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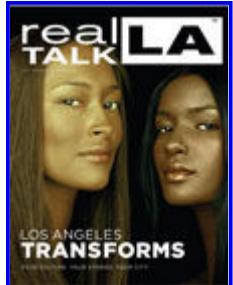
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Fade to Blacc: Genre-busting MC Aloe Blacc Breaks New Ground

By Rachel Levin

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LA native Aloe Blacc straddles multiple identities as easily as he slips from English and Spanish, the piano to the trumpet.

With Panamanian parents, a West Indian heritage and a strong reverence for African American history, the bilingual multitasker jigs across hip-hop, R&B, folk and Pan-Latin musical styles. He's gained success as one-half of the indie hip-hop duo Emanon with high school buddy DJ Exile. Although he cops to being "braggadocious" as an MC, his debut solo album, *Shine Through* (Stones Throw Records), emanates conscious positivity. Now he's lending his voice and his outlook to the Academy (www.kidmillionaires.com), an organization that encourages youths to think and act—you got it—positively.

You grew up in Orange County, went to USC and now live in Hancock Park. How has Southern California influenced your music? The diversity of my social groups within Southern California has been a huge influence. When I was growing up, my parents would have a lot of different music in the house. Of course they had R&B of the day, but [I heard] a lot of Latin and Central American and Caribbean music, reggae, soca, calypso, salsa, merengue and even tipico. I grew up playing the trumpet. Then in junior high jazz band, I got into jazz and started to really feel Stan Getz and follow Brazilian music. Southern California has been my learning ground. I've learned so much here, especially over the last couple years doing a party in Hollywood called Do Over. That's kind of how I ended up putting together my album. Shine Through was very much related to my experience with LA's finest DJs.

With all your multiplicity, do you feel connected to the Panamanian community? I do. I feel a little responsibility because now I have this voice, you know, that I can say and do things that will be heard on a grander scale. I feel a responsibility to be vocal about being a first-generation American, not only for Panamanians, but I think I speak for a lot of Latinos, Afro-Latinos and other first-generation Americans.

On *Shine Through*, you cover Sam Cooke's song "Change Gon' Come," a message song of its time. What do you think is the place of R&B and hip-hop in the current mood of political change that's going on? I don't think R&B and hip-hop have much of a place in any of the current changes in world politics and economy. Nobody is really speaking to anything that's relevant outside of the nightclub or the bedroom. None of what is going on in commercial music is really hitting the mark that it hit back in the day. But in the

independent scene, there are folks that are speaking to these things, like my contemporaries Georgia Ann Muldrow, Cody Chesnutt and Martin Luther. These folks are airing the dirty laundry of our nation and what's going on around the world. It's beautiful. There are people who still recognize the need to bring these issues to the forefront. Unfortunately there's not enough money to compete.

How do you balance commercial aspirations with your indie spirit? It's hard to really place where I fit in the commercial music world. I would like to be a writer/producer for other folks. But part of me also wants to be an artist and have a larger voice and have that visibility because I accept the responsibility of introducing positive ideas, positive concepts to the marketplace, and also I accept the responsibility of being a role model for folks, for youth, for adults. Part of me says, "I don't care if I ever go platinum." But then another part of me is like, "How could you be so selfish? What you have is a gift you should share with everybody. And, quite honestly, a lot of your contemporaries in the commercial music industry aren't doing what they need to do to help the world."

You wrote "I'm Beautiful" for your niece. What was the context? My niece is growing up in the same neighborhood I grew up in. She is about 10 years old now and one of the only black girls in her class. I can just imagine over the next five or ten years the kind of things she's going to go through in trying to figure out who she is, how she fits in and dealing with the kind of issues that girls will go through in adolescence with self-identity. I wanted to give her something that she could have as a mantra for herself when she wakes up or whenever she doesn't feel so human.

What's your goal for the Academy project? We're basically establishing seminars and phone group conference calls for youth to develop affirmation, goal setting and motivation for the immediate future and for their long-term future. PMA [positive mind attitude] is a major acronym.

What's next for you musically? Next I really need to start working on the new Emanon album. Hip-hop right now needs us. When hip-hop was really fun, I think we were a little too young and a little bit out of the scene to make the strides that we needed to make to establish careers like the Mos Defs, the Commons, but now we're older, wiser, been through the ropes a little bit. Now that commercial hip-hop is pretty much falling off, I think the industry's about to make a real huge change from hip-hop to something else. I'm not exactly sure what. I think that independent hip-hop is going to be very important again. And I have a feeling that we have an opportunity to be some of the strongest voices in indie hip-hop. So I'm really taking this next Emanon album very seriously. But also I'm going to be working on my next solo effort. It'll be a lot deeper, much more introspective and personal than the last album. I consider Shine Through more like a mixtape, a demo, showcasing all of the different styles that I write and do. The next one will be as diverse but topically you'll hear more about me.



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