

WRITERSMOSAIC

Love Ssega

In Conversation with Gabriel Gbadamosi

'How can we talk about our condition not as victims but saying, 'Look, this is where we are. We are aware.' And that's why when you look at *Our World (Fight for Air)*, do we really care? Yeah.'

— Love Ssega

[Music]

Presenter: This is *WritersMosaic, In Conversation*. Gabriel Gbadamosi talks to the musician and writer, Love Ssega, about art as activism.

[*Our World (Fight for Air)* by Love Ssega plays]

'Welcome to our world

Is this the place the South London voiceless speak

Because I can't see them past these non-existent headlines

If divide and conquer got us here

And oil prices are your fear

Because black gold is not the people

It's your mineral extraction

We don't need hyperbole or distractions

Give us the facts we don't want the factions

We have the people we have stories

Show us the pictures not allegories

More than just posters on the streets

This is where we live, die and eat

So if you wanna break bread with me

Then come and take a seat

Do we really care? Yeah

Do we really care? Yeah'

[Music fades]

Gabriel Gbadamosi (GG): That was *Our World (Fight for Air)* by Love Ssega. And Love, thank you for talking to me, Gabriel Gbadamosi, for *WritersMosaic*.

Love Ssega (LS): Thank you for having me.

GG: Not at all. Let me put this to you. Whilst you were at university, you also were doing music. Yeah, okay, technological music. We're using computers and machines and all sorts of things rather than ordinary, traditional instruments. But there was the voice. The voice is a very traditional instrument. And you became something like a front person for Clean Bandit and a singer-songwriter. Tell us about how that sat with your work as a scientist.

LS: It comes back from Africa because when you're on the continent, we don't separate dance, music, speech, word, being, all of that, that filters through. So even though having grown up here, I had that from my grandparents, from my uncles, from my aunties. That just flows through you, so when you're trying to communicate—and interestingly, with science, you can do all the research in the world, but you still need to communicate it. But that hunger for trying to express yourself through words and through song, through singing, that was always ticking over. So you'd study at night, and then later into the night, even later in the night,

you'd write some songs. So that's how that came about. And actually, I had a funk band, because I love funk music.

GG: Go for it.

LS: So Parliament, George Clinton, all of that. So I had a funk band because I didn't want to pay to get into these summer balls at university. So we did that, and then after a while, that's when my friend, Jack, his girlfriend had a string quartet, and then he said, 'Look, do you want to sing and write some songs?' And then that's what became Clean Bandit, based off of that, yeah.

GG: Fantastic. For people who don't know Clean Bandit, it's gone on and had endless number ones in the charts, lots of awards. So you started out, really, in a key of success. However, where you seem to have immediately turned your attention is back to where you came from, in South London. Now, South London has got this main trunk road running through it called the South Circular, which of course, I know very well. I grew up beside it. My children went to school beside it. And it transpired some years ago, about 10 years ago now, that a young girl of nine, Ella, her death was ascribed to the asthma and the crisis generated by pollution along that trunk road. Now, that brings what you were studying in laser spectroscopy, pollutants in materials, to your own community, sense of place. How

hard did that hit you, the news of that girl's death and the realisation that this is our communities?

LS: Well, I think it's the slow burn. It slowly dawns on you. So these things, you hear about them, and they don't get that much airtime. And really, so Ella Adoo-Kissi-Debrah, her mother, Rosamund, is an incredible, phenomenal person. And Rosamund has been campaigning all this time, having lost her daughter, and she's got twins as well. But then thinking about other people's children, saying, 'Look, we don't want this to happen to other people's children.' So [to] have that energy to keep going all over this time. And we know in this country how difficult it is. I was about five when Stephen Lawrence was murdered, so—and that's just three miles from where I grew up. So again, this is the same—similar part of London. And then when you see Neville and Doreen Lawrence, and you see how long that has taken, and there've been other miscarriages of justice and the like. But then for Ella's mother to be pushing this story, to push to get air pollution on the coroner's certificate, to do all of that. And it's a story which was just there, and then you hear about the diesel emission scandal, and then you start to see other things. And what brought it to a head was actually when COVID came about. And I think for all of us who are creative, we create. Maybe we create selfishly because it's for our own ideas to get our voice across or to get our thoughts down. And then if you have a modicum of success, you go, and it takes you somewhere else. But then in COVID,

where there was no touring, no performing, everything was shut down, I had to think, as a creative person, *what am I using my skills for? What am I using my voice for? Now I can't go and travel over here and perform in this great place. I'm stuck in Lewisham. What are the issues for Lewisham? And how good am I as a creative person? Can I take this idea of air pollution and have a creative response and how to do that in my area?*

GG: You've placed a people-centred, collaborative approach at the core of everything you do. Can you talk to me about how it dawned on you that that was going to be your process as an artist, to have, first of all, this felt impulse to express yourself, but then it's got to be useful, and it's got to be with other people? There needs to be some way of holding a collective consciousness and linking it with a public emergency, for example, like the climate emergency. Tell me something about that journey.

