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Yasiin Bey Would Like You To Quit Calling Him Mos Def

by Scott Korb

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hmoIJQWPg9w

At a performance last August, the deliberate and sharply dressed emcee, who is also well known as an actor, announced his "official transition" to a huge audience gathered in the parking lot of a popular pub and pizzeria in Anchorage, Alaska: "My professional name will be my chosen and my legal name, which is Yasiin Bey. … And I don't want to have to wait for it to be in *Source* or *Vibe* or someplace. I figure, we're all here. We can see each other." And then he spelled it out for them: "Y-A-S-I-I-N, first name. Last name: B-E-Y."

When a few Alaskans made some disapproving noises, Bey responded, "I understand. I understand." Cradling his signature bright red, vintage-style microphone, he then tried to make it clear he knew exactly what, and exactly whom, he was giving up. "No one has a more close relationship to Mos Def than me. I know that guy. *Really good*."

To be fair, Bey's mother, Sheron Smith, who manages a good portion of his career and whom even I, a reporter with no relationship to the family, call Umi, still mostly refers to her son by the name she gave him: Dante. So does the emcee Talib Kweli. "I refer to Mos Def as Dante, or 'D,'" he recently told me. "I'm trying to get used to referring to him as Yasiin." Obviously. Around his wrist, Bey even still wears a bracelet with links that spell it out: D-A-N-T-E.

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Kweli and Bey have known each other since they were teenagers together in the early 1990s. (Bey, 38, is two years older than Kweli.) On the weekends

back then, Kweli, who was raised in the neighborhoods of Park Slope and Flatbush and, like Bey, still calls Brooklyn home, would return from Cheshire Academy, a Connecticut boarding school, to spend time in Washington Square Park with other kids he knew from the city. There he became a fan of Bey, who sometimes performed in the park with his sister Ces and his brother Denard in a group they called Urban Thermo Dynamics. By the mid-90s, U.T.D. also had a video for their song "Manifest Destiny" on Ralph McDaniel's public-television program "Video Music Box," which to Kweli was like "the end of the world. If you had a video in 'Video Music Box,' you made it."

Of course today they've both made it. Although Kweli is probably best known as Bey's partner in the hip-hop duo Black Star, who reunited last year for their first tour in more than a decade. Their 1998 release *Mos Def and Talib Kweli Are Black Star*—"a bunch of rhymes that we had built up, that we just kicked over tracks," explained Kweli—was both critically acclaimed and continues to be adored by fans, and though Kweli says he's "done songs and projects that I personally feel are better than Black Star … the impact that album had on the fan base when it came out is so phenomenal that none of that matters." This year they plan to record, on Kweli's label Javotti Media, as much of two new albums as possible. One of these works in progress is a tribute to Aretha Franklin; the first cut, "You Already Knew," which was released in November, samples Franklin's 1973 "Mister Spain"—"I can feel your blackness," she sings—and features a line from Bey that brings together all his past and current identities but one, Mos Def: "You could feel it before I had anything to say / Yasiin, Dante, Black Star, ever see all day."

The other album will feature the single "Fix Up," which Black Star premiered on "The Colbert Report" last October. Introducing the band while wearing what Black Star calls their "classy warrior package," which consists of a camouflage tie, pocket square, and cap, Stephen Colbert announced: "Great news, Yasiin says I can be Mos Def now." Behind him, Bey cracked up.

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"Yasiin" is an Arabic word and Yasiin Bey is Muslim, arguably the most prominent pop-cultural Muslim figure since Muhammad Ali, a hero of Bey's, who went through his own series of name changes when entering the Nation of Islam under the wings of Malcolm X in the mid-60s. Depending on your perspective, Bey is either a convert from his mother's Christianity and the church that shapes his earliest memories of music, or he's what's

often referred to as a "revert" to the Islam of his father, Abdul Rahman, or Abi. ("Umi" and "abi" are Arabic words that mean "mother" and "father," respectively.) As Bey's brother, also Abdul Rahman, told me, "Everybody's born Muslim." In Islam, this fact is contained in the idea of *fitrah*, that every child possesses the innate understanding of the unity of God. It is our original nature. Coming to terms with that is, in part, simply what the revert does.

