

A MASTER OF CEREMONIES

Yangon-based underground hip-hop legend J-Me, who is also known to his fans as Capital J, has been a one-man boom box to his legions of loyal fans for a decade. Aimee Lawrence gets the low down on the transformation of his lyrical spread, as influenced by his reconnection with religion.

Hip-hop and religious faith are not often considered compatible elements which can be spun together for creative output without incurring accusations of hypocrisy.

American hip-hop stars from Dr. Dre to Jay Z are often seen taking a spiritual moment on stage to pay homage to the 'Big Guy upstairs,' but when you consider that the lyrical content is heavy with profanities employed to chronicle lifestyles rich with promiscuous sexual activities, drugs, alcohol, violence, fast cars, flash pads – the gesture seems lost considering the context.

While J-Me didn't mirror the homage-paying actions of such U.S. exported hip-hop acts, he could lay claim to the lifestyle in some respects – albeit to a less lavish scale. It was a lifestyle which he didn't temper in marriage or new found fatherhood.

It wasn't until late last year when he attended a sermon by Reverend Saw David Lah that a trigger was sparked and a new trajectory was lit – making way for J-Me's transformation.

"My sister actually recommended his sermon," recounts J-Me. "She came to me and told me I had to attend one of his sermons because of his energy and his unique teachings on the Catholic faith. I was born and

raised a Catholic, but until that point I didn't practice the faith for a multitude of reasons. I knew the lifestyle I was living wasn't exactly clean living. I was a sinner, simple as that. I also often found myself disillusioned by the preaching of men of the Catholic Church and the deceit shown in their practices behind closed doors.

"I followed her advice and was instantly blown away by his passion and spirit. The connection was instantaneous and a move which I wouldn't have predicted. I believe I'm a better version of myself and that feeds directly into the quality of my music."

The warm, charismatic and impassioned 29-year-old is quick to point out that his finding faith is a deeply personal experience and not one he wishes to impose on his fan base.

"I choose the way I live my life and they choose the way they live theirs. I'm not here to be righteous and 'show them the light.' I'm open in that I didn't hide that getting drunk or getting high were things that I used to enjoy doing. But that's part of my past and if my fans enjoy that lifestyle then that is completely their choice. We're all here to live life as we best see it. I'm a husband and a father of two young children under the age of three so it was high time my lifestyle changed to reflect this.

"My fan base hasn't changed. The fans I've had during my ten-year career are still around and supportive, and if anything I actually have more fans now. Perhaps my musical creativity will speak for how religious belief is benefiting me and that may prove to be inspirational to my fan base and aspiring hip-hop artists in Myanmar. I believe that if you have richness inside of you, the world will follow."

His pursuit of a career in hip-hop was greatly influenced by the release of Dr. Dre's multi-award winning debut studio album, *The Chronic*. His current influences are widely eclectic. He effortlessly bounces between pouring over the works of 13th Century Persian poet Rumi, *The Prodigy*, *Public Enemy*, *Enya*, *System of a Down*, *Eric Clapton*, *Dire Straits* and the compositions of Greek-American Yanni – to name but a few. "To be an artist at the top of your creative game, no matter what genre you base your musical style, your influences should be massively varied and not necessarily restricted to music. What I enjoyed before I reconnected with my religion has remained very much the same and it will no doubt come to influence new explorations.

"I'm listening to a lot of Simon and Garfunkel who were writing lyrics about graffiti long before hip-hop. I'm also an avid reader of novels and poetry. I love a collection of poetry by Serj Tankian who is from a band called *System of a Down*, and he's pretty crazy. I love his poetry and his music."

Returning to his roots, his material has never been particularly politically motivated. He may have only winked in the direction of politics, but he did attract the disapproving eye of the censorship board and



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when required, the true meaning of his lyrical content became cleverly concealed so as to flow under the radar.

His previous works draws comparisons with first wave Myanmar hip-hop acts such as Acid, who are considered pioneers of Myanmar hip-hop and inspired a generation, J-Me included. Acid burst onto the scene in 2000 and swept the floor despite predictions of their being a failure. Their material contained coded criticisms of the regime and accounted for the hardships of life in military-run Myanmar, which irked the authorities and resulted in some of their material failing to pass the censorship board.

