

ART AND SOCIAL ACTION

Music and Mobilization

Kombit Pou Haiti 2010

Chuck D and Gaye Theresa Johnson

The only way we'll get freedom for ourselves is to [remember that we are] blood brothers to the people of Brazil, Venezuela, Haiti and Cuba.

—MALCOLM X

The crises facing aggrieved communities all around the world are generating not only new works of expressive culture, but also new social relations guiding their production, distribution and reception. Our work with *Kombit Pou Haiti 2010* exemplifies this process.

Kombit Pou Haiti 2010 was a project born of three acknowledgments:

First was that the earthquake in Haiti, one of a long line of tragedies affecting this nation and its people, also constitutes an opportunity, a window, to lay bare the history of abuse and neglect of the well-being of Haiti and its people. This opportunity has been presented to us many times in the past, and while some artists, activists, and scholars have labored to maintain a clear view through this window into the problems attendant on the region, not nearly enough action has resulted to impact Haiti meaningfully in a sustained way.

Second was that the future of Haiti, if it is to be a positive and productive and meaningful future, is reliant on the compassion and purpose that individuals and groups bring to collective endeavors.

Third was that much of the “help for Haiti” initiated in the weeks after the earthquake, both in its nature and its implementation, duplicated some of the

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very exploitative relationships with which the people of Haiti are so familiar and from which they have suffered so much.

To distill these understandings into a project that could stand as both aid and testament, as both avowal and renewal, we identified some items that were essential to the project's center and foundation, the same elements missing from the vast majority of both the "culture business" and the "business of culture" today.

The Title

Today's record companies have abandoned a practice that was once the normal course of action in songwriting. There was a time when a project producer supplied the songwriter with relevant information and direction about a song's topic and context. Today's prevailing practice, however, is to choose topics that can produce the most amount of money from subject matter that has little civic or human value. Therefore, selecting the title for this musical and political endeavor was something we felt had to come before the compilation of songs. We wanted the suffering endured by the victims of the earthquake and the social relations that exacerbated it to be honored—at the very least—by an acknowledgment of Haiti's past, present, and future, by words that mean something not just to the artists and monetary contributors, but to the cultural producers and historical agents that provide the context for this project. The title had to inspire the songwriters before the songs were selected and, in many cases, written. It is Chuck's feeling that a title should be a "spark" for a song, so much so that it can nearly write itself. Indeed, this has been his own method over the last twenty-five years: start with a title. A good songwriter can take advantage of that spark, and like a motor, generate the energy that gets songs moving toward their lyrical and musical completion.

We contacted our Haitian friend and colleague, Professor Claudine Michel, who in collaboration with Professor Douglas Daniels and Kyrah Daniels came up with the concept of *Kombit Pou Haiti 2010*. Originally, Michel explained, the term *kombit pou* was used for agricultural cooperatives. When a group of people offered harvesting support for a person or another group, the result was an effective system of rotation, and an exchange of work for food and music. At its core, *kombit* signifies the collective work necessary to overcome particular extenuating conditions. It lends a strong sense of hope to the participants. This was the spirit that we knew we had to begin the project with: it spoke to us, and we knew it would speak to listeners. *Kombit* is a call to action.

Production

The musical producer, compiler, sequencer, and arranger for this project, Johnny "Juice" Rosado, believes deeply in the relationship between context, art, and

sound. This commitment translates into an important manifest for a project such as this: the histories of resilience and subjugation that are revealed by the earthquake in Haiti must be reflected in each song, and each artist needs to keep this historical confluence in focus. Juice was charged with putting out the call for finished songs from an array of independent artists and producers affiliated with the SLAMjamz label, and also with producing several songs from scratch. Moreover, all production needed to be completed within seven days.

The practice of quick turnarounds is part of a long tradition in hip hop: answering an immediate call for songs. In its early years, rap music did more than just comment on its context: it was accountable to the current events affecting its communities, whether those events were social issues or popular dances. Between 1979 and 1986, hip hop was largely a singles medium: songs were owned, shipped, distributed, and published by independent record labels, no different from the labels once affiliated with rock'n'roll in the '50s and soul in the '60s. Chess, Sun, Atlantic, Motown, Elektra, and many other record labels were later sold by independent entrepreneurs and bought by major labels, particularly once the profit margin was evident. The same pattern followed in hip hop, most observable with labels such as Tommy Boy, Select, Next Plateau, and Def Jam. In the 1980s, the challenge for independent labels in hip hop was financial viability, particularly through all of the media changes, from vinyl records (12-inch and 45-rpm) to cassettes, and later to compact discs.