LS: Yeah, well, I think part of it is, and you're right, it is a thing where it can be both selfish and selfless at the same time. So one of the amazing things about being a creative person or getting the opportunities is you can see what difference that can make to yourself and, if you so wish, to your community as well. So then one of the things which pains me is [that] everything is contextual. So right now, where we've

been going through—well, my whole adult life has been under austerity. So when we look at that—

GG: It began with the coalition government in 2010, following the credit crunch in 2008, up until now.

LS: So and then when you start to see all of the things that were exciting to me growing up, being from Lewisham, and then you see Malorie Blackman, and growing through that, and you see how Malorie Blackman's books then get turned into TV programmes and the like. So one of the key things with austerity is you then start to see that opportunities aren't being given to other people. So as a creative person, it's not athletics where you have to be champion, the fastest runner ever, and that's it. So I'm actually intrigued to see what other creative voices there are out there. So one of the things where you think it should be maybe these publishers, it should be these record labels, it should be these art centres doing it, if they can't, then if you've got a way of doing it, then you've got to try and find what way you can do it. And then when it comes to air pollution and these specific climate issues, there's so many different strands on this, but one of the things is it affects and it links back to COVID because when the pandemic came about and black and brown people were suffering the most, and then you see governments in the UK and in France saying, 'Oh, when we get the vaccine,' and they didn't know, 'let's test it out on Africa', as if

Africa is a test bed. So you start to hear these really problematic statements. And then when you start to—then you're hearing things here in the UK when they start to say, 'Oh, well, you're susceptible. That's why you're dying in greater numbers.' And it's like, *well, then how come the whole continent of Africa hasn't been wiped out if this is the case, if it's genetic*—it was eugenics just being cooked up again. And then you start to see it's because of the social conditions. It's the jobs of people being on—as care—people being in the care sector, people being in housing where it's not—where you don't have ventilation in the schools and all of these different conditions. So then what way can you, if you're not seeing it through the media, the newspapers, then it is to try and see, oh, through art. How can we talk about our condition not as victims but saying, 'Look, this is where we are. We are aware.' And that's why when you look at *Our World (Fight for Air)*, do we really care? Yeah, because we will fight for our air. So then you're starting to show black and brown people, saying, 'Look, actually, they do care. They do have an opinion. And these are the multitude of things we can talk about.'

GG: In your speech at the COP26 conference in Glasgow, the speech was called Culture: The Missing Link. So basically, it seemed to me that you were proposing the way we handle technology in the ways it organises us as societies and organises what we think and how we think collectively, and the real challenges we face may in

fact be in culture, may be in the artistic, creative voices, human voices. That's placing a very high value on creativity in the arts.

LS: Yeah, I do, which is strange for someone who studies science and engineering. But yeah. But then again, when we look at it, it's like, why is there a distinction between the sciences, the humanities and science? Why is there such a harsh cutoff? Because when I look at philosophy, that's closest to physics, I think. Because if Stephen Hawking is trying to tell you there's some extra dimensions, you've really got to think. [Laughs] You've really got to stretch your mind. And I don't—there's relativity, which I don't get. So there's all these—

GG: You don't get relativity?

LS: No, no, no, no, no, no. Not many people do. Not many people do. No, it's difficult, but you need that type of mind.

GG: And Einstein didn't get 'God doesn't play dice', probability, quantum mechanics.

LS: Precisely. Precisely. So it's a thing where you need that mind, and people have—other people have that mind, other people can see that. And I think that's the beauty of—because creativity there are more—and culture there are more

options to give answers, and—which means you can bring in more people. So you can bring in more people in a neurodivergent spectrum as opposed to when it's just two plus two. You can't say two plus two equals seven; there's no creative answer to that. So that's the exciting thing where, yes, we've got our functional things, where we're not going to pretend there's no gravity, we're not going to pretend that this is not polluted, it's not the fake news side, but we need to do things with a heart and then to also see how can you bring in as many people as possible.