In the U.S, political hip-hop came from a small, group of young people who were under siege in underprivileged inner-city neighbourhoods and used hip-hop and rap as a method of fighting the system in the hope of igniting change for their community. Fast forward to the 2000s and hip-hop has created a clan of millionaires and been accused of losing its edge.

Undoubtedly, music is a reflection of the times and Myanmar, which now stands without a censorship board since its abolishment in 2012, has gained exposure to other hip-hop scenes for some time now. However, like with the U.S, Myanmar hip-hop is also said to have lost its soul.

"The wonderful thing about music is that it serves many purposes. Hip-hop was used here to describe everyday life which was tough under military rule. Some artists wanted to reflect on this in support of the

rights of their people. And you also had artists who wanted to almost create a distraction – have fun with it which delivered a platform for their fans to have fun. I would say I fell into both categories.

"Recently Korean Pop has exploded here. I'm not into that. Young people are following the 'swag' trend and that focuses on personal appearance rather than the substance of the music. I agree with underground artists in that some hip-hop has lost its soul.

"Around two years ago because I was married and had kids I was considered out of touch. Organisers wanted the trendy, young boys who were trying to catch the limelight. That was disappointing because it shouldn't be solely based on being popular for the masses.

"The underground scene isn't dead. Good acts like Bigg-Y and are still making fantastic material and performing. I just hope that it stands its place against K-Pop which I consider to be gaining momentum and draining the culture of its meaning and purpose.

"Music is a hobby, that could be as a creator or a listener and it should be fun. But fun doesn't mean it can't be pure and heartfelt, whatever the subject of the track may be."

J-Me, who now frequently receives communion, spat rhymes to a track titled *Hallelujah* in 2014 before Reverend Saw David Lah spun his influence, and he also has three gospel hip-hop tracks in his repertoire. So, religious influences will be no stranger to his fans and peers.

Being the son of the famous musician-turned film-director-father, James Patrick, creativity has surrounded him since birth and continues to fire a light in him spontaneously.

"I was running a bath the other day and BAM, a melody suddenly played in my head and I had to get that down there and then. Don't plug the natural flow of creation. A bath wasn't had that night."

Outer cleanliness may have taken a side-step on this occasion, but inner cleanliness is now a way of living for J-Me who embraces his new-found relationship with God for streamlining his direction into 'earthy' subjects.

What can fans expect from the star who now champions substance over substance use and is set to release an album in the coming months?

"I feel healthier and I am now peacefully minded. The noise around me has been turned down which means I can focus and create better noise for my fans. I may be of a peaceful mind, but my album boasts even bigger beats for my fans to get lost in and I can't wait to perform my new tracks and rock the crowd."

As well as launching a new album, J-Me will be spreading his sounds on an international level, with him all set to share his new sound with audiences in Australia and San Francisco. ■

TEAM

MANAGING DIRECTOR

Andreas Sigurdsson

EDITOR

Bob Percival

CONTRIBUTORS

San Lin Tun
Tet Ka Tho Soe Moe Naing
Mimi Wu
Borbála Kólmán
Bob Percival
Aimee Lawrence
Keith Lyons
Virginia Henderson
Heinz Willems
Manny Maung
Max Toomey
Zara Dang

COVER PHOTO

Gerhard Joren
www.gerhardjoren.com

PHOTOGRAPHY

The Pictureman
Gerhard Joren
Keith Lyons
Tim Webster
Bob Percival
Heinz Willems

ART & PRODUCTION

Kyaw Kyaw Tun

PUBLISHER

U Myo Aung (Permanent No.00315)
InDepth MYANMORE Magazine
1st Floor, Annex Building, Strand Hotel,
92 Strand Road, Yangon

PRINTER

Shwe Naing Ngan Press
Permit No: 05745
No.90(C), Kabar Aye Pagoda Rd.,
Bahan Tsp., Yangon.

SALES

sales@myanmore.com
01 375 680

Contact us on
indepth@myanmore.com

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