

REVEREND SEKOU

and the Power of

It was the summer of 2015 in St. Louis, Missouri, about a year after the police shooting of Michael Brown, and tensions weren't letting up. The police shootings of Ledarius Williams and Alfred Graves earlier in the year had led to protests in the streets. The shooting of Brandon Claxton on July 11, 2015, was no different—African American citizens and members of the clergy hit the streets to protest in the days following the incident. Brandon Claxton was 16 years old when he was shot three times by police and made a paraplegic while he was playing with his brother in a western St. Louis neighborhood. The police alleged that they were responding to a report about a stolen pistol; however, they offered conflicting reports stating that Claxton had approached them with a gun, but they also stated that he had run away from them. Two out of three eyewitnesses denied that Claxton had a gun on his person as he fled the police.

by Warren Hines

On July 13, 2015, Reverend Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou was on the streets peacefully protesting the implementation of deadly force by the St. Louis Police Department. He was joined by other members of the clergy, rapper Tef Poe and singer-songwriter Tara Thompson. "Some people went out and held the street. Reverend Rebecca Ragland and some others held the street and then we pulled back and got back on the sidewalk. We had made our point. We were in front of the police department. They ended up making random arrests. They snatched a 15-year-old girl off the street. They snatched me. Tef and Tara were actually in their car about to drive off. They snatched them out of the car and arrested us," Sekou explained. Rev. Ragland insisted that the police take her with them: "I'm a white clergy person, what do I need to do to get arrested? Because you're snatching black people off the street. I'm one of the one's blocking the street. Why didn't you arrest me?" The police took her up on the offer, and the peaceful demonstrators were booked and taken to jail.

On Rev. Sekou's 2016 debut album, ***The Revolution Has Come***, which features soulful singing, organs and guitar in arrangements steeped in modern-day gospel, he proclaims in the title track, "We already won." In a speech given at St. Mary's College of California the same year, leading a group singing the album's title track, Sekou explained, "It is my belief that when poor kids in unimportant parts of the world stand up to the empire and refuse to bow down, we've won. When you think about the level of militarization by police forces against protestors, you don't pull out tanks and tear gas when you winning. You pull them out because you want to crush it, because they winning."



Reverend Sekou leading the United We Fight March to protest the killing in Ferguson of Michael Brown, St. Louis, Missouri, August 8, 2015.

HEATHER WILSON

Long



Reverend Sekou's singing voice seems to be an extension of himself as a speaker, human rights activist, author, intellectual and world traveler. He was brought up by his grandmother, Houston Cannon, in the Arkansas Delta before leaving to attend high school in St. Louis. He learned to play the piano around the age of six, and piano is his medium for writing music. A renaissance man in many respects, Sekou was mentored by Stokely Carmichael, who assumed the name Kwame Ture from the same African leaders of Sekou's name. He calls Carmichael his "revolutionary namesake." Osagyefo, which translates to "redeemer" in the Akan language, derives from Osagyefo Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana who led the nation's independence movement. Uhuru translates to "freedom" in Swahili, and its significance relates specifically to the liberation struggle in Tanzania. Sekou derives from Ahmed Sékou Touré, who was the first elected president of Guinea. Reverend Sekou's name, born out of African leadership and freedom movements, could not be more fitting for the forward leaning activist who has made it his life's work to seek out the politically disenfranchised of America and sing their cause.

Rev. Sekou cites Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Rosetta Tharpe and Donny Hathaway as vocalists who influence his singing style. It cannot be denied that these African American voices, along with legendary vocalists such as Percy Sledge and Aretha Franklin, sing to the heart of the American experiment. Yet, even today, the voices of black Americans tend to be varnished over with claims that their patriotism does not meet muster when they protest institutional racism in the streets or on the football field. However, their words through song continue to inspire us all. "The beauty about the blues is that it tells the truth about the darkness, but it never lets the darkness have the last word," Reverend Sekou explained.

"I've got my hands up on my head, so please don't shoot me dead," Sekou sings in *We Comin'*, which is the opening track for ***The Revolution Has Come***. His first album represents a transformational moment for the activist, drawing from his musical background as another medium of communicating his social criticisms, particularly of the police state. The casual listener would enjoy the album at a party for its southern blues and gospel sounds; however, anyone listening closely would notice that each song is packed with social commentary in a spiritual context.

"Blues has always had a leg in social commentary. Often when blues folks are singing about not having money or trying to pay their rent—those are forms of social critique that particularly come out of an African

Reverend Sekou performing at
Susquehanna University, Selinsgrove,
Pennsylvania, March 23, 2016.



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HEATHER WILSON

Reverend Sekou getting ready for a march in St. Louis, Missouri, August 8, 2015.