Convert or revert, that Bey is Muslim has never been a secret. His solo efforts dating back to the 1999 album *Black on Both Sides*, released on James Murdoch's—yes, that James Murdoch—Rawkus Records, each open with the same blessing that starts all but one *surah*, or chapter, of the Koran: "*Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Raheem*" ("In the name of God, the beneficent, the merciful"). Bey's recent release, "Niggas in Poorest," a remix of Jay-Z and Kanye West's "Niggas in Paris," begins with a similar blessing. In this case, the prayer is followed by this announcement: "Live from America. Yasiin, Yasiin, Yasiin." In the video, the name appears in Arabic script across the bottom of the frame. The song's final line: "Allah is in control."

For Bey, retiring "Mos Def" is nothing at all like when, in the late 1970s, folk singer Cat Stevens abandoned his music career when he became a Muslim

and changed his name to Yusuf Islam. Islam, who returned to pop music as simply "Yusuf" with a 2006 album release, told *The New York Times* that he originally gave up music because its permissibility for Muslims "was just a gray area, so I stayed out in order to avoid conflict."

Bey, however, seems to have come into his Islam through music. His father's deeper impact notwithstanding, his conversion can be attributed largely to the influence of the pioneering hip-hop group A Tribe Called Quest. And though members of the group would not credit themselves with Bey's becoming a Muslim, they were there when it happened—"*so* there," deejay Ali Shaheed Muhammad told me. Bey declared himself a Muslim at Battery Recording Studios on 25th Street in New York City surrounded by members of Tribe during the making of their 1996 album *Beats, Rhymes and Life*.

By the mid-90s, Bey was often around the studio, spending time with the emcee Q-Tip, or Jonathan Davis (who would later take the Arabic name Kamaal Fareed). Seeing members of Tribe practicing and praying, and as Ali Shaheed Muhammad said, "just living … Islamic values, principles, and actions," was a reminder for Bey of what he grew up in. As his association and friendship with Tribe grew, says Muhammad, he seemed to find it inspiring and comforting to have music around. The values of Islam were "innate in the music" of A Tribe Called Quest; through music, they were all "striving to earn the favor of the Creator in a world where you have to be mindful of the existence of the Creator." And Bey was there to take it all in. What's more, because Tribe was so successful—by 1996 they'd already had two albums go platinum—it was early on very clear to Bey what it could be like, as Muhammad put it, to "make a living in hip-hop."

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On the evening of December 17, Yasiin Bey, one in a long line of speakers, took the lectern in the Grand Ballroom of the Hilton New York, near Rockefeller Center, and before a Muslim audience of more than a thousand people, recalled spending certain Saturdays as a child with his grandmother walking the avenues that intersected Fulton Street in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood, searching for an uncle who was addicted to drugs. "It was like *another world*," he explained. "It was a completely other world. Skid row times a thousand. Filled with criminals, the poor, indigent, addicts. Just a lot of misery. And I would venture to say that as a child it was probably one of the worst neighborhoods in New York City."

Some thirty years later, and largely because of an aggressive approach by the evening's host, Imam Siraj Wahhaj, to moving crack dealers out of the neighborhood—an approach that involved muscle, which in 1987 landed the imam and several associates in jail—this piece of Bed-Stuy is a completely different place. Fewer drugs. More small businesses. More Muslims. At the center, on the corner of Bedford Avenue and Fulton Street, sits Masjid at-Taqwa, or "mosque of God-consciousness." Wahhaj's home base is a bustling mosque that began as a clothing store and a squat house for junkies and now, with the funds raised at this thirtieth anniversary event, is looking to build the five-story Taqwa Center, complete with basketball courts, an Olympic-sized pool, and room enough in the upper floors for a charter school.

Bey, whose connection to Imam Wahhaj and the mosque goes back to the mid-90s, was there as an entertainer to help raise funds; he'd been preceded on stage by Sheik Hamza Yusuf, a founder of Zaytuna College in Berkeley, California, the nation's first four-year Muslim liberal arts college. The famous Hamza Yusuf, with his tight goatee, horn-rimmed glasses, and a black kufi with white trim, was the real headliner of the night, entertaining the crowd with stories of traveling through New York as a young convert, witnessing a gunfight in Harlem and an altercation between a friend, Abdul Qadir, and some New Jersey johns that ended with Qadir saying: "I'm a Muslim. We don't hit first, so you go ahead and take your best shot." But there was more. Yusuf witnessed that in the late-70s New York's black Muslims—Muslims like Abi and Imam Wahhaj—"were right there on the front lines, and they were taking it to the streets," he said. "They were talking about Islam with people, selling incense and giving *dawah*," that is, inviting people to the faith.

