

Written by Patricia Turnier  
Friday, 01 July 2011 15:51

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Phillip Vassell was born in Jamaica and has been living in Canada since 1975. Vassell is the brilliant co-founder, editor, and co-publisher of *Word* magazine, established in 1992. It is one of the first urban Canadian magazines and the first *torontonian*

leading magazine in this realm. It was created out of a need to showcase and give voice to black urban culture. Prior to

*Word*

, Phillip Vassell worked five years at CBC (Canada's national public radio and television broadcaster) as a journalist, editorial assistant and researcher. At the time, Mr. Vassell saw and still sees himself as a "journalist" and wants to be acknowledged as such, "not as a Black journalist". While at CBC, Phillip decided to look at the hiring practices of mainstream media outlets and found that there was an under-representation which didn't reflect Canada's diverse population. In this regard, he, along with his wife Donna McCurvin, thought that it was important to create a magazine which gives another perspective.

*Word*

reflects the Arts through music, film, video, literature and visual mediums.

*Word*

looks at Art from a black and urban perspective. Among many others, Mr. Vassell has interviewed well-known people such as the legendary

[Quincy Jones](#)

for

*Word*

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magazine. As for the future of  
*Word*

, Vassell believes that his publication is like Motown where music is made by Blacks and has found a universal audience in the process. This is based on surveys conducted by the magazine which revealed that a 45-50 percent readership is from non-African backgrounds. For Vassell, Black urban culture is universal.

*Word* publishes over 50,000 copies monthly, with distribution in major Canadian cities such as Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver and Halifax. The magazine even added distribution in U.S cities like Detroit and New York for a limited time. It publishes currently two issues – a summer and a winter (Black History Month) issue. There are plans to increase its online presence in the coming months. Through its co-op program it provides training for students in media. It also initiated the Minority Media Training Program in partnership with the province of Ontario and the Southern Ontario Newspaper Guild. *Word* Magazine will celebrate its 19th anniversary this year. In 1997, *Word* co-founders started the Toronto Urban Music Festival, a showcase for new and emerging urban artists. The Toronto Urban Music Festival (<http://www.tumf.net/artists.html>) was held February 22 to 27, 2011. Artists like Mos Def, Talib, Jill Scott, Divine Brown, Jully Black, Melanie Durrant, Cali, Ayah are among the many talented performers who have taken the stage at TUMF over the years.

The couple also found the TD Irie Music Festival ([www.iriemusicfestival.com](http://www.iriemusicfestival.com)) which will take place from July 29th to August 1st 2011. Past celebs guests at the festival include singer/songwriter and author Dan Hill who read excerpts from his autobiography *I Am My Father's Son* at the 2010 Irie Literary Program. Other Canadian artists like Liberty Silver, Shawna Stewart, Imaan Faith and Isax performed last year at the festival. International musical acts like the Grammy Award-winning UK reggae band, Steel Pulse, Third World, Tots & The Maytals, Byron Lee & The Dragonaires, Fab 5, Morgan Heritage and Maxi Priest have also appeared at the Irie Festival. In this interview Vassell will talk about the upcoming Irie festival and other projects he's currently involved with. Readers will also feel the love of Mr. Vassell for his Jamaican's root in the interview. We had the pleasure to speak with him on March 8th 2011 on the International Women's Day.

*Interview conducted by the Editress-in-Chief, Patricia Turnier.* □ □ □

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### Patricia Turnier talks to Phillip Vassell:

**P.T.** You worked in the media for decades. Can you name us one to three people who were the most instrumental in your career?

**P.V.** I can think of three people. Two of them were quite direct and the third one was someone indirect. The first one was Clennell Bynoe. He was the editor of the predominant Black newsweekly *Contrast Newspaper* in the '80s. I was attending University of Toronto at the time. His publications had a significant impact on my vision in the editing field. The second one was Tim Knight, the head broadcast training at CBC television where I spent five years as a journalist. He had a great influence on me in broadcasting. We became fast friends and he was one of my mentors. The third person is Earl G. Graves Sr., the founder and publisher of *Black Enterprise* magazine. He was ahead of his time and raised awareness of the black consumer power to corporations and big sponsors by making them more conscious of the value of the African-American market. It had a significant impact in the United States regarding the importance of the Black economic contribution. Hopefully, this will become a worldwide phenomenon. With the Internet, there is definitely a greater chance to see this happening because the world has become more unified than ever.

