

Hey Sista, Go Sista, Soul Sista

Since 2014, the photographer Alexis Chabala (Zambia - United Kingdom) has given himself the meticulous task of taking artistic portraits of key singer-songwriters, composers and performers in the contemporary configuration of English language Afro music comprising a series called *The Influence Project*.¹ These artists have renewed the genres of R&B, soul, funk, jazz and hip hop, not to mention the myriad hybridizations that have developed from such foundations.

A key role in the renewal of the Afro musical universe has been played by women, whose contributions have influenced their contemporaries, as well as immediate generations of singer-songwriters and performers. *Hey Sista, Go Sista, Soul Sista* offers a short selection of them. It includes recognizable personalities with historical relevance such as Sister Sledge, whom many visitors will recognize when they remember one of the emblematic themes of their repertoire: “We Are Family” (1979). From that milestone, portraits of other, very relevant artists of the last three decades are on show, such as Lauryn Hill, who only needed to release one album to revolutionize female hip hop: *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998).

Erykah Badu, one of the voices and pens credited for the rise of Neo Soul also appears. Chabala has emphasized her song “Master Teacher” (2007), a theme celebrated for the popularization of the expression *woke* that the African-American community had already used since the 1930s, resurfaced in the 1960s and was popularized in the twenty-first century thanks to Badu and singer-songwriter Georgia Anne Muldrow, who wrote the aforementioned song and is also featured in this show.

The concept of *woke* was originally linked to class consciousness, to awareness of racial discrimination and the status quo of African-American

¹ *The Influence Project*. (2018). [Exhibition]. Somerset House, London. 27 June 2018-22 August 2018. And *The Influence Project*. (2020). [Exhibition]. Midlands Arts Centre, Birmingham. 18 January 2020-22 March 2020.

life, particularly at the moment when that person realizes that their life faces clear limits, decided by third parties, and they will not disappear despite their efforts to fit in with the majority. Currently, digital culture and social networks have completely changed their meaning.

Meshell Ndegeocello and the spoken word artist Ursula Rucker share their presence in the show along with more popular artists. This is the case of Kelis, who achieved worldwide success with her third album, *Tasty* (2003). Of course, new generations including Rapsody, the hip hop performer, and the British singer-songwriter Nao, who has linked her work to the wonky (funk) musical style, are wholly represented.

Chabala's work has a clearly documentary discursive base and resorts to the formal solutions common in the field of mass publications. These kind of loan between photography circuits, which until the beginning of the 21st century were considered incompatible, have consolidated a contemporary visual trend in tune with the consumption of images via digital platforms. The selection shown here stands out for its use of the photographic portrait to synthesize the uniqueness of each artist, from which the portrait-artist cum photographer proposes interactions with the lyrics of the songs they have written, as well as formal solutions in which color, and the absence of it, play a key role in presenting a harmonious visual universe based on its elements.

Hey Sista, Go Sista, Soul Sista is Alexis Chabala's first single in Mexico, and an opportunity to learn about artistic contributions that have shaped what we hear in today's popular music universe.

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