

# EMMANUEL JAL

The earth records its pain with telltale scars: forest fires become blackened rings inside tree trunks, and floods leave white layers within sedimentary rocks. The human body is no different; our ecstasies and tragedies are burned into our minds and etched into our hearts. This sediment of experience is the bedrock that forms how we choose to live and cope with the realities of life. Some people lie down, others stand tall. For Sudanese child-soldier-turned-hip-hop-artist Emmanuel Jal, the wreckage of childhood trauma and the courage to persevere comes out on the title track of his album *Warchild*: “I’m a war child / I believe I’ve survived for a reason / To tell my story, to touch lives.”

Today, Jal is ebullient as he chats on his cell phone from a London café, poised to tell his story to the world. His album has earned good reviews, and the documentary about his return to Africa, also called *War Child*, received standing ovations at the Berlin International Film Festival. But Jal’s recent success is based on the hardships that he endured as a child. Like many children born in Sudan, Jal became a child soldier some time before his eleventh birthday (Jal doesn’t know his real age). “We left our village because there was war. My mom died and our village got burned, our cows got killed, and there was a declaration that all children should be taken to Ethiopia for school. I became one of those kids taken to Ethiopia. We actually went to school for a while, and then we went to train to be soldiers. Many kids there were so bitter, they wanted to know what happened to them. And we all wanted revenge.”

“I lived with an AK-47 / By my side / Slept with one eye open wide / Run / Duck / Play dead / Hide / I’ve seen my people die like flies.”

In these lyrics from “Forced to Sin,” Jal serves up a reality that does not fall into the American gangsta-rap mythology, those tall tales of the modern Wild West that seemingly come straight outta Compton. Instead of subscribing to a hip-hop aesthetic that Jal calls “movies in a mythical form,” the album, essentially, is Jal’s autobiography.

“*Warchild* is just basically what I experienced when I was a child,” says Jal, “what my thoughts were, and how I reacted to situations—so it’s my story in a musical form.” A compelling and fully realized album, *Warchild* begins with Jal as a child soldier, robbed of his innocence and forced into a life of violence, until salvation comes in the form of Emma McCune, a British aid worker who smuggles him to Kenya, where she nurtures him and encourages him to disarm.

Jal’s friendship with McCune was shortlived, however. After her untimely death in a car accident, McCune’s friends set up a fund for Jal, so that he could finish his schooling, ultimately moving to England for university. At first, he studied engineering, but dropped out of school when his visa expired. Then he turned to music.

“Back in my village, people used to rap. It was a dissing game with two village kids [saying], ‘Yo, you’re so ugly that you’re gonna make blind kids cry.’ You could use it as a point to go on, or maybe to talk to a girl.” His charismatic cleverness and observations of Western culture appear in “Skirt Too Short,” “50 Cent,” and the materialism-eschewing “No Bling,” each of which delivers a poignant message in a sugar-coated pill. Jal’s biting honesty breaks down the status quo.

“The song ‘Vagina’ is talking about the whole African system,” says Jal, “because I’ve done a bit of reasoning, and I realized that Africa is not poor; parts are rich. But the problem is the leaders...have no vision.” “Pimps and thieves in Italian-cut suits / Stop raping Africa like she’s your prostitute / To Mister Oil, Diamond, and Gold miner / Stop treating mama Africa like a vagina / She’s not your whore, anymore / you take the riches and you leave her people poor.”

With the press attention that has surrounded him since his 2005 performance at the Live 8 concert in Cornwall, England, Jal is feeling some media fatigue. The acclaimed documentary *War Child* follows him back to Africa, where he is reunited with his family. Although repeatedly telling his story has been difficult, it has afforded him the opportunity to give back to his homeland. Jal started Gaa Africa, a London-based organization that educates children in war-torn areas of sub-Saharan Africa and gives them the hope that once kept Jal alive. “I am planning to build a school in my hometown. I want to give back to the community through the music, and also to inspire the people to be able to appreciate, to *know* that life is hopeful. It’s worth living.”

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