

LOCAL NOISE

K'naan

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K'naan, Tony Mitchell, Alastair Pennycook,
Astrid Lorange.

Summary:

“I’m certain that any country, any given country in Africa, you will find an ancient form of hip hop. It’s just natural for someone from Africa to recite something over a drum and to recite it in a talking blues fashion, and then it becomes this thing called hip hop.”

K'naan is a Somali refugee who now lives in Canada. His family escaped Mogadishu on the last commercial flight to leave the capital before the airport shut in 1991. He got into hip-hop by memorising rhymes from records by Eric B and Rakim that were sent to him by his father from the US. He considers hip-hop to be the ‘poor people’s weapon’, an art form that is present where ever there is struggle and oppression. His lyrics deal with the superficial, glorified notion of the ‘gangster’, often contrasting the commercial image of the ‘gangster’ with the young people in Somalia who are the victims of extreme violence and bloodshed. In this interview, conducted at the Enmore Theatre cafe before he supported Xavier Rudd, he talked to Local Noise about the Somali tradition of poetry, the inherent connections between hip-hop and Africa, and his notion of the ‘dusty foot philosopher’.

About:

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Local Noise is an ARC-funded research project from the University of Technology, Sydney. Its focus is on Australian hip-hop, and the localisation of hip-hop in different cultural, societal and educational contexts.

K: K'naan

TM: Tony Mitchell

AP: Alastair Pennycook

AL: Astrid Lorange

TM: In 'Blues for the Horn' [from the album *The Dusty Foot Philosopher*], you talk about the Somali tradition of poetry. I understand your grandfather was a poet, and you mention a guy called Areys Ise Karshe. Who is Areys Ise Karshe?

K: One of my all time favourite poets. Ever, ever. It's him, my grandfather, Pablo Neruda... These are the people that I think were the grandest people in poetry. He, however, did a different style of poetry, where he drummed while he was reciting poetry, and there's a famous poem that I had remade in my own way, in English, which has become what is on this album, 'Until the Lion Learns to Speak'. That rhythm is from Areys Ise Karshe. He would do [*K'naan does the beat and melody from 'Until the Lion Learns to Speak'*]. That was his rhythm. No one else in the country did that. And he would recite. That one poem had the Somali alphabet, from 'a' to the end of the alphabet, he would go through each letter, he would go through maybe what would be in typed five or six pages of recitation. And everything that he talked about was concerning the struggle of the country and its power struggle with independence and colonialism.

AL: When was he writing and performing his poetry?

K: In the 40s.

AL: Because I was reading that the actual language wasn't written until the 70s.

K: Yes. We never really wrote our language.

TM: So it's purely an oral tradition?

K: It is, yes. It's what makes it so poetically heavy.

AL: We were interested in this idea of the language – obviously in the poetry – all being taught to the younger people orally. I remember reading in an interview; you said that the articulation, the learning of the language and the poetry was part of becoming a man, this idea of manhood, which is really interesting, and that's obviously connected to your music as well.

K: Yeah. There was a man who drove me in a taxi in Toronto who's a Somali man, who after recognising me said, 'You know I wanted to share a story with you'. He said, 'I took my two children, who are 11 and 12, back home to Somalia to meet their family, and coincidentally, they met their younger cousins, one of which is three-years-old'. And he said after meeting the first day, the young three-year-old came to him with concern, and said to him, 'What has happened to your children?' And he said, 'Oh nothing', and he [the child] said, 'What has hindered their growth process?' And he said 'Why would you say that?' and he said, 'Well they don't speak very well, and they're already grown people, so I was wondering...' And that's really the nature of language in our country. It is so highly regarded. It's your livelihood.

AP: So how do you see hip-hop relating to that?

K: My music is everything to me. The reason why I started writing – one of the reasons – partly was the struggle that I had seen, and wanting to articulate [it]. But secondly, it was to try to regain my place in a universal context, which I had lost after losing my language, after losing my country, and travelling to a new country where my language was no longer in use. I could no longer communicate

anything, I had to learn a new language, so that was a big loss. And for me, finding music and hip-hop was directly linked to overcoming that, and to finding a place that I am necessary, linguistically.

AP: And you still use Somali, like in the track 'Hoobaale'.

K: Yes.

TM: In 'Hoobaale', you say "how come they only fix the bridge when someone has fallen". What's the context of that?

K: Just the world at the moment. In fact, I have a good friend, Mos Def, who is a brilliant artist. This is one of his favourite lines that I have done, and he always recites this, and he says to me, 'It makes me think about New Orleans'. But I had written this before [Hurricane Katrina], and this is about just generally, [how] we often wait to appreciate a circumstance after it is dire, it's a human trait. After loss is when we recognise loss.