Though he came to Islam through music—and as Talib Kweli has told me, "His reason for doing music is to give praise to God; that's the reason why he writes"—Bey followed Hamza Yusuf onto the stage, choosing an approach that he thought would be appropriate for the audience, sensitive to those in the crowd for whom music's permissibility isn't a gray area at all.

At first he didn't sing. Instead, Bey read a reported narration from the Prophet about the "most excellent" actions Islam calls on Muslims to take —"to feed the hungry, to help the afflicted, to lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful"—followed by a quotation from Malcolm X's 1964 "A Declaration of Independence." Looking over the crowd, leaning forward and grasping the lectern, Bey read from notes he'd taken in a trim red book: "'I do not pretend to be a divine man, but I do believe in divine guidance, divine

power, and divine prophecy. I am not an educated man, nor am I an expert in any particular field—but I am sincere, and my sincerity is my credential.'

"I feel very close to that quote," he said, "because I'm not an expert in any particular field, I'm not a divine man, I'm certainly not a scholar, but I am sincerely happy to be here—sincerely happy to be a part of this *ummah*, to be a Muslim, and to be a native son of the community that Masjid at-Taqwa is in."

What singing Bey did came after some spoken word, including a poem he's recorded as the first verse of Kanye West's "Lord, Lord, Lord." The song Bey prepared was called "The Salaams," the name for the greetings of peace Muslims share with one other. It began, "*As-salamu Alaikum*" ("Peace unto you"), and though the typical response is an immediate "*Wa alayka al-salaam*," the crowd required a little goading.

"You can come," said Bey, after waiting through some silence. "You're part of it, too."

The crowd laughed, and so they joined him, but without any melody at all: "And unto you be peace."

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Back in the day, "Taqwa was the spot," novelist Eisa Ulen Richardson told me when we got together to reminisce about her relationship with Bey around the time he became a Muslim, a few years of heady, intense friendship that she recalls as being something like "summer camp." Before they began running into each other at the mosque, Richardson knew Dante Smith mainly for his impeccable style and swagger around Fort Greene, Brooklyn, in the days, she says, "before every other resident … had a dog," when you could see Foxy Brown drive down the street past where the guys from Digable Planets lived. The film director Spike Lee championed the neighborhood, living there and opening his office there.

When they first knew each other, Richardson and Dante Smith didn't have lunch dates and they certainly didn't talk about God. He performed poetry at Fort Greene's Brooklyn Moon Cafe and "always had a smile on his face, even when he didn't." (As a local Brooklyn poet and a young television actor, Dante Smith, who appeared, for instance, in the short-lived Paul Haggis sitcom "You Take the Kids" ['90-'91], starring Nell Carter, and Bill Cosby's "The Cosby Mysteries" ['94-'95], sometimes adopted the surname Bezé—a pig-Latin play on the surname he uses now.)

Eventually Richardson and Bey encountered each other outside Masjid at-Taqwa, and the two became friends as part of a larger group that included Kamaal Fareed from A Tribe Called Quest, his cousin Dexter Mills (the emcee known as Consequence), and several of Richardson's girlfriends. "And Dante," she said, "when we came to our discussions about Islam, he was always very serious about it, and he was always sincere about it. And he was always very worried that we would make the right decisions, so—as to not end up in hellfire. … In that time we were all hanging out together, I think he really did genuinely care about all of our souls. I really think he did."

Since last August, explaining the retirement of "the mighty Mos Def" has been part of both his solo performances and the tour with Kweli. It's Kweli, along with Kanye West, who is a friend, whom Bey credits with helping him make the decision to proceed in his career without what now strikes him as the "artifice" of a "*nom de plume*." (It's worth pointing out that Kweli, which in Swahili means "true," is actually the middle name of Talib Greene—so while Talib Kweli isn't a *nom de plume*, exactly, he does consider it a stage name.) It hasn't always been easy. Responding to the Alaskan crowd's disappointment, Bey reacted like a stand-up comedian sparring with hecklers, a mode he seems quite comfortably in: "You know, some people have an emotional relationship with that name, Mos Def. So do I: *I made it up*."

Performing in October with the Brooklyn Philharmonic at an event curated by WNYC's "Soundcheck" host John Schaefer, a more serious, public-radio-friendly Bey took the stage, informing the audience that Yasiin was a name he'd "kept close to myself for a long while," but that "many people close to me, and my intimates, and extended family and friends, have referred to me by that name for quite a while."

