

Choose Your Own

An interview with Saul Williams.

Minutes before his spoken word performance at the UO on the evening of Jan. 14, poet/actor/musician Saul Williams looks tired. He seems to retreat behind the green knit scarf wrapped around his neck, and his voice is sleepy-soft. He says that he got up at 3 am to catch a flight from L.A. to Portland, and he's been looking forward to some sleep. When Multicultural Center Director Steve Morozumi offers him a can of Red Bull, he politely declines. "I choose life," he jokes. But following this interview, when he takes the stage in front of a packed-beyond-capacity audience in the EMU Ballroom, he exudes energy, alternating between performing poems and taking questions. His dominant message is this: Make change in the world by doing what you love.

Has hip hop provided a forum for the comeback of poetry?

I think that new forms of meter and stanza have been created through hip hop. Also, there is something that hip hop has done to the lyrical attention span of its audience. We are more used to dissecting lyrics, perhaps, than past generations. I remember in the earlier days of hip hop, playing songs for my mom or my dad, and them being like, "Huh?"

In the piece posted on your website (www.saulwilliams.com), your friend Kalamu ya Salaam wrote that our generation – the people who are 20 to 40 years old right now – is putting less emphasis on dividers like race and class than our parents. Do you agree?

Yes and no, because we have to realize that we are still subject to a lot of those dividers that have been instilled and installed by predecessors. Those of us who are willingly entering the job market will pave the way for the changes that have to be made. We can't just sit back and complain or expect our parents to do it. It has to be done by us. And that's where things get difficult. Because it's hard work, and a lot of us are like, 'Fuck! Why did you make this so difficult?'

Do you think there's validity to the stereotype of the "slacker generation?"

We may be late bloomers in a way. Our childhood has been prolonged more so than other generations. This is the first generation where you have grown men playing Sega. Look at

hip hop dudes who wear oversized clothes and big floppy shoes and shirts. Literally, grown men dressed like babies, like that's the style. [Chuckles.] I don't think that we're lazy or apathetic; I just think that it's gonna take a minute for us to mature. But when we do, the changes that we will bring about hopefully will shed some light on who we are.

How much of your life do you feel is under your control and how much is guided by fate?

It seems as if there are pivotal things that come about that are a bit of both. People pop into your life, like "Oh my God. Wow. She's just what I asked for." You didn't know she existed, but this is what you'd been asking for all along. It's up to you to face this reality and allow it to continue to manifest beyond its initial appearance, to see it through.

A lot of people give you credit for the takeoff of Slam Poetry. Do you feel that the scene is evolving in a positive direction?

I think it's a wonderful thing that so many young people have been inspired to voice their views, whether it be through poetry or whatever. I don't think

of poetry as a place to voice my opinions. I think of it as a way to develop.

What helps you develop – the process or the performance?

In my writing, there's a lot of equations, like "If this is this, then this must be this." And I'm not doing that to show you how my mind works. I'm doing that because I'm literally working it out on the page. That's what a great deal of my poetry is — me processing out loud.

Has being in the spotlight affected the content of your writing?