Even though Juice has not yet reached the age of forty, he has twenty-five years of experience in hip hop production and artistry. He is among the most qualified to discern hip hop's relationship to a project such as *Kombit Pou Haiti 2010*. Juice was recruited from a group of emcees and deejays who wanted to work in college radio. At the time, Chuck D and Hank Shocklee were looking for local talent to produce and develop for broader venues. Shocklee invited Juice to work alongside Public Enemy DJ Terminator X to implement innovative scratch techniques. This is how, while still a student at Uniondale High School, Juice did turntable work on Public Enemy's first two albums—*Yo Bum Rush the Show* and *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. Both of these albums, particularly the latter, are widely considered to be some of the most formative and significant hip hop albums ever made.

Juice has operated at the convergence of specific technological and historical events, most significantly the advent of digital sound. More than most artists, he has adapted and excelled in the creation and recording of digital music. The proficiency of hip hop artists and producers in remaking themselves in relation to the constant change that characterizes music and record producing and processing is the only reason that an album project like this is possible.

A Call, a Response

A key term for our ruminations above is *independent*: it is a term whose meaning has been remade by millions of artists and producers as they maximize their uses of recording and distribution technology. These technologies, once monopolized by major record labels as exclusive and highly sophisticated mechanisms, are now obtainable by all who have computer access and the motivation to broadcast themselves and their productions to the world. This has resulted in a twenty-first-century reclamation of one of the basic principles and original practices of independent hip hop: call and response. Chuck created www.SLAMjamz.com in 2000 as a supplier of articulated and relevant responses to social events. SLAMjamz and other similarly run labels reflect the technological adaptations of cultural creators: hip hop, and by extension all music, has returned to being a singles medium, and *Kombit Pou Haiti 2010* is evidence of that. In essence, the album is like a film soundtrack, a compilation of singles threaded together by a unifying theme and by an understanding of how this tragedy resonates in the history of African diasporic people. In this way, the call emerges from the progression of imperial occupations, permanent enslavement, and lasting economic and racial subjugation that culminated in the images broadcast to the world on January 12, 2010. The response articulated in the album project, a collective of *independent artists and producers*, is, in true hip hop tradition, intentionally immediate and relevant, retaining focus on a combination of methodologies that has often been lost in the album-making process over the past twenty years.

Kombit Pou Haiti 2010

All of the artists on *Kombit Pou Haiti 2010* contributed their songs within twenty-four hours of being asked. All mastering costs and studio time were donated by Earle Holder of HDQRTZ, and the album artwork was created and donated by graphic artist Kelvin Fonville. Chuck wrote “This Bit of Earth,” featuring Kyle Jason and DJ Johnny Juice. The song is the culmination of things heard and witnessed about Haiti, particularly the combination of patriotism and frustration associated with Black Haitians’ love of their country. Even if the earthquake itself was not predicted, many felt that some catastrophe was imminent. They knew that the amalgamation of historical events destined such an occasion. Most Haitians Chuck knows consider the continued suffering of the country and its people a sort of retribution for the powerful effect and lasting symbolism of Toussaint Louverture leading the first successful slave revolt in history and establishing the first non-slaveholding republic in the Americas.

The HEET Mob is a group with deep roots in Kansas City. They are, in their own words, “fully self-supportive,” with an office facility and studio; sixteen

artists and staff make up “the family.” They released their album *Found Missin* in 2010. HEET Mob gave us “Help Is on the Way,” a high-energy, uplifting call for hope. Six of the HEET Mob emcees cover different lyrical styles throughout the track, which is about the present struggles of Haiti.

HiCoup contributed “Knockin’ on the Lord’s Back Door,” which features Kyle Jason on vocals. The song describes the struggles of men of color, emphasizing that Haiti “is the country that the world forgot.” HiCoup is from New York, but now lives in New Jersey. He has performed and recorded with Redman, Smif & Wesson, Wu-Tang and Nice & Smooth. A highly gifted lyricist, HiCoup focuses on sociopolitical content as well as vivid descriptions of modern-day Black life. He is also half of the hip hop/soul/funk/rock/fusion band The Chosen. He released the album *Domestic Violence* with artist Divinity in 2008 and was working on his 2011 album *Guerilla Jones*.