**P.T.** You are the co-founder, editor, and publisher of *Word* magazine. It was created because you had a desire, a need for expression and development of urban culture. It was needed at the time because black urban culture was unknown and not really addressed in the mainstream press. What is your assessment of the actual state of urban culture in Canada?

**P.V.** I think that we are in a high growth period. We see the success of Drake, K'Naan (who toured over 80 countries), Justin Bieber, Melanie Fiona, Kardinal Offishall, K-os, Nelly Furtado, Jully Black. Things are changing since the last five years; we are really in an exciting period of growth and flourishing urban talent in Canada. We also have people like singer/songwriter Glenn Lewis. He is working on a new album and had a song which was nominated in the last Grammy Awards. We have other R&B singers such as [Deborah Cox](#) and [Tamia](#). We have Canadian producers who worked on the albums of international urban artists such as Boi-1da. He is among the most celebrated hip-hop producers. He was nominated for a Grammy for a record that he produced for Eminem. He got a nomination also for Drake's first album

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### *Word*

magazine, as you said, urban culture was underrepresented in the media. It is still the case to some extent. However, the Internet can be used as an important tool to take urban culture to a higher level.

I would like to add that in a broader view regarding black culture, I think in literature, interesting things are really happening. For instance, the latest novel of Lawrence Hill *The Book of Negroes* is a bestseller which won the 2008 Commonwealth Writers' Prize. The Canadian filmmaker of international acclaim, Clement Virgo is working to make Hill's novel into a movie. So, there is dynamism in many fields and I am very positive that we are going forward.

To finish, I would like to say that there was a time ethnic publications were seen by the mainstream as substandard. With our staff some ended up working for CBC and there were non-Black people who wanted to write for our print media. That was great because black music is universal and our publication is inclusive.

**P.T. As an urban music publisher expert, what needs to be done to bring Canadian hip-hop and R&B music to a higher level (of success), even at par with the U.S.?**

**P.V.** U.S. urban culture is much more well-known than the Canadian one and we can't forget that the demographic weight is different and plays an important role. To be promoted, artists need the media. The critical mass is not the same in the Canada versus U.S., so it is not easy for the urban culture magazines to attract big advertisers required for survival and longevity. As a publisher of a magazine dedicated to urban music and culture, recently we had the Urban Music Week, a series of events which included a two-day conference in Toronto. The keynote speaker of our conference was Chris Hicks, the executive Vice-president of Island Def Jam Music Group which is part of Universal Records, one of the largest labels in the world. He believes that Canada will become bigger in urban music's realm like Atlanta. On the billboard charts, you often find groups from Atlanta. He added that Toronto brings a lot to the table in the hip-hop scene and Drake is the best example of it. Justin Bieber has also achieved tremendous success. In a different music category, we have the crooner Michael Bublé also. Those artists are widely known and they are from Canada. So, I really believe that things are changing and we have what it takes to become bigger. There are American artists who look for inspiration regarding urban culture in Toronto. The prospects are positive but we need to build an industry structure to get the best of the opportunities.

**P.T. You spoke about the urban music in English Canada. Do you have an opinion about the French hip-hop and R&B scene?**

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**P.V.** Unfortunately, I don't have an opinion because I am not familiar enough with French hip-hop and I might need your input on this for the future [Laughs].

**P.T.** **Do you think that it is a myth or a reality that radio doesn't play the music of independent artists?**

**P.V.** Independent artists have a tough time getting their music heard period. But it is especially true with independent urban artists. With little or no avenues in terms of urban radio across the country, it is extremely difficult.

**P.T.** **This year, you and your team will celebrate the 19th anniversary of *Word Magazine*. What are you planning as a special event for the 20th anniversary of this magazine?**

**P.V.** We are producing an anthology of the best writings throughout the years. It will be a great opportunity to share with the readers the contribution of our writers. I think that it will be an excellent way to celebrate our accomplishments in publishing. As you know, many established publications (magazines and newspapers) are struggling with the growth of the Internet.