GG: Now we come to dealing with the pandemic and its aftermath about, as you've earlier mentioned, perhaps medical malpractice, perhaps all sorts of things around the questioning of how it arose and how it was managed and the inequality that emerged globally around the distribution of vaccines. All of these issues. But nevertheless, where it leaves us in this country, you've proposed, is young people who, unlike you and me, are not given a grant to go to university. They have to pay for it themselves. Young people, who are not given opportunities to make a life, to express themselves. You've seemed to see a flatness of opportunity amongst young people. Is the future dim in that way, do you think?

LS: The way we're going, yeah, the future is dim because we haven't got the people with vision in charge now. And it's a dimness of ideas. That's the thing. So actually, when you think about it, when we've been talking about technology, we've got

technology to do whatever we want. It's all there. And it's just marketing someone saying, 'Oh, we haven't invented it.' It's all there. And it's surprising because solar panels have been there for ages. And I'm saying, 'Why on earth is there—does Africa need oil if solar panels are a way forward?' That's always perplexed me. That's always perplexed me, but we'll leave that there. But it's—we don't have the ideas, and that's what we need. We need the imagination, where we've had austerity and we had one government. Now we've got another government that's coming in, and then the prime minister of the United Kingdom is saying it's going to be a tough time. And I was like, *I thought it was a tough time before*. Where are the ideas? Where is the optimism?

GG: Where is the vision?

LS: Exactly. Where is the vision? And I think this is—if you don't know how, whether we call it culture, whether we call it community, whether we call it, yeah, society, collectives, if you don't know how that works, that's why you break things. And that's why we're in this whole thing of austerity. You break things because you don't understand. So coming back to why as a musician, as a creative person, as a writer, as a whatever I am, is because you understand that you stand on the shoulders of other people, and you are part of a chain. So you're part of a chain where you're inheriting the landscape that has been laid by people before you and the ideas for

you to build on, and that also means that there's going to be people after you. So the books don't stop as soon as you finish writing. So there are people after you. So it's to make sure how are you then supporting the people after you, otherwise you're just burning down that bridge.

GG: Let's go to a really visionary moment, it seems to me, in Atlantic and particularly black Atlantic culture in 2001—I think you'll know where I'm going—2001, Nas, *Stillmatic*, that album. [LS laughs] Why is that still the [inaudible] of the pulsing lodestar of generations of artists who come since?

LS: Ah, what's amazing about that is because with Nas, if you think when his first album, *Illmatic*, was seen as such a seminal album, so to be able to come out with this, and then to come to go around, and then make maybe the flashy commercial rap, all of this shiny suits business, and then people say, 'No, we want the poetry.' And then he comes back with *Stillmatic*, which sounded like it was a clarion call of what the United States actually is. Whereas of course, when you look and you can see, oh, we've got—where the United States is looking—oh, we've got the space race, we've got the Atlanta Olympics, we've got these shiny things, we've got McDonald's, it was brash in the '90s, we've got all of this. And he's saying, 'No, hold on a minute. All the stuff I was talking about in *Illmatic*, I'm being actually really direct here in *Stillmatic*.' And it was to—it pulled people back in with an urgency.

And it's really interesting because that was at the time where hip hop was turning to become the behemoth. I don't think anybody realized how big hip hop was then going to become in the next 10 years afterwards, 15 years. But it's to remind people, to say, 'No, actually this is on the production side. This is on the lyrical and the poetic side.' And what's great, I think now, the era that we're in, is I'd encourage people to go and try and see the biopics and things of other different rappers of the time, because actually, to call them rappers, which I love rap, it's to, in a way, to say, 'Yes, you're doing something, but you're not poets. And we put poets on this pedestal. So yes, what you're doing is good, but your hip hop. Hip hop is not rock and roll. So you're not going to get to the upper, upper echelons of our creative halls.' And then that's why when you go from Stillmatic, and it's incredible to then when you see Kendrick Lamar winning the Pulitzer, because it's taken that length of time, and it takes somebody like Kendrick Lamar to be a student of rapping, to be a student of all of this and to really understand how to piece this together and to really understand the lineage of everything. So when you look at To Pimp a Butterfly, and you've got links through Flying Lotus to Alice Coltrane and everything like that, then you understand.

GG: Yeah, Lamar got a Pulitzer, come on.

LS: Yeah, there we go. There we go.

GG: It is the pinnacle. It is the pinnacle. One of the lines that you pick from Nas' Stillmatic is the line from Ecclesiastes, 'Vanity, vanity, all is vanity, and there is nothing new under the sun'. Right? So let's get back to that thing that you've proposed around ideas. We need ideas, we need vision. In a way, what you take from Nas is to say, 'Well, ideas, ideas, I have 20 an afternoon. It's not actually the originality of the ideas, it's how we deploy them, how we frame them, how we distribute them, how we put them into circulation, how we form this wider meta conversation in our society, amongst our generations and communities.' You seem to have implemented your thinking around this in the ways that you've generated collaborative projects with schoolchildren, writing projects, bringing different artists from, as I say, from dance, from comedy, from film, and place them in different contexts just to get people thinking differently. Is that what you're doing? Are you just trying to get people to see things differently and do things potentially differently?

