

# AN INSPIRATIONAL CHAT WITH TSHOMBE THE POET

Today, I am interviewing one of favourite independent artists. Tshombe (the Poet), aka Tshombe S. Harris, is a spoken word artist, producer, and radio show host committed to sharing his love of God and the Word with others. So, open your eyes and your mind and be inspired!

Cendrine Marrouat: Hello Tshombe, tell us a little about you. What do you do?

Tshombe (the Poet): Well, where should I start? Perhaps a time before the consciousness or the awareness of an artist within emerged. I was born in New Orleans, but raised abroad in the state of Israel where I received most of my formal education. I currently serve in the US Navy, and have been for more than fifteen years now; and have traveled to more than sixty countries around the world as a result of it. In my travels I have been able to immerse myself within the cultures of each and study the human conditions of the world around us. Somewhere in all of this was born an artist, but you know, now that I recall even as a child I was an artist designing handcrafted jewelry and drawing pictures of random things that came in visions (most call imagination). So I guess I have been an artist all this time unconsciously conscious of it.

CM: Was there a particular moment that triggered your desire to become an ambassador of the spoken and written word?

TSH: I think that's an excellent question, thank you! I would have to say that it was when I realized a purpose in my art, and the fading-to-black of positive messengers like Talib Kweli, Gil Scott-Heron, and those like Charles Bukowski, the Last Poets, or Allen Ginsberg. While they had begun to fall to the back of the stage of a rapidly emerging sub-culture of poetry and hip-hop that focused less on the promotion of growth and human development, but rather momentary satisfaction and get rich schemes coated with dreams of big names in lights; so the messages changed. Which is all ok in the right context, but we live in a time where education is at an all-time low, emotions are running high based on the contributions of societal conditions and broken homes, families and lives ripped apart by war; so to top that off with the one thing human kind have always used to let their minds drift to a place that they could rest their burdens be inundated with lyrical inebriation and feminine degradation is an unacceptable remedy. I mean if you listen closely, five in seven songs played in mainstream media are lascivious in nature, and the other two (if positive at all) won't be noticed enough in our hyper-sexual culture of today; so we're left choosing the lesser of two evils in music—grungy sex or mildly pornographic. Now, I know that what I just said doesn't fit with popular opinion, but it is where I stand on the subject of spoken-word and other media.

CM: Who are your main influences and why?

TSH: Hmm, well here is a question for you then: Where do I begin with this question without leaving someone out?! I have an incredible affinity for deep and thought provoking poetry, and equally for the jazz genres. Both have been major themes in my upbringing; I've been influenced by so many starting from heavy-hitting poets like Yusef Komunyakaa, Ntozaki Shangi, Amiri Baraka, Ira Sadoff, Kalamu Ya Salaam, S. Pearl Sharp, and many others. In jazz I would have to point out artists like Miles Davis, The Suppliants, Donald Byrd, Bobbi Humphrey, Chet Baker, Lena Horne, Billie, and the most magnificent Nina Simone. I'm a huge music fanatic, so I can go on and on with influences, but you get the idea of where my soul rests in music.

CM: You produced 4+ spoken word albums. Could you give us more information? Where can people purchase your creations?

TSH: Wow, if this interview had taken place six years earlier; I would have to say that I would never have produced a single album, let alone four or more...lol! Well the first album I produced was released in 2007 as my debut project titled "IAMNOTAPO3T" (and still not despite my title, lol) which is available in all the usual places on the web like CDBaby, iTunes, etc. The second project I worked on was a collaboration CD to market spoken word to terrestrial radio stations, where I produced eleven of the seventeen tracks in as little as three days, and this project was never made for retail. Thirdly, I unexpectedly worked on the debut album from poet/friend MahoganyDiva "Is My Mic On?" where I produced 90% of that album and the other 10% by a producer named theNxtLvl. "Is My Mic On?" is available on CDBaby. In 2009 I released my second personal project "Verbal Jazz Vol. 1: Tshombe & Co." as a free project which is available at my homepage ([www.tshombethepoet.com](http://www.tshombethepoet.com)) for FREE, and lastly is my newest project "The Messenger".

