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Kontihene

Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

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[Type text] Date: November 10, 2009

Interviewee: Kontihene

Interviewers: Dr. Jane Edward, Kojo Ampa,
Kareem Salifu, Dr. Mark Naison

Transcriber: Kaitlin Campbell

Mark Naison: Hello, today is November 10th, 2009. This is an interview with the Bronx African American History Project at Fordham University and today we are interviewing a great Ghanaian Hip-Hop star named Kontihene. With us today are Dr. Jane Edward, Kojo Ampa, Kareem Salifu and I am Dr. Mark Naison and doing the videography is Dawn Russell. So, Kontihene, could you please begin by spelling your name and giving your date of birth?

Kontihene: Well, it's K-O-N-T-I-H-E-N-E. I'm January 5th, 1985.

MN: Ok, tell us a little bit about your family background in Ghana.

K: Well, my parents are here. Unfortunately, my dad passed away last year – may his soul rest in peace. My mom and my sisters, they are all in Virginia. I'm the only boy and I have two wonderful sisters.

MN: Now, did you grow up in Ghana or the United States?

K: I grew up in Ghana, yeah.

MN: In what city?

K: In Kumasi.

MN: And was music in your family background at all?

K: Well – I can say yes, because, from the time that I was in my mom's womb, I was singing every time, I was kicking, head-belly. So that was when the music started, and I love music – I remember the time that I started growing up, going to churches. I was always behind the front pew and, you know, trying to figure out what's going on. So, I love music, and—

MN: --In Ghanaian churches is there a lot of singing?

K: Yeah, yeah because from what I realized [coughs] all of the churches – ninety percent of the activities is singing, because they worship God through music. They give thanks to God through music and most of the things that goes on in the churches, they always go with music.

[Crosstalk][Paying for food]

MN: Ok, so the church. You said ninety percent of the activity in a Ghanaian church takes place to music—

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K: -- exactly, because they worship God through music. And they give thanks to God through music. So, when you go to Ghanaian churches, you see that – I mean, they always go with music.

MN: Now, what instruments do they play in the church?

K: They have-- [crosstalk][Rearranging room]

MN: --So you were saying, what are the instruments that they would play in the church?

K: They have the **gin bass**, the African drums, the congos, the rattles and mostly all the ladies go with the tambourine.

MN: So you have a lot of percussion instruments—

K: -yeah, exactly—

MN: Wow. Now, was there other music in your house? Like on the radio, or in phonograph or tape recorders – were you exposed to music other than church music?

K: The radio and – the radio kind of music, I think that era came in the early nineties. In the time that I was growing up, I was introduced to this real state of music, like, the **chin bass**, mostly that go with the chin bass. And the time that electricity and other things that came and people started shifting to, you know, the guitars, like the electric guitars. But people used to play more acoustic guitars, those they buy – they were very expensive to get.

MN: So you were playing, you know—some of the music you were supposed to was not electrified – it was the standup bass rather than the electric bass--?

K: Yeah, exactly.

MN: Now, when did you see yourself becoming a singer and a rapper?

K: Well, I started doing music at the time that I was observing things in the community and the society that maybe I want to talk about it. But because it was a **reserved time** – so I decided to, you know, write it down and express it through music so that – even if I can't stand in your face to tell you what is in my heart and in my mind – you can just listen to the tape and you know what I'm going through.

MN: Ok – so you were concerned about political and social issues--?

K: Yeah I was concerned about – family issues. Like, the things that I went through myself, like, my mom and my dad, my love affairs with other people, how people treat you that you think is not appropriate – I always express them through music. And when you listen to my [sings in Ghanaian] that very album, you can hear the song that goes [Claps][Sings][Raps in Ghanaian].

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You know, this song was explaining the things that I've been going through – my mom's made in our home, the things that my dad pushed us through that was very heartbreaking. So, I mean, in Africa – in Ghana, I should say – we are always raised in a way that is hardly for you to talk to your dad; it's hardly for you to express your opinion – you cannot insult anyone, you can't even call them by the other name – And when you're talking to an elderly person you have to, you know, put your hands at your back, just to pay respects, so—

MN: --Really--?

K: Yeah you have to, yeah – because you can't just keep your hands flowing, that means – that was the time that you were growing up—

MN: Yeah, it was for then this respect for elders that even in the way – Like, if you approached the teacher in school--?

K: --The teachers...when you're late and you see a teacher, you have to vanish – because, that means you are being a bad man. You can't even stand there. If you stand there that means you – [Laughs] Don't be there, don't be alive. You know, you have to pay respect. You have to pay respect when you're growing up. So I started music by expressing what I can talk in their face—

MN: --Now did you write poetry also?

K: Yeah I do that as well.

MN: So, when was – how old were you when you first starting writing poetry and writing songs?

K: I was about ten years of age. I started – there was this great musician that I was looking up to – his name is Tony **Radu**, he was living around our area. So I always go to him and talk—

MN: --How do you spell this name?

K: Yeah, Tony Radu, but he just passed away last—

MN: --Tommy, T-O-M-M-Y?