“Find My Way Home” was contributed by Kyle Jason, who was inspired to write the song after ruminating about preventable tragedies and concluding how sad the confusion of spirit is when immediate death strikes. Jason is a Long Island native whose numerous talents, chief among them his mellifluous voice, led him to talk radio, first building a dedicated Internet fan base for years, then being recruited to go national via Air America Radio/XM. *The Kyle Jason Show* offered music, informative interviews, and topical chats with some of the most influential figures of today.

“Faith,” a song about trying to see good through clouds of evil, was contributed by Dontique Mangual. Born in Brooklyn to 15-year-old parents, Dontique started writing music at age nine, mimicking his songwriting father. He was signed to Epic Records in 1994 at fourteen and started producing at age fifteen. He has recorded with Lord Jamar (Brand Nubian), Groove Theory, and Mark Sparks.

LOWdown offers “La Misere,” inspired by Haitian recordings of 1950s Vodou ceremonies. Also featured are some sound bites of a public-domain travelogue film that contains some of the island’s history. Longtime comrades and artistic collaborators, Tirade & C-Doc have been creating music and video-works for many years.

Professor Griff of Public Enemy fame wrote “Why Y’all Wanna Kill God,” and recorded the song with his band, The 7th Octave. Griff explains that the song illustrates the damage we do to the “god self.” His central questions, both in this song and in his broader politics, are about the impulse that men and women have to destroy the “god essence.” Griff urges knowledge about the ways in which this process destroys music as an art form, bringing the industry “to its knees, begging for the people’s mercy.” The 7th Octave introduces a colorful blend of original sounds, as well as substantive and creative subject matter culled from urban and musical realities.

“Raise Up” was contributed by Son of Bazerk, and features Al “Purple” Hayes.

It is intended to be an anthem that calls for people to “get up and get involved” in helping Haiti as well as other regions by restoring and rebuilding hope, faith, and prosperity in communities, humanity, and the Earth.

Pa’lo Monte is a cultural group that teaches and performs the traditional rhythms and melodies of the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Through the teaching of music, dance, and specific political and spiritual traditions, they maintain a legacy that has been transferred from one generation to the next. The group’s work preserves and popularizes the African and indigenous cultural traditions of Dominican and Haitian people and strengthens respect for ancestral values and traditions.

Pa’lo Monte’s contribution, “Candelo,” is an example of the traditional Afro-Dominican rhythm *palo*, which is popular throughout the country and the island as a whole. It honors Candelo, one of the *lwa* (spirits) in the Dominican and Haitian Vodou pantheon, who is a warrior represented by fire, a machete, and a fist, and who has the power to resolve problems expeditiously. Within this song, Sánchez laments the miserable, unjust conditions under which people are living, imploring Papá Candelo to intervene on our behalf, asking why people must suffer in order to live. Finally, he reminds us that no matter how hard it gets, Papá Candelo will take care of his children. In both Haiti and the Dominican Republic, songs such as “Candelo” are calls to the community, expressing understanding of their hardships, reminding them of their faith, and serving as a rallying cry to resist and survive.

What We All (Should) Know

The terrible damage that has characterized the history of Haiti’s relationship to the United States, France, and Spain was thrown into sharp relief (once again) by the January 12 earthquake, only to be overshadowed by the stupefying audacity with which multinational corporations evaded accountability for their role in Haiti’s current crisis. It is a legacy that incites us, but it is also what reminds us, as Malcolm X iterated, that “the only way we’ll get freedom for ourselves is to [remember that we are] blood brothers to the people of Brazil, Venezuela, Haiti and Cuba.” Reckoning with this relationship means reckoning with the realities of Haitian life: it is the third hungriest country in the world after Somalia and Afghanistan. It is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere and the fourth poorest country in the world. Haiti has contributed untold resources to the world in the form of goods and services, but the country and its people are among the most overlooked and undervalued, particularly by the United States.

