

FREE RASOOL

Journalist Mohammed Rasool was detained on August 12 by Turkish authorities on baseless allegations of assisting a terrorist organization while reporting for VICE News. Fifty-six days later, Rasool is still being detained in a Turkish prison.

[FIND OUT MORE](#)

UNITED STATES ▾

The Skid Row Arts Festival Was Full of Beautiful Weirdos with Lots to Say

October 21, 2015



(whatsapp://send?text=http://www.vice.com/read/the-skid-row-arts-festival-was-full-of-beautiful-weirdos-with-lots-to-say-1021)





All pictures by **Juliana Bernstein** (<https://www.facebook.com/gettinyphotography?fref=ts>)/Get Tiny Photography

Welcome to Los Angeles Central City East, better known as Skid Row. In the immediate shadow of LA's booming, gentrifying downtown, thousands live at the bottom rung of American society in an area not larger than a few square blocks. At times, driving down 6th Street looks like a scene from *The Walking Dead*. Pestilence, drugs, prostitution, and violence are rampant. People sleep tent to tent, body to body. Suffice it to say, it's pretty fucking bleak.

Most media representations of Skid Row stop short at this carnage on the streets, but amid the doom and gloom, there's a very real community that lives and thrives on The Row. From Pastor Tony's **Skid Row Karaoke** (<http://mashable.com/2015/05/13/skid-row-karaoke/>) to the **Midnight Mission's** (<http://www.midnightmission.org/>) nightly dinners to events put on by the local arts organization **Los Angeles Poverty Department** (<https://www.facebook.com/lapovertydepartment>), people are establishing a community in defiance of the fact that society has abandoned them.

Over the weekend, the LAPD (the Los Angeles Poverty Department, not the other one) held the sixth edition of the Skid Row Arts Fair in Gladys Park. I met with some of the artists, onlookers, and organizers at the event to help share their stories.

The particular brand of empowerment the LAPD offers Skid Row residents isn't saddled with religious or political overtones, or even guilt. There's a joyous expression in every person who steps out on that stage. Whether they be a

Michael Jackson impersonator of a legendary street guitarist, for a moment, everyone is watching, supporting, and loving... them. It's moments like this that keeps the light flickering during dark times for many of the performers.

Art serves a different function on Skid Row. It's not about selling, it's not even necessarily about being good, it's about defiantly expressing your existence in a world that would rather pretend you didn't exist at all. To me, art like that is more valid than any fancy shit hung up on a wall in the nice part of town that's threatening to squeeze Skid Row out.

JO CLARKE—Michael Jackson Impersonator



VICE: You're a pretty convincing Michael Jackson impersonator.

Jo Clarke: Thank you! I've been doing it for 30 years. I am a professional. I was with a Las Vegas show for 25 years, and I've been performing here for six years.

Do you live in the neighborhood?

Right now. Just for now.



Tell me about the community down here.

There's a lot of beautiful people out here. There's also a lot of not-so-beautiful people. Case in point: Someone stole my outfit! I just stepped away to go to the bathroom and someone stole my stuff. I guess they wanted to be Michael Jackson too!

Did you have backup outfits?

I did! But if I had to go up there naked with one shoe, I would. I proved to them that the show must go on. No matter what happens to you in life, if you're serious about what you do and love what you do, nothing can stop it. This is my destiny to do it again, to be successful again. Stuff like that is not gonna stop me!

Continued below.

RECOMMENDED



VICE: What are these?

Myko: They're bracelets. They're from Kenya. They're the Rastafarian colors, the colors of Ethiopia. The Rastas were down with Haile Selassie, the Emperor. They refer to him as a living god. The black is for the people. The red is for the blood that was shed. The green is for the fertility of the land, and the yellow is for the gold that was stolen. I don't have a color for the bible they gave us for the land, though. *[Laughs]*

I drum here every year. This is the fourth year I've drummed here. And we've been fortunate—All the drummers that have come for the past five years, nobody's died. Everyone keeps coming back!

H. Gabriel Cousins—Trumpet Player



VICE: What's your name?

H. Gabriel Cousins: OG Slim, OG Universe, OG Omniverse. I'm called many things. My given name is H. Gabriel Cousins.

Where do you live?

I live in a dormitory now. People are getting up and leaving the dormitory really late, and Joe [the superintendent] said, 'we can make a penalty!' And I said 'How about a reward for coming back early?' He didn't even think about that! He wants to hurt people when they fuck up. People should be punished! Fuuucked up! You wanna punish people, then they're out!



You're like a shaman when you're on stage. It's like you're channeling some crazy shit.

I am. It's true. I spent all those decades and decades, including right now, continuing, to become infinite, a channel for an even higher power for which, I am their instrument! It's true. Oh, it's wild.

Do you perform around here a lot?

Oh, oh yeah. I've been doing it for 55 years. But I don't perform.

If you don't call it "performing," what do you call it?

Playing! Oh, this is important: People are really fucked up. People wanna fight you down over the word w-o-r-k, work work work. I say no, it's play play play. I refused to work at about 24, so god gave me a lot of play! It's true. Fuck that shit. I don't want no job. Fuck the state of the economy... The state of my economy is that I'm an artist doin' my own shit, and the universe is pleasant enough to give me money to do it! That's the real world.

