is significant. Back in the days Zulu's struck fear in many who lived outside of their Bronx River Housing Project strong hold. While they gave birth to Hip Hop's first B-Boys and B-Girls, the group for the most part was made up of former gang members. Many of them from the Notorious Black Spades which once reigned terror throughout the Bronx in the early to mid 70s. It used to be a really big deal for cats to hang out at Bronx River and not get stuck up. It was a sign of toughness and brought much prestige.

Many of the early crews tried to associate themselves with Zulu Nation for protection from roving bands of stick up kids and other gangs turned crew. It was in this backdrop that Bambaataa and other conscious brothers spent a lot of time teaching and preaching and working with Zulu members to bring about positive change. Bam often talks about how he would do simple things like bestow titles like "King" and "Queen" upon Zulu members in an attempt to instill pride and confidence. His feeling was that if you treated people like royalty then they would turn around and act like royalty in their actions. As Bam's recording career blew up, he saw too it that many of folks who were from the streets got an opportunity to go on tour with him and the Soul Sonic Force. Sometimes they were employed as roadies. Other times they worked as security. Again Bam's main objective was to see to it that local cats got a chance to see there was a much bigger world outside the Bronx.

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Change didn't happen over night, but today the testament to all that hard work is the fact that there are vibrant Zulu chapters in more than 20 countries all over the world with estimated membership of over 10 thousand. They have come to embrace and preserve Hip Hop's key elements and have exemplified what is often considered Hip Hop's 5th Element-"Knowledge".

To me the beauty of it all is seeing what was once considered a "ruthless gang" evolve" to a group that has strived and succeeded in serving the community. There are all sorts of stories about Zulus ridding their housing projects of drug dealers and many of the older guys spending time mentoring younger people. There are stories about Zulus escorting women to and from their apartments as well as looking out and helping those in need. This of course is in addition to various Zulu chapters that have involved themselves in local politics including the fight to Free Mumia and get him a new trial. We also can not overlook the fact that it was Zulu Nation members who put out some of Hip Hop's first records as well as among the first to establish Hip Hop's first radio shows. Who could forget Zulu Beats with Afrika Islam on WHBI. It's a shame that there hasn't been more of a public celebration and acknowledgment of this organization and its accomplishments. In any case, props to them on their 29th anniversary.. For more information and a run down of this week's schedule check out...

<http://www.zulunation.com/events.html>

by Davey D

Note: Please keep in mind that since this article is a reprint from 2002, that the Zulu Nation Anniversary for 2006 is taking place November 10-12th at the Kennedy Center which is located at 34 west 134th street in Harlem. For more info go to:

<http://www.zulunation.com/events.html>

Check out more from Hip Hop Historian Davey D at

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