

AUGUST 2015

ÁFRICAN STYLE

ISSUE 12

MAGAZINE

Recycle

NICO & VINZ

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WE ARE AWAKENED

CONSCIOUSLY SPREADING POSITIVITY THROUGH OUR MUSIC
AN INTERVIEW WITH NICO AND VINZ

INTERVIEW BY ASM TEAM
PHOTOS BY JASON MADDOX

Singing and songwriting duo Nico and Vinz have emerged to be one of the recognizable and successful music groups in the industry. With a lot of artists chasing the latest genre trends with sexuality in the forefront, Nico and Vinz chose to go explore in a different direction focused on the everyday questions and issues that linger in the hearts and minds of many. Songs about the will to live, to succeed, to love and be loved. To live our lives feeling good about ourselves with no regrets. Along with the unique style, comes the diversity in the genres of music heard in each of the songs. The Norwegian singers who are of Ivorian and Ghanaian ancestry believe in spreading joy in any genre possible to aid in listeners relating to the stories and messages they sing. From meetings with leaders and icons in the entertainment industry and the community, these artists had a dream and burning desire to make their mark and presence known - a feat that did not come easily. In an exclusive one on one interview, the duo tell their story on their rise to the top.

ASM: Where did the name of your album *Black Star Elephant* come from? What is it about?

NV (Vinz): The name represents us. It is symbolism of who we are. My family is from Ghana and the *Black Stars* is a term widely used in the country. Nico's father is from Ivory Coast and in his country, they are known as the *Elephants*. So we brought those two together and came up with the title. It is our way introducing ourselves to the world as we take them on our journey finding our purpose.

ASM: What would you say is your vision as artists who are consistently developing and evolving – especially for those who are still getting to know you as a group?

NV (Nico): We always wanted to make music that would be impactful in a positive way. With *Black Star Elephant*, we had a vision of just being ourselves. That means in the album there is Scandinavian and African music. In addition, as former rappers, there is also the urban genre of music. We wanted to create songs that are relatable in some way, which means speaking to issues that we as a people regardless of where we are from can attest to the lyrics of the song because we have experienced the underlying theme or story in each song - or at least know of someone who has. Overall we want people to feel good about themselves; therefore making a positive difference around the globe. If one person feels better and happier about himself or herself, the joy and happiness become contagious; which in turn will affect others whom they meet. We notice people here in the States are impressed by the types of music represented in the album, which is typically not the norm coming from two black guys.

ASM: Listening to your songs, there is a deep rooted African influence. How much of that is a conscious choice and how much is pure natural inspiration?

NV (Vinz): It is not necessary a focus but we did notice the patterns afterwards when we completed the

album. Typically, when we go into the studio to work on songs, if a genre feels right with the concept of a song, we go with it. If it so happens to be an African genre, we go with it. So it is a matter of the flow of the music, the story behind the song and how we feel. If asked why we are using a specific genre which happens to be African, Latin or Scandinavian inspired, our response is - *why not?* We just want to make good music that represents us. As we worked on the album, we wanted to highlight and paint the right picture of where we were in our hearts, minds, spirits and lives by using the right genre to accompany the lyrics of each song.



ASM: What music did you listen to?

NV (Nico): At that point because we wanted to find ourselves, we did listen to different artists to enhance ourselves. We listened and still listen to African music from Nigerian artists such as *Fela*, *PSquare*, *Wizkid* along with other African artists from South Africa, Mali and many others. Paul Simon was definitely someone we listened to because we loved the mix of Pop music with African music. We emulated that in our album experimenting with the idea of fusing Latin beats with African beats; or fusing Scandinavian music with pop and so on. The producers we worked with are talented Norwegian guys so there was a lot of music experimentation as we worked on the album.

ASM: With your music, do you feel closer or more connected to your roots in Ghana and Ivory Coast?

NV (Nico): It does not make us feel closer because we have always been close having lived in our countries for an extended period of time; and in addition, we still go visiting when we can. We know and speak our languages and have a very close relationship with our families who are there. I would say we do not have a close connection to our roots, we have a great one.