Dante—Singer

**VICE: How have you seen the Arts Fair change?**

I've performed here from the very beginning and it's changed a lot. People are a bit more receptive than they used to be. A lot more artists come out to share their art. It's almost like some of the older people that used to go around when I first started singing jazz. They were not critical, they allowed you to grow as an artist and for you to be able to do what you wanted to do. They didn't laugh at you, didn't discourage you. It was just a lot of encouragement, and that's what this community tries to do. I try to do that as well.

Is that something you try to pass on?

The only way you can do that is not by tellin' 'em. You gotta show them. I went home, back to Milwaukee. I got back there and I hired a band because I wanted to show my nieces and nephews what I do. They don't know! After I got finished... All of them that didn't know me, they understood me more, ran up to me. It was really awesome.

Where would you be without music?

I'd be lost. I'd be lost. I'd be lost! Music helps me be able to do everything that I need to do. I don't do it as much as I used to, but when people call me, I make sure that I show up. That's the way that the older guys taught me.

Houston (Bluesologist) and Khalif (Rapper)



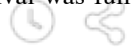
Houston, left, and Khalif, right

VICE: What's all this commotion about?

Houston: Go on your iPhone right now and look up Roy Porter "Generation '94" and when you hear the song "Generation," it's him, Khalif right here. He recorded this twenty years ago in Leimert Park. This guy, Khalif, he's the Picasso of rap. And he disappeared for twenty years! He was like "Aren't you Houston?" I was like, "Khalif!" We haven't seen each other in twenty years!

Care to elaborate?

Roy Porter was a be-bop drummer. When he was 23, he recorded with Charlie Parker on the Dial Records, "Night in Tunisia," "Loverman," all these important songs. When he was in his 70s, he came to Leimert Park where all the arts are, and he found this rap group Khalif was in. They were teenagers, I was like 30 or whatever. Roy Porter connected be-bop with hip-hop, and the album is called Generation 94 and Khalif raps on the track "Generation."



(/)



What's your booth about?

I'm a bluesologist. Everything on this table is about my blues journey. A bluesologist, Gil-Scott Heron says, is a scientist who is concerned with the roots of blues. From Paul Lawrence Dunbar in 1900, I will tell you how the bluesology writers came on down through Gertrude Stein and Langston Hughes in Paris, hanging with Picasso, into the 30s with the Harlem renaissance, Claude Mckay, Zora Neale Hurston and all them. I'll bring you into the 40s with Richard Wright, the 50s when James Baldwin was about to leave Harlem and go to Paris, into the 60s when Come Back Charleston Blue and Cotton Comes to Harlem were written by Chester Himes in Spain, the 1970s, Maya Angelou's first book, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker's first book. I will bring you from Nicki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Leroy Jones, all the way to the 80s, stop you at Colored Girls by Ntozake Shange, all the way into when hip-hop happened with KRS-One and Eric B and Rakim. All the way into the 2000s.

Henriette—Community Organizer

(L)

**VICE: What's the LAPD all about?**

Henriette: The LA Poverty Department was started by my husband, John Malpede, in 1985. He was a performance artist in New York, but Skid Row got his interest when, all of a sudden, there were homeless people in the streets here! There really weren't before. He got a job at legal aid, advocating on behalf of the homeless, but eventually, they pushed the desks aside, and started making theater based off of the testimonies homeless people had given to the lawyers.

On Noisy: [A Portrait of Artists on Skid Row \(http://noisy.vice.com/blog/sounds-of-the-unheard-a-portrait-of-musicians-surviving-on-skid-row\)](http://noisy.vice.com/blog/sounds-of-the-unheard-a-portrait-of-musicians-surviving-on-skid-row)

Why did you start the festival?

We started the festival as a big community gathering for residents and service providers. We saw that a lot of initiatives came out of LAPD, people started their own theater group, or making poetry or making music. It's a network! Anyone can get in. We never do auditions. People walk in from the street and participate. And they look after each other, meet each other in the street, do their own stuff. We need spaces for the people here. There are a lot of artists here. We have a database of more than 500 artists! We didn't have the money to do a big inquiry or to bring scholars, but we thought, "OK, we can throw a festival in the park."

What was a standout performance today?

The Skid Row Arts Festival has been around so long, and she has performed before, but this year, she got clean to do the performance! If you see her face, she looks so much better. She's got some meat on her bones. Those things, they really mean the most.

Jemayel Khawaja is Managing Editor of THUMP, Vice's channel for electronic music culture. He's on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/JemayelK) (<http://twitter.com/JemayelK>).

All pictures by Juliana Bernstein/Get Tiny Photography.



(whatsapp://send?text=http://www.vice.com/read/the-skid-row-arts-festival-was-full-of-beautiful-weirdos-with-lots-to-say-1021)

TOPICS: [Skid Row \(/tag/Skid+Row\)](#), [Homelessness \(/tag/Homelessness\)](#), [Los Angeles \(/tag/Los+Angeles\)](#), [Jemayel Khawaja \(/tag/Jemayel+Khawaja\)](#), [Homelessness in LA \(/tag/Homelessness+in+LA\)](#), [LA Housing \(/tag/LA+Housing\)](#), [Downtown LA \(/tag/Downtown+LA\)](#), [Music \(/tag/Music\)](#), [Skid Row Arts Festival \(/tag/Skid+Row+Arts+Festival\)](#)



FROM THE VICE CHANNELS