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DEAN ATTA

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# SILENCE IS NOT GOLDEN

Dean Atta has helped make poetry cool and fresh through his powerful piece about Stephen Lawrence called 'I am nobody's nigger'. Now he is trying to do the same to politics. ➔

**WORDS: JULIA ROSS AND KATRIN MAGNUSSEN**




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I am on Twitter day and night. I am more observant at night with more time for conversations.

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**D**ean Atta, poet extraordinaire, social commentator and Spirit of London award winner, produces one of his infectious laughs accompanied by a wide, beaming smile.

The first thing you notice about Dean is his smile, closely followed by a shock of brown, curly hair and a passionate demeanour.

The Guardian dubbed Dean 'the iPhone Poet' after he filmed his poem 'I Am Nobody's Nigger' on his iPhone and posted it online.

"Writing 'I Am Nobody's Nigger' was very emotional and spontaneous for me," Dean says. "After watching the Stephen Lawrence documentary on the BBC, I spent the whole night just thinking about it." The poem began life as a Facebook and Twitter post. "Rappers, when you use the word 'nigger', remember that's one of the last words Stephen Lawrence heard, so don't tell me it's a reclaimed word," prompted an avalanche of comments, tweets and re-tweets from other people.

The feedback triggered Dean to create a poem around the last words Stephen Lawrence ever heard.

He filmed the poem on his iPhone, launched it online and put it on iTunes, donating all the proceeds to the Stephen Lawrence Trust.

Dean admires the way a tragedy such as

Stephen's death can be used as a catalyst to create something positive such as the trust, which in turn can help young people. "It is encouraging to see the families of both Stephen Lawrence and Damilola Taylor doing such good work for young people through their trusts."

Dean is no stranger to working with young people himself through poetry work shops, leadership conferences and political forums.

"Being young, black and gay, I tick many boxes, so I think many young people can relate to me," Dean continues. "I'd like to think that I am open and friendly and that young people feel they can talk to me."

One of the issues Dean likes to talk to young people about is the importance of voting and politics in general – a subject he is passionate about. His face lights up: "If young people were involved in the Mayor's office for instance, there would be better choices made for them."

"When I was little, I wanted to be Prime Minister. But in 10 years' time I could be Mayor of London instead!" Dean laughs.

Such is his charm and instant likeability, you can imagine he would make a great Mayor of London.

The success of Dean's poem has led to travels across the UK and a deeper appreciation for his

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*Left and right Dean Talks with our interviewers at the Stephen Lawrence Centre*

home town London. “We are lucky in London, compared with many places around the UK.

“There is hope and opportunities for young people here. “Lots of free schemes where young people can gain work experience.”

Dean started writing poetry at school, as an emotional outlet. “I found it a great way to

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**“Rappers, when you use the word ‘nigger’, remember that’s one of the last words Stephen Lawrence heard, so don’t tell me it’s a reclaimed word,”**

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express myself. “I never kept a diary but I think if you look at my poetry, there is an element of a diary there.” Dean feels his early poem “Revolution” still has a universal relevance, having performed it recently for both Occupy London and the Houses of Parliament.

“It’s about standing up for what you believe and being your own voice of change,” he says.

“When I wrote it, I don’t think I was aware what revolutions really were and now we’re seeing them happening all over the world.”

Dean is an artist with many strings to his bow.

His critically-acclaimed play Queen Pokou (commissioned by StoneCrabs Theatre Company) has been staged at several London theatres.

A tour is planned for next year. The three-actor music, theatre and dance production tells the story of a historical West African queen, shrouded in myth.

“I based it on strong women like my Mum and Doreen [Lawrence],” he says. Dean hopes to write more plays, particularly for children and young people. “I just love kids,” he enthuses. “I spend a lot of time with my young cousins, and I really want to write things they’ll enjoy reading.”

Musically, Dean has a new big project in the pipeline, though he remains tight-lipped on the details. “You’ll see – no teasers.” He laughs.

Dean’s first love, however, is poetry.

He is focused on writing more and plans to publish his first collection as soon as possible.

“That’s a big priority for me,” he adds.

The whirlwind success of ‘I Am Nobody’s Nigger’ has undoubtedly opened doors for Dean, with interest flooding in from Europe, America and even Australia.

He is quick to put things in perspective, however. “I don’t think I’ve become famous – I think my poem’s become famous.”