K: Yeah, Tommy Wireedu [Crosstalk] – he just passed away last two years or so. So I was always going to him to tell him I feel like, 'let's discuss this through music.' There are some issues that you can't talk about in the society: what the politicians are doing, what the chiefs are doing, selling the gold, swapping the gold and all the raw materials of the country while not taking care of the people in the land. You know, all those issues that, I mean – you can't say in public, why don't we do that through music. So, that was how I started—

MN: --Now, what languages did you grow up speaking?

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K: Twi, T-W-I, twi—

MN: --Which we pronounce “chee—[Laughs]. And in school, what language?

K: In school, Twi and English, but mostly we were forced to learn the English language.

Jane Edwards: What language was your poetry in?

K: English, English because we have ten different tribes in Ghana and the ten different tribes that almost speak one language – they have different different languages. But before you can communicate with all of them they have this – you know, because of these tribal wars – they didn’t want to address it to one language. But because Ghana was polarized by the British, so we all have to learn the English so that you can communicate with your neighbor.

MN: And in Kumasi, were there members of—what’s your family ethnic group?

K: They are Ashanti—

MN: --They’re Ashanti, were there other people that are Shanti in Kumasi?

K: Yes, we have the **Evers** we have the **Northnests**. We have the **Ghans**, we have all types of—

MN: --So Kumasi is multi-cultural--?

K: It’s multi-cultural, it’s multi-cultural—

MN: --Is it also multi-religious, that you have Christianity and Islam?

K: Yes, that we have the Chrisitnas and the Islam.

MN: So you started at ten years old, now – did this musician to encourage you, Tommy Wireedu?

K: Oh they do, but—catching out with my album was a problem because there was no, there was no support for me—

MN: --Could you talk a little louder, for the microphone--?

K: --Ok, coming out with your own, like, my own album was a problem because my mom was not supporting about it. I mean she didn’t want the idea – and I was always sneaking out from school to go to the studios and go to these musicians to, you know, get the music advice from them—

MN: --Now what did your mother want? Did she want to become a teacher, or a doctor--?

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K: --Oh she wanted me to become a pastor.

MN: A pastor! [Laughter] Oh!

K: She told me that she named me Emmanuel, meaning that God is with me, so whatever that I do I should always think of God first and, I mean – she always say that she would be very proud to see you preaching and, you know, converting people, to serve the living God, that's champion on the stage and you know, twisting your wits—[Laughter].

JE: What was your religion?

K: Christian.

MN: Was it a particular church?

K: Pentecost—

MN: --Pentecost, OK.

Kojo Ampa:--Now let's come to now. Since you've been here, have you made any efforts to produce music here or to do any music with any American artist at all? What are your plans for your visit here in America?

K: Well, not yet – I was trying to observe what they like, what triggers the people before you can introduce a music with them, before you can sell your product to somebody, you have to – know what the person wants, I mean – what is going on. So, I mean my **[Indecipherable]**—but thank God I met her, I just met professor which I believe that soon we'll be recording some things together. But to observe and see what's going on in the community, what you can talk that can triggers, what you can say to, you know, push them and their ascent barrier. I'm putting so many things into consideration, so that I will be able to do something, not just to do it for doing it, but to do and succeed in it—

KA: So do you believe that a way in America, or your community in The Bronx, you can use music to better the lifestyles of people, or—in anyway to help put Bronx in the lighter, to help Bronx in anyway--?

MN: Well, I should say, Bronx is already doing well. But they still got issues that – you've been viewing in the environment, you have to steady observe and assess things before you can just open your mouth and come out with music, because music is a very powerful tool, it can make and it cannot make. So before you can come out with a record, that, music never expires –you know, people can always refer you with it. So you have to be careful and, you know, observe the things in the society very well before you can come out with a music.

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MN: Now how long ago did you move to The Bronx?

K: Since 2004.

MN: And what sort of work do you do other than music?

K: I put use – CDs, like, I have a (_____) and Chris C P and other couple of albums, when they released back home I just take the rights here, you know and produce it and sell it to the community.

MN: So you're in the music business here—

K: --here—

MN: --And you produce in Ghana and then distribute cd's here--?

K: --Yeah and distribute cds here. I send them to UK and also England, Spain, Canada and other places.

MN: So the Ghanaian diaspora is all over the world--?

K: Yeah

MN: --There are Ghanaians in Spain? [crosstalk] in Canada? In Japan? [Crosstalk][Laughter]
And wherever they are, they want this music.

K: --Yeah the world is becoming one, is becoming smaller.

MN: Wow. [Crosstalk]

Jane Edward: At the beginning at your talk about the music you said you talk about issues. So what of the issues would you be focusing on in The Bronx in particular--?

K: Well, we have a lot of issues. I was raised from a different background—

JE: --Can you explain that background?

