

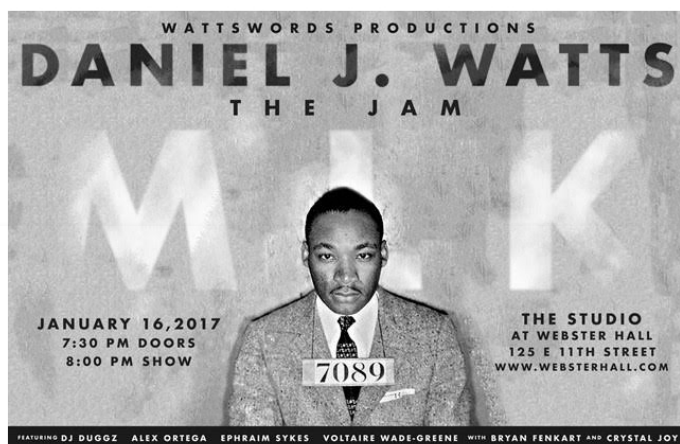
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Music, The Latest / January 19, 2017

On The Scene: Daniel J. Watts Brings 'THE JAM: MLK' To Webster Hall

by Hilary Weissman



n Jan. 16, 2017, The Knockturnal attended The Jam MLK, a one-night only event of poetry, music, and dance produced by and starring Daniel J. Watts at Webster Hall and it was resplendent.

Daniel J. Watts (*Hamilton*) didn't necessarily have big plans to do a 5th installment (or batch) of his "spoken word preserves" called *The Jam* because, he admits, "2016 was tricky" for him, and threw quite a lot of punches his way. He got emphatic nods and "Mhmms" at the admission. But, luckily for those in attendance, we got to reflect on and honor Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy, and the innumerable lives lost to police brutality over the last several years, because Watts and his collective decided only on Jan. 3 to put this together, less than two weeks prior. He said they couldn't wait any longer to address this, especially not until this time next year, because "next year's not promised," and it was a truly impressive feat.

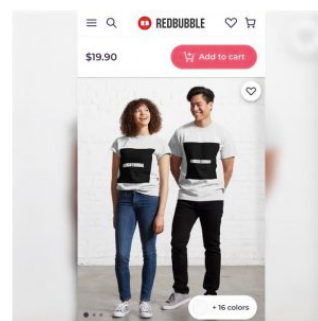
With interludes of recorded speeches from Mr. and Mrs. Martin Luther King Jr. and Muhammad Ali, among others, Watts made his savory Jam (as he repeats in the intro, it "ain't sweet") of poetry and movement for preservation, and shared the rest he couldn't consume with the grateful audience, just as his great-grandmother taught him to. He said that his poetry helps him battle his self-doubt and procrastination, and here was the preserved fruit of his labor.

He poured his heart out into our mason jar of a stage and studio with Ephraim Sykes (*Hairspray Live!*) on drums, Alex Ortega (*Broadway at the W*) on guitar, Voltaire Wade-Greene (*Hamilton*) on bass, and DJ Duggz spinning. It was a HamFam affair (Lin-Manuel Miranda would have surely been proud), as Watts, Wade-Greene and Sykes perform in *Hamilton* (and Watts and Sykes were both in *Memphis* and *Motown: The Musical*), and fellow cast members Brandon Victor Dixon (yes, *Hamilton*'s Vice President Burr who asked Vice President-Elect Pence to hear them out, saying that he does "truly hope that this show has inspired you to uphold our American values and to work on behalf of all of us."), Austin Smith, and soon-to-be Marquis de Lafayette/Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe Iglehart (of *Aladdin*'s Genie fame) were all there to support.

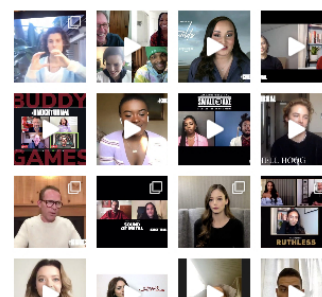


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WattsWords Productions' latest renditions of The Jam have recently been produced to benefit the victims of the Orlando shooting (*Love Terrorists*), or have been in venues that have since closed, but this one at Webster Hall had the intimacy of feeling like you were personally invited by Watts to share in his pain, and he would accept yours in return. He encouraged the audience to interact often, asking us to turn and say, "Neighbor, it's 2017. You made it." With recordings of King's and Ali's speeches throughout, he reflects on how each had left an impact on him, and how he's "one man's dream" and yes, "we got comfortable."