CM: You are also a performer. Would you share some of your experiences? What do you like the most about performing?

TSH: Performing. You know, I believe that there exists nothing more powerful than human expression; be it in verbal or physical animation; there is just something invigorating about it. And to see others feel your spirit and be inspired to share in kind is simply...divine! I have performed in some of the most dimly lit stages of Chicago to the open fields of Malaysia where children eagerly listened to spoken-word poetry for the very first time, and were involved as if I was speaking in their own tongue. To me, this is what it means to perform/serve in a capacity that is relevant to our nature as human beings, in such a way that replenishes the spirit of both the performer and them the listeners. But my first performance in art was as a child in school plays, percussion jam sessions, and later when I took up drama and theatre classes, and joining a warrior dance troop. Standing on stage was nothing new, although doing poetry is different, but I did runway modeling for about two-and-half years before I joined the service. So the stage was no stranger, except this time I am exposing more than my outer character, but the inner me; it's that vulnerability that gives me the strength to perform.

CM: You are the owner of your own production label, "Emet Productions". Why did you create it and what is long-term goal?

TSH: I started Emet Productions in 2005 when I whole-heartedly decided to be independent. To me independence means to be in control of every aspect of what I put out as an artist and not succumb to the very beast that hip-hop has been prostituted to. "Emet" meaning "Truth" in Hebrew has always been at the forefront of my tongue and the fabric of my construct, so to have something that only produces the truth has always resonated with me and the spirit within. Emet Productions has helped many poets in the past and present with track productions, art work, project consulting, and product packaging. With Emet Productions I really have no desire to expand hugely in the industry, but rather a small beacon that makes a break amidst all of the darkness. That is to say that I hope to continue supporting positive messages and teaching artists how to maintain independence.

CM: Now, let's talk about "Freedom Verse Cafe". This excellent radio broadcast showcases independent artists, while entertaining and educating listeners. Now, for those who do not know what it is, tell us a little more about it.

TSH: Why thank you for the compliments. Freedom Verse Café (FVC) is as you said a venue that

promotes indie artists, but focusing on the genres of Spoken-word poetry, jazz, and soul. FVC is the final development program that actually began back in 2007 with the broadcast of “The Wakeup Call” that transitioned to “Mic Check” to what you know today as Freedom Verse Café. In recent months FVC has branched out to two other venues beyond the scope of online radio broadcasting; I have established a regularly released mixtape that provides the same type of promotion of positive and progressive music, still focusing on the above mentioned genres, and with a website that provides regular news on such music and album reviews. I should mention that my army of one has expanded with poets AtlantaRed and his wife U’Nek Reality who now host the online radio portion of FVC.

CM: Where can people tune in to listen/watch?

TSH: Well for the online radio they can visit [www.blogtalkradio.com/freedomversecafe](http://www.blogtalkradio.com/freedomversecafe), for the mixtapes they can subscribe via iTunes or simply visit [www.freedomversecafe.com](http://www.freedomversecafe.com) or my home page (given above).

CM: Many talented independent artists do not receive enough exposure. Why is that so? According to you, what are some possible solutions?

TSH: You know I struggle with that in a lot of ways; there can exist a myriad of reasons ranging from lack of self promotion to the over saturation of flashy hooks and “dummy music”. I mean we can swing as wide as the conspiracy theorists or as narrow as the fact that positivism doesn’t sell as quickly as emptiness in a negative world. There is a huge imbalance in our consumption of the types of music available; I mean if your name is big and you’re not saying anything but have a deceptively catchy beat, or you’re accused of urinating on a beautiful young woman but you’re a good vocalist, you might sell a few million over the truth speaking, soul stirring indie artists. The music industry feeds based on the consumption and acceptability of its consumers. They push the “envelop” as far as possible to see how much we’ll take, and that is where the money mark is set. Indie artists have all the tools necessary to get the same level of exposure—absent the use of mainstream radio—they just need to commit to their own success and be willing to go the extra miles.

All that as it may, I firmly believe that if we watch long enough and put full support behind positive messengers like Lisa McClendon, Autum Ashante, Rachel Walker, Travis Brunson, Tantra-Zawadi—whom you just recently featured—or the likes of Floyd Boykins Jr., and many others in this world of “underground” music, there will be a time we can respect music again. There is hope, we just have to keep the faith that we can prevail.