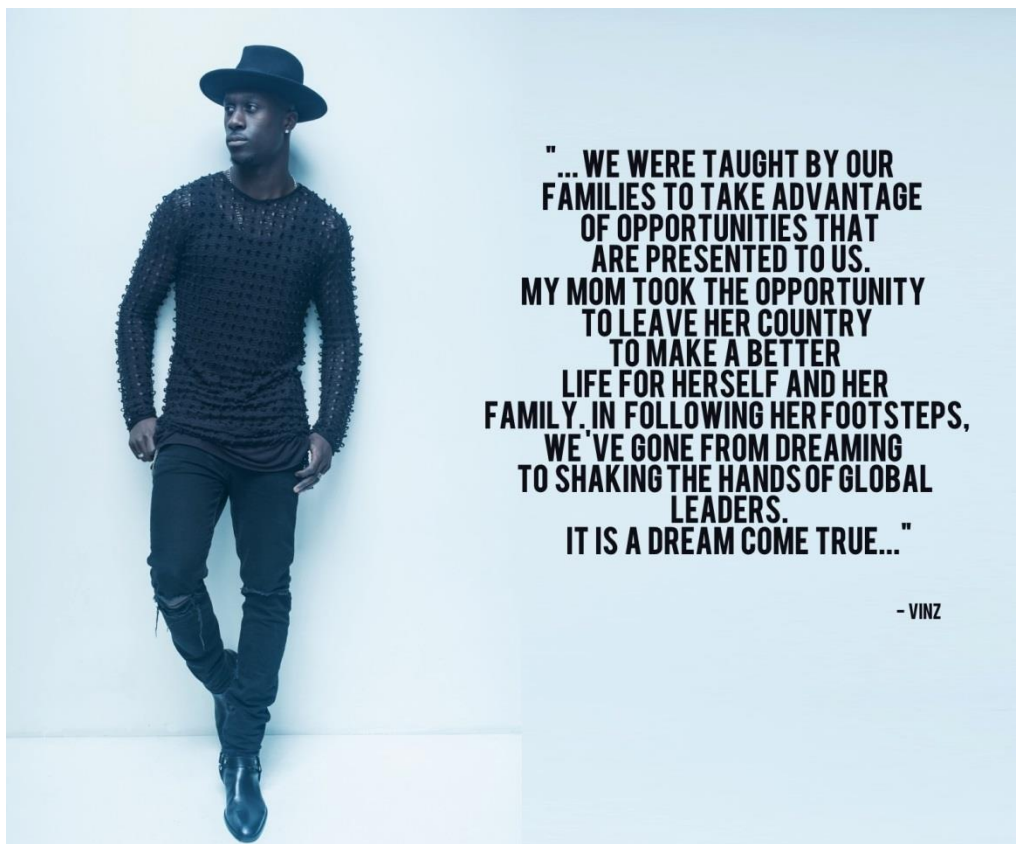
ASM: Approaching your music from a personal angle, are there influences from the world at large or in your personal lives that help formulate each song?

NV (Vinz): Our parents are our inspirations. My mother left Africa for Norway in the 1980s and worked hard to put herself through school and learn the language. She worked hard to make something of herself juggling work, school and a son. She instilled in me to believe in myself, to dream big and not give up no matter what. So to see me now shaking hands with global leaders such as President Obama is something I give her credit for because she made me see the magnitude of opportunities even when I did not see them initially.

NV (Nico): When we decided to take our music careers to the next level of success, we did not focus on being just well known artists in Norway; we wanted to be globally recognized artists. So we found inspiration by just looking at our parents. His family going from Ghana and mine from Abidjan, Ivory Coast all the way to Norway to make something of themselves, made us believe that if they could do it, so can we. There are not many, if any, artists from Norway that have made it beyond the country and we wanted to be the standout group that does; and having our parents as our support system helped make it so.

ASM: Were there moments you wanted to give up having given it your all?

NV (Nico): We had those moments. We had been working on our craft five years before the single *Am I Wrong* came out. We had mixtapes, songs and albums we thought would be big in Norway, but they did not. It got to a point where we thought of going our separate ways. That is when the single *Am I Wrong* debuted becoming a major success. There were definitely ups and downs, but I think that is how success tends to happen - when one goes down, one will eventually come up.



ASM: As you know, in Africa, parents tend to have their children's futures mapped out. So if you were not artists, what profession would you have taken up?

NV (Nico): Well, my dad is a music artist so he did not really get on me about the usual professions to taken on. I played soccer and wanted to be a part of a national team. I was really serious about it until I was twenty-one or twenty-two years old. Then music came along and turned things around.

ASM: Then how satisfying was it for you to get on FIFA?

NV (Nico): *(laughs)*. It was an amazing feeling. I played the FIFA video games from the age of ten dreaming and believing that one day, I would be a part of it. Years later, my dream came true through music. I had such a strong passion for it and be given the opportunity to be a part of it through a different platform means so much. Some people did not understand why I was so ecstatic about that – well now they know. It is a big deal to us.

ASM: Your approach to Africa seems to be a conscious effort that your presentation is beautifully done in your music videos? Is there something being outside of Africa that gives you a perspective about the continent itself?

NV (Vinz): In making the videos, there is some conscious approach. When we debuted the first music video to *Am I Wrong*, it did not look or feel right. As the song gained international attention, it only made sense to shoot a video that best captured our thoughts and spirits when we recorded the song. Africa was the place to capture everything from the colors to the people. Shooting in *Maun, Botswana* and *Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe* was a wonderful experience and we wanted to show that to the world because most people do not get to see that. We also wanted to be ourselves and represent ourselves as Africans from Ghana and Ivory Coast as we simultaneously represent Norway; therefore setting us apart. In that sense, there is a conscious yet natural choice.

ASM: Who is an African? What is the spirit and essence of being an African?

NV (Nico): Vinz and I have a strong connection and love for Africa. When we return from trips to Africa, there is a different feeling when we think about the continent. Africa has everything that money cannot buy. Living there was of the best moments of my life. Even though people do not have much, they are glad to share the little they have with others. There are definitely improvements that can be made to help to improve their living conditions but people still hold their heads up and remain humble and welcoming despite hardships they face. To define an African is a difficult question because answers will vary. One has to go there to capture the spirit of Africa and the people. For us based on our experiences, being African is being love and sharing love to those around no matter how little.

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