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Sonic sage in Little Africa: A report from Tulsa

I can't lie. Before a visit this past March to Tulsa, Oklahoma, I never thought Oklahoma hip hop was a thing. Even more, I erroneously called the vitriolic attack on the prosperous Black neighbourhood of Greenwood during the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre the 'Tulsa Race Riots'. Sure, I had watched the radical re-envisioning of *Watchmen* on HBO and applauded the acknowledgement of the rich history of Greenwood as 'Black Wallstreet'. But it never went any further than that, my satisfaction for the recognition of Black Wallstreet sitting comfortably at the back of my head.

I got put on game quickly, however, when I headed to Tulsa to witness the recording of the *Fire in Little Africa* album, a collaborative hip hop project featuring Tulsa and Oklahoma City rappers to commemorate the 100-year anniversary of the Black Wallstreet massacre. My time in Tulsa was short but memorable: I was moved to tears reading the accounts of massacre survivors, only children at the time. I was moved to anger when listening to the program coordinator for the Greenwood Cultural Center, Ms Mechelle Brown, talk about the struggle to gain financial support for the Center's work in highlighting and amplifying Greenwood's traumatic and triumphant history.

After gaining a new historical understanding, I was thrust into Tulsa's and Oklahoma City's hip hop game: I met and heard the fire ass lyricism of emcees like Steph Simon, Saint Domonick, Thomas Who? and Original Flow, and producers like Nolo and sound engineer Jacc Spade, who ended up feeling like kinfolk I met at the family cookout. I heard them tell stories inside and outside the booth about being Black, country and angry. They delivered

bars that held as much history and energy in setting the record straight as the Greenwood Culture Center about what really happened during those terrifying hot June days and nights nearly a century ago – a massacre widely considered 'the single worst incident of racial violence in American history' (Ellsworth 1992).[1]

1. The Tulsa Race Massacre took place on 31 May and 1 June 1921.

However, what stands out as the most monumental event of my time in Tulsa was the third night of recording for the album. After visiting and supporting local Black businesses like Silhouette Sneakers and Art and Fulton Street Bookstore (both owned and operated by amazing Black women), I headed to the Skyline Mansion venue to listen in on the recording sessions. At first glance, Skyline Mansion stood tall and proud, with various shades of white accent paint, light-coloured brick and mortar held up by three large pillars. The house boasted multiple balconies and viewpoints of the city. The second balcony held my gaze as I walked up the driveway. Its white double doors stood stern, silently at attention, casting solemn judgement out into the city. I broke my gaze long enough to see my friend Stevie standing outside, tapping away on his phone. Dr Stevie Johnson was the visionary and architect for the *Fire in Little Africa* album. In addition to organizing the event, Stevie was also a contributing producer to the album. I tried to get his attention.

'Stevie!'

He remained face-deep in his phone, bopping his head to a beat only he could hear. I tried again, this time calling him by his producer and deejaying name.

'View!' His head snapped up. He smiled.

'What's good? You ready?'

We stood facing each other on the porch, the echoes of emcees and producers laughing and dapping each other up creeping out of the open front door.

'Let's do it'.

I stepped into the foyer and the chandelier held me hostage. It shyly sparkled in our presence, a subtle reminder of the house's former owner, W. T. Brady. Brady was a white supremacist and high-ranking member of the Ku Klux Klan. An active participant in the murder of Greenwood residents during the massacre, Brady allegedly saved the Black people he favoured by holding them hostage in his mansion. The energy in the house was a lot to take: Brady was gone but his legacy haunted the mansion, his mistreatment and murder of Black people forever etched in the walls and crevices of the house. Brady's living quarters, behind a locked and closed door for the event, housed jail-like holding cells for his Black workers. The chandelier, a lasting symbol of the grandeur Brady believed his whiteness afforded him, made me uncomfortable.

'There is a helluva lot of painful energy here', I said.

'Yeah, but we gone fix that', Stevie said, before disappearing into one of the makeshift recording studio rooms.

I ended up spending the majority of my time in the mansion on the second floor, where a small open parlour with plush leather chairs sat in front of the balcony windows that had entranced me earlier. After talking with yet another lost 'cousin', Kyra, I learned that Brady was rumoured to have stood on the balcony watching Greenwood burn.

The parlour was central to a hive of recording sessions and rooms creating music simultaneously. One room blasted G-Funk inspired beats. Another paid homage to Texas hip hop, especially the Pimp (Pimp C of pioneering rap group UGK, for the uninitiated). Yet another room played beats featuring Oklahoma

City violinist Am're Ford. And one was trap beats. Oklahoma hip hop pulled unapologetically from every region. 'It's like God's Gumbo', Stevie said when I asked him earlier to describe Oklahoma hip hop. Emcees and producers scurried from room to room, many bopping their heads to an invisible beat while singing or spitting bits and pieces of a rap swirling in their head. I kept tabs on Oklahoma City rapper Thomas Who?'s trajectory because he passed by my chair the most. Who? declared how many beats he murdered as he jumped from room to room.

'How many bodies you up to?' I'd holler at him as he quickly walked past me.

'I lost count! But they everywhere!' he tossed over his shoulder with a laugh before heading to another room and another beat.

In the unfinished basement of the mansion was another recording session where emcees huddled together on the steps and across the dusty floor to listen to the beat and take turns at the mic. The basement session made me speculate about what those early days in the dungeon back in Atlanta might have been like, with young and hungry artists eagerly listening to beats made by the legendary production team Organized Noize. As a Georgia girl who studied and was steeped in the history and culture of Georgia hip hop, the familiarity of the collaborative spirit happening during the sessions to create and speak their truths to power bound Oklahoma and Atlanta together in my head.

It was not lost on me that I was witnessing the healing and reclamation of Black Tulsa and Black Oklahoma. The descendants of Black Wallstreet were creating amazing hip hop in the house of the former leader of the Tulsa KKK. Their music was sonic sage. The beats echoing through each room and from the basement converged to clear the mansion's dark past while recognizing the Black lives traumatized within its walls. The hip hop being created conjured Black excellence and Black trauma to reach through time and space to reclaim the narratives of resilience lost to the back annals of history.

These artists were the lions sharing their story of the hunt without fear. Perhaps most importantly, the artists recording for *Fire in Little Africa* were using historical and contemporary rage to create – a longstanding tradition in the Black community – making music in order to heal and move forward.

I have long argued that hip hop takes root – I am country, so the proper way to say this is 'rut' – differently in the south and the regions outside of the standard bi-coastal aesthetic. While hip hop at its best is the art of liberation, the quest for liberation hits different in dispossessed and doubly underrepresented communities like those that exist in the south and – in Oklahoma's instance – the west-ish South. To borrow from the work of Mississippian Kiese Laymon, Oklahoma hip hop is doing long division, reckoning with the remnants of a traumatic past while embracing the futurities that are grounded in hip hop culture.

Fire in Little Africa is guaranteed to be a banger, offering up ancestral ambition and rectifying one of the most significant events in American history. They may be able to claim it for now, but Oklahoma will not be hip hop's best kept secret for long.

REFERENCE

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