

Ibra Ake and his crew disrupt the pop scene with injections of truth.

# Royal Blood

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A shirtless black man is gyrating hypnotically. He shimmies and shuffles across a warehouse floor. The camera continues in reverse as it follows him until it pans out and steadies on the body of another man, tied to a chair with a bag over his head. Our dancing Virgil in this circle of Hell withdraws a gun and shoots the seated man in the head. Then the chorus kicks in: "This is America."

The music video for what would soon become Donald Glover's first number-one single as Childish Gambino arrived late on the first Saturday in May, and it erupted into an inferno that engulfed the national consciousness. It accrued almost 13 million views in its first 24 hours on YouTube.

Unsparring in its depiction of violence, the video received widespread acclaim for its rawness and masterful direction. Artful as it may be, though, it is far from an abstraction on a canvas. To many, it's a mirror held against the face of a nation—one observed from the periphery by people like Ibra Ake.

Ake, who played an integral role in the development and direction of the video, is part of the creative ensemble known as Royalty, formed in 2012, coincidentally, with the launch of the eponymous Childish Gambino mixtape. The Royalty crew, which Ake characterizes as an enclave of "chaotic creators," comprises an array of tastemakers and creatives, including managers Chad Taylor and Fam Udeorji, and Steve Glover, Donald's younger brother. The group may not assign roles, but it does thrive on a collective trust, of which Ake is a key figure: He's been dubbed the team's soundboard.

"I think what's interesting is we kind of think of ourselves as a millennial creative team, and to be a millennial, you have to do so many things and be skilled at so many things to make it," Ake says. "We didn't really have any mentors in any of this."

Born 32 years ago in Rivers State, Nigeria, Ake lived between his home country and New Jersey throughout his youth before attending the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) in Georgia to

study animation. Ake departed after a year and returned to New Jersey to live with family; the networking and social aspects of arts school proved more worthwhile to Ake than academics. Ake's desire to gain fluency in Photoshop led to a photography course during his time at SCAD. Citing the vibrant and sumptuous iconography of David LaChapelle and *Vibe* magazine as inspiration, he began to perfect his eye behind the lens. "I could make my black friends look like they were in Renaissance paintings," Ake says. "I just felt powerful."

His portraiture won over modeling execs at Ford Models, who tapped him to lend his expertise to the fashion world, relieving him from a cycle of odd jobs. Shortly thereafter, Ake found himself immersed in Royalty.

The seed that became the award-winning FX show *Atlanta* was first presented to Ake and the Royalty crew during a lull in Childish Gambino tours and recordings. The concept spun from the team's observations of the world as they witnessed it from the periphery as black men in an industry otherwise at odds. The *Atlanta* writers room strays from its contemporaries in that its composition is exclusively black.

"I really don't think we think about white people when making stuff, honestly," Ake explains. "I feel like we now realize our value is not putting white people into consideration when making things."

Blurring the lines of genre altogether, *Atlanta*, a so-called comedy, has been compared to *Twin Peaks* by its own creators for its surrealist take on the everyday. Like "This is America," *Atlanta* evokes a discomfort characterized by a sense of unpredictability. In a world free of safety nets, we journey along with our black protagonists aware that more than just the tone could be upheaved in an instant. The first season finale chronicles Glover and company's mission to retrieve a jacket left behind in an Uber, only to arrive in time to witness the Uber driver shot to death by the police while wearing the



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jacket in question. A sensitive comedic perspective injects balance into a moment wrought with pain. Ake and his fellow writers wield humor as a weapon against this onslaught of agony, aware laughter is the sole alternative to tears.

"I feel like we just have a dark sense of humor. We're very romantic, but we have a very nihilistic view of the world because I feel like we learn more and more as we progress how much uneducation we needed to protect ourselves and make it an even playing field," Ake says. "We don't have the luxury of romanticizing the way things work."

Although principled, Ake understands the rules of the game and highlights a learned currency on what it takes to earn exposure: "I think we're aware of when we put Tina Fey in a song with a rapper on a mixtape. We know what we're doing in that instance, but really, the only way I will get *Vanity Fair* to write about this song is by throwing a white woman they love on this mixtape track. And that's the only way *Vanity Fair* will cover a mixtape, and sure enough, they did, because they love white women more than they love black art."

The success of *Atlanta* and Childish Gambino has yielded not only exposure to the Royalty team, but creative authority. Landing the platform and using it as they see fit is not enough; the goal is to revamp the playing field until it's even enough for future Akes and Glovers to generate art that affords visibility to one audience and necessary discomfort to another.

"I always say we're toymakers, and the longer we can get people interested in a toy and coming back to that toy, the prouder we are of that work," he says. "We kind of structure it so that you can't pay attention to it all at once in *Atlanta*, so people go back and catch stuff. It gives you more value for your toy."

Ake penned the season two episode "Champagne Papi," which chronicled the character of Nessa (played by Zazie Beetz) and her friends as they choreograph their way through a party at Drake's house. The episode leans into a theme of social media that echoes Ake's own manipulation of the medium as he and his crew saw their stars rise. He recalls, "I remember I would have times where I had this thing on Instagram where I hated that people would follow me based on stuff about Donald."

Ake experimented with Instagram, delivering bursts of up to 100 simultaneous posts along with the integration of the hashtag #timewilltell. "I just felt like [the hashtag] started becoming like a prayer for me, like a mantra. You just have to put your shot up and time will tell," he explains. "'Time will tell' is just reminding myself that, good or bad, I still won't know or see the final outcome. And the outcome is irrelevant because I won't know."

For now, Ake's calendar is marked up with projects across an expanse of media, particularly filmmaking. While mum about his pursuits, he conveys an acute enthusiasm devoid of compromise. "Looking at life like a nature show can feel abrasive to people outside the circle," he says. "I don't think of it as black art. I think of it as not having to dilute where I'm coming from, but understanding in certain spaces it will be attractive and more shareable."

A few weeks after "This is America" debuted, Nigerian rapper Falz released his own video and song inspired by the Childish Gambino video—"This is Nigeria." The video garnered praise and made many fans, Ake already among them. "I think that's great," he says of Falz's new release. "I've grown up on the Lagos music scene and I'm very inspired by it, so it's cool to see a conversation happen."

As focused a toymaker as ever, Ake adds, "I just want people to remember that this is a street single and it's okay to enjoy the song outside of the political conversation. It bops."

