

Meet the.....

Black Shakespearean

Over the last couple of years, Akala, the self-proclaimed Black Shakespearean has proved himself to be a rising star in the UK hip-hop scene, and with latest album Freedom Lasso gaining him even more exposure, it's only right that Akala is at the top of his game.

After a year in which Dizzee Rascal brought us a below-par third album (*Maths and English*) and Lethal Bizzle joined forces with the indie elite, with Akala's second release fans of UK hip-hop could sigh with relief, here was an album that was honest and thoroughly entertaining.

"My album *Freedom Lasso* was recorded last February, with all the music I make, I just tried to be as honest and as real as I could musically and lyrically and express the ideas, thoughts and feelings that I was having at a particular time."

Akala was involved in an array of different jobs, before deciding music was right for him. His interest in hip-hop dates back to when he was a child.

"I grew up listening to and loving music foremost, but loving hip-hop records, loving the energy of hip-hop, the outspokenness of it, having a love for words and for music and just from the age of six or seven, I've just always kind of copied other hip-hop songs that were out there, performing songs in school assemblies and stuff like that. Then as I got older, I started writing my own music and performing my own music and just realising that is what I wanted to do with my life."

Freedom Lasso is an album that utilises a variety of different musical styles to create something fresh, this is mainly down to the music that Akala is influenced by and spends his time listening to. However it isn't just music that influences him.

"I would say my influences are life and music. I don't limit the kind of music I listen to; I was listening to George Benson just this morning. I don't just listen to hip-hop, I listen to all forms of music and I'm open minded and a fan of all forms of this art that we've come to know as music, so I take influence from all kinds of music."

Akala is clearly an artist who makes the music that he feels is important, relevant and what his fan base wants. He claims that the subject matter of his songs often are about "Life, the human condition, love, growing up as a young teenager in the inner city of London and the world."

In terms of doing something different with the album, and trying to set himself apart from other hip-hop acts, he says, "It's for the listeners to decide really. I'm just me and I'm just being honest about who I am and where I'm from and there isn't really any champagne and tits 'n' arse on there, so that should really set it apart from what's coming out in America right now, but I think if you're being yourself and being original and creative and trying to at least be honest, your music will always come out differently from the next because there's only one you, whoever you are."

So with Akala becoming one of Britain's emerging hip-hop talents, what does he think about the rest of the UK scene?

"I think in the UK there is some interesting things happening, there are some artists who are really trying to push boundaries and do some creative things" From speaking to him, you can tell that he isn't too impressed with

the direction mainstream hip-hop in the US has headed.

"I think in the states, bar your Kanye West's, your Common's and people like that, there's not really anyone trying to anything creative and new and different. It's all champagne and tits 'n' arse, it's quite boring."

For all the success he has been receiving lately, Akala remains modest and it's apparent that his work is his main focus.

"I wouldn't say I don't view it as success obviously, it's progress. I'm a person very much always striving to do better than I am, always striving for the next goal and while I totally appreciate and I am completely grateful for every fan and every piece of success that I've had, I'm always trying to work hard to attain my next goal and go from there."

His efforts paid off in 2006, when he scooped the MOBO award for best hip-hop, although there was a lot of controversy surrounding the decision, he remains grateful.

"I was really pleased to have won the MOBO, it's always nice to be recognised in public for your work and to have won against such competition as Kanye West and The Game, people like that was very flattering."

Like all artists, no career in music would be complete without the touring, and he revels in getting out on the road to spread his message. "Playing live is my favourite thing in the entire world, getting the energy back from the people who love and appreciate your music, nothing can beat that, nothing can manufacture that, it's the greatest feeling on the entire planet."

Despite going on his tours, he has played sup-

port to some pretty impressive acts. "With Christina Aguilera, it was really satisfying to do her tour. I was the only support, so I was coming off stage, half an hour before she went on, so there was a full house during my set, getting a good reaction out of those fans was really gratifying and pleasing for me because it proves what a market for UK hip-hop there is, it's just not being promoted."

He goes on to say "it showed me if that music was presented in the same way Christina Aguilera's or anyone else's music is presented, fans are either gonna like it or not, there not gonna detest it because its hip-hop, I think they would judge it by the same criteria as they judge all other music."

What with supporting such high-profile acts, what was the most satisfying support slot he'd done?

"I'd have to say Jay-Z, I've grown up listening to him, as an MC, he's certainly one of the

finest."

Akala was the first artist to play a hip-hop gig in Vietnam, so how did he gain that honour.

"That came about via the British council who came to one of my shows with my agent and offered me the chance to do that show. It was the second most incredible event and honour of my artistic career so far. Because it was the first ever hip-hop show, it was on Vietnamese national news; the whole country effectively knew that I was there almost, it was like being The Beatles for a day or something, it was really weird. The sponsors gave every person at the show a placard with my face on it, so there was 4000 people waving my face around, it was very surreal."

Akala equates hip-hop to be similar to the work of an unlikely hero - William Shakespeare, even proclaiming himself the 'Black Shakespearean'. The work of the Bard and rhyme-spitting MCs can't be that similar, can it? Akala thinks it can.

"The parallels are generally between the cultural and social impact that the work of Shakespeare and writers like him had in their time, and that they were almost like a social commentary in their time, almost like a mirror for society was the work of Shakespeare and people like him, in very much the same way I feel that hip-hop, good hip-hop especially has been for the latter part of the 20th century and the early part of this millennium."

This need to make a cultural and social impact has seen him get involved with BBC Blast workshops, on the work of Shakespeare and the parallels with hip hop.

"There's actually two parts to the project. I'm doing a series of workshops throughout the summer comparing the work of Shakespeare to modern day hip-hop, exploring the cultural, linguistic and social parallels between the two. I'm also doing a project with the arts council, where I take those workshops to London schools and the project will expand beyond that."

So it looks like Akala has got a busy schedule, with a brief US tour coming up, an appearance at the infamous South by South West festival and a new UK tour during March, his attitude is "onwards and upwards, still working hard, just doing our thing."

Akala's new single 'Comedy Tragedy History' is out on April 7, his album *Freedom Lasso* is out now.