**P.T.** **At the beginning, some people thought that hip-hop was only a novelty, a fad whose days were numbered. What do you think helped hip-hop become a worldwide cultural phenomenon with longevity?**

**P.V.** Urban culture speaks to people (about struggles, oppression, the realities of the streets, their joy, etc.) and it gives them a window to their world. So, the public relates to this. Reggae has similar traits and there are Jamaican roots to urban culture. Prior to America, this genre of music originated in Africa with Griots and instruments like drums. It became a source of sharing information about what was going on in their communities and the world. It empowered by giving voice to a lot of people.

The contribution of DJs such as Kool Herc (called the godfather of hip-hop), Grand Master Flash, Afrika Bambaataa in urban culture are fundamental. A lot of people do not know that these artists at the beginning were instrumental in the development of hip-hop culture in NY during the 70s. Regarding more specifically Kool Herc, he used hard funk, rock, and records with Latin percussions which formed the basis of hip-hop music. His involvement was priceless in the growth of the urban culture.

Another factor which can explain the worldwide phenomenon that hip-hop became is the fact that this genre is democratic and more accessible. I mean that big bands with musicians were not required. The artists didn't need a lot of equipment to create their music. In other words, less material was needed. We must not forget that the kids from the Bronx didn't have access to many dance halls and community spaces. Everything began in the streets. The underfunded schools didn't provide instruments, so the teenagers had to use what was available to them, such as stereos, to create new sounds.

I want to mention that I see also a connection between hip-hop and blues. We must not forget that the blues genre originated in African-American communities, primarily in the Deep South of

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the United States at the end of the 19th century from spirituals. It was an ensemble of work songs, field hollers, shouts, chants, accompanied by rhymes with simple narrative ballads. Jazz also had a profound influence on hip-hop. This genre is intertwined with hip-hop. Rap is mainly about lyrics, expressions, living conditions. It can be incorporated in different formats and styles such as blues, jazz and so on.

I also think it is nice to see that rap is taken more seriously. For instance, we see more studies about this genre in universities. Not too long ago a tribute (through a documentary) was paid to the phenomenal late urban producer J Dilla who died of lupus at a very young age. J Dilla was an amazing producer and when he passed away, it created a huge loss in the hip-hop community. He worked for big-name acts like A Tribe Called Quest, [De La Soul](#), [Janet Jackson](#),

Common and so on. Several artists paid tribute to him since he passed away: Erykah Badu, Pete Rock, Q-Tip, etc. In the documentary we see an orchestra which performs his music. That is a big development for hip-hop, being associated with classical music. For me, this sets a great example of what is changing.

In résumé, hip-hop is not an insular art form. The world embraced it. Hip-hop throws out couplets with metaphors which give audiences different emotions related to freedom, etc. This genre covers a wide range of artistic expression with reappropriation and the world fell in love with its authenticity. Many people didn't see its potential and its wealth at the beginning; if they did, they would never say that it wouldn't last. We must not forget that it took a long time for jazz and blues to receive the deserved recognition on a larger scale. It was seen as music being made by people who had drug problems, living on the streets, etc. Those artists were not seen as classical musicians. Hip-hop had to go through similar struggles. It is fascinating for me to see now that the Caribbean-American, Hispanic-American and African-American youth came together and created what is called hip-hop culture, an international phenomenon.

**P.T. □ Chuck D in the past said to the media that rap was Black America's CNN, in other words the documentary news service the inner cities have never had. □ Do you agree with this statement? □ If so, why?**

**P.V.** Absolutely! It reflects what is going on with urban youth. It gives a real sense of their thoughts, their vision, etc. Rap was born from a specific socio-economical context. In the '60s, several Bronx businesses and apartment complexes were destroyed to build the freeway for white suburban commuters. This situation created the devaluation of the Bronx sector with a dearth of external support. This phenomenon became a national symbol of the crisis in the American inner cities during the '70s. Hip-Hop emerged in this context as a new creative art with graffiti, breakdancing and rap music. It became a collective mode of survival.

Rap is a form of story telling and a form of sharing with narratives. The rap that we know today started with pioneer groups like Sugarhill Gang, Grandmaster Flash, Afrika Bambaataa and so on. They shared information about what was going on in the street. In other words, the best rap music can be perceived as street level journalism or real-life observation penned in a poetic style.

