

## Talib Kweli Interview

with DJ Matt Werner on Fresh Air: The Alternative

<http://freshair.org.uk>, <http://mattswriting.com>

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The full hour-long interview and feature can be downloaded [here](#).

DJ MATT WERNER: This is DJ Matt Werner on Fresh Air: The Alternative. We're coming at you from Edinburgh, Scotland, and we have Talib Kweli with us on a phone interview. And so Talib, you've been very active this last year, and I've read most of the interviews you've conducted this last year online: on everything from your song about Lauren Hill, J Dilla, MCEO, and other projects, so I don't want to repeat questions that've already been asked in these other interviews. But my listeners here in Scotland have had two main questions for you. One is on...

TALIB KWELI: Black Star?

DJ MATT WERNER: Yeah, Black Star.

TALIB KWELI: [*laughs*]

DJ MATT WERNER: They're wondering about a reunion album, or they're wondering if any more collaborations are coming up between you and Mos Def.

TALIB KWELI: Well, Mos Def has the album coming out on Downtown Records. I don't know when, but it should be out shortly. We have a great song on it called *History*. I don't know when the next Black Star album will happen, but we've certainly stayed active, stayed prolific on each other's records, since the Black Star album's come out.

DJ MATT WERNER: And segueing off that, your fans here in Scotland were wondering, When is the second Reflection Eternal album coming out?

TALIB KWELI: That'll be out this summer. There's a single—well not a single—me and Hi-Tek did a song with Bootsie Collins just for fun that we put up, we blasted out on our Twitter pages, and we put up on my website <http://yearoftheblacksmith.com> for download.

Just to let the fans know that we will be coming soon. Right now I'm soliciting, I'm reading video treatments as we speak for the next Reflection Eternal single, and that's a project that's almost finished.

DJ MATT WERNER: And how about *Liberation 2*? You've been dropin' some really dope mixtapes in the last couple of years, and fans were wondering about, will there be a *Liberation 2* coming out?

TALIB KWELI: *Liberation 2*—I've been working on it with Madlib. Madlib is real elusive, so it's hard to work with him sometimes. But I mean, you know, it doesn't matter

how hard it is work with Madlib, his tracks are that dope that it's always worth it in the end.

DJ MATT WERNER: And now because I'm a literature Master's student here at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, I've been very interested in your lyrics, ever since I first listened to your track *Fortified Live* back in '97. And I'm curious as to what your writing process is and how you come up with your similes.

TALIB KWELI: *Fortified Live*, I mean, it's changed since then. When I wrote that song, I had a book of rhymes, and I had a bunch of rhymes that I wanted set to beats. And it's particularly in that song, you know, I try to stay relevant. A lot of rappers were talking about their South American drug connections and stuff like that, like a lot of street rap was on that when I first came out, and that's why I make references to Assata Shakur and to Cuba, because I wanted to show that the revolutionary aspect could be a lot more "gangster" than the street aspect of it.

Now I just try to stay relevant to what people are thinking about, what people are talking about and try to write to the track. The production, the music to me is king and should be respected as such. And the lyrics, as much as people like yourself appreciate great lyricism—in entertainment and music that's done onstage and in nightclubs where they got speakers and drinks are flowin', it's hard for people to concentrate on lyrics, so you have to figure out what you're doin' to bring them into what you're sayin', and that's makin' sure that it matches the music.

DJ MATT WERNER: I'm curious as to how you define yourself as an artist. On your track *Beautiful Struggle*, you say, "They call me the political rapper," but you try to distance yourself from that title. But at the same time, you've come out and publicly supported Barack Obama, and you've dropped tracks like *The Proud*, and more recently, *Take it Back*, where you rap about Iraq, suicide bombers, and you also critique politicians. So I'm curious, How do you define yourself as an artist? Like as a political rapper, conscious rapper? Where do you see yourself fit in?

TALIB KWELI: Well, you know, I mean as an artist, you grow and change, and you shift and you bend. And as an artist who makes music, I would really like to define myself as just a musician. When I made the song *The Proud*, you know, I was specifically sayin' in *The Proud* that I don't really deal with the politics and that I don't... You know, you wouldn't really find me criticizing politicians in that era of my career. You know, I've talked about social situations. In the song *Take it Back*, I'm talking about human life way more than I'm talkin' about politics.

