

Immigrant ANTHEM

Zambian-born rapper Chansa has written a song that explores the newcomer experience

BY LISA EVANS

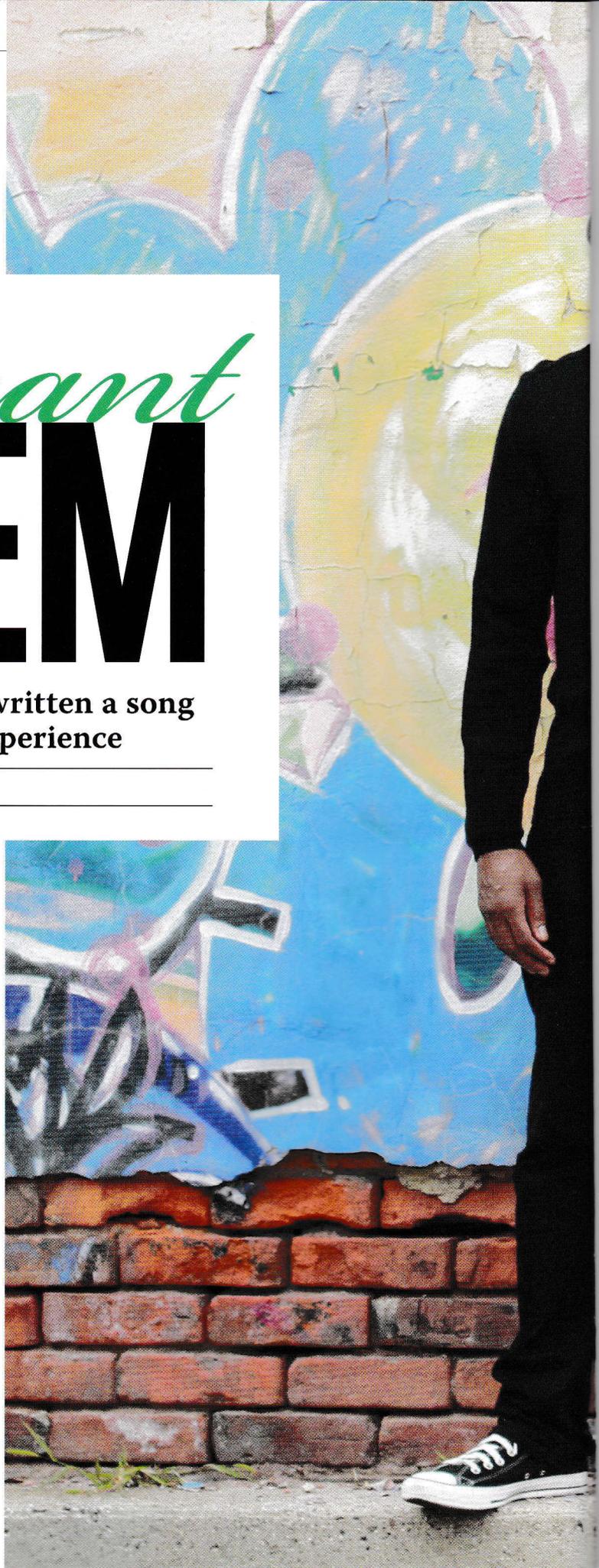
Sitting in a West End Toronto coffee shop, I scan the street for a man wearing baggy jeans, dark sunglasses and sporting the kind of clunky gold necklaces that are often referred to as “bling.” I’ve never met a rapper before and admit to having a preconceived image of the musician I’m scheduled to meet. I’m caught off guard when a poised man in a collared shirt and fitted pants reaches his hand over a stroller carrying the most adorable two-year-old boy with a head full of bouncing curls and a wide smile. I look for heavy gold rings before shaking his hand and immediately feel ashamed for my mischaracterization. The 31-year-old isn’t the stereotypical rapper I expected.

Soft-spoken and humble, Chansa has a down-to-earth personality that’s diametrically opposed to the loud arrogance I’ve come to associate with rap musicians. After politely correcting my pronunciation of his name — “it’s with an ‘ah’ sound: Chansa” — we proceed to talk about his life in Zambia, his move to Canada and his career as a performing artist and songwriter.

Born in Zambia, Chansa spent his elementary school years in Iowa, U.S.A., while his father was studying and teaching at Iowa State University. Upon returning to Africa, he travelled around the continent and even spent a year in Europe. “We have a saying in Africa that if someone has itchy feet, they like to travel and seek new things,” he says. His travels always seemed to lead him to discovering another type of music — from rap and hip hop to afro-jazz and soul — genres that have all influenced Chansa’s eclectic musical style.

