

Musician-singer M.I.A dropped from Afropunk festival for criticizing Black Lives Matter

David Walsh and Zac Corrigan
18 July 2016

Officials at the Afropunk music festival announced Friday that M.I.A., the British-Sri Lankan hip hop artist, was being dropped as the headline act for the event to be held at the Alexandra Palace in London on September 24.

The festival organizers took the decision after M.I.A. came under fire from racist forces when she criticized the Black Lives Matter movement in the US for its narrowness and indifference to the fate of refugees and displaced people around the world.

In April, M.I.A. (Mathangi 'Maya' Arulpragasam, born 1975) told the *London Evening Standard*, "It's interesting that in America the problem you're allowed to talk about is Black Lives Matter... Is Beyoncé or [rapper] Kendrick Lamar going to say Muslim Lives Matter? Or Syrian Lives Matter? Or this kid in Pakistan matters? That's a more interesting question. And you cannot ask it on a song that's on Apple, you cannot ask it on an American TV programme, you cannot create that tag on Twitter, Michelle Obama is not going to hump you back."

The comment stirred reactionary elements in the UK into action. In an editorial published June 15, "MIA Shouldn't Be Performing at Afropunk London," Tobi Oredein of British lifestyle magazine *Black Ballad* displayed her ultra-racist outlook: "I've imagined what it must be like to be at a festival where it is an unfiltered celebration of blackness—all blackness... I have dreamed of the day when Afropunk would arrive in London, so I can stand among black women and hear the British screams of jubilation as we celebrate ourselves on an open field." (The festival has been held annually in Brooklyn, New York since 2005.)

Oredein's fantasy of self-congratulation was

apparently disrupted by M.I.A.'s legitimate comments about millionaire American performers and their self-absorption. Oredein went on to lambaste the Tamil rapper because she "had the nerve to criticise black struggles." She complained that M.I.A. was "not an [sic] racially black woman or a woman of black origin," yet she "spoke out of spite & hatefulness for a movement [i.e., Black Lives Matter] that is trying to save the lives of the festival's target audience." She continued, "If Afropunk is truly for us, then put people on stage that look like us."

This is foul stuff, not very different from the filth that might be found in a white supremacist rag.

Various individuals thereupon posted to Twitter that they planned to boycott the Afropunk festival. Initially, the festival organizers claimed that M.I.A. would still be the headline act. Behind the scenes, they were apparently working on the best manner of organizing and presenting their capitulation.

For her part, M.I.A. announced at the time her decision to pull out. She responded to Oredein and others on June 19 and 20 via Twitter: "Accusing me of racism is no better than being accused of terrorism—yet the number of people killed by Americans' stamped wars continue"; "It's not the first time my words have been twisted—when u see drones we don't think what's the colour of the person flying it? We c USA"; and, finally, "Sorry I'm not doin Afropunk. I've been told to stay in my lane. Ha, there is no lane for 65mil refugees who's lanes are blown up!"

In their July 15 statement, the festival organizers hypocritically presented their act of McCarthyite-type censorship as an act of considerable courage and even moral rectitude. (This is a festival that advertises itself

as standing opposed to sexism, racism, “ableism,” ageism, homophobia, “fatphobia,” transphobia and “hatefulness” in general).

The statement declared: “A key part of the AFROPUNK ethos has always been educating one another, breaking down boundaries and sparking conversation about race, gender, religion, sex, culture and everything that makes life worth living. This exchange has meant receiving wisdom, as well as imparting it in the most respectful way possible, with the participation of our entire community of fans, creators and artists. This community is something we are incredibly proud of, and this community will always be a priority for us.

“We are excited and honored to do our first AFROPUNK Festival in London and want to do it right. After discussing the situation with the artist and the community, a decision was agreed upon by all involved that M.I.A. will no longer headline AFROPUNK London.”

Presumably, piercing the doubletalk, M.I.A.’s offense was not “imparting” her wisdom “in the most respectful way possible.” In other words, she spoke truths that were not palatable to the “entire community,” including right-wing, racist elements.

Mathangi Arulpragasam was born in London in 1975 to Sri Lankan Tamil parents. When she was very young, her parents moved back to Sri Lanka. Her father, Arul Pragasam, was a Tamil activist who was a co-founder of the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students (EROS), most of whose early membership later joined the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). M.I.A.’s childhood was spent in the midst of government repression and violence in Jaffna, in northern Sri Lanka. Her family went into hiding from the army. Eventually, her mother moved with her children to India and, in 1986, returned to London.

M.I.A. knows something about the consequences of sectarian-communalist warfare. Hundreds of thousands of people died in the 26-year war waged by successive Colombo governments against the separatist LTTE. On Twitter, she has condemned the killing of “147,000 Tamil civilians... by the Sri Lankan terrorist Regime.”

She has also defended Julian Assange of WikiLeaks and whistleblower Edward Snowden and indicted the US for its wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, where there are “1.3 to 2 million dead since 9/11.”

An M.I.A. concert in New York City in November 2013 was opened by a live address from Assange, via video conference. Assange spoke to the audience for ten minutes, championing Snowden, warning of the dangers of NSA spying and imploring the singer’s fans to become politically aware and active in seeking to change the world for the better.

M.I.A. has every right to criticize Beyoncé and Kendrick Lamar. The former singer and her husband, rapper Jay-Z, both millionaires many times over, travel in privileged circles around the Obamas and other leading Democratic Party figures. Beyoncé performed both at Barrack Obama’s 2013 inaugural ball and Michelle Obama’s fiftieth birthday party.

Kendrick Lamar’s hit song “Alright” has become an unofficial anthem of Black Lives Matter demonstrations. At the 2015 BET (Black Entertainment Television) awards ceremony, he performed the song atop a police car in front of a giant American flag. Obama has met with Lamar, his “favorite rapper,” in the Oval Office and recruited him to be the face of the White House’s “My Brother’s Keeper” affirmative action initiative.

M.I.A.’s 2015 “Borders” expresses solidarity with those trying to flee war-torn or economically devastated regions of Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia. It shows scenes of young men trapped behind and attempting to scale barbed-wire fences and of boats overflowing with refugees. On June 19, she tweeted, “When I stand for people from all over the world—it’s hard to say if anyone is more important than the other. Surely equality is key.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact