# Transcript of Interview with El Jay'Em By Kit Heintzman

**Interviewee:** El Jay'Em **Interviewer:** Kit Heintzman

**Date:** 09/23/2022

Location (Interviewee): Cleveland, Ohio

**Location (Interviewer):** 

**Transcriber:** Angelica S Ramos

# Some of the things we spoke about include:

Providing conflict resolution strategies with art therapy. Working on the Bernie Sanders 2020 campaign. Getting marooned in South Carolina at the beginning of the pandemic, not knowing anyone there. The imperative for BIPOC people to be "productive"; taking time to sit and think during lockdown; re-evaluating priorities. First hearing about the pandemic; questions about the origins of the virus. Media, fear, and propaganda trying to keep people inside; media as triggering; the mental stress of uncertainty. Medical racism and the impact on personal healthcare use. Instead of going back to the pre-pandemic norm, re-imagining different futures. The American Constitution; being 12th generation living under the laws of 8th generation. Poor messaging around masking and prevention. Shopping: Lysol, toilet paper, bottled water. The importance of paying attention to emotions.

#### Kit Heintzman 00:03

Hello, would you please state your name, the date, the time and your location?

#### El Jav'Em 00:08

Hello, my name is El Jay'Em is September 23. The time is 11:11am. And I am currently in Cleveland, Ohio.

#### Kit Heintzman 00:19

And the year is 2022.

#### El Jay'Em 00:22

Yes, 2022, that is the year.

#### Kit Heintzman 00:25

And do you consent to having this interview recorded, digitally uploaded and publicly released under Creative Commons License attribution noncommercial sharealike?

#### **El Jay'Em** 00:35

Yes.

#### Kit Heintzman 00:36

Thank you so much for being here with me today. Could you just start by introducing yourself to anyone who might find themselves listening? What would you want them to know about you and the place you're speaking from?

#### El Jay'Em 00:46

That [inaudible] makes it even more loathing, right? Well, like I said, my name is El Jay'Em. You can follow me everywhere but home at E-L-J-A-Y-E-M underscore LJM. About me, let's see, Oh cough on the interview, that's embarrassing, well, it keeps, sorry, I really just, I really just recovered from severe allergy. So you might hear some coughing throughout this interview, I apologize to anyone listening for that, but real life, right? If anything, today is a good day September 23. And it's actually my grandmother's birthday. Oh, you know, [inaudible] passed away 2007 today was the day of her birth. And today, it's actually a good day, Speakezie Go Hard fourth anniversary, and Speakezie Go Hard is a cultural entity that provides conflict resolution to vic, to survivors of violence, through the use of prosperity, right? Basically, we are trauma relief over the phone. And I'm speaking on that, because right now, we're just, I felt the whole world is in a space of healing, and reimagining. And I think right now, it's just important that we activate those skills and spaces that we can have to really heal properly. To give time and the proper love and nourishment to give instead of trying to rush through because of the unpleasant feeling. Yeah, that's, that's who I am right now.

#### Kit Heintzman 02:38

Would you tell me a story about your life during the pandemic?

#### El Jay'Em 02:43

A story about my life? Well, I had just, when the pandemic hit, literally when the pandemic hit, I had just finished out my contract with the Bernie Sanders campaign in 2020. And I think if anything anytime we talk about the pandemic, it goes back to that moment, you know, it's the same type of moment, like where were you when Michael Jackson passed away, Right? Well, where were you when you heard the news about this? It was the same thing with 2020. Like, so many people had so many big plans for 2020, right, like we want to do it big 2020. This was the year it was the year all right, but just getting off campaign. I was in Columbia, South Carolina. And around that time, you know, it's like panic spreading. Things are shutting down. People don't know what to do. I don't have any family in South Carolina. So I kind of got like, what's that word when you get stuck on the island? It's not stranded, marooned! Yeah, I kind of got marooned in, in South Carolina. And that was quite interesting. Because again, I didn't have any family there I didn't have any community, and I'm one of those people I thrive off of community, I thrive being close to my loved ones. I had to like really figure out things to do during that time. Also I wanna say being a BIPOC Millenial you know, we're always put in the mind frame of if we're not producing, what is our value? Right. I believe around that time, the question of what my true value my true worth was, I mean, is it just the title and the salary? As well as just trying to figure out what I really wanted to do. I've dealt with some people and I always say that COVID was a vacation for people. It gave people time to really think to like, sit down, think and unpack somethings about what they want to do with their life. I guess. It was a scary time. People were dying. No one really knew what was going on. We saw the adequate of the infrastructure of the healthcare system as it stands in America. But I think it was also a time of rebirth and reimagining, in some type of way.

#### Kit Heintzman 05:13

You remember when you first heard about COVID-19?