The facts leading up to this disaster have been cooking in this region for two to three hundred years. First of all, the country of Haiti is half of an island that had long been controlled by France and Spain. Western nations enslaved Black people from the continent of Africa on both halves of the island, never letting

those enslaved people mix, creating fabricated prejudices and biases that exist to this very day. Although Haiti has been the heartbeat for many Black people in the entire Diaspora because of the revolution led by Toussaint Louverture, one cannot help but see the ways that the West has damned that liberation.

When the people on an island cannot come and go as its indigenous people once did, when they are forced to be concentrated and compacted by economic and political limitations, it creates a situation in which millions of people flocked to Port-au-Prince for better chances of survival. When resources are sucked from a region and the people don't share and can't build, it's a recipe for disaster.

The problem in Haiti doesn't stop just because Americans take it off the news. Long after Wolf Blitzer, Larry King, Anderson Cooper, Fox News, and MSNBC leave the half-island nation, the issues that went on before will be twice as heavy. The question remains: what is the West going to do to fix a region it screwed up with slavery, conquest, government takeovers, occupation, and underhanded modern gangsterism?

The West interrupted and destroyed the Caribbean, South America, and Asia for the benefit of Europeans, North Americans, and a vast majority of white-skinned people. If the West now truly wants to aid, it would liberate the entire island. It would build townships and cities to redistribute the population and allow Haitians and other people descended from slaves to travel the world for refuge and opportunity. It should provide them with a universal passport, so to speak.

Marketing and Promotion Politics

Kombit Pou Haiti 2010 won't—and isn't meant to—make the same kind of impact that a major record label's production or a televised fundraiser would make. Before the project got off the ground, as we discussed what our contribution could be, we came to understand that the gestures that comprised the "Help for Haiti" events were as problematic as they were noble. For example, major record labels that allowed their artists to create songs with other artists as part of charitable efforts to help Haiti rebuild were themselves built on the same principles as Disney, one of the worst culprits of Haitian exploitation. An astounding amount of capital is circulated within privately owned networks (many sharing the same ownership) before it achieves any beneficial outcome to those who need it most.

Major record labels are now no more or less than a banking system for music promotion and distribution. Among independent labels, manufacturing and distribution are as quickly achieved as they would be in a major record label context. But a significant material difference in marketing and promotion creates the gap between these two business models: the capital to create a buzz for particular artists and their creations. As major labels scramble to regain some of the revenue

that has gone to iTunes and other digital avenues, they've begun to employ some of the same strategies that independents have used as a matter of survival over the past ten years, such as the expansion of licensing as a key revenue stream.

In many ways, SLAMjamz and labels like it are uniquely poised to compete in this environment. SLAMjamz was founded by Chuck in 1996 as a highly innovative, digital-only record label, dedicated to discovering hip hop and new urban music and distributing it to a global audience. SLAMjamz artists uniquely retain the rights to their work, allowing them to own the master copies of their recordings as well as their own publishing rights. Licensing, then, has become the main revenue stream for SLAMjamz and labels like it.

One hundred percent of the proceeds from the sale of *Kombit Pou Haiti 2010* benefit the Lambi Fund of Haiti (www.lambifund.org), an organization dedicated to helping Haitian communities rebuild and recover by building economic community enterprises, such as sugar mills, grain mills, and small businesses, and by planting crops to sustain local communities. The SLAMjamz Relief Project may be a small part of what has been achieved for Haiti, but it is intended to stand as something instructive about the mobility of art and the power of independent artists to impact people and issues that seem far away but are really integral to the lives we all lead. Therefore, while it is the oppression that angers us, it is the enduring tradition of resistance that inspires us. Cuban revolutionaries once warned the United States that in the event of an invasion, "even the chickens will fight." *Kombit Pou Haiti 2010* is meant to show that art, too, fights mightily in defense of freedom and social justice. That feeling has never left. Our anger evolves from the ways that all of our people have been played with for centuries. The album responds to this: we're tired and mad as hell and ain't gonna take it no more.