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### **P.T. Do you think that it is important to have more raptivists in hip-hop?**

**P.V.** The young people coming up need to be educated about the music industry. It is important to not be ahistorical in this realm. They need to know that the purpose of the corporate big labels is to sell music and culture to as many people as possible. Their interest can be mercantile. It is a multi-billion industry with all its derivatives in other areas such as cinema and advertisement. There are people who are going to do it for money while others will do it to heighten social consciousness by delivering powerful messages and sharing values. In many parts of the world, hip-hop is used to empower communities and is employed as a tool of self-expression. Being a raptivist depends on your sense of identity, your desire to connect with people by enabling them. I think by choosing the latter path, urban culture would become stronger, with substance. I believe that with the globalization of hip-hop, people around the world remind us of the roots of the music and how important it can impact social change. If the readers go to Wikipedia.org, they will discover information on Asian hip-hop for instance, with parallels of what was taking place in the 1980s, early '90s in not just in the U.S. but elsewhere. At that time, there were hip-hop groups who went to Taiwan and became phenomena in terms of Chinese rap. It is an incredible medium and I think we are still trying to understand it. With the Internet, there are more opportunities than ever to talk about social issues. I believe that as a raptivist, you have to be aware of your community which is global now more than ever. Personally, as a publisher I have been a student of history and I think it is important for anybody who wants to grow in his domain to continually learn.

**P.T. I would like to say that I think, unfortunately, rap went too far to some extent. We can think, for instance, about the emcee who got banned in 2006 for singing about minstrelsy and lynching. Some rappers embrace corporate interests which can deny the complexity of Black identity and culture by using stereotypes, exploitation and the promotion of misogyny. When I was in Atlanta for vacation in 2006, I heard a nice hip-hop group rapping about Dr. MLK. It was pretty refreshing and I wonder if those groups are being silenced because we don't hear them on mainstream media.**

**P.V.** I think raptivists who value lyricism and poetry over style are out there, but because of the nature of the music industry which emphasizes more on the bling aspect of life, their voice is hard to be heard. However, the audience has power and there are ways to let the industry know that they want to hear more uplifting lyrics with substance. I think also that the ultimate tool is the Internet. It is definitely the best platform to create strong communities with alliances. I know spoken word artists who make tours in many parts of the world to transmit their messages. There are many instruments to use.

**P.T. What advice do you have for aspiring R&B and Hip-Hop artists who wish to establish a strong relationship with the media?**

**P.V.** I think we have been doing that through the urban music conference; it is part of the urban music week which occurred at the end of last February. The conference does several things. It provides professional development for artists by bringing experts from Canada and the U.S. We have panelists from both sides of the border. They provided industry expertise and opportunities for people working behind the scenes. The experts shared information about

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new trends, etc. This event was also an excellent networking opportunity with an outreach goal. We encourage people to learn more about the industry in all its complexity.

As you can see the vision for our magazine goes beyond our publication. We want to share information and educate people. We organized a panel discussion last year for our urban music week festival. It was a public forum on the Caribbean roots of hip-hop. I believe that our conferences are great examples of the kind of mechanisms which provide valuable information to establish a strong relationship with the media for the urban music community. I could add that it is important for the artists who wish to have longevity to nurture their relationships with the publicists and the people involved in different sectors of the media. You need the right publicist, agent and so on. In other words, it is imperative to be well surrounded.

**P.T. You, along with Donna McCurvin created the Irie festival. Seeing that our readers come from every corner of the world, can you describe for those who are not familiar with the festival what it is all about, and can you name us some of the main performers for the next Irie festival in summer 2011?**

**P.V.** The list of the entire artists will be on our Web site [www.iriemusicfestival.com](http://www.iriemusicfestival.com) as of spring 2011. The festival will take place from July 29th until August 1st 2011. This year will be our ninth anniversary. It started as a way to celebrate reggae and world music including gospel. We realized that it was imperative to celebrate reggae locally and internationally. We also discovered that a platform was needed to fete visual arts, literature and poetry in this period of the year. We decided to put all of this together by creating a music and arts festival with a tropical food fair and drink. The annual TD IRIE Music Festival is a free multi-media event with talented international and Canadian artists. The weekend will feature a variety of music, dance, spoken word and visual art as well as eclectic food from the Caribbean, Africa, North America, South America. The festival provides an opportunity to promote a greater understanding between diverse cultures and traditions of Toronto.

