

An Interview with

MOSley WOTTA

by Ellen Santasiero

"I am MOSley WOTTA, and so are you."

From his home in the high desert of central Oregon, artist MOSley Wotta mixes media, plays with form, and works tirelessly with youth arts education. In this interview, he discusses the relationship between art and place, his artistic lineage, race, rap, and his poem "Songs from the Field," which appears on this page. HDJ's Ellen Santasiero conducted this interview on e-mail and in person in Bend in March 2015.

HDJ: In a previous interview, you said, "Oregon is the background, backdrop, backbeat, and backbone to everything we do here. Oregon leaks in, leaves a yellow pollen dust over everything. Oregon gets into your lungs." Are there other ways you describe the relationship between your work--or yourself as an artist--and the place in which you live?

MW: I heard a geologist say that folks' environment often dictates their culture. She talked about living in view of the mountains, looking up to the next level, living within reach of a new vantage. I think a lot of people in Bend enjoy the relaxed atmosphere here, but a lot of us aspire to something higher. It reminds me of the the Dryden quote "... for even were Paradise my prison, still I should long to leap the crystal walls," which in a way asks us to challenge who we think we are and train ourselves to move beyond our station, get beyond our standard or our own mediocrity. Climbing a mountain, rafting a river, spelunking a cave, all are tremendously symbolic, and applying the metaphor to yourself is just as, if not more, important than the physical/recreational act itself. Climbing one's personal range or learning how to navigate the rivers of thought or exploring deep within ourselves is incredibly valuable. The art I/we make is one way to continue these explorations. Other than that, I think obsidian is like Spoken Word poetry. Folks have been passing it along from its original source since it was discovered. It cuts deep precise incisions into our surface self and goes deeper than many other tools we have. I'm also inspired by the stubborn juniper here, and the deer that keep old trails even when a new home has occupied their space.

HDJ: In a past interview, you indicated that your way of composing is not so much about you the individual composing by yourself. You have a well developed practice of composing with the participation of the audience. Are there other elements of rap that you want to develop?

MW: I would like to incorporate more singing/chanting into the work because singing goes well beyond words. Words are good, but they can get in the way, too, especially if the listener becomes fatigued with trying to comprehend every nuance. Don't get me wrong, I love to write, BUT words are a well-built craft that rides the ebb and flow of the sea, so to speak. If you are really good with words, you can become a creature moving, swimming, even breathing within that sea. With singing though, you transform into the water itself. Over time this is the ultimate goal, personally. I can sing but I still am trying hold on to something. I desire to let go totally. As I evolve artistically, I will "return to the sea." Oh man, I can hear the eyes roll as I say this, but, its true for me...got to get to the source.

We're also incorporating more theater into our shows. We have a shit ton of ideas for how to make the show include visual elements as well. I recently got to meet with an artist that does visual design for Beyonce and Kanye and Jay-Z. One thing I walked away with is that, in a very real way, there isn't much I can think of that can't be created and presented. It was very inspiring. We've started working with AMZ productions to help bring these concepts to life. Mostly I'm asking what can I do to bring more connection and communication into the show? When we think about doing shows abroad, in Europe or in Dubai and Morocco where I will be later this year, we wonder how to communicate with an audience that doesn't speak our language or know our culture. How can we let go, give over and go beyond the words? I'm also asking how I can bring more crowd participation into the show. If we are on stage and I have a microphone and my voice is louder than everyone else's, there is a disconnect in that. We'd like to invite everyone up on stage. We are in a very real way starting to do this.

As for my own creative process, I takes notes, I record things, and then I take all my jumbled thoughts and put them in digital format so I can organize them. I like to write to music. Sometimes I work in

MOSley WOTTA (above, right) is a poet, performer, visual artist, and arts educator in central Oregon. His published work includes Hiphop albums KinKonK (2012), Wake (2010), and EPs Amalgam X (2012) and Scrap Mettle (2008). The winner of Bend, Oregon's 2010 Last Band Standing competition, his works have been featured on OPB's Oregon Art Beat and at Ted X Bend. MOSley WOTTA teaches poetry and performance through CADA-CASA, Caldera Arts, and the Americana Project. As a member of the Hiphop duo MOSley WOTTA and Collothen, he is poised to launch the "Markets Flooded" tour which will take the pair across the country to perform new work and teach poetry and art in communities and schools. MOSley WOTTA is Jason Graham, a thirty-something husband and father whose alias "MOSley WOTTA" reflects the artist's ethos of inclusivity and unity because the name refers to the fact that all human beings are made of "mostly water." A Chicago native, MOSley WOTTA grew up in Bend where he now lives with his wife and three children.

Click the image below to watch a video of Mosely performing

"Songs from the Field"



[Visit Mo's Site](#)

the living room, and sometimes in a shed out back. That's where I have my mess.

HDJ: I love the word play in your Spoken Word piece "Songs from the Field." It reminds me of a passage by Gertrude Stein that I love to recite just to hear the repetition of sounds. When I read your piece, I get a sense of disruption. I get a feeling of America's past injustices breaking through the surface of present day cliches and complacency. Can you talk about this piece?

MW: "Songs from the Field" is an address to folks who feel the tedium of injustice or the fatigue of running maintenance on an inefficient machine. It's about the idea that you can maintain dysfunction as long as people have their creature comforts. As for the way I wrote the piece, it's not meant to be crystal clear. Throughout time, people have often codified messages about liberation in art, song, dance, theater, poetry, and painting. It's like a song from the field during slavery or a quilt in the Underground Railroad. Both had information encoded within them to help people escape to the north. The messages were hidden to preserve their potency and effectiveness. So, you are able to hear this poem if you are oppressed in any way. Rap songs can be like this. Sometimes they will throw off some listeners to preserve the potency within the songs for those listeners who can hear it.