Now as far as my support of President Obama, he's the first politician that I've come out and support, and I felt like he deserved my support. And it was a big deal for me to come out and support him because I've been very careful throughout my career to not only not support politicians but to not talk about, not be critical of politics. When you listen to my record, you might hear me mention the name Giuliani, but Giuliani is a social/cultural figure in the city I'm from. I wasn't talkin' about his skills as a mayor. In the realm of

politics, you could argue that Giuliani cleaned up New York City. But in the realm of reality, which is bigger than politics, that's not necessarily a true argument. Because, yeah, he made New York City more 'Disneyfied.' But the amount of people that he arrested, and he wrongly arrested in that time period, the amount of freedoms that were stripped away from people in that city in order for that to happen, for it to *look* like the city is better, is really a lot that needs to be thought about and considered as well.

DJ MATT WERNER: One track I'm playing on my half-hour feature of yours is my favorite track of yours, which is your tribute to Nina Simone's *Four Women*. It's the *Expansion Outro* off your first Reflection Eternal album. And I'm curious as to how you came to write it because it's a bit different than many of your other tracks.

TALIB KWELI: Yeah, I mean Nina Simone is probably one of my, if not my favorite artist. And that song *Four Women*, is just a perfect piece of song writing. And my introduction to it was a live concert of Nina Simone performing at Berkeley. So the first few years I listened to that song, I didn't realize that it was like a 3 or 4 minute simple song. Because the version that I heard, she was really explaining how she wrote the song, explaining where these characters came from. And I thought that's just how the song went. So when I wrote my song, I really went into depth with the characters because I thought that that's where Nina Simone went. As I grew older and became more knowledgeable about music, I found out that you know what, I was basing my version off of a long extended live version. But you know I think that it made my version something

different. I don't know if I would've been able to recreate that song without knowing the history of those characters, for a hip hop song, you know.

DJ MATT WERNER: And I'm curious as to how you balance your role as MC and CEO. You have some dynamic artists under you like Jean Grae and you got the crew Strong Arm Steady. And you're also part of Idle Warship and I hear there's this *Party Robot* album coming out. I'm curious as to how you balance this work life while being creative and also having to run a business and oversee other artists.

TALIB KWELI: Well, I mean it's tough. I wouldn't lie and say that it's easy—it's very tough. And I owe these artists a lot. These artists are artists that...Strong Arm Steady, Jean Grae—these artists are artists that have inspired me to do and become the artist that I am, and these are people I look towards for my inspiration. So if their music ain't poppin' out there, and their situation ain't great, then my situation ain't great, that's the way I look at it. But I always maintain that I come out of a musical community or a musical family....So as tough as it is to try to oversee all of this and keep pushin' all of this stuff, even when people, sometimes they don't get it, it would be even harder to do it by myself.

DJ MATT WERNER: And part of your marketing is very creative. You got this great website called <http://yearoftheblacksmith.com>, where you have some videos of Blacksmith TV, where they follow you around with your different tours and different shows, and it's really quite funny. I was recently watching Episode 4, where it has you on

a bike and it's raining, and you're saying, "I was trying to be environmentally conscious, and now I'm just wet." I thought it shows the lighter side, the behind-the-scenes of the hip hop game.

TALIB KWELI: Yeah, I mean, that's the key about that show. Definitely.

DJ MATT WERNER: And I'm curious if it's going to be made into anything on TV. I know you've been on MTV a bit, but when's your next role on TV coming up?

TALIB KWELI: I don't know. TV is a beast, you know? Part of the reason of doing Blacksmith TV is to develop content that I can control. So hopefully I do get picked up for some sort of situation. I just did a voice over for a web-based show called Blockheads, which is like an animated hip hop thing. And it's me... Lauren London, and a bunch of people. That was really fun. But hopefully I can do more TV and more stuff like that, you know, I'm into that stuff.