TM: So it's part of the philosophy of the 'dusty foot philosopher'. We wanted to ask you to talk a bit more about the whole concept of the dusty foot philosopher; you talk about things like the 'articulate gangster' and the 'survivalist'.

K: In struggle, we don't have a posture element which is connected to that struggle. We don't have a way to glorify it. Really because it is so rampant, everyone in the country is dealing with the same thing that you're dealing with, it doesn't make you unique. In America, the struggle in community lives in the ghetto, and everyone knows this. And outside of that, the general population lives. And so, this is why it is so special to voice your struggle, and glorify it, in a sense. This is why it's 'Me, I'm the one having a problem in the ghetto', but in my country, everyone is in that condition. So it's not special. So therefore we don't have an element which makes it a thing that is possibly glorifiable. And that's why, for me, what I was talking about was [that] these are the people who don't speak about it, they live it. And when there's a gangster, quite a few of which exist in my life, who I know, they never say that they are. They don't have that mentality; it's not linked to 'cool'. In fact, it is uncool. And they know it, and that's the misfortune.

TM: So it's a completely different concept of gangster from the US gangsta rap.

AL: And this is what you are talking about in the track, 'What's Hardcore', relating to some American mainstream hip-hop.

K: Exactly. When my older brother, who in that world, is quite respected – back home in Somalia and in the US and in Canada – he's just naturally one of those people who has overcome many, many struggles, and is a survivor, you know it in his eyes. He and I would sit around and sometimes watch music videos from MTV or BET on mute, and see a lot people like [*K'naan strikes a few typical gangsta rap poses*] 'I'm this, I'm that'. And he would just always look at them and say to me, 'K'naan, aren't they sort of like the spoiled children in Somalia?' That's how we look at them. Even the toughest of them we know can't survive how we live. And so it just looks a bit cartoonish.

AP: That idea of the 'dusty foot philosopher', what are you trying to say more broadly with that idea?

K: Well, I'm just one of them. On television, when they show Africa, often they show children and then, often they show – and I'm talking about charity television, which unfortunately is the majority Africa, now, what we see about Africa – they focus on the feet of the children. The camera always kind of pans to the feet, and the feet are always dusty. What they're trying to portray is a certain bias connected to their own historical reasoning. What I saw though, instead, was that that child with the dusty feet is not a beggar, and he's not an undignified struggler, but he's the dusty foot philosopher. He articulates more than the cameraman can imagine, at that point in his life. But he has nothing;

he has no way to dream, even. He just is who he is.

AL: And that's related, I think, to something you said: that the idea of feeling displaced when you arrived in Canada was just the simple fact that you were wearing shoes everyday. There was that idea of something so simple as barefootedness being natural and then not; something like that can displace you.

K: It can. If you imagine that everyday in your life you, I don't know, say you took a shower. And then one day, you were told not to take a shower for the rest of your life: this is a strange thing. And for us, walking on the sand with your bare feet is therapeutic, you feel the sun... and suddenly you just don't do that, you just wear shoes. And so it's things like that that would make you feel like a foreigner.

TM: Do you see yourself as connected to the African griot tradition at all?

K: Well the griot idea, that's a west African tradition, it's not an east African tradition. But we have our own poetic lines that exist, heritage in poetry. Areys Ise is one of those poets, so yeah, I belong to the eastern aspect of that world.

AL: We wanted to ask you about storytelling and using drums, and this idea of rhythm and oral language; how you see that connected to hip-hop, and hip-hop's beginning, its roots in Africa.

K: Well it has been said before, and it's quite obvious, I mean most musical traditions have come from Africa, jazz or whatever it is...

TM: Blues...

K: ...Yeah. And hip-hop seems to me like the most obvious tradition that came from Africa. It's certainly been Americanised. And you know, it's significant also that the person who first started to do hip-hop in America was Kool Herc, and he's from the islands, from Jamaica. And Jamaica has always traditionally musically been connected to Africa a lot more than the Americas. And so, there's the griot tradition, but then there's our own tradition in Somalia... I'm certain that any country, any given country in Africa, you will find an ancient form of hip-hop. It's just natural for someone from Africa to recite something over a drum and to recite it in a talking blues fashion, and then it becomes this thing called hip-hop.

AP: In your lyrics, you've said you feel you've got a right to talk and sing about Somalia, because if you don't, you're kind of ignoring what is so much a part of you. I'm interested though to what extent you see that as an educational role, do you see it as raising people's awareness? There was the famous time when you were at the UN and told people what was going on... But how do you see that as the educational role of what you do?