To conclude, the festival encompasses a wide variety of activities: live music, dance presentations, art exhibitions, children's activities and rides, crafts, street performances, author readings, etc. It is important to mention that the festival has a focus on showcasing food from tropical regions around the world. We also present film documentaries at the festival.

**P.T. It is similar to Marcus Garvey's approach [Laughs].**

**P.V.** Definitely! Last year, we had three stages and 100, 000 attended the event. It is growing annually. Over the years, we added salsa music. We also have a program dedicated to gospel music. We incorporate a diversity of music (Latin, African music, jazz) with reggae as the backbone. Everybody who appreciates and understands Black culture knows that other forms of music are intertwined. It is easy to establish links and connections.

Reggae is embraced in every part of the world: in South America (for instance, samba reggae from Brazil which is a music genre from Bahia), Asia (Japan is the Asian country which supports

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the most reggae), Oceania, Africa and Europe. My goal for the festival is to showcase more of this genre of music. We'll also see in the years to come how to incorporate its derivatives, such as dancehall, etc. I believe that reggae brings people together.

**P.T. Definitely! It is a powerful music genre. When we think about reggae, the first person who comes to mind is Bob Marley who is considered a musical prophet. His contribution is priceless and timeless. His message will continue to speak to future generations.**

**P.V.** Exactly. *Time Magazine* voted one of Marley's albums the record of the century. That speaks to the popularity of reggae worldwide.

**P.T. I hope that one day a biopic will be made about Bob Marley.**

**P.V.** Actually, a documentary has been made about the Marley family called "Africa Unite" and it is possible that it will be screening at the Irie festival. If this occurs, it will be an instant hit.

**P.T. Absolutely!**

**P.V.** There is also another documentary called RasTa: A Soul's Journey starring Donisha Prendergast, the granddaughter of Rita and Bob Marley which looks at the rise of rasta culture around the world. In addition, there is another documentary on the way. We will be working with the Canadian producer of RasTa, Patricia Scarlett and her team. Donisha will be making a special appearance at TD IRIE Music Festival this summer.

**P.T. Can you share with us a hard lesson you learned as an entrepreneur throughout your career?**

**P.V.** Oh, there are many [Laughs]. You have to learn how, strategically, to get financial resources, especially when you are starting as an entrepreneur. You have to start with a small budget and stretch it as much as possible. In other words, you have to function on a shoestring. It is important to be bold and courageous because you might meet a lot of people who do not share your vision. Some will even try to discourage you. It is important to be persistent, consistent and avoid the naysayers. So, as much as possible it is imperative to be surrounded by people who support you and who can take you to the next level. You have to set the bar high and get family support

**P.T. What message do you have for young people who want to follow in your footsteps, and what advice do you have for "visible minorities" who want to break the glass ceiling in journalism?**

In terms of journalism, we need more "visible minorities" in the schools. I have friends who are teachers in journalism. They are involved also in radio and television. However, it is seldom that they receive calls from Afro-Canadians for internship programs. When I started in this realm, less than 3% of "visible minorities" were in the news rooms across Canada. The people in positions of authority have a duty and a responsibility to make sure that there are more

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“visible minorities” in television station, radio and in the press, it reflects the population. The audience and the readers need to be exposed to different perspectives which will help to eliminate biases. An estimated 15%-17% of Canadian citizens are “visible minorities.” In major Canadian cities like Calgary, Alberta, 25% of the population are people of “color”, in Toronto it is 50%. There is a need for diversity in the media and there is definitely a market for it. CBC is doing a great job in terms of diversity and it is a model to emulate. I also see more opportunities in Ontario for Afro-Canadian male reporters and I think it is great because it wasn't always like that. Changes are happening. It can be slow in some areas and faster in others. Nevertheless, we don't have enough media which reflect the reality of our diverse demography.

The most important thing is to believe in yourself. Barack Obama is one of the best examples that I can give. He was not deterred by the hurdles, his competitors and the fact that there was no Black president before him. I am sure that the words “can't” and “impossible” are not part of his vocabulary. I strongly believe that a mountain can never be climbed successfully by looking down.

**P.T. Thanks Mr. Vassell for this great interview. It was a real pleasure to speak to you!**

### **Awards for Word Magazine:**

- Best Publication, UMAC/Urban X-posure, 2002 & 2001
- Harry Jerome for the business category, 2000
- Special Recognition Award, UMAC, 2000