

Music, Censorship, Harassment and Artistic Freedom

Cris Gera

Conversation with Jude Dibia

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A conversation between Cris Gera, musician from Zimbabwe, based in Piteå through ICORN's guest artist programme and Jude Dibia, former guest writer in Malmö.

Editor's note: This is an abridged version of the comprehensive conversation between Cris Gera and Jude Dibia that took place in Malmö during the Migration Memory Encounter – Conversation Series.

The session kicks off with a short introduction of Cris Gera(CG) by Jude Dibia (JD) after which Cris performs his newly released song “Piteå för alla” featuring Adam Faye, William Nordlund and Leyli Afsahi.

Cris Gera, a musician, has a musical career spanning about 20 years. His music is a mix of Afropop, Afrojazz and traditional Zimbabwean music:

– My music touches on issues of the life we are living and social issues, says Cris.

JD: – Thank you Cris for that beautiful performance. I think I will jump straight into key points of our discussion. In your opinion, how would you define art and how do we interrogate art? Also, why did you choose to anchor your music with the tough issues that plagued your home country, Zimbabwe?

CG: – You are not doing your art for yourself only, you do it to make life better for others in different ways. When I'm stepping into the studio to record music, it's not only for myself. There are a great number of issues you can touch upon as a musician.

JD: – Have you come across any form of censorship to your work even in Sweden?

CG: – I can't say I have encountered censorship in Sweden yet.

JD: –Piteå can be said to be a different country when compared to cities like Malmö, with a low population of people from the African continent. So, my question is, what is it like being black in Piteå? Is there a visible community that you socialise with?

CG: – That's a tough question. It's not always easy – when you're completely new to everything. So far, I haven't seen so many black persons in Piteå.

JD: – Are there any other black musicians in Piteå who has been given the same amount of airtime like you have enjoyed with your new song? Can you also tell us a little bit about your musical background, I read that you started singing in the church.

CG: – Well, I don't yet know anyone else who is black and making music in Piteå... I was brought up in a Christian family, grew up loving music from childhood. I participated in youth choirs, youth groups, wanted to express myself more – I'm a Christian and a musician so I decided to stick with that.

JD: – You had to leave Zimbabwe for South Africa and I read that you had a very challenging time in South Africa. Can you tell us about that?

CG: – There's a lot of xenophobia in South Africa. Zimbabweans are quite educated. We get more opportunities in South Africa than South Africans themselves. Also, it is easy to identify a Zimbabwean from a South African.

JD: – Earlier on we listened to other panellists discuss discrimination and stereotypes attributed to people of colour in Europe and Sweden, would you say that you have ever been subjected to negative stereotypes surrounding black people while you have been in Piteå?

CG: – I haven't experienced too much negativity yet, and I'm studying music at Framnäs folkhögskola.

JD: – Earlier panellists in other discussions also tackled issues of gatekeepers within the art community and how restrictive they are, I was wondering if you feel like the opportunities that have come your way would still be possible if you weren't an ICORN artist?

CG: – I have good people around me... I heard a lot about Sweden. But I never planned to be here, not in Europe at all. But the situation changed and became something else. People said to me it is a very racist country. But faced with the alternative to go back to Zimbabwe, I chose to come here.

I read before about how Swedish people are in general and found out that in general they are a closed people. In Piteå a lot of people are not too flexible about speaking English they love their language. So I have to do my homework to fit into the community by speaking the preferred language.

JD: – What is your impression of artistic freedom here?

CG: – Well, in Zimbabwe artistic freedom is a nightmare. You are not free to sing whatever you think, you are restricted. When you take things to radio – if it's political songs for the ruling party, then you're definitely accepted. Not for the other political views. In South Africa it is freer. In Sweden I haven't experienced much, but from what I've heard anybody can comment on anything freely without being victimised.

JD: – Do you feel the pressure of not saying too much? I ask this because some foreign born artists who have migrated to Sweden due to persecution they faced back home, have expressed that they sometimes feel pressured to be grateful for having a safe space here and they fear if they criticize issues happening here they may not get the funding they need to continue to work.

CG: – If I could say anything to help people I would do it. The song "Piteå för alla" is not only for me but for the people to come.

Comment from the audience: – I'm new to Malmö and it hit me that there's no censorship here. The radio is very outspoken.

JD: – Freedom of speech is a double-edged sword; both moderates and people with extreme views have equal rights, hence you can't then control fascist expressions either.

CG: – It's key for artists to take hold of freedom of expression with responsibility. You know how to use your freedom.

The conversation and the full day ended with Cris Gera performing an à cappella version of his song "Piteå för alla".

Report: Karolina Jeppson