The name dates back to Bey's first trip to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj in 1998. "When he came back, he came back with the name Yasiin," Kweli told me. "He didn't ask anyone to call him that, but I definitely remember him saying, 'My name is Yasiin.'"

Bringing "Yasiin" out publicly over the end of 2011—"unleash[ing] it," as one friend put it—it became clear that over time Bey had begun to see the name "that the streets taught me," as he told MTV, had become "something that could be boiled down into a persona. Or a product. Or a brand." The name Yasiin Bey, on the other hand, would allow him, he told Schaefer that evening with the Brooklyn Phil, to "reassert my own humanness."

This makes sense to the producer Anas Canon, founder of Remarkable Current, an independent media collective known for its relationship with Muslim artists and its international Hip Hop Ambassadors program, sponsored by the State Department. Canon has always known Bey as "Yasiin," going back to the first Black Star tour. Over the years Canon has produced three tracks with Bey, including Amir Sulaiman's "When I Die (Rebuild)," recorded at Bey's Toronto home and released on Sulaiman's 2007 *Like a Thief in the Night*. Convinced Bey is "100% committed to spiritual refinement," Canon asked, rhetorically, "Why would a grown man go by a *code name*?"

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As you might expect from someone who speaks freely about Bey's eternal original nature, his brother Abdul Rahman contends "there's never been a difference," between Dante or Mos or Yasiin. Someone with a little more distance, though, can see things differently. Take, for instance, a young and admiring Muslim rapper like Big Samir, of the Colorado duo the ReMINDers, who recalls breaking fast with Bey backstage at The Boulder Theater on the first day of Ramadan, 2009. Introducing himself as Yasiin even then, Bey invited Big Samir and his wife Aja Black, the evening's opening act, to his green room with the Arabic blessing, "*Ramadan Mubarak*!" and offered them food and tea.

In this act of generosity, Big Samir sees Bey "growing in Islam." And looking back over his own career, Big Samir admits that Bey was proof to him that he "could be a Muslim and still be myself," that he could be an emcee and still be a "good person." What pride Kweli had in coming from the same crew as Bey, someone like Big Samir can feel in sharing his Islam.

Here's a man who wears a beard and usually a kufi or some other head covering on stage and who accepts a gift from the audience with the Arabic phrase of thankfulness "*Masha'Allah*." Bey's pants' cuffs are perfectly hemmed so as never to reach below his ankles; in Islam, says the Prophet, admonishing the arrogance of anyone who would walk dragging their garments behind them, "Whatever is below the ankle is in the fire." If these are the kinds of things you notice, it's impossible not to hear the new Black Star single a little differently: "Fix up look sharp / Black Star, good God / And when the sky look dark / Shine a light, look ahead, look up." And it's likewise impossible not to see Bey's recent release of a scented oil called Harun No. 7, in partnership with a creative collective called Fellowship Mission, which also released "Niggas in Poorest," as in keeping with the tradition of Muslims selling incense and giving *dawah*. Still, most impressive of all, perhaps, here is a man whose public name—indeed, his only name—represents as deep a mystery as Islam has ever produced.

What's in a name like Yasiin Bey? The Muslims would tell you, *Allahu alam*. God knows best.

When Dante Smith became a Muslim, he didn't choose just any Arabic name; he chose one that, by near scholarly consensus, is considered untranslatable and so profound that it's known as the very heart of the Koran. According to Imam Dawood Yasin (a different spelling but the same Arabic name), of Dartmouth College's William Jewett Tucker Foundation and one-time leader of Masjid Al-Islam in New Haven, Connecticut, unlike with most Arabic names taken on by Muslim converts, the meaning of the name Yasiin is almost a complete mystery.

"Yasiin," the name of the thirty-sixth *surah*, or chapter, of Islam's holy book, is also, according to at least one commentary, one of the names of the Prophet Muhammad. "Yasiin" is often recited in memory of someone who's recently died. One part historic parable, one part meditation on the order of the heavens, and one part lesson on human accountability and resurrection, the *surah* brings together what Imam Yasin sees as those facts of life we can observe and understand with those experiences that defy rational explanation.

As for the word's meaning, the dominant opinion of Islamic scholars is that no one knows. Despite the mystery, and largely because of it, says the imam, the word "yasiin" is about "acknowledging that humans will not know everything." After all, "to know everything would make you a god"; and believing this would destroy the first pillar of Islam itself, that Muslims humbly acknowledge that there is no god but Allah.