DJ MATT WERNER: Yeah, and part of this cross-over marketing, you talk about in *Internet Connection*, your first track from your new collaboration with Hi-Tek. And in this, you touch upon how technology and Web 2.0 has sorta changed hip hop. And I was curious if you could elaborate more on how the hip hop game has changed since the late 1990s when you were starting up, and today, when you have YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter.

TALIB KWELI: Yeah, I mean all those sites are really just digitally building a community. Whereas before, you had to get up and get on a train or get on your bike, or take the bus to the park and meet up with other people and actually go to a show. Now, you can stream whatever. Now you can iChat, or talk on Twitter or whatever. And it makes you more self-absorbed. Because you have to spend more time talking about yourself than you ever did in your whole career, but at the same time, it enables you to connect on a global level, if you figure out how to master it. If you figure out how to freak it and use it to your advantage. If you're just on the social networks being social, then you're not really using it to your full advantage.

DJ MATT WERNER: In *Internet Connection*, when you're referencing avatars, which I assume was a reference to Second Life, it reminded me of Jean Baudrillard who has this notion of "hyperreality," where people live their lives mediated by different elements of the media, without actually being there in person. And I thought it was fascinating because you're known as one of the most provocative live emcees and performers, and I was wondering what your thoughts are on that.

TALIB KWELI: As soon as they made Second Life, I was one of the first performers on Second Life taking advantage of it. I haven't really been on it since then, since the start-up of it. But it's a scary concept, you know? All this stuff is scary. Twitter is scary to me. I'm on Twitter all the time, and it's scary to me. But I realize if I'm not on it, it's just another lane that somebody else's taking advantage of that I'm not taking advantage of. But man, yeah—[Jean Baudrillard's notion of "hyperreality"]—



that's something that's completely and totally foreseeable for our future. They haven't figured it out yet, but they're tryin' damn hard with these websites and these robots and things they're making, they're trying damn hard to get us there.

DJ MATT WERNER: I have another question that goes back to the notion of being the MCEO. I read on an internet forum about Blacksmith's relationship with Warner Brothers. And I was curious as to how you're reacting to the news [I read in online forums] that Warner Brothers isn't going to be distributing the future Blacksmith titles. I was wondering if you could elaborate on that.

TALIB KWELI: Well, actually, that's not complete true, and I had a problem with Warner [Brothers] over that because I felt that they should've did a better job at cleaning that up. But my album with Reflection Eternal with DJ Hi-Tek is furnished by Blacksmith Music, and it's still coming out through Warner Brothers, and it's on track and it's on schedule, and we ready to put it out.

I also deal with Warner Brothers as a solo artist. Keep in mind, I only put out one album with them as a solo artist. That deal was a three album deal. And that was a successful album. The deal as far as Reflection Eternal and Blacksmith is not going anywhere. It is what it is. Now as far as Jean Grae, Jean Grae was upstreamed by Warner Brothers, but right now, what we're we're just tryin' to do is figure out which situation through Warner, which arm of Warner, whether it's the one that I'm on, or the Asylum situation 'coz of Todd Moscovitz is now the head of Urban at Warner Brothers and if it's coming

out through there. We're just tryin' to figure out what makes sense for Jean Grae's album.

Strong Arm Steady's album will be coming out through ADA [the Alternative Distribution Alliance], which is another chapter of Warner, which we put out the Jean Grae *Jenius* album last year through. And also look out for our participation in the Blu situation. Blacksmith as of marketing, with the online stuff, you're goin' to be hearing more about Blu from LA, who just signed with Warner Brothers. And you're gonna be hearin' more about John Forte.

DJ MATT WERNER: And also I've seen that there's been a number of mixtapes. There was a Coast 2 Coast Mixtape that was just recently released on your site. I was wondering if you could talk a little about this March Mixtape Madness that you're hosting.

TALIB KWELI: Yeah, that's my man Fillet Harrison [Donald Harrison], he's a DJ up in Portland. With him and his homeboys, they have this Coast 2 Coast Mixtape, where every month, they have a different artist host a mixtape, and this month, it just happens to be me.