# El Jay'Em 05:18

That was that was around that time in March, people were talking about it. They were saying COVID, at first, they were trying to figure out where it came from. And I remember reading something from an ambassador in South Africa, and he had connections with China. And he had, he had tweeted, he said that COVID might have

been first discovered in China, but they were not the ones who created it, you know, it's going around to about COVID being created. It wasn't, it's not like a natural thing that took place that came up. But it was definitely, they say, that it was definitely created. So that's curious, because you know nowadays, is out there in the world, and it keeps switching up. It's a new variant every single time. And there saying there's no cure for it. And, you know, it was a lot of back and forth in the beginning, some people believing it was real, other people believing it wasn't real, thinking it was a hoax. So it was a lot going on on the ground as far as like confusion and trying to figure out what's real, because you just came out of the Donald Trump era, right? Where people was learning not to trust the media, not to trust Fox News. And unfortunately, around that time, the media, they were all media, all new channels, CNN, ABC, FOX5, Fox period, just all of them were pushing fear propaganda. They were like scaring people to stay inside the house, when you would drive down the highway, you will see signs that said hey, stay inside, stay inside. Like they're literally pushing you to stay inside your house, and not come out, right? We've never seen that before. So it was like I said, it was definitely interesting to see how everything unfolded.

#### Kit Heintzman 07:13

I'm wondering, based on your experience with conflict resolution, what were some of the things you noticed about the fear mongering?

# El Jay'Em 07:26

If anything with the fear mongering, you saw people being guided by. This was also a time where you had to start sitting with yourself, right? So all those emotions, that you had an attack, and you go into work trying to get through it, right? But really what you're doing is you're ignoring it, until the memory is so far away. You don't remember it until it's the trigger. Well, I think 2020 was also like really triggering so fear in the news, along with like triggering to people. It wasn't helpful. It had triggering aspects on people. You saw anxiety go up, you saw depression in teenagers, people discovered that they didn't know they family, you know, they had, they had been imagining what their family was like for so long. And now they're getting close to understanding and knowing who their family was versus who they imagined them to be.

#### Kit Heintzman 08:26

To the extent that you're comfortable sharing, would you say something about your experiences with health and healthcare infrastructure, pre pandemic?

#### El Jay'Em 08:39

I'm black in America, I don't want to really subscribe to the stereotype that all black Americans dont do doctors but I guess I have fallen into the category of I don't do doctors or the healthcare system, just because of all the biases, the the biasness and weirdness. I mean, I just know from my own perception, and I was talking about to my doctor today who I met because about my cough. And it was weird. Because he was he was a he was a black doctor, but he was African descent but he looked like me. He gave me proper care. Or he took me serious is what I felt so I felt more comfortable with him. I could say I get a feeling for the healthcare system is uncomfortable. Right? And not sureness. And I don't really had too much faith in them and that's just coming from me, because I gone sort of being sick and you know, scared and worried about what I'm doing and what's my health and I see my friends go through that as well. And the healthcare system tried to tell them something else. My best friend went to doctor, to the hospital. I remember I took her to the ER we went to the ER because she thought she was having a miscarriage. The black nurse came in, looked at us and said why did yall come here, shes just on her period, and du du dah. Like what? You know? It was kind of just just off putting and see, that's

the other thing when it comes to, like white supremacy and racism, you know, it can soak into generations. So people are taught to have bias against their own people, or just against certain people period, just because that's the trend, right? That's how deep that type of hatred is, to the point where future generations can also view others like them as a nuisance, or in the way so, again, is just just trauma impacted I probably went off way too much. Yes.

#### Kit Heintzman 10:47

No, that was perfect. And you really can't talk too much in an oral history actually, so your great. Staying in the pre pandemic, world, what was your day to day looking like?

## **El Jay'Em** 11:00

Oh, I have [inaudible] five phases. One, it was amazing, you know? Wake up, go to the office, go to a school, teach at the school for a second, go to the event. Come home, take a nap, go to another event, probably get good food at the event, go out have drinks with friends. You know, go find another kick-it, probably grab some more food, go in the house, go to sleep. It wasn't anything too crazy. It wasn't, you weren't really thinking about germs. You know, like you knew they were out there. But it wasn't anything that could take out 1,000s of people, your elders or things that you had to worry about. You really weren't thinking about it from that sense, at least I wasn't. So, just, just get into that space period. I think that's what life was. But again, people always talk about they want to go back to the norm to be around the norm. Pre post was cool, but why can't we reimagine something too, so.

#### Kit Heintzman 12:12

What are some of the ways that you'd like us to be reimagining?

# **El Jay'Em** 12:19

It's, it's just time to reimagine everything, I mean. And in this current moment, we're the 12th generation, I believe the 14 at this point with the babies being born. But were like the 12 generation still living under eighth generation rules and regulations. You get what I'm saying? So in layman's terms, we're living underneath a bunch of laws that dead white men made that don't even reflect today's demographic of America. So how are we really living, like, are we really alive? Our constitution is supposed to be a living breathing document, not a mummified archive of what used to be or impose, not real democracy, because really, America is just a corporation underneath the UK or underneath the Queen or now King were deep, you get what I'm saying? And that's just because they conquered over 90% of the world. That's a fact. But you know, who's really gonna pay attention to that?

