Roots on the Record

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Hubby Jenkins uses old time and blues music to address revisionist history in America. He’s been playing banjo, guitar, bones, and singing with the Grammy Award Winning all-black string band the Carolina Chocolate Drops since 2011. Jenkins has also been a permanent fixture at the Jalopy Theater in Red Hook since it opened in 2006. When he’s not on stage, he teaches music lessons. And, on stage he’s been known to give some history lessons.

In his performances, Jenkins uses his understanding of the music to introduce his audience to how black history has been re-written around the banjo. He discusses how African American history has been co-opted by blackface minstrel singers and tin pan alley songwriters, resulting in a distorted and stereotyped view of black men.

“From the moment white guys darkened their faces and started singing minstrel songs - Genuine negro tunes - they were changing history,” said Jenkins. “They created these characters, these caricatures of the black man that exist today.”

One example is a song called Little Log Cabin In the Lane, a charming little ditty from 1871 about the good old days. It’s a song written by a white northerner from the perspective of a slave who is missing the days of slavery.
“I can use that to talk about perceptions of African Americans and how they were changed in popular music,” Jenkins said.

In a studio interview on October 5, 2016, Jenkins came to CUNY and did just that.

Jenkins connects the fictitious longing of a former slave for his plantation days with other ways in which history was altered in order to push negative stereotypes of black people. He encourages his listeners to push back against the common pre-conceived notions about African Americans, many of which stem from caricatures intended to undermine their humanity.

Jenkins often plays for mostly white audiences, but he doesn’t shy away from playing songs like Little Log Cabin and dissecting their meaning for the crowd. At times, he’s had verbal altercations with audience members. But that won’t stop him from delivering his message.

“It’s hard to be a bearer of bad news for these communities,” Jenkins said. “You have to know your history to evolve beyond it.”

**Eli Efi**

and the Soldiers of the Black Movement

Eli Efi is a rapper and producer from Itaquera Zona Leste, a favela in Sao Paolo, Brazil. His first group, D.M.N., was one of the earliest Brazilian hip hop acts to write popular music addressing the issues that face poor black people from the favelas, and the first to be featured on MTV Brasil.

Efi has been living in the Bronx since 2004. Along with his studio partner MC Maniphes, he operates a community recording space for CUFA Bronx, an arts-based non-profit that started in Rio de Janeiro in 1996, out of the Andrew Freedman Home.

Tucked away from the Bronx’s busy Grand Concourse, the Andrew Freedman Home is a historic landmark that spans an entire city block. The Renaissance-style gray and yellow limestone mansion was built in 1927 and is surrounded by a wrought iron gate, a close-cropped lawn, and a small grove of trees.
Efi’s space is on the second floor of the mansion, which houses spaces for several other artists, including Bronx hip hop legend Kool Herc. At the end of a long hallway peppered with easels of brightly colored paintings, Eli Efi’s studio is set up to provide a creative outlet for local musicians to come and record music.

At a studio interview at the Andrew Freedman home on December 5, 2016, he discussed the role community plays in his music. Efi delivered a remix of the D.M.N. classic Marcha Soldado, a track that shares the title with a popular Brazilian children’s song. He also previewed the song Vitorioso, a forthcoming track about the rapper looking back on a life of triumphs over adversity.

A survivor of one of Sao Paolo’s toughest neighborhoods, Eli Efi mentors students from Brooklyn, Manhattan, and the Bronx on how to use music to unify the community around a common message of justice, peace, and empowerment. He grew up without a strong knowledge of black Brazilian leaders, a trait he says he shares with many people in his generation. Eli Efi has put it upon himself to be a leader in his own community, and he encourages the musicians he works with to write music promoting positivity.

Efi will release a new EP in 2017. Though he mostly stays local to New York City, Efi plans to perform in Brazil in the coming months along with MC Maniphes, Sao Paolo-based DJ Nyack, and DeLaCeiba, the New York-based rapper and producer.

DeLaCeiba
Spread Love and Keep It Humble

Johnnito Cienfuegos, better known as DeLaCeiba, is a rapper and DJ from Los Angeles, California. He uses hip hop as a catalyst to bring people together, and to share his story with the world. He works closely with several community organizations, including CUFA Bronx, as a performer and event organizer. He writes and performs songs with his wife Atiyya about issues facing their community. He’s also a mentor for at-risk youth in NYC public schools.