K: One thing that, I didn't wanted to say this on camera, but one thing that we were raised for is like – there is no way I can stay somewhere else (inaudible) my mother is also staying somewhere, while she is being taken care of somebody. [Crosstalk] Sometimes when I'm in the house I ask myself, so can you stay somewhere and leave your mom so that she's being taken care of strange people, people she's just never known in her lifetime, so I always ask myself those things because back in Ghana, I mean, when your parents are going, you have to be there for them, you have to fetch water for them, you have to, you know, pamper them – you have to

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be there for them as they did for you./ So you are giving your returns back to them. So these are some of the pretty pretty issues and – another issue is about the rains, the bills, and other things that in Ghana you saw a phone and other things, you pay as you go. But here, I mean [laughs] it's a different environment so it's all about studying and weighing the possibilities and seeing what you can do so that you're not afraid, or you not step on somebody's toe. That is why I say – it's up to you to study so you can talk all great music about a certain topic that you not step on somebody's toe.

JE: And the fact the Bronx is not only Ghanaian, there are other nationalities in the Bronx [Crosstalk] So are you observing only the Ghanaian community or like observing everybody like the Mexicans, the Dominicans, The Congos, and other African nationalities in the Bronx--?

K: Well, we are all becoming one now. Right now, there is no barrier because – we are all creations of God and we are all children of God. So when you are considering things sometimes you always place your culture first. But you'll have to consider someone too so that you can – Because by the end of the day if you hate anyone – I mean you, it's not only in Ghanaian communities, that means you have a bigger price to sell, but if it's only in Ghanaian communities that means you've centered. But Ghanians are not more than other cultures. So I'm considering other people as well.

Kojo Ampa: So you said that you see aging here in America as a problem because the elderly tend to need health care and they go to like assisted living – they need support in they're taken away from their family to somewhere else where they are taken care of by other people, and you thinking that it – i[inaudible] like from Ghana, [inaudible] you know Kipeedeo Elderly Community, actually care of them, other taking them to rich places--?

K: Yeah so they just can keep a constant eye on them. Because the time that you were born by them, because I wouldn't be too proud if maybe God blessed me with children and kids in the future and when I'm growing old, they just ditch me out, you know.

KA: This is very good point because I personally think that one of the many reasons why health care costs so high in our area that, the elderly, needs this care and this care is very expensive. So if they keeping home in kids, and comfort them – the African way, or the Ghanaian way, I think it's really good or—

K: That is my opinion but before other cultures can understand this, you have to make your points clear. Because they have bills to pay, they have appointments – so, I mean, some people will not get it. “Why should I keep my old parent home while there is nobody at home?” Okay, but – there are all processes that we have to, you know, share the benefits that advantage the disadvantage than you can decide or choose when you want to be back. Me, for instance, I don't want to be in their shoes.

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MN: Well one of the things is that – Africans are now setting an example for other people in The Bronx by the way they raise their children, they build businesses, they build churches and mosques – and are showing how families and community solidarity can produce a constructive environment. So, you know, I think you have an opportunity to maybe influence the way other people live because, like when we brought Reverend **Bache**, and his church was the kind of thing that other people were going to be attracted to – because it was such a solid community. I think the same thing is also true of music. If you can take, like, American Hip-Hop – which is, people say is becoming, you know negative, and then combine it with African music to make it positive, then you'd, you know, there may be a response to that.

K: Yeah. [Crosstalk]

KA: Are you married, or, have a girlfriend, or have any kids?

K: I'm not married but I'm seriously in a relationship.

MN: That sounds like facebook. [Laughter][Crosstalk] Now, how much education did you get in Ghana?

K: Well I finished my – the secondary school that they call it GED here, and I was at the University in Ghana, I studied Diploma in General Music. But fortunately I was dismissed.

JE: Why? [Laughter][Crosstalk]

K: I mean every disadvantage can be an advantage for you. Because in Ghana we don't have nice schools. If you want to be in school, they will scrutinize and hold the information. Sometimes it would just take schooling out of you. But I don't blame the administrators, I don't blame the government. We don't have much schools in Ghana. I know that we are now getting other schools like the Central University and other universities coming in. By the time that I finished secondary school – that's the GED – getting into university was a problem. The whole opportunity for me, for me to see the world, for me to explore, for me to make money as well.

MN: Now, when did your first album come out?

K: That was the year 2000—

MN: -- And how would you characterize the music that you were creating--? Somebody uses the term “hip-life,” or is that, how would you describe your music--?

K: I call it Afro-pop music—

MN: --Afro-pop--?

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K: -- Afro-pop music. But our people call it hip-life, because it's full of – I don't have much hip-hop beats in it, like as the great Rock Stone and other people did. This was – pure African readings like, the Our Power [Sings in Ghanaian] You know, old tunes--

MN: --These are Ashanti music that you are talking about when you say “old tunes,” or is it Ghanaian pop music--?

K: They were folk songs that people used to sing by the fireside and tell stories by the fire growing up. I remember the time that I was growing up, they used to send me to the village to see my grandparents and we will be sitting by the fireside, eating corn, then they told us stories and advice you – these are kind of the songs that we did used to share with there – So I decided to bring those memories back and – also add my ideas to it.

MN: So using traditional folk music