Atlanta-based rapper 21 Savage detained by ICE agents in “targeted operation”

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On Sunday, February 3, 26-year-old Shéyaa Bin Abraham-Joseph, better known by his stage name 21 Savage, was detained in a “targeted operation” by agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) for overstaying a temporary visa. Abraham-Joseph, a Grammy-nominated entertainer, now faces imminent deportation to the United Kingdom, where he holds citizenship.

The rapper’s detention comes only days after the release of “A Lot,” a single from the album *I Am>I Was*, in which he directly criticizes the Trump administration’s and ICE’s policy of separating families detained crossing the US-Mexico border, along with other injustices in the US. “Went through some things, but couldn’t imagine my kids stuck at the border/Flint still need water …” he raps.

On January 28, 21 Savage appeared on “The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon” on NBC, a nationally televised, late-night program with an average audience of several million people, where he sang against Donald Trump’s immigration policies.

The arrest appears to be at least in part a punishment for the rapper’s speaking out.

According to comments given to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* by ICE spokesperson Brian Cox, Abraham-Joseph was facing “removal proceedings before the federal immigration courts.” The UK citizen and longtime Atlanta resident originally came with family from the United Kingdom when he was seven years old, spending the majority of his life in Decatur, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta. In 2005, Abraham-Joseph was issued a temporary visa which expired a year later, when he was only 13 years of age.

Abraham-Joseph’s legal team released a statement which explained that the future rapper “arrived legally in the United states at the age of 7. He remained in the United States until 2005, when he departed for approximately one month to visit the United Kingdom. He returned to the United States under a valid H-4 visa on July 22, 2005. Mr. Abraham-Joseph has been continuously physically present in the United States for almost 20 years, except for a brief visit abroad. Unfortunately, in 2006 Mr. Abraham-Joseph’s legal status expired through no fault of his own.

“Mr. Abraham-Joseph, like almost two million of his immigrant child peers, was left without immigration status as a young child with no way to fix his immigration status. … Mr. Abraham-Joseph has three US Citizen children, a lawful permanent resident mother and four siblings that are either US Citizens or lawful permanent residents. He has exceptionally strong ties in the United States, having lived here since he was in the first grade. Because of his length of residence in the United States and his immediate relatives, Mr. Abraham-Joseph is eligible to seek Cancellation of Removal from an Immigration Judge.”

ICE’s Cox falsely asserted that “[21 Savage’s] whole public persona is false. He actually came to the U.S. from the U.K. as a teen and overstayed his Visa.” A since-deleted tweet from Abraham-Joseph’s manager, Stone Mound Meezy, relayed that the rapper was being held “in lockdown for 23hrs of the day no tv or any communication besides our 10 min phone calls.”

In addition to being nominated for two awards, Abraham-Joseph was originally scheduled to perform at Sunday’s Grammy awards ceremony. On Sunday, it was reported that the show’s organizers were refusing to release tickets to Abraham-Joseph’s mother, who sought to attend the ceremony on her son’s behalf and raise awareness about his situation. “Everyone want us to be quiet [a]bout] s—- that ain’t right man ... its crazy,” wrote the rapper’s manager on Twitter.

According to the *New York Times*, Abraham-Joseph grew up “in some of Atlanta’s poorest communities, [and] had a troubled childhood. He’s said that he dropped

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out of school to sell drugs, and has spoken in interviews of a youth marked by violence and crime. But after losing a close friend and a brother to gun violence, he turned to rapping."

The rapper faced drug-related felony charges in 2014, the results of which have been expunged from his record due to Georgia's first offender law. His legal representatives assert he has no criminal history. ICE officials have stated they failed to identify Abraham-Joseph as a noncitizen at the time.

In 2017, Abraham-Joseph applied for a U Visa, which is designed to give resident status to an individual who has been victimized by crime (a shooting in 2013 in this case) while in the US. His lawyers point out that, when granted, "the U visa will afford him lawful status in the United States. Generally, ICE has recognized a pending facially valid U visa as a basis to delay removal proceedings and release individuals from custody."

A number of high-profile celebrities have spoken out against Abraham-Joseph's outrageous detention. Hip hop entrepreneur Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter has reportedly hired immigration lawyer Alex Spiro to "get him out and figure out what happened." Writing from his personal social media account, Carter has called the detention "an absolute travesty." Over the weekend, Abraham-Joseph's family members posted social media images of dozens of handwritten letters from Atlanta-area school children calling on immigration officials not to deport the rapper.

Despite his persona and troubled beginnings, 21 Savage has sought to provide support to impoverished communities in Atlanta, including organizing supply drives for school children and other charitable acts. In an interview with the *Constitution-Journal* last year, Abraham-Joseph said, "I might rap about a lot of stuff, but that's just a reflection of what I've been through … In real life, everything I do, I want to bring everybody together. I want to give back to the community, help the kids, get them uniforms, books, book bags, everything they need … just do better. That's where it starts, the kids."

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