K: It's interesting, you know, because I've never really dissected those thoughts. If it's education, then it's education I haven't been conscious of. I just thought it was necessary to inform, to say these things. It was necessary, more than education. Education has an element to it where you are conscious of the result. But for me, it was information. It was just one way; I just had to get it out. And that's what I was doing in my music, it was urgent and necessary, and no one at all in any musical form in a mainstream manner in North America was talking about what I was talking about, or what was important to me, or Africa, when I had first written my first few things. So I was more focused on just getting it out, without being aware of exactly what I was doing.

AP: But do you now see yourself as having a role to kind of make people aware of what's happening in Somalia?

- K:** Yeah, now I do. It's clear, I mean because, I've used most of my media avenues that I've had, from the time I started my career to now, to inform about the Somali struggle. There's no interview ever done with me that's absent from that, that is solely based on me. But even that wasn't apparent to me until after I had thought about it. After a long time.
- TM:** Can you talk a little bit about the *Building Bridges* project that you did with Youssou N'Dour?
- K:** When artists come together, they always, be it that you are known or not known, artists have a magnet circle where they know who to gravitate to. And ideas, and the philosophy then become widely dictated by the few that they gravitate to. And there was a few that for some reason I was a part of in that circle. And we all were a little suspicious about this project and if it will have any merit, artistically, if it will be any good. Because we had two weeks to record it, and we didn't know each other. But Youssou, myself and Bai Kamara Jr, were these guys who thought about it, like, is this going to be any good? And it was because of that that it gave it some soul.
- AL:** So you guys were actually collaborating? Because my impression was that it was individual tracks...
- K:** We kind of sat around for each other's sessions the whole time and contributed musically to one another's things and ideas.
- AL:** And the idea was that all of the artists were in exile, is that the idea?
- K:** Yes.
- AL:** Only from Africa?
- K:** Yeah, exiled artists from Africa.
- TM:** One thing I noticed on the album was that you don't really talk much about your Muslim background, which is interesting because there are a lot of hip-hop artists who do talk about being Muslim. I wonder why you chose not to?
- K:** Well, being a Muslim is something that you do, not talk about. I don't mean that you do not talk about it; it's something you do, rather than say you are. And I'm a Muslim in that way, in the true way, in the way that it is not holding a banner saying 'I am a Muslim, look at me'. Instead, I am doing what a Muslim is supposed to do. I'm trying to spread some good, trying to be good, trying to not offend people; those are the elements that exist for me. And so it means nothing to say 'I'm a Muslim', it means more to *be* a Muslim.
- TM:** So what do you think about the 'Nation of Islam', and all the US hip-hop artists who are involved with that?
- K:** I think it's cool, but it's not Islam. It's more a cultural tool. It's more addressing the black issue, [and] something always needs to address the black issue in that crazy place. There always needs to be some sort of primary instilment in the people that live there. 'Cause it's very hard, for the people who live there. You know, there's an uncle of mine who is pro-'get up', you know, pro-'get off your arse and don't complain', kind of a guy, who's been a soldier in Somalia, and really struggled, and that sort of thing, and he says to me, 'Man, the black Americans, why are they like this? How come they're still looking to the past and saying "we've been messed over", how come they don't do something?' And I was saying to him, 'What about the Jews?' and he says, 'Well they're successful, look at them', and I was saying, 'Well imagine now, that the Jews still lived under their past oppressor, to this day, that their legislations were still coming from those who'd previously oppressed them'. And this is the case for black people in the US; they still live in those conditions. So something always needs to happen, and I think Nation of Islam was just one of those things. But it's not Islam. Islam is a

unified thing, it has no cultural boundaries, it has no skin affiliation, it has no political ideology, it is something that is for humanity.

AP: Someone has actually spoken of the global hip-hop 'umma'... Do you see yourself as part of that?

K: *[laughs]* That's amazing! I don't know, man. I've been asked to do this interview in Canada where they were doing a profile entirely, like a big national profile, one me, and they were following me around, and one of the ideas that the producers had was to see me in my natural environment; praying, and maybe doing things that are Islamic, and I said to him, 'That's the only thing I won't do on camera', because you don't pray on camera. As soon as you are praying or giving charity on camera, it's no longer pray or charity. So I don't know about being involved in that... *[laughs]*

AP: Do you see yourself as being connected, or do you have connections with African hip-hop, like east African, Kenya, or other people there?

K: I have a lot of connections: south, west and east. I'm friends with a lot of the guys who are coming up, and doing something. I don't know if you guys know Tumi and the Volume from South Africa?

TM: I have just heard of them.

K: They are very interesting. Tumi is an incredible poet and MC from South Africa. There's Zaps from there. I'm friends with Mwafrika, who's on my album, in Kenya. He's like the freestyle champion in Kenya. So much so that he used to go and battle every few weeks to pay his rent, he was certain that he would win. There's people that are in these regions who are coming and doing their thing.

