

This Ain't Hip-Hop, But It's Hip.

By JAFFER BATICA

Slow and low, the bass slinks out serpentine around a smoky jazz chord progression. The drummer tickles the hi-hat as the keyboard saunters in with a shy, liquid ripple of vibes before plunging fully into the mellow groove. The tall, black man with long dreadlocks and an African vest addresses the crowd, tingling with anticipation, in a magician's basso voice: 'Greetings ... Antioch ... Yellow Springs ... Ohio...'. The band then kicks a melodic funk into full effect with the tall man in front, introducing the Muntu Kuntu Energy Ensemble to a packed house in the Antioch Inn. He presents Muntu as an African concept of the spirit of life in all things. He then presents Kuntu as the living spirit of the arts. 'Let us speak to your Third Eye,' the singer entreats the crowd, before bending down to get busy over his drums and joining the vibe of the other players in a full on, living jam.

On Friday, February 25th, Antioch and the Yellow Springs Community got treated to a stellar set of live poetry by poet, musician, and Professor of Pan-African Studies at Kent State, Mwatabu Okantah and his band, the Muntu Kuntu Energy Ensemble. The band featured Eric Gould on keys, Glenn Holmes on bass, and Bill Ransom on drums. The performance and poetry workshop that Okantah had hosted earlier that afternoon were part of the closing plans for Antioch's Black History Month celebrations. Almost ironically, during the intermission of the ensemble's performance word was spreading around campus that the four police officers brought to trial in the case of Amadou Diallo had been acquitted. That Sunday, there was also to be a protest to raise awareness about Mumia Abu-Jamal in Columbus with Ramona Africa speaking. So, while the official celebrations were closing, unofficial recognition of the other side of African-American History was still playing out. They seemed to reach a synthesis, however, in the political artwork of the MKE Ensemble as the band

played on behind Okantah's striking and touching poetry.

At the poetry workshop (held earlier that Friday in the SSC lounge) Okantah talked about his personal history and the role of the poet in society. He also read from both his book, *Collage* (available in the Kettering Library), as well as some unpublished works. The audience consisted of students from both Antioch and Yellow Springs High School, and some faculty from both. The poet was a tall, dark, black man with long dreadlocks tied with a near red, green, and gold ribbon underneath a knit cap, with copper bracelets adorning his wrists. Added to this were his Vans, Adidas track-pants, sweatshirt, and professorial glasses. When he spoke, he filled the room with his intelligence, wisdom and charm, engaging the classes to interact with him and to respond to his poetry.

The discussion was lively and challenging with students asking Okantah questions regarding his work and influences. Addressing the high school students in particular, he told a story of how he had received an 'F' in English for not writing poetry and had, years later, gone on to make a living as a writer and had earned degrees in English and Creative Writing. 'Poetry for me is essentially how I see. It's what I experience. It's how I express myself - through poetry and music,' said Okantah. He spoke about the failure of public schools and our general attitudes about poetry to really tell us how important it is. He went on to say, 'I really didn't know what poetry was. I only knew that what I had been exposed to in school. I did not like it and if that's what poetry was, I vowed that I would never do it.' At the workshop and the performance, Okantah, through his performing style, challenged the traditional educational paradigms of poetry. What is presented in schools is dead poetry, by dead poets, held down to their pages by static chains of type and whips of linguistic analysis. At the performance, his first poem opened with a howl that Allen Ginsberg could not have pulled off, and closed with soft cooling. In

between were raucous shouts, sung ballads, and words constructed to make heads nod. The way we're taught to 'enjoy' poetry, we can forget to tap our feet to it, play air guitar to it, scoot boots to it, or just plain hear it.

Apart from poetry, he spoke about his influences and other topics, such as how he was part of the militant Kent State black student movement. He began being less militant than his peers, but the movement brought out feelings in him that he knew had always existed and had given shape and direction to them. He spoke about how the two books that significantly influenced him were *Native Son*, by Richard Wright and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. 'From those two books, I could see writing as a weapon. I wanted to write stuff to make people feel like that,' said Okantah. Citing more influences, he mentioned *A Love Supreme* by John Coltrane and *The Miseducation of the Negro*, by Carl G. Wilson, among

others. He went on to say that 'everything you experience becomes a part of what you do'. Asked about hip-hop, Okantah replied that hip-hop needed to develop a moral conscience and join 'the great black tradition of music - pure creativity.' 'Sampling will prevent you from finding your own voice,' said Okantah, but he also pointed out hip-hop artists that he found positive such as Lauryn Hill, Black Star and Erykah Badu.

At the performance, a rapt crowd watched as the MKE Ensemble rocked and grooved



photo by Cristine Vitalekos

through the gamut of black American music, from blues beats to ballads. 'Music is the healing of the nation,' sang Okantah during a funky salsa. In between songs, he would impart wisdom and critique of culture, music, and systems of racism and oppression. During the performance, as the band wandered through the many avenues of black music, Okantah's words from between two smoking numbers rang truer and truer as he progressed through the music: 'This ain't hip-hop, but it's hip.'

SO WHAT DID YOU DO ON COMMUNITY DAY?

By STEPHANIE MCCREARY

"We had a big open cleaning party for the Queer Center and we invited all the administration to come. Bob was the only administrator who came and he did a really good job scraping crud off the floor. There were like fifteen people total maybe. And it's cleaner now."

— Dana Malan, Queer Center Coordinator

"I went to the party the night before, and slept most of the day. Then I hung out with my friends on the grass by Pennell and did some work."

— Anthony Bowman, fourth year

"I worked on my senior project and watched some people play frisbee, and drank some beer and smoked some cigarettes while I watched them."

— Jennifer Gerberick, fourth year

"I played frisbee on the lawn of Birch and Mills and did nothing intellectual."

— Damien Joyner, fourth year

"On Community Day I helped with a project out at G. Stanley Hall Hall and then I went and marched at the march for Mumia."

— Anna Johanson, fourth year