American rural context,” Sekou remarked of lyrics expressed on his 2017 album release, *In Times Like These*. (Its anthem track, *Resist*, begins with the Reverend singing, “We want freedom and we want it now!”) He continued, “When you look at the work of Fantastic Negrito, who is clearly influenced by the blues, his album *The Last Days of Oakland* is really a critique of the ways gentrification is encroaching upon the life chances of the people who have always been here.

“I think we have a fundamental crisis in this civilization that relates to the question of democracy—that we have seen an encroachment over the last 30 or 40 years whereby corporate elites of both parties have been tone deaf to the needs and the capacities of everyday people. So, whether it be Barack Obama deporting over 500,000 people or holding a kill list himself, or whether it be the machinations of Donald Trump—it is my belief that the



HEATHER WILSON

Reverend Sekou was one of 57 marchers arrested at the Thomas F. Eagleton U.S. Courthouse during the United We Fight March, St. Louis, Missouri, August 10, 2015.

Dr. Cornel West and Reverend Sekou are the first over the police barrier to form a seated protest at the Thomas F. Eagleton U.S. Courthouse, St. Louis, Missouri, August 10, 2015.



HEATHER WILSON

working on a book about Dr. King, Sekou saw the news about the uprisings and protests against police brutality in Ferguson, Missouri, as a result of the killing of Michael Brown. He decided to return to St. Louis where he got involved with religious groups that practiced nonviolent protest as a form of resistance to institutional violence toward the black community. Reverend Sekou was arrested four times during his tenure as a protest organizer and a public speaker in St. Louis.

Sekou truly embodies the Martin Luther King Jr. quote “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” He doesn’t see the Resistance as a movement representing a particular ethnicity, political movement or orientation, but as a vehicle for any group of people who find themselves in a struggle against a system run by corporate elites.

Sekou quoted the late French philosopher



HEATHER WILSON

Reverend Sekou marching in Charlottesville, Virginia, August 11, 2017.

Albert Camus when asked about his feelings of the Resistance: “What is a rebel? Someone who says no. But saying no does not mean giving up: it also means saying yes, with every gesture.” Putting the quote in modern context, Sekou explained, “Whether it be the struggle of undocumented folks inside the United States, workers, if it’s the fight for them to eat, if it’s the struggle of people in North Carolina, West Virginia and in Appalachia who are struggling over mountain top removal—wherever those folks show up and stand up and say ‘no’ to elites and demand that their humanity be honored is a form of resistance.”

Rev. Sekou cites classic American artists with blues impulses such as Bessie Smith and Pete Seeger as a communion of musical saints “wrestling with the American Project in terms of an attempt at a multi-racial democracy, one of the few in human history.” For him, the blues is a way to sing out the human struggles within an American democracy using musical traditions he grew up with in the Arkansas Delta. “For me, it’s my attempt to return to the source.” With so many musicians wading into the territory of activism in the age of Donald Trump and Black Lives Matter, it could be said that Sekou is a case study in the reverse of this trend. He is an activist and a scholar who has launched a music career.

Rev. Sekou recently collaborated with the

prolific blues artist Luther Dickinson, who cut his teeth touring with R.L. Burnside’s band and produced two of Otha Turner’s albums, ***Everybody Hollerin’ Goat*** and ***From Senegal to Senatobia***, in 1998 and 1999 respectively. Sekou enlisted Dickinson to produce and play guitar on his album ***In Times Like These***.

The two first met in 2016 at the North Mississippi Allstars’ annual homecoming show in Memphis the week of Thanksgiving.

“I was completely honored that he wanted to work with us,” Dickinson said. “He was like a brother from another mother. We all wanted to do as much as we could to help the cause,” Dickinson said of his draw to Sekou’s music and activism.

Dickinson shared his own thoughts on the current state of America: “It’s just like Obama said in the JFK 100 speech he just made: ‘Progress is fragile.’ You know? It’s sad how many ignorant, hateful people are in the country—and they were quiet for so long, quietly stewing. The pendulum has been swinging to the left for so long, and it slammed back with a violent velocity. At least we can be aware of them now. At least they’ve outed themselves.”

Dickinson is familiar with using music to call out injustices and speak up for what he believes is right. Commenting on the North Mississippi Allstars’ album ***Prayer for Peace***, Dickinson said, “I wrote that album about police violence, police brutality and southern

states’ fucked up legislation. Southern legislation was going crazy! It seems just like a drop in the bucket now, but at the time, I was alarmed.” In the album’s title track, Dickinson asks what Dr. King might think of the current state of the world, singing, “Wish we could be color blind.”