#### Kit Heintzman 13:27

What are some of the things that changed for you when lockdown happened?

#### El Jav'Em 13:35

I think the real thing is like the family, you know, I can say in mine it became divided, because you know, people get scared. And when people move out of fear, it's a different. It's a different type of movement. And I guess it's something that you would never experience with other people until you're in that moment, right? Like, you don't know how somebody will handle a crisis until they're in the middle of handling it. And the first thing you're not supposed to do is panic. Well, guess what? People panic. People panic. So, and then you got an election going on? Or you feel me so it was just it was a lot. It was a lot of emotions going around. And people don't even deal with

their emotions day to day on their own. Right. So now you have a pandemic, people are scared. People are sitting at home. No one knows what's happening. That's that's a lot. That's a lot. That's like mentally stressful, or people have to have to deal with. What was, can you repeat the question? Because yes, and this is my point. Went off on a tangent.

#### Kit Heintzman 14:56

I was asking what your day to day looked like.

### El Jay'Em 14:58

Oh yeah. So basically, you said once we went on lockdown, that's what we're saying. So, you know, again, just when we went on lockdown with that, and just with the mental resources and mental health resources, not not being present, right? We don't have a lot of mental health clinics around you don't have that. So your home had to become your own mental health clinic, as well as it had to become your workspace, a lot of people started working from home, because production has to go on, right, you can't just stop. What happens if you just stop everything? And at least that's what people think. So yeah, I think for that time, me, I was still trying to figure out how we were going to make money cuz you know, the unemployment that said that Care Act money that had came through yet. So it was just like, three months of the Wild West, so to speak, so when lockdown happened, I think that's what you can compare it to. For me, it was like the Wild West, it was an unknown, just trying to figure it out.

#### Kit Heintzman 16:05

What are some of the things you noticed about the reactions of people around you?

# **El Jay'Em** 16:11

Like I said, they were scared. They were scared, everybody kept. Everybody kept saying like, Oh, make sure you wear your mask, so you don't catch it. And you know, if you pay attention to science, and you focus on science, and you focus on everything that they were saying in the beginning, they were explaining that when you wear the mask, you're wearing the mask so that if you have it, you wont go and give it to other people. So that's why you put the mask on that mask and not prevent you from catching COVID It prevented you from spreading COVID So yes, the mask helped stop the spread of COVID but not for the way people were digesting the information so to speak. So it was just it was just like a lot of information being given, people not understanding it. People trying to go and and market or monopolized the hand sanitizer market, you know, they were comparing it to the walking dead like, it's really about. That's why everybody went and stole the toilet paper. Do you remember that you are going to stores and there will be no toilet paper in the store is like, Good God, man. Why did yall take all the toilet paper I really felt like The Walking Dead had something to do with that. And then even the water like people were taking up on the water. It was crazy. Like it was certain things you just couldn't find in the stores that didn't have anything to do with covid, like Lysol. Everybody wanted Lysol, Right? Lysol went from being I think maybe \$3. Now a can of Lysol is a solid \$10. Talk about supply and demand.

## El Jay'Em 17:59

Ooh, that's funny. So yeah, just dealing with that. So lockdown was interesting again, because you really got to see people, you really got to see people's true intentions, so to speak. Oh, and I do have to hop off this call, in like ten, maybe five minutes. I do have another call at twelve that I have to prepare for, that I completely forgot about.

#### Kit Heintzman 18:27

All right, then I'm just going to ask for you to say whatever you think is most important for a historian of the future to hear from you.

# El Jay'Em 18:35

Oh, okay, hello, future. How yall doing? It's all about emotion, please be mindful of emotions, because emotions are real. I think that's one thing that our time is not doing right now. We're not paying attention to emotion. And the fact is that emotions are what creates the culture. And the culture denotes an environment and your environment determines your success. So emotions, and mental health on the emotional scale is supremely important. Emotional Intelligence is important. That's something that we really have to pay attention to. Because that's why we deal with all of the issues we have now because I believe we're lacking emotional intelligence. And please stop trading people for profit, I hope by the year 2050, we're, we're no longer trading people for profit, and I hope the corporate chokehold on the government is obsolete. We have a real government that actually reflects the people and it's for the health and humanity and joy of the people and not for the bottom line. So that, those are my last words I think. I can go on for days, but I think I'll stop there.

# Kit Heintzman 19:59

All right. Thank you. So much for your time.

# El Jay'Em 20:02

Alright, thank you have a good one.

## Kit Heintzman 20:04

You too.