

Collecting Our Story

Author

Akwamu, Kwasi

While the Detroit Electronic Music Festival will be held for only its third year this May, not everyone looks at it as the contemporary phenomenon that it is. It is true that the festival lured over a million people from around the world during the past two years, but the music form that is the rave of Europe has local roots.

Khalid El-Hakim, a local school teacher who has included festival posters in his traveling museum of historical artifacts, known as the Bell Collection, equates the founders of electronic music with the likes of W. C. Handy and Jimi Hendrix.

"A lot of people don't know that techno is a Black music form," says El-Hakim. "The music of Detroit Electronic Music Festival goes back to the late '80s. Being in high school, we used to go to the Underground Park where Juan Atkins, Derrick Mays, and Kevin Saunderson were the deejays of the day."

Named after his family, the Bell Collection is El-Hakim's attempt to rescue the physical history of Black people. When last inventoried a few years ago, El-Hakim counted around 700 pieces. Today he says there has to be well over a thousand items in his collection. A recent trip to Chicago enabled him to meet Sam Greenlee, author of the radical 1969 novel, *The Spook Who Sat By The Door*, and to return home with a signed copy of the original promotional poster ... and an unused 8-track tape of Eldridge Cleaver speaking.

The collection includes "racist items, sports, music, Black Power items, civil rights items, toys, literature, just anything that had something to do with Black people in general," he says. "Over the past 10 years I have ended up collecting probably one of the most diverse collections that a lot of people have seen."

Remember when Barbie had an Afro, or when Malcolm X graced the Sept. 12, 1964 cover of New York's *Saturday Evening Post*, or when Sambo sold Gold Dust washing powder? El-Hakim's collection recalls these and more.

While El-Hakim recalls collecting frivolous items such as comic books and baseball cards as a teen, his current collection was inspired.

"I really started off in the mind-set of collecting things," recalls El-Hakim. "But as I grew older the focus became more on African American artifacts. What hipped me to it was a college professor I had back at Ferris State, David Pilgrim. His focus was collecting racist memorabilia. He opened a museum called the **Jim Crow Museum** at Ferris State that has about 6000 pieces of the most racist, ugliest images of Black people ever produced. It was a really deep experience."

Touring for the past five years, El-Hakim has presented his exhibit before audiences as diverse as the Detroit City Council, the New Black Panther Nation, Black Cinema Caf  , and prisoners at the Mound Correctional Facility. He eventually looks to establishing his collection at a permanent site.

"My goal," he says, "is to have these items in the public eye. It does me no benefit to say I have this in my house. I want people to be able to touch and feel, to look at 'em, to have

access to 'em."

Viewing with distaste the naming of galleries and the theater at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History after white corporations, El-Hakim is specific in what support he seeks to establish his collection.

"I want, when I open this museum," he says, "to be fully funded and supported by the Black community and Black corporations. I would rather not take a dime from anyone other than us, and definitely no white corporate sponsorship. I would refuse it because it comes at too big of a price."

El-Hakim contends, however, that Black people stand to pay a bigger price if we don't do a better job at preserving our history.

"If we don't keep hold of our possessions, then white folks come in and take our stuff and sell it on the market as they [tried] to do with the Malcolm X collection," he says. "Most of the stuff I get from white people. And white people should not have some of the things that I have, such as personal belongings that should be ours."

Those interested in booking the Bell Collection can call (313) 582-4090.

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