DJ MATT WERNER: I was wondering, is there any question, or an area that I haven't covered yet that you'd like to address or bring up?

TALIB KWELI: No, besides Idle Warship, that the *Party Robot* album at this point is still independent. I don't know if it's gonna remain independent or if we're going to put it out through our label or whatnot, but Idle Warship is an extremely, extremely exciting experience for me at this point, doing these shows with this live band.

DJ MATT WERNER: And also, I was reading that you had participated in experimental theater at NYU. And I was wondering if this was accurate. Just 'coz other artists I've interviewed on my show who include Saul Williams, and other people who've been on the Def Poetry Jam with you like George Watsky, Ise Lyfe, Dahlak Brathwaite, and all of them have somewhat of a theater background. And I've seen that with more of the "conscious rappers," or people who have amazing stage performances, they have this theater background, and I was curious if this background, you think has influenced how you perform onstage.

TALIB KWELI: Yeah, I think without a doubt. The thing about theater, especially experimental theater is that you have to embody everything you're doin'. Like you have to... You get a character, right? But you have to create everything about this character, like the backstory and the blocking, like the way the character is gonna speak and talk and everything like that. And it's like, that's what you do when you come up with a rap name, like you create a character. But your character is based on some sort of fantasy version of yourself. You know what I'm sayin'? So it's like, it's really the same skill-set. The only difference is you have to write rhymes that go along with the attitude of this character.

DJ MATT WERNER: The thing that I like is that you keep it real, where you just use your own name. And so it's not like you have this caricature of yourself. But you do come across a lot more fresh and a lot more real than the kind of emcess who're frontin' and have this whole image of them set up.

TALIB KWELI: I'm glad I'm havin' that effect because even though I do use my real name, who you see onstage is definitely a caricature of who I am in real life. And you know, who I am in real life is somethin' that I strive to protect at times. I'm a lot funnier and I'm a lot angrier in real life. You know I'm sayin'? I'm a lot more balanced as an artist. You try to present a perfect picture of yourself, even in exposing your history. Some artists...I don't have no real bad, no real traumatic thing in my past to expose. But artists who expose that sometimes, they expose it sometimes with the intention that you'll feel it.

And with me, the stuff that I reveal, whether it be my social views, or how I feel about somethin', it's with the intention that people will be like "Yeah, I feel you." That is something that drives you on the ego side as an artist. And that's somethin' that's real, but as an artist, as your stage persona, you try to present the best version, I think.

DJ MATT WERNER: And going with this stage persona and presenting your image, one trend that's been very popular in the last couple of years is the use of Auto-Tune, with

people doctoring their vocals. And I was curious—have you pursued Auto-Tune, are you thinkin’ about doin’ that, or are you just gonna keep with your fresh voice?

TALIB KWELI: Auto-Tune: you know makin’ music is not a paint-by-numbers thing, so it’s not a thing where someone could be like “Okay, I’m gonna test Auto-Tune this year, or I’m gonna try....” If it works for the song, it works for the song. And there are certain songs where it certainly works for. The problem is not Auto-Tune. The problem is people’s overuse of it. Same thing with conscious rap back in the day. Back in the days when PE [Public Enemy] was on top, and you had...[*indecipherable*]... KRS One, you had a lot of people doin’ conscious rap, positive rap. Not all of it was good, though, and a lot of it felt fake. And so it made the way for groups like NWA. And so they blew up, and then you had a lot of copycat gangstas, and so then that felt forced and fake. And that’s the just the way things go naturally, I think.

DJ MATT WERNER: Thank you very much for taking time out of your busy touring, CEO, emceeding schedule...

TALIB KWELI: [*laughs*]

DJ MATT WERNER: ...to talk with us here on Fresh Air: The Alternative.

TALIB KWELI: Thank you.

DJ MATT WERNER: Thank you very much for taking time out.

TALIB KWELI: No problem.

*[For more podcasts and show transcripts from DJ Matt Werner, including his interview with Saul Williams, please visit Fresh Air: The Alternative at <http://freshair.org.uk> and DJ Matt Werner's website at <http://mattswriting.com>]*