LS: Yeah, definitely, definitely. And you look at it, and it's people like Nas, where they were coming from Queensbridge, the projects, where they're coming from a very small, small environment, which were very oppressed because of that, and they're aware of the political landscapes and the reasons why they were there. But then it's to say, look, how do you grab people's attention to say you're not saying anything

new, you're not necessarily being the—you're not the fountain of ideas, but it's the presentation of how can you create that? How can you create the space where it's welcoming for school children to be writing books, where it's welcoming for abolitionist people, Solomon [missing name], who stood on the Colston plinths when that got pushed over in Bristol, and then to have him standing right in the National Gallery in front of the King of Spain, one of the biggest slave owners? So it's these things. How do you then set these things up? How do you have black squatters again in these spaces? How do you set that up in a way where it becomes—you create the space for people to say what they've always been saying. So it's not—and for other people, who maybe have not been looking, to look.

GG: And to hear.

LS: And to hear. Yeah, exactly. And that is the fun thing. So you say, okay, what's my—where in this cog, in this machine, do I sit? And if you've got that skill and that talent to do so, then I think that's where it's exciting.

GG: Essentially, you've become a conceptual artist in the way that you move elements of our culture into new spaces and have them seen in different ways. Your framings are extraordinary. And a keystone of that is collaboration, people-centred, community-driven. Now, let's look at you as a selfish writer. [LS laughs] Yeah, where

are you going with that? Because interestingly, you say there's nowhere to hide on the page.

LS: Indeed. There's nowhere to hide on the page.

GG: I'm just sitting back now

LS: Yeah. I love it. Do you know what's interesting is when I started off—and it's really interesting because before going to university, one of my schoolteachers said, 'Why don't you do English literature at university?' And I said, 'I'm not studying it for A level.' [Laughs] I was like, *that's confidence*. But then I just did like an AS over two years. But I always—I remember when I was at school, I did a public speaking thing, so I've always loved the written word. So as a songwriter, that's how I approach it. I approach—and that's why I love rap; it's the placement of words; it's the cadence of it. And the challenges in book form is then it becomes—it belongs to the audience because then the audience then takes that and then interprets it and then puts the voices on top. Whereas if I'm singing, you have to deal with my voice, so it's not that interpretation. And I think that's the excitement and where you can, in music, you only hear it when there's a cover. So you're like, 'Oh, here's Carole King. That sounds nice. Oh, here's Aretha Franklin. Now that sounds nice.' So with the book, you can be selfish where you're writing, but then also how people—how they can enjoy it as

well. That's the exciting thing, where they can get a book and then enjoy it, whether they're in their little library, whether they're at home, whether they're on the train, wherever they are. And recently, I've been working a lot with poets, and just the idea that there's the National Poetry Library, and you can see that their work is there in the National Poetry Library, whereas my music is just in the ether somewhere. We don't even have CDs, vinyl, really like that. That's really attractive. And it's different people who you can reach because not everybody is going to—I've got a style of music that I like, and I like these instruments; some people might not like that. Whereas with a book and with the written word, you can put your own voices on it. So it's selfish because you've written the ideas, but then it's democratic how it's ingested and how you can interpret it.

GG: So you really like that space, the co-creation of the writer and the reader. What is the big project, a way off into the future, in which you're going to put yourself on the line, say within literature?

LS: Do you know what there's—to cut you off here—there's, there's a project now—see, because I'm not in the literature world, I don't know what you're allowed to say and what you're not allowed to say.

GG: You're allowed to say everything and anything.

LS: [Laughs] So I'm writing a children's series. And I've just finished book one. I won't say of how many, but book one. Yeah. So this is a children's series, and this is where the *WritersMosaic* arc comes in. And it's really thanks to Sita, really.

GG: Sita Brahmachari, part of our editorial team.

LS: Sita Brahmachari. Absolutely, because again, that's why when we go through this whole conversation and you talk about community and you talk about opportunities, you might say, 'Oh, I've had—somebody might have success here', but then you need that other person, and you need these other things to say, 'Actually, I see this in you.' So Sita Brahmachari is the one who teased the writer out of me and said, 'Right, you need to do something.' So and with that—so I've just turned in a first children's book. Yeah, a story of characters. And hopefully there, these characters have adventures. And again, it doesn't need to just be limited to book form. Of course, me being another creative person, what world can we create around that? So that is the big challenge because having worked with Sita Brahmachari on *Imagine A Story* with schoolchildren down at Southbank Centre, having to read out to a live audience of hundreds of schoolchildren, then you realise, *okay, now these are the critics*.