Kombit Pou Haiti 2010

Track listing

"This Bit of Earth," by Mistachuck, featuring Kyle Jason and DJ Johnny Juice
Rosado

"Help Is on the Way," by Heet Mob

"Knockin' on the Lord's Back Door," by Hi-Coup

"Find My Way Home," by Kyle Jason

"Faith," by Dontique

"La Misere," by Lowdown

"Why Y'all Wanna Kill God?" by Professor Griff, featuring The 7th Octave

"Raise Up," by Son of Bazerk and The No Self Control Band

"Candelo," by Pa'lo Monte

“THIS BIT OF EARTH”

Performed by Mistachuck, featuring Kyle Jason and DJ Johnny Juice. Written by John Rosado, Juice on the Loose Publishing (BMI); Carlton Ridenhour, Terrordome Music Publishing (BMI); and Kyle Jason Smith, Afro Wop Music (BMI). Produced, arranged, recorded, and mixed by DJ Johnny Juice at the Terrordome (Strong Island, NY). Scratches by DJ Johnny Juice, featuring Kyle Jason. Background vocals by Veda Byrd.

EXCUSE MY FRENCH
GOD DIDN'T DAMN HAITI
FROM THE PLANTATIONS TO CORPORATIONS
THE SAME MENTALITY THAT HATES ME

AFRICANS ENSLAVED TO WORK SUGAR AND COFFEE
TODAY IS SWEATSHOPS FROM LEVIS TO DISNEY

BUT RECOVERY'S THE ISSUE
WITH NO TIME TO LOSE
BUT WILL THE WEST STOP PAYING DUES
WHEN HAITI'S OFF THE NEWS?

AND HOME PAGE VIEWS?
REMEMBER THE IMF
STOPPED HAITIAN FARMERS FROM GROWING
THEIR OWN FOOD

INDUSTRIALIZATION MOVED THE HAITIAN
FROM THE LAND INTO THE CITY BY DEFAULT
IT'S THE WORLD BANK'S FAULT
TO PUT THE MASSES ON A FAULT
JUST SO THE REST OF THE WEST
COULD FILL THE VAULTS.

SOMEBODY HELP
IF YOU KNOW NOTHING ELSE
HELP REDEVELOP THE LAND
AND HAITI'S BEING OF SELF

BUT TO KNOW FIRST
INSTEAD OF GUESSING THE CURSE
HOW WE GOT SMACK DAB IN THE MIDDLE

OF
THIS BIT OF EARTH

(CHORUS) THIS BIT OF EARTH
BEEN OVERLOOKED FOR WAY TOO LONG
BUT NOW WE LOOKING
AS THE BLOOD TURNS THIS BIT OF EARTH RED
WHAT DID WE DO BEFORE THE NEWSPAPERS SAID
DEATH AND DEVASTATION
NOW A PEOPLE WITH NOTHING NOW HAVE EVEN LESS . . .
. . . ON THIS BIT OF EARTH

WHAT'S THE SCORE?
DOWN INTO POVERTY AND DESTITUTE
THE FIRST WORLD PIMPS CREATE THIRD WORLD PROSTITUTES

CARIBBEAN GOT AFRICANS
SPEAKIN' ENGLISH, FRENCH AND SPANISH
ORIGINAL PLAN IN EFFECT
DESTROY THE BLACK PLANET

ASK THE PRIVILEGED TO GIVE AND NOT TAKE
IT FOR GRANTED
THE EXCUSE HISTORY SAYS WAS HOW THEM BLACK DOCS RAN IT

PAPA DOC, BABY DOC ARISTIDE 'ROUND THE CLOCK
GENOCIDE AND YOU DON'T STOP

WITH THE WEAPON IN THE LEFT HAND
UNCLE SAM BEHIND THE MAN
HARD AS HELL FOR GOD'S PLAN

THAT HAITI BE FREE
AND THE WORLD CAN SEE
WHAT WE SEE
IS STILL AFFECTED BY HISTORY

SOMEBODY HELP
IF YOU KNOW NOTHING ELSE
HELP REDEVELOP THE LAND
AND HAITI'S BEING OF SELF

BUT TO KNOW FIRST
INSTEAD OF GUESSING THE CURSE
HOW WE GOT SMACK DAB IN THE MIDDLE
OF
THIS BIT OF . . . EARTH

(CHORUS) THIS BIT OF EARTH
BEEN OVERLOOKED FOR WAY TOO LONG
BUT NOW WE LOOKING
AS THE BLOOD TURNS THIS BIT OF EARTH RED
WHAT DID WE DO BEFORE THE NEWSPAPERS SAID
DEATH AND DEVASTATION
NOW A PEOPLE WITH NOTHING NOW HAVE EVEN LESS . . .
. . . ON THIS BIT OF EARTH

NOTE

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