

Rap artist Yasiin Bey’s “final” performance at Washington, D.C.’s Kennedy Center

Nick Barrickman**7 January 2017**

On January 2, rapper/vocalist/musician Yasiin Bey (formerly known as Mos Def, born Dante Terrell Smith in Brooklyn, New York in 1973) performed his third and final show at Washington, D.C.’s John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. The Kennedy Center shows (December 31-January 2), and a December 21 engagement at the Apollo Theater in Harlem, were collectively billed as the artist’s “retirement” performances in the US.

Since first gaining recognition in the mid-to-late 1990s’ hip hop scene, the talented Smith/Mos Def/Bey (who changed his legal and performing name in 2011) has gone on to success in both music and films and television (*Be Kind Rewind*, *Cadillac Records*, etc.). Bey has the unusual distinction of having been nominated for Emmy, Golden Globes and Grammy awards.

In addition, Bey has taken principled stances opposing police violence, nuclear weapons, the “war on terror” and the US-led wars in the Middle East. There is a widely viewed YouTube video in which Bey, in a 2013 protest against the barbaric conditions prevailing at the US military’s Guantanamo Bay internment camp, submitted voluntarily to force feeding to highlight the plight of the detainees.

In late summer 2016, Bey announced that he planned to retire from film and music “effective immediately,” although the performer later announced he would release a trio of albums before doing so. The first of the three, *Dec 99th*, a joint project with producer/journalist Ferrari Sheppard, was released December 9 on Tidal. The return to music marks Bey’s first studio release since 2009’s *The Ecstatic* (Downtown Records).

Bey’s humane and charismatic personality was on display at his Washington, D.C. performances; with the artist rapping, crooning, drumming and at times breaking into dance on stage. Bey, who has been living in South Africa since 2013, was clearly overwhelmed at times by

the enthusiastic reception he received from the audience of several thousand mostly young people. The artist paused on numerous occasions to both thank the audience and joke with it, at one point humorously thanking vocal members of the crowd for their “uninvited suggestions” to the show’s set list.

The artist appeared to be the most engaged—and received the strongest reaction from the audience—when he performed work from early in his career. Numerous songs from the years 1998-2000 received strong applause. In addition, various groups and past collaborators joined Bey on stage to perform old numbers. An energetic reunion took place between Bey and rapper Talib Kweli, the two of whom formed Black Star and released the critically acclaimed *Mos Def and Talib Kweli are Black Star* on Rawkus Records in 1998. Despite the passage of nearly two decades since their last album together, one could feel the camaraderie and friendship on stage.

The show ended with Bey tearing up while singing the lyrics of “Umi Says,” a jazz-inspired introspective work from his first album, to the tune of Burt Bacharach’s memorable hit “The Look of Love.” Bey clearly was alive in the moment.

As a rapper, Bey has a penchant for humility and self-deprecation which never becomes caricature. The rapper stood out from his musical peers of the late 1990s and early 2000s by his ability to combine technically dense, clever lyricism with a musical personality that seemed to test the hip hop genre’s boundaries. On his debut solo album *Black on Both Sides* (released by the rapper as Mos Def in 1999 on Rawkus also), Bey offered songs like the aforementioned “Umi Says,” alongside pieces such as “Ms. Fat Booty,” a misleadingly titled single that offers a more nuanced version of the typical club-song/anthem.

That being said, Bey is an artist whose best performances are over a decade old. His early pieces possess an exuberance largely missing in his more recent

work, despite the latter having perhaps more musical influences and breadth. Listening to Bey-Sheppard's *Dec 99th*, for instance, one notices the generally bare and sparse character of the effort—absent are the triumphant choruses sung by the rapper in earlier works. Bey appears tired, almost lacking direction. What was once Bey's soft-spoken tendency to murmur words has taken on a lethargic quality, while the instrumentation has become minimal and grey in texture.

There are, of course, pressures bound up with an artist simply achieving a certain level of success in the U.S., and, furthermore, the recent period has been politically and socially difficult. In a May 2015 interview on YouTube, Bey explained, somewhat vaguely, his reasons for leaving the U.S. for South Africa: "America's a very challenging place for me. Sure, there's great business opportunities, familiarity and all that. But given the current social, political, economic climate, it's very difficult... To create to the degree of fullness, the type of robust, type of creativity that I like to have, it's very difficult for me to produce that here."

Major media commentators have lamented Bey's apparent inability, despite his immense talent, to "fit into" the current music and film industry. Miles Marshall Lewis of the *Village Voice*, for example, remarks, "With his political consciousness, lyrical dexterity, and acting chops... [Bey] could easily have been more Kanye-ubiquitous on the pop landscape." Without endorsing Bey's decision to retire, one can only express relief that he has *not* taken that dreadful path.

As is the case with every rap artist, big artistic and ideological questions come up in regard to Mos Def/Bey's career. Even his strongest efforts are marked by considerable unevenness: touching compositions exist alongside less-inspired braggadocio, and worse. Again, almost inevitably, the somewhat vague "humanism" co-exists with identity politics and racialism. (During the January 2 show, one was pleased to note that Bey altered many of the lyrics in these earlier songs; reflecting not only the multiracial composition of his audience, but also the recognition that many of those listening, whatever their ethnicity, had profound interests in common.)

With the coming to office of Barack Obama, the conflict between Bey's art and the demands of retrograde racial politics seemed to pull him in different directions and perhaps even paralyze him. (No albums between 2009 and 2017!) For many in his circles, and many in the broader liberal-left, the election of Obama represented the fulfillment of their wildest dreams.

Although the 2013 anti-Guantanamo protest was implicitly an attack on Obama's policy, Bey never addressed the character of the administration head-on and has never seemed to recover from this inability. It doesn't seem out of place to suggest that an element of pessimism and bewilderment, perhaps heightened by the campaign and election of Donald Trump, has played a role in Bey's apparent departure.

If his retirement is final, it is a sad commentary on the present state of American culture and the music industry in particular. Music will have lost an authentic and deeply talented voice. If it is not final—and one hopes it is not—Bey will find that his art will grow in depth as he draws inspiration from the inevitable upsurge in the struggles of the working class, as they oppose many of the same conditions the artist himself has responded to.

The author recommends these songs by Yasiin Bey/Mos Def:

DJ Honda featuring Mos Def—"Travelin' Man"
Mos Def & Talib Kweli (as Black Star)—"Respiration"
Mos Def featuring Slick Rick—"Auditorium"

The author also recommends:

Ten years since the death of hip hop artist James "J Dilla" Yancey
[21 March 2016]

A tribute to James Yancey: Volumes 5 and 6 of Madlib's Beat Konducta series
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