GG: What kind of a model do you think multicultural London could be for future world society? Because there doesn't seem to be another place like it.

LS: No, there really isn't.

GG: What makes it distinctive?

LS: There really isn't. I think it's because whenever I've gone to other cities, other big cities, they are heavily segregated in the sense that you've got Koreatown, you've got Chinatown, you've got the Latin district, and you've got these other areas.

GG: You've got the West Indian community over there in St Pauls or wherever it is.

LS: Exactly, exactly. So whereas with here, and it's interesting because when I did *Our World (Fight for Air)* the video—and actually with the Brexit thing, when Brexit came about, and then politicians, right-wing politicians, were saying, 'All these people from Türkiye are going to flood.' And then you walk around Lewisham, and then it's got me thinking, *oh, they're quite—the Turkish community is quite big here, and it's been here a long time, and it's the first time they put the lenses on you.* And then you realise that you can have all these different—in London, you've got all these different communities all mixed up. And the fact that I didn't see a Turkish

community, I saw Londoners who were Turkish, whereas these other people, they don't see that. So I think there is a story there, but we need to do better in terms of highlighting all of these different stories within London. Because the London that we see, even the fact that we've got a Muslim mayor, outside of London in the United Kingdom, they see it as some strange planet, a completely different thing. And in other different countries, I'm not sure whether we've actually shown the strengths of London, the fact that when you're growing up, you have an appreciation of you know when Eid is, you know what Hanukkah is, you know what Diwali looks like, you know when there's Chinese New Year, all of these other things where that's what we need going forward. Because we've decided to mess up the planet, we're all going to be smushed together, so where do we—where can we learn and to have that—it's not even empathy, but it's the joy. It's that joy. And I think that's the key thing of saying, 'Look, what is the joy of having—enjoying these different differences that we can learn from and sit beside.' I think that is why it's important to have things like *WritersMosaic*, because the difference when I see United States, and then I see the United Kingdom, in the United Kingdom, it's not a capitalist country; the United States is a capitalist country. And the reason I say that is because the United States will see someone who is a drug dealer, talks about drug dealing and selling crack cocaine to communities, and say, 'This sells. Let's support this, and let's make this person a billionaire because this is going to make us money.' Over here, what happens is they will see something, and if they don't like

it, then they're going to squash it. So again, when you start to see that in America, they've seen, 'Oh, okay, we don't particularly want to invite you to our house, but we will get in business with you because it makes business sense.' Whereas in the United Kingdom, when you see all of these great people who've done nothing wrong, they've not sold any drugs and sung about it, but then these massive cultural stalwarts, when you think from Soul II Soul, when you think of Goldie, and you're wondering, *why are they not running the record labels? Why are all these people who invented grime and drum and bass, why are these people—why are they not in charge? What happened?* And when we look at our structures, do we have a Motown and Def Jam in the same way where we've—I grew up and I love Trace FM. You see all of the things. I remember when you think—everyone talks about *Eastenders*, but I remember *Desmond's*. So you look at these—*The Real McCoys*, all of these, all of these.

GG: West African barber shop on television.

LS: Exactly. You look at these things, and they were massively successful, massively successful. So this is the thing which should have continued and been promoted. And then we're further rather than—they get squashed somehow. And then you're there wondering, *oh, why are we not capitalising?* The question I have, if Rihanna was—I mean, if you're from South London, you will know that there are people from

the Caribbean because of Windrush and like—are you telling me that we don't have an equivalent of Rihanna just walking around Brixton or somewhere like that? Are you telling me that you cannot find this individual? So that's a problem where the culture, the talent, it must be there. It has to be there.

GG: It's just not being promoted.

LS: It's not being promoted. So I'll take Beverley Knight, probably one of our finest singers. The music industry—

GG: What happened to her career? She should have been up there.

LS: Precisely. But then now, that's why Beverley Knight then goes, 'Okay, well I'm going to go over here to the theatre.' And then I'm watching the Oliviers, and I'm seeing her do two performances for two different shows. [Music] And that's the thing. So it should be less of a struggle for people. And then we can start to celebrate, and then we can explore more things than just *Downton Abbey* and *The Crown*.

[Music]

Presenter: Gabriel Gbadamosi was talking to Love Ssega. To hear more writers, go to writersmosaic.org.uk

[Music]

Love Ssega was in conversation with Gabriel Gbadamosi

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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