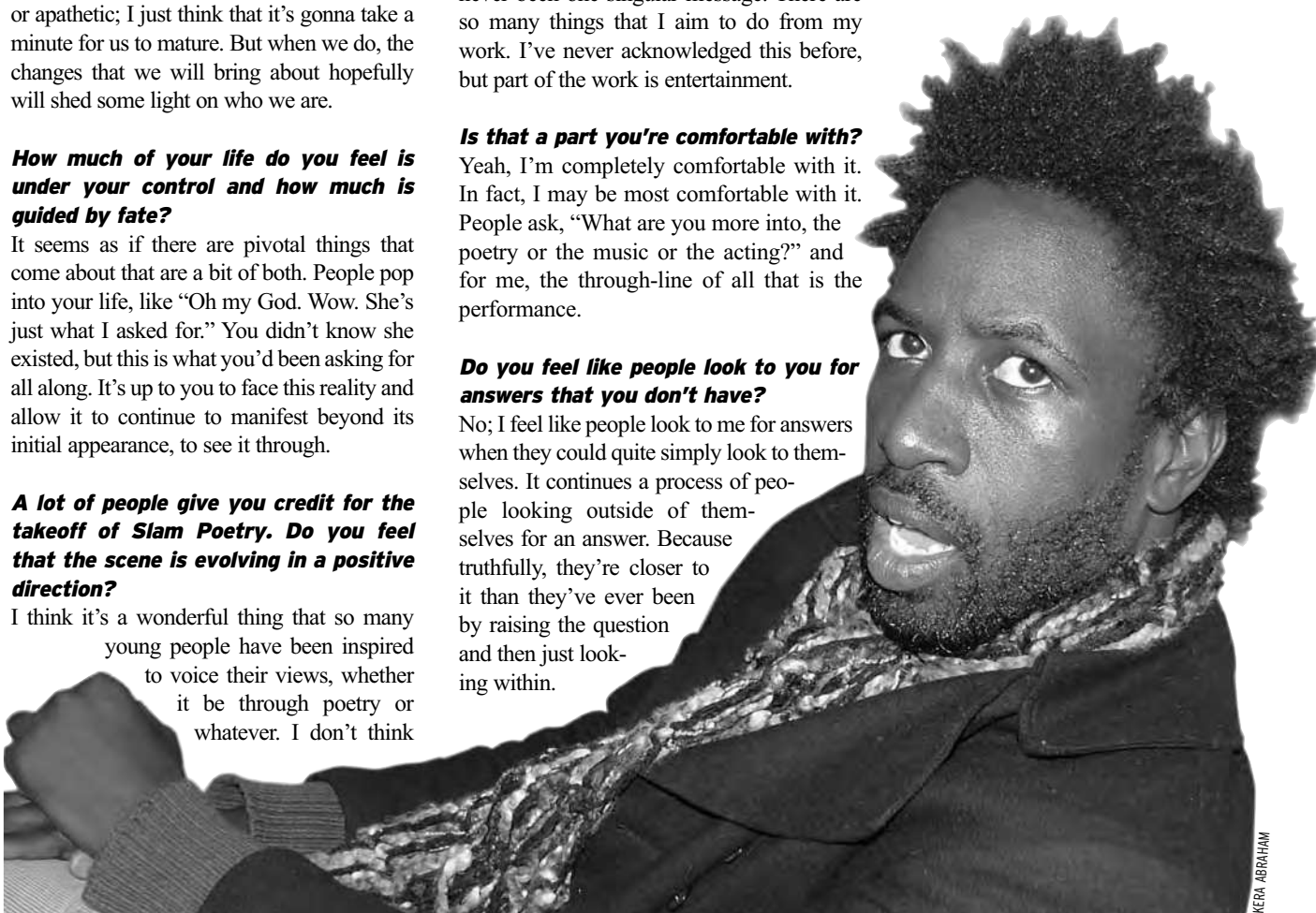
It would be easy for me to say "No effect at all," but of course, I've become more aware of the fact that people are watching, people are listening. It's a matter of challenging myself continually to grow. 'Cause there's never been one singular message. There are so many things that I aim to do from my work. I've never acknowledged this before, but part of the work is entertainment.

Is that a part you're comfortable with?

Yeah, I'm completely comfortable with it. In fact, I may be most comfortable with it. People ask, "What are you more into, the poetry or the music or the acting?" and for me, the through-line of all that is the performance.

Do you feel like people look to you for answers that you don't have?

No; I feel like people look to me for answers when they could quite simply look to themselves. It continues a process of people looking outside of themselves for an answer. Because truthfully, they're closer to it than they've ever been by raising the question and then just looking within.



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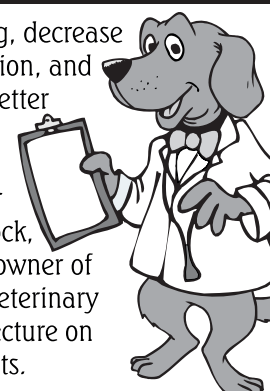
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How do you feel about the end of the Mayan calendar in 2012?

You know, I'm been somewhat focused on it for years, and I have intuited — before I knew about the Mayan calendar — that something amazing is going to happen. There's nothing we can do, the same way we could never have prepared for the tsunami. But we also have to realize that it's not just some big hand of fate. There are several routes that we can go as a society, and it's dependent on each and every one of us. Like we're all a part of those novels with the many endings — Choose Your Own Adventure. The sooner we realize we're all a part of that, the sooner we can all get on the same team and start working towards a peaceful outcome. **EW**

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