AL: There seems to be a bit of a growing scene in Australia too of people; we've been looking at a few people, there's a group from Melbourne called Diafrix, and there's a group out in western Sydney, all the members are originally from Ghana, and there's another group up in Darwin, and that seems to be a scene that's quite happening. Recently Sinpare came out from Kenya and performed in Sydney.

K: Hip-hop is a thing that has to go where the struggle goes. Wherever the struggle is, is where it goes. And so no one's dealing with struggle more than Africa is, and so naturally, it was from there, it is there now, it will always be there. It's an odd expression, it's the way that you say something when you can't sing that emotion, you say in hip-hop what you can't sing.

TM: I remember you saying in an interview that you are involved in hip-hop because it's different from singing, because it's more speaking from the heart, more expressing emotions in a powerful way, whereas if you write a song, it's not so direct or visceral.

K: Because I mean, when we have something to say and we want to complain, we say it, don't we, and this is what it is; you say it with metaphors and similes and stories... but directly. But I do like singing, I do like doing all of those things, but it can't replace what it is to say 'aaah'.

AP: You were talking about having to leave Somalia and move to Canada, but through that you gained a lot of access to English and now you use predominantly English – do you feel that in some ways that was ultimately an advantage for you, because English is so much more widely used, that it gives you an advantage to get this message out to people? Say if you had stayed in Somalia, been a rapper only in Somalia, no one might listen to you?

K: Right, but that's an advantage for the people of Somalia. I see it is as not an advantage for me, but an advantage for the people of Somalia, because they have someone that is expressing the conditions, that is talking about their own struggle in a dignified way, and presenting it in a well-rounded way. That is my privilege, but it is their present, their gift. I never really saw my music as a personal

success story, or something I wanted personally to succeed in. The truth is, I'm the type of person that if there existed an alternative for me, and there was someone talking about what I was talking about when I had written it, I wouldn't have done this at all. I would have probably written poetry like my mother does, and just shared it with the people I loved, and that's it.

AL: Do you see English as a poetic language, do you think English is a language which lends itself well to poetry?

K: No, I don't think so. Well, I don't know what else to compare it except Somali, and Somali is entirely poetic, I mean, even if I was to speak to you in Somali just in conversation, you'd hear rhythm, and you'd hear rhyme, and most of the words I would use would have to begin in the same letter. It's just because it is set up in poetry. So, when I compare it to Somali, English is very dry, and also very young sounding. It's blatant. Whereas in Somali, if you had done something wrong, I would have to take three minutes to address the universe, and then say to you, '...this is why you've done something wrong'.

AL: I saw on the internet somewhere a clip of Mos Def and you, and you were doing 'My God' with the drum, where was that?

K: New York, in a place called BB Kings. A legendary venue in New York. It was nice. It was his time, he was ending the show, and I was back stage. If you ever see him live, if you ever get the chance you should see it, because it's not like anything you've seen, it's not like hip-hop, it's almost like folklore. Like a legendary kind of a person that exists amongst us now, that people will really start to appreciate some other time. He has two people who play music behind him, like DJs, who send songs for most of the evening to him, to his monitor. They will send whatever song they feel like sending, as a challenge, and he will create the song over that. He's prolific. And then, that night, just before his last song, he said, 'All right, stop, stop', and he stopped, and he said 'You know, I'm really bored with hip-hop and this stuff, but this is the guy who got me back into it', and he brought me up, and we did 'Oh My God'. So it seems like things are changing. Because before I was making this music, before this thing, before people started seeing it in America, no one really was paying attention, they don't care about hip-hop in Africa, they don't care about content in Africa... and now, you know, it's crazy, the change is ridiculous there, kids in the US listening to this thing, thinking it's the coolest thing they ever heard...

AP: When you look at that global spread of hip-hop, the problem is always that it doesn't go back to the US, so few people listen...

K: It needs to! Because America, you have to face it, is globally the most dominant economic engine, and musical engine, and it has to work, and there has literally never been an artist, a hip-hop artist, not from the US to ever work in the US. They just have a certain arrogance that surrounds their whole thing, 'you can't do it, you're not from here'.

AL: There's not even an awareness that it is happening, it kind of just seems to be really introverted, only an awareness of themselves and nowhere else.

K: They are the only people in the world that vacation in their own country...

AP: So who's listening to your CD?

K: Other musicians, you mean?

AP: Anywhere!

K: Oh...

AP: Where is it selling?

K: Oh... Well, it's kind of everywhere, I mean it hasn't been released everywhere yet, but it gets around, you know, it gets around. I get all kinds of strange comments, from places. There's someone who's doing a thesis in Russia, in a university there, on my music, and also I heard about a professor, I believe in Colombia, in a university, who taught a class 'Smile', the song. Cool little things are happening with it, I guess.