HDJ: As a rap artist, in whose lineage do you think you are working? Politically--De La Soul? Artistically--Saul Williams? Others?

MW: We are certainly like several artists that are considered to be Hip-hop such as the ones you've mentioned. We try to stay true to the ethos that Hip-hop began with which meant/means exploring all styles to create unique musical blends and innovating perspectives. Hip-hop pulls from all genres and art forms, it's like Frankenstein's monster. Our lineage is really linked to Rural Ghut Music. This music, although not very well known, finds itself in the blues and celebration songs and funeral dirges. Ghut music was created for the sole purpose of "divining divinity." It was music created outside of the temples and churches and such, but was considered just as important in regard to the creative and spiritual journey an entire community or tribe must go through in order to be of use in the world. Really, we would like to be grouped with anybody that pushes themselves creatively and challenges their belief systems in order to reveal a "truth," for example, Arca, Björke, FKA twigs, Death Grips, John Coltrane, George Winston, and Blue Man Group. The artistic lineage runs deeper and is older than any one name/person. We all draw from the same source to create our own thang. Hopefully, the music takes on a life of its own and becomes bigger than the people making it.

HDJ: You seem to be reinventing rap to suit your values around community rather than follow in the tradition of the boasting rapper or the rapper who focuses unambiguously on illicit behavior and misogyny. Is this an accurate assumption? Can you expand on how you signify with rap history and other rappers?

MW: Any art form that isn't in the mainstream has to go through immigration, and rap is going through immigration right now. The folks that may be getting the most neon attention may not actually represent the majority. That's tip of the iceberg stuff, ya know? Cream floats to the top, but so does crap, and if you are good in business, you can sell either and people will buy it. One thing is that folks who don't yet know how to hear rap might see it as something other than it is. To compare, I love the Miles Davis album Bitches Brew, but I can't say I get it all the way yet. Sometimes I just hear noises mashed through instruments, but when I really listen I hear the masterpiece. It's not the music's job to hold my hand. It's my job over a lifetime to gain the experiential sophistication to digest the music. I mean some of the lyrical content maybe viewed as one thing when really there may be a deeper message. Also, stereotypically rappers may appear to be hard and big and loud and brash, but really they are very subtle and it takes time to learn where all the "winks" are. I think a lot of rappers are aware of how their music is viewed on the surface and they use that to play games with the uneducated listener. We also use provocation as a way to coax our audience in a little farther, to play along with us, and become the show. One time I ran around a put a smudge of chalk on everyone's face and thanked them for coming out that evening. I laugh just thinking about it. They know it's part of the show, but they play along. Some shows we all hold hands and chant "we are love and light" right after a track that is really aggressive and edgy just to rattle the audience's perception of our persona. It's all done in fun, but it can certainly feel provocative. When you provoke people, they go into their own thinking. It's risky but those are the best relationships. It's an old and effective technique and when the message is one of connection or growth or love, it's useful.

HDJ: What question would you like to be asked?

MW: Something about race and the dawn of new problems. I wonder, in what ways can we discuss and examine our old problems without prolonging their existence? Race has come up in our work often, but maybe it's just a metaphor for something else, a way to provoke the audience to go deeper. The biggest dupe about race is that there are sides, separation. Same goes for religion, politics, sexual orientation, class, on and on. We are all in this together and no amount of prejudice is going to change that. When you read a news report, it's pretty obvious that we need to be reminded of this fact over and over.

We can not throw anything away, not really, all we can do is make space. Looking at our our social and literal garbage in a new light will benefit us, REALLY! What once was a mess will become a resource. The dumping grounds of guilt and despair, and agony and oppression become gold mines of inspiration and imagination and resolution and clarity. We must make space. One place we seem to have an unlimited amount of space for change and growth is in our "hearts." I honor the tradition of placing flowers on a grave, but I'm really fascinated by the flower that grows FROM that grave. Can we absorb our choices and evolve from them? We can and we are. No matter what, we know how to flourish under pressure. We humans are good in a pinch. Cultural transformation happens in the realm of the imagination first, in the arts. This is where we can safely explore what will eventually become our reality. Imagination allows for play, and play is where some of the best learning happens. It's fun to play around with the fact that your heart and your fist are about the same size. We have a choice as to "what we're gonna hit them with." How will we continue to understand and apply our creativity in order to better understand ourselves and move into some new problems?

HDJ: Can we talk about paper? As an essayist, my background is with text on a page. I don't really seek to read it out loud in public. Am I right to assume that your current art form is more about performance and sound rather than words on a page? How would you describe the relationship between the oral tradition and written traditions that you've inherited?

MW: The oral comes first-bottom line. We used sounds and body language long before parchment and papyrus. I am amazed by cultures who have transferred their entire history through oration and dance. That said, I truly admire the craft of the written word, the placement of the words becomes just as important, if not more important, than the words themselves.

I think, however, that unspoken communications are the truest. The look, the intuition, the feeling, meaning that what is in your heart or in your eyes or actions speaks clearer than any words we might say. It's been said that "in order to speak to God, you must silence your tongue." Anything that is written or spoken will only get so close to the inspiration from which it comes. All our written and spoken works are like rocket ships, powerful vehicles for exploration, but far from the natural, effortless, elegance required to talk to divinity.

HDJ: You often use the image of an open, toothy mouth in your painting. You've said that this image represents a "banshee" quality that is important to you. Has this image evolved into something else or faded over the years, or is it still alive for you?

Now I see it as door open to giving and receiving thoughts and truths.

