

Ready to Die

*Sellassie puts his life on the line for San Francisco*

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Sellassie is planning to put out a new album called Black Jedi just in time for the Republican National Convention in July. But, true to the title, you'll have to look for it in the physical world because the San Francisco raised rapper and activist born Averi Blackwell, 39, is not sure if he'll make it available online. As a seasoned community and music event organizer — recent gatherings include a public conversation with Black Panther co-founder Bobby Seale — he prefers the personal touch.

He expects Black Jedi to have about 20 tracks that he recorded in Los Angeles. He pretty much just drove to Southern California in search of a better life out of grief shortly after The Jacka was murdered in Oakland in February 2015 in a tragically still-unsolved case, but family and the Bay Area being his real home means that Sellassie is here in the 415 area code quite a lot of the time.

That's right, a San Francisco native who is now a Los Angeles resident was among the #Frisco5, the group of five activists who went on a 17-day hunger strike in front of the Mission District police station in order to urge San Francisco Mayor Ed Lee to fire or demand the resignation of the Greg Suhr, the now former chief of police. Instead of hiding behind a computer in Southern California, he came home and put his life on the line in a gesture that made international news.

Suhr did eventually resign, but not before a 29-year-old unarmed pregnant woman named Jessica Williams was shot and killed by an SFPD sergeant in a stolen vehicle just days after the hunger strike came to its conclusion. The strike's finale was driven by community and concerns from the UCSF medical staff and students who closely monitored their situation daily that it could soon have a grave ending.

Despite being hospitalized twice that week amid concerns with his blood work, Sellassie wasn't ready to stop the cause on that 17th day. But he readily admits that when he went into the hunger strike at the behest of his friend (fellow rapper Equipto, who was planning the strike with his mother), he only thought it'd be for a few days.

"I reluctantly didn't want to do it at first but eventually felt compelled to do it because we were kicking it so tough and we were doing everything else, fighting all these other battles, so I'm like 'Yeah, fuck it,'" Sellassie recalls. "So I thought we'd do it from Thursday to no later than Sunday and I didn't think it garner as much attention as it did."

We're speaking about a month since it all ended, yet it's clear he hasn't really had that much time to process what happened and get his body into some semblance of health — he estimates that he lost about 15 pounds off a naturally slim frame. "People who know me were like, 'You were pretty sucked up, you looked like you were on some crystal meth or something.'" he says.

Black Jedi features beats that Sellassie has collected over several years from producers he's met online from all over the world. Some of the beats, he says, he's lived with for years before creating the perfect song to go with it. He works slowly and deliberately, but is still fairly prolific; he has released five previous albums in a decade.

It will probably be a while before he translates his recent experiences into art.

"That whole 17 days, I haven't even written about it at all," he admits. "It's really still kind of sinking in, my body's getting back to the way it used to be I think and I haven't really been able to write about that but I know when that time comes it will be really really cool when I do."

"I think there was a lot of progress that was made but there is still much more work to do so that consumes my mind," he reflects now. "Being a part of that change and what we've done, the thoughts of how do we keep it going without it self destructing [arise]. How do we keep it focused without all that work being in vain? I don't think it could ever go down in vain but where we don't splinter off and destroy the movement. But I'm very inspired."

He also sees personal obstacles removed as a result of achieving what they did.

"Even now, there are things I want to change about myself that I know I can do from doing that if I put the same kind of dedication in my mind that I did with that to do with something that I want to change," he says. "So that taught me something very valuable about myself and about life because that wasn't something I ever thought that I could do, go 17 days and fight the biggest politicians in San Francisco without eating. I'm looking forward to using that knowledge to things that I need to change in my life."

What's it like to go that long without food? People of all persuasions who checked on them daily to offer love, blessings, hugs, phone chargers, water, and moral support fed them spiritually.

"When we were doing it we were on a spiritual high. I don't want to sound like a Zen master or nothing like that," he laughs, "but I've never done something like that where — I'm hungry now, I haven't eaten today so I kind of have the same kind of feeling that I felt when I was out. My point is, we were out there and we weren't eating but there was so much stimulation around so I think that helped us survive. It was an amazing spiritual ride."

Sellassie's goals through organizing events and through his music is to keep the black history conversation going, to learn from previous generations of activism and to keep a lineage open and not lost to social media static.

He's also trying to show that he can be for his people, and those people are all people — the way he was taught to be, growing up in San Francisco.

“I’m trying to change the way people look at black revolution to where it’s not a black nationalist or a black radical, it’s a brother that can be just as down for his people and not be a homophobic a bigot or a racist,” he adds. “I feel very blessed to be a part of something that has sparked the idea of change.”