In arguably the most poignant and visceral poem, "Hands to the Heavens/If They Gunned Me Down," Watts recalled the moment that changed his life, when he visited a friend for a theater conference in Jacksonville, Florida. How he drove up to their house, in their car, with their permission, and a suspicious neighbor called the cops on him. How he answered the phone (do you know many robbers would do that?). How he opens the door to four police officers, one with a gun pointing directly at him. How he procures two forms of identification ("they weren't expecting my credentials"), and even after being patted down, can't put his hands back in his pockets (there are gasps in the crowd) without alarming the officers, while he waits for his "white knight" friend to diffuse the situation.

And then, as he wonders aloud "If they shot me, what would they tell my momma? I had my hands in the air!" (his mother, aunt Theodosia—a coincidence not lost on Hamilton fans—and cousin were sitting third-row center), he slipped into his tap shoes to temper his helpless survivor's guilt, noting how quickly putting his hands in his pockets could have gone south, and he could have joined the long list of names sprinkled through his entire set who are no longer here. "If they had gunned me down, I wouldn't be able to tell the world who I really am."

Another touching exchange came when he called up his "baby sister" Crystal Joy (who also appeared in *Motown: The Musical*) to sing her rendition of "America, the Beautiful" ("That's what they sold me, the American Dream") she also recalls our country's oldest question, "Oh say can you see?", to which Watts' follows up, "Can you see me?"

With "Line Crossers," Watts honors the women behind the movements, from Harriet "Hat" Tubman ("She said, 'If I could have convinced more slaves they were slaves, I could have saved more.'") to Coretta Scott King, from Susan B. Anthony to Sonia Sotomayor. After this, in a moment of audience connection that was so sublime I could hardly capture all the promises made, Watts acknowledged that in the struggle to be seen for who he truly is as a black man, he may have turned a deaf ear to the struggle women face to be seen, and to survive. He had all the men make eye contact with women in the crowd and say "I'm sorry for all those times I didn't speak up," and vow that "Henceforth, we're gonna do better." He also had the women in the room find a neighbor to connect with, to encourage virtuous patience within one another and to understand that "men realize we don't need them any more, and 95% of the time that's why they wildin' out."

With Ortega's riff on James Brown when Watts' urged America to "get on up," more impressive dancing from the rest of the band, and even getting to do The Electric Slide and The Wobble at the after party thanks to DJ Duggz, these moments of levity and free expression gave brief respite to the deeply heavy content of Watts' savory Jam. "It's not gonna stop just 'cause we had this conversation today," he said. There was no shortage of inspiration, wisdom or emotion throughout the entire set, so here were the rest of my personal favorite nuggets of his food for thought, which we all gladly devoured:

"We poets love to hear ourselves speak but we honestly hate (hate, hate, hate, hate, hate, hate, hate, hate) having to repeat ourselves... expecting different results to no avail has proven our insanity."

"The voices in my head that told me my art is dead...I'm not fishing for compliments I'm just trying to vent, not spit a list of accomplishments and I can tell you this in confidence, but you better turn around and leave if you don't want to be accomplices...Nobody?"

"We got the same glass ceiling and I'm supposed to be thankful for my sunroof."



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"Revolution is messy... We gotta man up, we gotta open that can up"

"I hate that this deferred dream keeps occurring, wake up America"

"I'm in therapy, worth every penny, well, not every penny. I'll keep my two cents."

"Susan B. Anthony and Sacagawea coins are not change enough."

"I need to get this off my chest, we need to discuss this so I can put this to rest. I let my mouth be my musket. This is how we shoot back."

"I can't lose another brother, I can't shed another tear...[Bam] there goes another one (another one bites the dust)."

"The saying goes it takes a village to raise a child. But without a village there's a risk that we may raise them wild... these sons and these daughters, they need mothers, fathers, they need guidance for starters, before they become martyrs."

"Imagine who else's life your silence is impacting."