When asked about bluesmen such as R.L. Burnside and Otha Turner, in terms of their perspective on living under Jim Crow laws in Mississippi, Dickinson explained, “R.L. never focused on the bad times. He would sing the most dark, murderous lyrics with a big smile on his face.”

Having produced records for the jubilant, high-energy fife and drum blues of Otha Turner’s Rising Star Fife and Drum Band (that evoked a sort of spiritual call not unlike the songs of Rev. Sekou), toured with R.L. Burnside and performed with his own band, the North Mississippi Allstars, Dickinson is well versed in uplifting audiences through the power of song. It only seems natural that he would support Sekou’s activism through music as a way of showing his support to so many of his African American collaborators, band members and mentors throughout his career. Dickinson describes his Hill Country home as a place that transcends the stereotypes of poor race relations in the South.

“Music brings people together—sports bring people together. I think that open-hearted

Reverend Sekou performing with Luther and Cody Dickinson of the North Mississippi Allstars, May 10, 2017.



HEATHER WILSON

people tend to search each other out, no matter what walk of life they're in," he added. Nevertheless, Luther does not necessarily believe that music has the power to bridge the chasm between the political and worldview gap that exists in modern-day America, citing fans at a Chris Stapleton concert shouting, "USA! USA!" "It's just what they're into, man."

"On tour with Sekou, we played Daryl's House Club—it's on film—and Sekou was doing his thing, he jumped on this table. He was getting in people's faces—it was like playing a dinner theater. Sekou is aggressively putting on a show for these people, and he's like a foot from this person's face. The guy wouldn't even look at him, acted like he wasn't even there, ya know? What I'm trying to say is that, with music, you can turn people on, but a lot of time you're preaching to the choir."

Reverend Sekou explained how much he enjoyed working with Luther and Cody Dickinson on the album and on tour: "When you got Charles Hodges on the organ who played on 25 gold and platinum records, when you got A.J. Ghent who is probably the greatest steel guitarist of this generation in the studio, then you got Luther and Cody and their great engineer Kevin Houston—it was just magical. For three days, we worked from 12 to 16 hours knocking it out." Sekou played a Wurlitzer piano on the title track, *In Times Like These*, and on the final track of the album, *Problems*.

"It was a lot of fun, a lot of joy, they were extremely professional. I did about 25 to 30 dates with the Allstars in the US, Canada and the UK. It was wonderful to tour with them. They are consummate musicians. They

burn the stage down every night, and it was just quite powerful."

Dickinson reflected further on his career and his work with Sekou: "In this day and age, we have to work together and lead by example and take care of one another and help each other out. Rev. Sekou is a true freedom rocker, and I love how his message is subtly whispered underneath the soul music overtones. He doesn't shout at you in his music, but he smoothly slips his message in underneath the funk and soul. As soon as Sekou and I met, I knew that we would get along and why it would work for us to collaborate—'cause he's just like us—crazy, country, Saturday night, Sunday morning—good ole country folk. We had songs of our youth in common, and we share a passion for conjuring a moment in music and trying to make people feel something. Watching Rev. Sekou work with Rev. Charles Hodges and arranging his new songs on this record was a true joy. Rev. Hodges had the perfect old-time church feel for what Rev. Sekou was singing. To bring him to Mississippi to our studio where Otha Turner and R.L. Burnside and the Kimbroughs, T-Model Ford—where all the North Mississippi bluesmen have recorded as well as my father and all of our friends—was a fantastic continuation of our culture's legacy."

From the perspectives of Rev. Sekou and Luther Dickinson, blues as a form of protest does not necessarily mean changing minds. It does, however, act as a medium to preach to the choir, to sing songs of hope even in the most hopeless circumstances, and, it provides a transcendental—even spiritual—energy of perseverance.

Sekou united with clergy members and counter-protestors at the infamous Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville on August 11–12, 2017, when a group of over a thousand neo-Nazis hit the streets, ostensibly in defense of a public statue of Robert E. Lee. Sekou recalls that they were "yelling primarily homophobic slurs. We would just sing, and it would change the atmosphere. We would get our folks to sing with those persons yelling at them, you could literally see a change that would bring the temperature down. So, when we're singing *This Little Light of Mine* and someone is yelling a homophobic slur, it would just sound so off that they would just stop."

In the St. Louis jail cell back in the summer of 2015, musical activists Rev. Sekou, Rev. Ragland, Tef Poe and Tara Thompson sang songs. They sang *This Little Light of Mine*, *Over My Head* and *We Comin'*, off of Rev. Sekou's first album. "We sang the whole time we were there," Sekou explained, "and the police did not know what to do with us, because they were not used to seeing people who were in jail but still free." *LB*

HEATHER WILSON

Matia Washington, Reggie Parker (bass) and Reverend Sekou, New York, April 1, 2017.