CM: I would now like to focus on Tshombe, the man, and his commitment to the betterment of society. You have travelled around the world in order to immerse yourself in different communities and cultures and, as such, understand human beings. Last year, you spent a few months in Asia. Would you explain to us what you learnt from these experiences?

TSH: You know last summer was probably the best summer of all of my life for a number of reasons, but I will start with the fact that I learned a lot about myself and my place in this existence of life. Immersing myself within the communities of the people of Cebu taught me so much about what happiness is and how the small things like simply waking up is worthy of a smile. In Singapore I learned that the liberties we take here in the U.S. with our “freedom of speech” rites are indeed taken for granted by speaking non-sense at times for the sake of freedom. While in Indonesia I spent time at a center for children with autism headed and privately funded by a father whose son was diagnosed as autistic. His love and compassion for his son became so infectious that it began to grow where people

from all over found themselves supporting and seeking treatment through love and extreme personal care to heal their children. Point being I learned much about the point of being an individual in the chain of human existence, and my greater responsibility to the world outside of myself.

CM: To me, we, independent artists, must acknowledge our mission as actors of social change. What can we do to positively affect the world and make it a better place?

TSH: Honestly you're right! We have to open our eyes and see the truth of the struggle for life around us; I think we—as a whole—have plugged in and tuned out of “life”. Almost sounds science fiction, I know, but we have become so technologically consumed with the latest gadgets, apps, and devices that we can talk to folks on another planet, but won't talk to our neighbours even to borrow sugar. I mean come on, we are so connected that we are disconnected. We need to unplug from the fantasy and face the reality that we need to focus on the relative issues of our society, not just indie artists, but the whole populous of our planet needs to reconnect to one another. But for now, let's start with our immediate neighbours and ourselves.

As artists, we are the educators, the last line of defence against total ignorance; we develop the minds of those who consume auditory and literary works. Poets/artists throughout history have been instrumental in constructing revolutionary and evolutionary changes in societies across the globe. If you look at the works of Thomas Jefferson, Mya Angelou, or Kaneko Mitsuharu who all have been instrumental in changing the world around us through poetry, you might find that we indeed have a greater responsibility than gathering at poetry shows pleasing and gratifying ourselves; “preaching to the choir” is the term used.

I believe that we can be more effective by emulating church missionaries or the prophets of old that went out to the people to spread the message. Now don't get me wrong, it is great to commune with fellow messengers; in fact it is recharging to do so, but we need to heal the world with what we have been gifted as allocutionist. So I would have to say that I hold my responsibility high and necessary when it comes to presenting the word.

CM: What motivates you in life?

TSH: Wow! The idea that love can conquer all and that truth can be sweet once taken.

CM: What advice would you give someone who would like to follow in your path?

TSH: Find their convictions and embody them within the trinity of self (mind, body, and spirit) to find peace through wholeness. Find God in all things and place your faith blindly in Him.

CM: Are there any upcoming projects in your busy schedule?

TSH: You know, I never know what the spirit is going to move me to do next, but right now I am working on a project called “The Messenger” which will be released in chapters beginning of course with chapter one which is due to be released on February 23<sup>rd</sup> of this year. There will be subsequent chapters that will continue to be released throughout the year. That's my plan at least, but as I stated; I never know where the spirit is leading me. Another project I am working on is something that is not for this era/generation.

CM: Thank you, Tshombe, for sharing your experience and wisdom with us. It was a pleasure and an

honour to interview you.

TSH: Thank you for having me in for the chat, I only hope that I have put forth fruits that someone will find fulfilling. I am honoured by your questions and found them to be highly fitting...THANK YOU!

Also to the readers of this dialog: thank you for taking time to learn a little bit about what is being said and thought about art today. I hope you find some truth in what was said here and that you find the courage to speak out in your universe. Shalom! (Peace through wholeness of the trinity).

[Please include a picture of yourself with your answers. Don't forget to send me a picture or two of your albums as well as the logo of your label, if you have one]