A writer, Chansa first became interested in rap music in high school when a friend pointed out the similarities between his poetry and rap lyrics. “I’d listened to rap as a casual listener, but after he said that, I started studying structure and similes and metaphors and really understanding rap for what it was,” he says.

In his 20s, he went by the name C-4 The Bomb, but struggled to





Chansa's eclectic musical style has been influenced by rap, hip hop, afro-jazz and soul.

make a career out of his music. “There were a lot of ups and downs. I signed a development deal with a record label, got to perform in a few music festivals, and learned about the craft of songwriting,” says Chansa. The deal fell through and Chansa never got to produce the album, but the lessons learned were invaluable.

After immigrating to Canada two years ago with his wife, Katherine (a Canadian journalist who was stationed in Zambia) and his son, Imaani (a name which means “to rise up” in his native Zambian dialect), Chansa pursued his musical career — with one major change. He gave up his alias and returned to his Zambian name, a decision he says was emotionally difficult, but felt right under the circumstances.

As a child in Iowa, Chansa felt ashamed by his ethnic name. “I wished my name was John, just so I wouldn’t stand out,” he says. After writing his debut single “Immigrant” — an homage to the struggles faced by newcomers in Canada — using his Zambian name was a way to reclaim his African roots and show the world he’s proud of his heritage.

“Whenever I meet people the first thing that happens when I in-

“ I would like for any immigrant who hears the song to say ‘He articulated what we’ve been feeling.’”

roduce myself is they say ‘huh?’ and then I have to spell it out. It’s so ingrained in me now that usually I spell it before I say it and then the next question is where are you from?” laughs Chansa. “So, I thought what better way to proclaim my Zambian-ness that going by my name”; a name, Chansa says would be easily recognized by any of his countrymen as clearly Zambian.

His single, “Immigrant,” was released in July and is full of provocative lyrics that are sure to touch a chord with newcomers. The song describes the struggles immigrants face in Canada from culture shock and loneliness to financial sacrifices and dealing with prejudice.

I ask him to explain his thoughts behind some of the song’s most evocative lyrics:

Lord knows the struggles I’ve had to endure to get me here ... here’s a place that I’m still adjusting to, feeling’ culture shock, seein’ things that I’m not accustomed to.

“Where I come from, it’s a very community-based society. Here, in Canada, it’s all about personal space. Even when you’re on the subway, people don’t want to be spoken to. If someone’s engaging with you, it has to be for a reason like I need directions or something. It can’t just be saying hi for the reason of saying hi,” he says.

I may be overseas, yeah, but don’t get it twisted, money doesn’t grow on trees here, but we sacrifice and send it, it’s hard to comprehend it.

“When you’re in Africa or Asia or Latin America and you’re watching TV, you see the shine. So you come out here and you speak with people



Chansa’s song “Immigrant” reflects the ups and downs of immigration.

on the phone and say you’re struggling [in Canada] and they say, ‘Yeah, whatever, we see what the lifestyle is like.’ When you leave the ‘developing world’ to go to the ‘developed world,’ there’s an expectation that you’re going to be the saviour for your family. So when you come here and perhaps things aren’t what you expected them to be, you’re now stuck between a rock and a hard place. You can’t go back because what awaits you are people that are expecting a saviour and they don’t want to hear that you came back empty-handed. At the same time, you’re the lowest of the low here.”

People look at us and judge us like we’re repeat offenders ... This is who I am, an immigrant, does that make me so evil?

“Any kind of discrimination usually comes from ignorance. I think the average Canadian doesn’t know what being an immigrant is like. Listening to the song [might] give them insight. They’ll say, so this is what you guys go through, this is how you feel, tell me more. The purpose of any art is to initiate conversations. Whether some people really hate the song, but they talk about it or people who like the song and talk about it, then it’s done its job.”

Although “Immigrant” contains some truths about Chansa’s personal experience in Canada, he says he didn’t write it to be about himself, but wanted it to be a portrayal of the collective immigrant experience. “I would like for any immigrant who hears the song to say ‘He articulated what we’ve been feeling,’” he says, adding he hopes the song will inspire others to share their stories and create an open dialogue about the struggles of Canada’s immigrant community.

Chansa is currently working on his debut album *Baptism by Fire*, a title he chose to represent the struggles he’s faced in his career. “The term ‘baptism by fire’ was used by soldiers in wartime,” he explains. Before heading into battle, soldiers would hide in the trenches, listen to the gunfire above and say their Hail Mary’s before jumping onto the battlefield. “I feel like I’ve been in the trenches all this time and this is my chance to jump into the fray,” he says. 🍁

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