

Interview with Chaka of RAS: How He is Building the Black Community in Austin



Having grown up in Austin and spent my formative years ingesting all the live music one could expect to absorb in the “Live Music Capital of the World,” I was familiar with Jonathan “Chaka” Mahone, the musician, as one part of the Riders Against the Storm hip hop group prior to this interview. Riders Against the Storm (RAS) is a husband and Wife hip hop duo that has graced many a live music stage in Austin, including shows at SXSW, ACL Fest, and The Circuit of the Americas. If you have been in Austin for even a few years, you might know Chaka’s music, but fewer realize how ingrained he has become in building the Austin community.

Chatting with Chaka is like having a conversation with your favorite cousin on Thanksgiving. He’s hip, talented, full of deep wisdom and great advice, but at the same time so incredibly cool, that y’all could take a ride to the store together to pick up some ice for your grandma’s sweet tea.

When I reached out to Chaka about doing an interview, he responded immediately and agreed, and even though I only arranged for a short amount of time to speak with him, he assured me that he didn’t mind chatting as long as I needed. I’m grateful for that because, throughout the course of our phone interview, I found out much more about not only who he is as a musician, but who he is as a community member and an agent for change.

Tashara: So let’s start from the beginning, what made you move to Austin to do music?

Chaka: Music has always been a part of our lives. We (Chaka and Qi Dada, his wife) are originally from Rhode Island. From about 2000-2009 we were making music and performing in clubs around the city but it wasn’t really a career. We had other jobs and were performing here and there, but nothing too serious. In 2009 we decided to pursue music full time. We knew that for us, music is an Entrepreneurial endeavor. We would have to give full effort to make it happen. Rhode Island wasn’t really a great place to do that. We had a friend who had moved to Austin and had great things to say about it. So we came down for a visit and decided this is where we wanted to be.

Tashara: What inspired you to make music that brings together the community?

Chaka: Everyone has to take the path that inspires you. We had to think about what makes us different and make a lane for ourselves. For us, it wasn’t about building fans, it was about building community. I used my former experience as a community organizer to build a base group of people who loved our music. Once we had that base group of supporters, it allowed us to do different things that further built the community. We built relationships with people who connected with us because we offer something unique.

Tashara: What if any, is the artist’s responsibility during times like this with ongoing police brutality against the black community, and just unrest in general?

Chaka: I believe it's the artist's responsibility to speak to the times. There was a time when we (Black People) had less, yet we were talking about power. It was about "Black Power." Now we seem to have taken a step back and are just asking for our lives to matter. To an extent, our expectations have lowered. Artists back in the day spoke on liberation, they were more inspired by having our own and controlling our own. Now they talk about inclusion. It's just a different approach.

Another responsibility that artists have is just using their freedom; the ability to express themselves fully. In doing that, they inspire others to embrace that freedom as well.

Tashara: Are there any new projects you are working on that you want to share with the community?

Chaka: People may not know this, but I am the Vice-Chair of the Austin Music Commission. The Austin Music Commission created a 1.5 million live music fund last September which allocates a portion of the Hotel Occupancy Tax Revenue to create programs and offer direct relief to assist Austin musicians. I have called for the city to create a "Black Live Music Fund" that would support the businesses and interests of black musicians, specifically, in the city. Everyone is talking about "Black Lives Matter," but it's time for them to put their money where their mouth is.

Last year, I also fundraised for and launched the DAWA fund, a fund which grants small sums of money to people of color that are the "helpers" in the community. Those could be musicians, teachers, artists, social workers, or service industry people. I just remember the stress and anxiety that we went through when we moved here and were first getting started. We would be on food stamps, then cut off, but we stayed committed to our artistry. We had a safety net of people who cared, who would fill our fridge with groceries. To honor that, we wanted to really help people who give and have an impact on our community, but what they do is not valued like it should be. Through the fund, we have given out over \$20,000 including about 200 prepaid gift cards to people in need.

People who are interested can donate funds or apply for the grant at, www.DawaHeals.org

Tashara: Okay, time to break from the serious questions, last question, if you could do a show with any artist who would it be?

Chaka: Man, there are so many artists I can think of! Maybe, Stevie Wonder, that would be an epic, once in a lifetime experience, or Earth Wind and Fire, someone that has a legacy so that I can thank them for what they have done for so many people.