

# ADVENTURES IN SOUND

**London-based DJ/producer Esa Williams is a truly global selector. When you check into one of his sets, be prepared to touch down in Ghana, Uganda, Cuba and South Africa – all without leaving the dancefloor**

Never afraid to travel and explore, Esa Williams left his native Cape Town in 2004. Having flown to Scotland as part of a work-exchange programme, destined for a job as a door-to-door energy salesman, Williams instead saw the move as an opportunity to pursue his dream of making it as a DJ and producer.

The world of sales is now a distant memory, his unique brand of Afro-influenced house and techno – released on underground labels such as Dekmantel and Burek – having gained critical acclaim. Williams now hosts a show on Gilles Peterson's station Worldwide FM, and is band leader for Ghanaian dance-rap group Ata Kak, all the while running his own record label,

Rememory Music. He also curates for music-focused educational programmes in Cuba and Uganda, providing a seat at the table for musicians who might otherwise fall between the cracks.

More recently, Williams began his Saturday residency at south London club Phonox, where he takes dancers on a journey across continents and musical genres. *The Red Bulletin* caught up with him...

**“My family always gave me the opportunity to look outside our community”**

**Who nurtured your creativity when you were growing up?**

After Nelson Mandela was released in 1990, the whole country felt like there was this newly acquired freedom. But we were still living in challenging conditions. I was lucky that my family always gave me the opportunity to look outside the communities we lived in. It was the vision of my parents and my grandparents, who always pushed forward and let us know we could achieve whatever we wanted.

**What do you mean when you say you looked outside your community?**

At the age of 17, after the difficulty of my father's death [the late Mervin Granger Williams was himself a house DJ with an extensive record collection], I had just finished high school and my mum encouraged me to visit my uncle in Frankfurt to get some inspiration. When I arrived, I saw techno DJs in Frankfurt and Berlin for the very first time. I didn't have that time with my father to sit and quiz him about music, so

my uncle really played that role, helping to open my mind. That was when the seed was planted.

**In 2013, you worked with music network Santuri Safari in East Africa, in addition to international projects with the British Council. What did you learn about yourself and the power of collaboration?**

I suppose I just get so much from collaborating. I could really tap into a different side of my creativity. There was a mutual understanding, and all we did was share good energy and create some amazing tracks. In fact, it was during a session in Uganda that we created the monster track *Blast* with the singer Pendo Zawose. That was the moment. We didn't think about it – she just put on the headphones, started singing and blew my mind!

**How do you break the ice when collaborating?**

I want to get to know the artists first; I like to laugh with them and eat with them, to make them feel comfortable. You must respect the artists and the environment. I can't expect too much, I can't give too much. You just have to go with the flow and have fun.

**Will you adopt the same philosophy at your residency at Phonox?**

Yes! The club has a great soundsystem and a great vibe. Once, I played a last-minute show and grooved for two hours. Plus, I want to connect a bit more with Brixton. I've been living in east London for five years, but I've met loads of amazing musicians based in the south of the city. Now, I want connect with the south London jazz scene and bring more local music into my set. Find Esa Williams behind the decks at Phonox every Saturday; phonox.co.uk

In addition to all his other work, Williams collaborates with fellow musician Auntie Flo on the global music project Highlife World Series



Opened in 2015, Phonox attracts a discerning crowd of underground house and techno lovers



CREDIT: TOM GUISE