DeLaCeiba was born in Honduras. At the age of five, he came to the United States with his family in pursuit of a better life. Though his status as an undocumented immigrant when he was growing up made reconnecting with some of his family members in Honduras difficult, he’s now married with two kids, and maintains a close connection to his roots.
He began writing poetry and rapping in the mid-1990s, mostly in English, which he had been using more commonly since coming to the United States. It wasn’t until he began working with the legendary group the Watts Prophets that he switched to rapping in his native Spanish, which he believes helped him connect more closely with his identity.

A product of public schools in South Central Los Angeles, the decisions he would make at a young age had high stakes. Fortunately, despite his undocumented status, when he was in the sixth grade his parents were able to enroll him in the USC College Enrichment Academy’s Neighborhood Academic Initiative, a program created after the L.A. riots to create educational opportunities for inner city youth. He was able to attend University of Southern California on a full scholarship.

“When I was growing up, things were tough. I had a lot of great mentors to help me make better choices in my life,” he said. “It’s important to be able to give back to communities that need it the most.”

DeLaCeiba helped implement a music workshop at Automotive High School in Williamsburg, led by Brazilian rapper and producer Eli Efi. The two met over MySpace and began working together musically, which led to their professional lives overlapping. They both believe that community is the most important asset they can protect, and are in a unique position to do so. Coming from disadvantaged and immigrant backgrounds, they are able to connect with their students, the majority of whom are Black and Latino, and provide a perspective that fosters trust, self-empowerment, and commitment to their community. Cienfuegos provides mentorship and counseling services, while Efi connects with their students through music. They are committed to producing a new generation of “healers not killers,” and sticking to DeLaCeiba’s mantra: spread love and keep it humble.

Jen Nascimento
and the Power of Music

The Singer and Percussionist Jen Nascimento was born and raised in New York City in a Brazilian family, who relocated to the U.S. when her father, the legendary soccer player Pelé, joined the New York Cosmos in the fledgling North American Soccer League.
After speaking Portuguese only at home and eventually majoring in English at Wesleyan University, Jen’s love of language led to a career in teaching and translating in the academic and film industries. She has subtitled primarily activist documentaries and translates articles for the likes of Vice and The Huffington Post.

Music has always been central to Nascimento’s life. The Brazilian lyrical tradition and its connection to social movements fascinated her. She learned about Brazilian artists who were forced into exile because of the messages of their music, and about how they were forced to write lyrics in code to keep communicating with their audience.

“In Brazil the protest music from the dictatorship (1964-85) is fascinating, it’s so smartass, and, cutting,” she said. “If you weren’t famous, and you spoke out against the government, you’d just disappear you know. But the famous people got exiled. So they would write songs in code; the lyrics would be about dancing in the streets as if it was about carnaval when really it was about the street protests that were going on, which eventually overthrew the military rule in a movement known as “Diretas já,” or “Direct votes now!”

Throughout adulthood Nascimento developed her natural music ability, focusing first on percussion (Brazilian and Ghanaian traditions, as well as afrobeat and jazz), and later training her voice in the stringent bel canto discipline.

She was also strongly impacted by the music and story of Fela Kuti.

“When I first discovered Fela Kuti, after finding myself in the backup section of a 22-piece afrobeat band, I really came to understand the power that music and lyrics can have in society,” Nascimento said. “And then I read his autobiography. Let’s just say it’s easy to see why it’s not taught in our schools.”

She sings and plays percussion with 7-piece groove machine The Saturators, and hosts a Brazilian music podcast. In her spare time, Nascimento translates Brazilian songs from Portuguese into English. Two of the tunes she performed in a live studio interview on November 16, 2016 are activist songs in Portuguese, while the other is a classic American protest song.

Nascimento’s accompanying guitarist and vocalist Viva de Concini is an accomplished performer and composer.
Nascimento describes de Concini’s music as “inspiring and cerebral,” noting her stylistic range from Samba to acoustic folk and blues to “masterful rock guitar, with virtuosic vocal arrangements.” Nascimento calls De Concini’s lyrics “revolutionary love poems.”

Since they met in 2001, de Concini has played a crucial part in Nascimento’s musical life, and they continue to work closely together.