For his part, Imam Yasin was brought to tears the first time he heard the *surah*, a recording of which was played for him in the home of near stranger outside Capetown in 1996 while he was working as a fashion model in South Africa, weeks before his own conversion and certainly before he knew Arabic. The audio recording made it back home with him to Nantucket after his conversion abroad, and after months of repeated listening—"a personal ritualistic practice"—the name, in all its mystery, became a part of him, he says, and a daily reminder of where "our ability to know stops and faith itself begins."

When I spoke with Eisa Richardson in December about what the name "Yasiin" meant to the Dante Smith she knew from Brooklyn, she was careful at first about revealing too much of what they'd shared privately more than a decade ago, but it was clear they'd spoken about it at the time: "It's a very special name that he chose," she said.

A few days later, though, "loath[ing] loose ends," she followed up with an email, part of which reads: "Dante chose faith, real Faith, the evidence of things not seen, when he chose Yasiin. I would be afraid to assume a name with an unknown meaning. Dante wasn't. Perhaps he was unafraid because 'yasiin,' the word, expresses the unknown within, an unknown we all have, an unknown Yasiin, the man, was unafraid to claim in himself."

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During the holy month of Ramadan as 1999 came to a close, aboard a plane descending into Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, Yasiin Bey moved through the aisle to sit alongside his friend Ali Shaheed Muhammad. Bey and his father had invited Muhammad to get away while the rest of the world dealt with whatever crazy apocalypticism would be associated with Y2K. The two friends had hardly talked at all during the long flight, but as they approached their destination, Bey had something important to tell Muhammad.

Unlike Muhammad, Bey had been to Islam's holy cities before, and Muhammad recalls his friend advising him as they made their approach

into King Abdulaziz International Airport, in the way a father or an older brother might: "This is Allah's personal invitation to you … Everyone doesn't get to come here." It didn't matter that Bey was the younger of the two, or that Muhammad had come into his Islam years earlier. The understanding that comes with travel to Islam's holy cities made Bey seem to Muhammad like a kind of "elder," in the sense of what Muslims know as a kind of living saintliness. Bey's message, as Muhammad tells it, "turned on the water in my eyes." The land of the Prophet, and, as I've seen more than once with some of the most renowned Islamic scholars in the country, the mere mention of the Prophet himself, has the power to bring grown men to tears. (Hamza Yusuf is just one such man.)

At various moments during this trip, Bey continued on like this, mentoring one of the people who'd witnessed his own entrance into Islam. On a bus ride from Medina to Mecca, Bey advised, "You probably have an imagination of what this city is like." Beware of that, he continued: "This city is wild." It was dangerous and also poor. You had to carry yourself, Muhammad recalled, as you might in certain neighborhoods of Brooklyn, with a special awareness of your surroundings.

But for Muhammad and his hosts on this trip, with all that awareness of the profane came an even more striking awareness of the sacred in Islam. It's one thing to see two people pray in a room, or even ten, or maybe as many as a hundred, but in Mecca, when the call to prayer came, even those who might not have had much, "just cardboard," Muhammad continued, each day "they all dropped down to make the *salat* … nose and face to the ground in one place." The power of prayer was mind-blowing.

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In early December, Black Star came through New York City for an evening of two shows at the Best Buy Theater on Broadway and 44th Street, each one promising a performance of *Mos Def and Talib Kweli Are Black Star* in its entirety. By 9:00 p.m., the first show already forty-five minutes behind schedule and with just ninety minutes to go before the "HARD CURFEW" announced on the rear of the stage door, Bey was still missing. Kweli, who considers himself the more practical and predictable member of Black Star —he books studio time and then, when they're together, waits for the "vibe to be right," he's told me—stalled at the front of the stage with a freestyle he'd put together in early October for Occupy Wall Street: "The water drawing away from the shore / This ain't no ordinary storm." All the while, Blacksmith Management's Corey Smyth (pronounced Smith), Black Star's manager, looked on, not seeming to enjoy himself while fielding updates

over the phone regarding Bey's whereabouts. The delay had him in a kind of panic.

When Bey finally arrived wearing a version of the "classy warrior package," his explanation, whatever it was, fell on deaf ears.

"You got misinformation!" yelled Smyth. "You got misinformation!"

Chastened, Bey then took the stage to join Kweli in the song "Astronomy (8th Light)," the first track off the album.

As the song came to a close and they were together once again, Kweli announced: "I want to welcome Yasiin Bey to the stage!" He got the name right, but I can't imagine there wasn't at least a little sarcasm loaded into that remark.