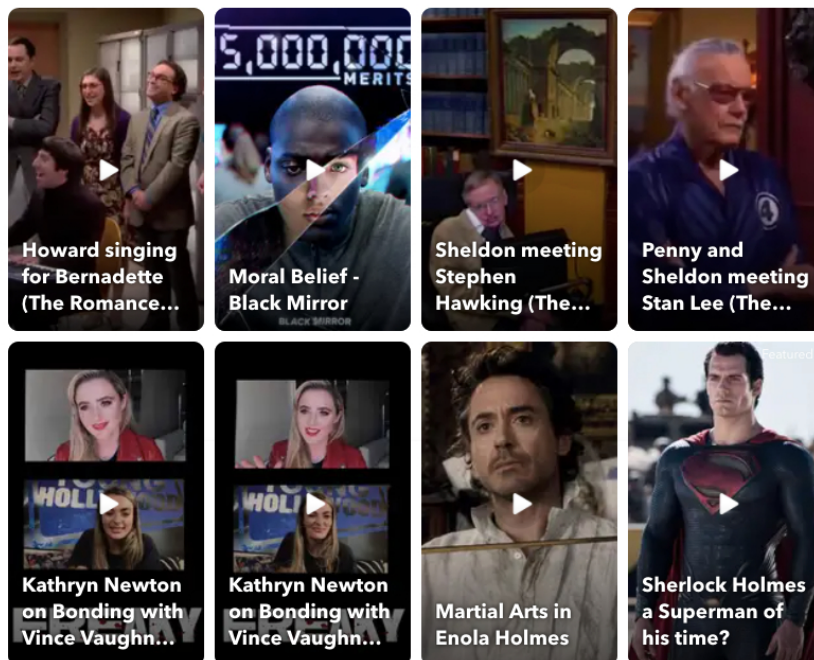
"I believe we are all early birthday gifts To: Each Other, From: God. And I thank Him for letting us unwrap each other daily."

"Don't be too concerned with doing it right. We should just focus on doing it. Right? So just do it. Write!"

You can purchase *"We Are"* by *Everyone Else feat. Daniel J. Watts* on iTunes and Amazon ("don't you just Spotify it," Watts plead), and keep your eyes on WattsWords.com for the next Jam.

[slideshow]

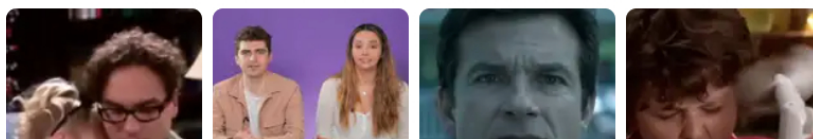
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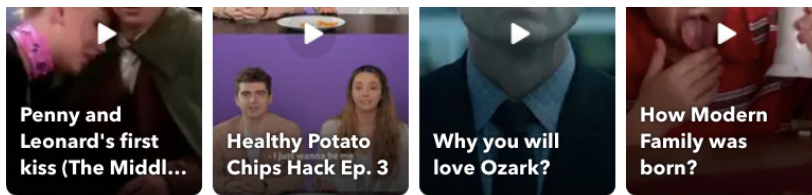


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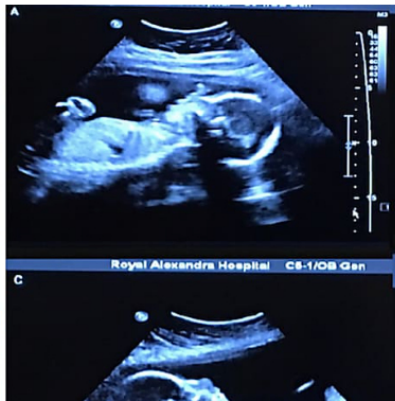
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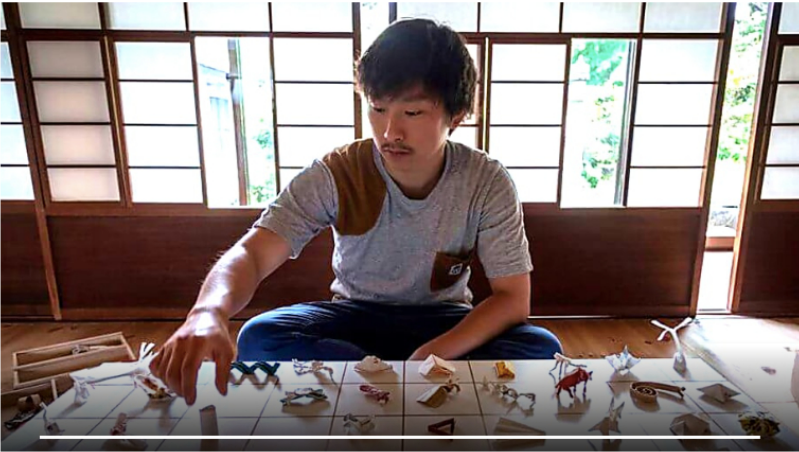
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