See, it's difficult to find anyone who will say anything frankly negative about Yasiin Bey, which for the Muslims who know him seems in keeping with Koranic prohibitions against gossip and backbiting, something Bey himself has been known to correct his friends against. Yet apart simply from what Ali Shaheed Muhammad sees as "the way he carries himself" as a Muslim, or what was otherwise described to me as Bey's "way of being"—from the length of his pants' cuffs and the shine on his designer shoes, to the humility he espouses in claiming to a thousand-plus Muslims gathered at the Masjid at-Taqwa fundraiser that he's intimidated to be "standing on the same stage as Hamza Yusuf"—Bey's most talked-about characteristic is his aloofness.

During our conversation, Eisa Richardson told me very frankly something I already knew: "Dante's not good with time." Ali Shaheed Muhammad "strive[s] not to be frustrated with him" for being near impossible to reach these days. Before agreeing to speak with me, Anas Canon reached out to Bey for permission but then never heard back. (We spoke anyway.) Canon told me he never calls Bey professionally; Bey gets in touch with him. Even Talib Kweli rarely talks with Bey when they're not together. "And if the vibe ain't right," Kweli said, "he doesn't work."

Asked whether the name "Yasiin" presents any challenge to Bey's career, Kweli, who is not a Muslim, said flatly no. "I think there's no better time for him to do it. This is coming from the guy who's named Talib Kweli—my career's getting started when the Taliban's blowing up buildings." More to the point, however, at least in terms of their current music, Bey and Kweli have sworn off major labels—no more middle men: "At this stage," Kweli

told me, “the Black Star name is what it is, so it’s like, we own that. It doesn’t make sense to invite more hands into the pot.”

Asked what he thought about Bey’s future without “Mos Def,” Ali Shaheed Muhammad said, “It’s a ‘win-win’ for him,” an expression typically used to describe a single beneficial outcome for two competing parties. Somehow, though, when you’re talking about Yasiin Bey this makes a little sense.

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As it approached 3 a.m. on a Saturday morning in January, Yasiin Bey began wrapping up a tribute to the soul singer and poet Gil Scott-Heron, who died in May 2011. He’d opened—on time, not late—nearly two hours earlier with a forceful rendition of Scott-Heron’s “Free Will,” after which he requested a cup of tea. The crowd at the Highline Ballroom had thinned considerably since the Roots bandleader ?uestlove first took his place behind the turntables five hours earlier to warm up the room. Bey had been on stage then, too, behind ?uestlove dancing and goofing and absolutely beaming at the J Dilla beats being played by the deejay, who had backed most of the performers that night on the drums, including his fellow Philadelphian Bilal, the Grammy-winning saxophonist Gary Bartz, and the legendary jazz singer Jimmy Scott, who’d performed from a wheelchair positioned in a clearing in the front of the stage and posed for photographs with the other performers, including Bey, in a hallway just off the stage.

I sat with Umi as Bey finished his set following a long and loose rendition of “Umi Says,” from *Black on Both Sides*, perhaps his most deeply loved and important song. Photographer Jamel Shabazz, who shot photographs for *Dave Chappelle’s Block Party*, a film Bey performed in, told me in an email that “Umi Says” is his “national anthem”; after Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Going On?” it’s been the “soundtrack to every photograph I’ve ever made.” Ideas from “Umi Says”—a mother telling her child “shine your light on the world”—appear as early in Bey’s music as that first U.T.D. video for “Manifest Destiny”: “And the word is, the big U got it goin’ on / … / Aiyo, we gotta shine the light, aight?”

Wrapping up his tribute to Scott-Heron, Bey combined “Umi Says” with a riff on Coltrane’s “A Love Supreme,” words he sang as a refrain such that, if you listened carefully, they came to sound more and more like “Allah’s supreme,” just the same way Bey could turn the lyrics “to be free” into “truly free” in “Umi Says.”

"Do you know when he says, '*I don't wanna write this down*,'" Eisa Richardson asked me, "and he's saying, I'm speaking from my heart to your heart? That's really Dante. … He not only shares that moment, but he makes that moment belong to all of us." From heart to heart, "Umi Says" is just like "The Salaams."

And that night, in the middle of it all, as if to say his own freedom and peace comes with this, still clutching that bright red mic, the name D-A-N-T-E still wrapped around his wrist, he sang out: "I just wanna be Yasiin."

Scott Korb is the author of Life in Year One *and the forthcoming* Light without Fire: The Making of America's First Muslim College *(Beacon, 2013).*