

Upski speaks to pissed off voters

Story by Manda Aufochs Gillespie

How did a young man who came to notoriety in Chicago as a graffiti writer go on to be a prized journalist, youth organizer, philanthropist and, now, electoral politics warrior?

This question has me on the phone at midnight with William Upski Wimsatt. I am surprised to find him as good a listener as he is an articulate speaker. He explains, “I never thought I would get involved in electoral politics, but *The League of Pissed Off Voters* is the culmination of everything I’ve tried to do so far.”

Before hip hop was a culture, and just a type of music, Upski was involved. In this interview he explains how his passion has evolved from a time when he thought he would die for hip hop to now, when he paints a larger picture of what the movement is really about.

Over time, he has become one of the most important voices in hip hop culture. He wrote the audacious and groundbreaking *Bomb the Suburbs* and *No More Prisons*, which he self-published and passed out on buses and subways. His graffiti friends tagged the sidewalks with “No More Prisons,” to market the album by the same name, the book and the belief that this idea itself mattered.

The books caught eyes. They got recognition. The hip hop musician Chuck D called it one of the best hip hop books ever and *Utne* chose Upski as an “Utne Visionary,” the youngest ever to receive this distinction.

Most recently, reflecting his new propensity for electoral politics, Upski co-edited, *How to Get Stupid White Men Out of Office*. The book is a collection of electoral success stories and strategies to get stupid people, “of all colors,” out of office.

Now, just 31-years old, Upski has found his way, seemingly irrevocably, into electoral politics. He serves as the Director of The League of Pissed Off Voters, a non-profit that engages pissed off 17-35 year olds in the democratic process to build a governing majority in our lifetime, and The League of Independent Voters, an advocacy organization which organizes progressive voter guides and voter blocs nationwide.

Manda Aufochs Gillespie: Bakari Kitwana, author of *The Hip-Hop Generation*, describes the hip hop generation as African Americans born after the Civil Rights movement, between 1965 and 1984. How do you define the hip hop generation?

William Upski Wimsatt: Bakari is coming out with a new book called *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop*. In this book he has a broader definition, coming from a black nationalist perspective and confronting how multiracial hip hop has become. When I grew up in hip-hop culture in Chicago in the ’80s, I thought it was all black and Latino. I grew up in Hyde Park and there weren’t many hip-hop artists in Hyde Park. I had to go to Woodlawn and the ghetto to find hip-hop and graffiti writers.

It’s shocking to see this phenomenon of white hip hop that has come about; where a whole bunch of people feel comfortable having a whole bunch of white hip-hop crews

playing to a white audience. To me it's missing something—it's missing its context. Yet it's still so powerful.

A study came out recently that white males who listen to hip hop are three times as likely to be against Bush. It makes me happy because I am sometimes cynical about the relationship of hip hop and white kids growing up today. Where you can watch t.v. and sit in your basement and produce tracks and think of yourself as hip hop.

MAG: Kitwana also describes this generation as consisting of 9.5 million people but with the potential to organize around a group of 40-45 million as a hip-hop voting bloc. How many people do you think could realistically be considered to be part of the hip-hop generation?

Upski: I agree with Bakari's numbers. What interests me is how many of those numbers could be organized into a voting bloc and that is exactly what the League of Pissed Off Voters is created to do.

What the League is doing is allowing young people to sign up and be counted as a verifiable voting bloc. Young people who live in Uptown or the suburbs can get together in their living room and make a slate and endorse candidates.

We all know who we are going to vote for for president, and we know to vote for Barack Obama, but you look at the rest of the ballot—who the fuck is our state legislator?—and we have no idea. We are making our own, home-made, endorsement slates and putting them on the Internet and passing them out. People sign up to be part of that voting bloc and then on November 2 we can prove our numbers. Then we can say xx people in Helen Schiller's ward voted this slate and were for her and against this Tax Increment Finance (TIF) that is gentrifying the neighborhood. Then this group can mobilize to hold politicians accountable.

We estimate that 3-5 million between 18 and 35 are connected to, and can be reached through, existing cultural networks. That's the universe that we are focused on organizing. The majority of them don't vote but they do give a shit. It's about connecting the "giving a shit" to an actual endorsement slate that gets them excited enough to get to the polls. (He adds later, this number, 3-5 million, is also how many bought the last album of hip hop artist Lauryn Hill.)

We grew up in a generation with people that made their own cds, websites, zines. We like to make things. That is what the voter guides are.

MAG: What is the political potential of the young, hip-hop, indy (or pissed off) community?

Upski: It's a group that has never been organized politically before. This is just the start. This is just the opening salvo of a multi-decade organizing project.

After November 2, that is when people are really going to start talking about the League because we will be able to show we won elections all over the country. That is when it will capture the imagination of kids. People think organizing voters means registering voters to vote. That is important, but a huge percentage of people who are registered don't vote and many of those that do vote leave a majority of the ballot blank or take a wild guess and feel entirely disempowered and never want to come back again.

The League, in Chicago, is off the hook. They have their own website at www.chicagoyoungvoters.org. We encourage people to make their own voter guides for their own social networks. People don't want to hear from some random person knocking on their door, they want to hear from their friend.

MAG: With voter fraud and the number of blacks and Latinos whose votes are discounted, what do you say to all those young people out there who say they don't vote because "it doesn't matter anyway?"

Upski: I get that a lot. What I say is: first of all, yeah, the system is fucked up and we do need to change the whole system. Part of how we do that is by showing up in such a huge majority that they can't steal the election. We know that they are scared of us showing up like that.

We know that they try dirty tricks. So, what do you do if there is a bully in the lunchroom that is going to try and steal your lunch? Do you just not come to lunch? No. You find a way to deal with the bully and you fight back and you fight back with everything you've got in every creative way that you have. You have to use your brain to win against the bully. Your telling me that you are just going to lie down for them and be a coward?

On a practical level, we have to turn out enough votes to make it un-stealable. We have to show up as poll watchers to make sure that potential voters aren't getting intimidated at the polls and that their names aren't getting disenfranchised from the list, and that they aren't making it hard for blacks and Latinos to vote.

That is why we have to show up in force, be informed and get our whole network to vote. That is why we are going to be ready on November 3 and 4. So if, when, they do try to steal the election, we will shut down the country until we get our democracy back. We aren't going to riot, we are going to do non-violent, direct action and civil disobedience. We are planning this massive, coordinated, national effort.

We aren't going to let Biff take over the lunchroom because he's the biggest bully. We're going to kick Biff's ass.

MAG: There is a perception that young people, though profoundly affected by increasing rates of incarceration, lack of living wages, inaccessible health care and environmental destruction, don't care enough or aren't powerful enough to organize for significant change. How accurate is that perception?

Upski: It's not about being disenfranchised because there are lots of people that are disenfranchised but do something. And, there are lots of people who aren't disenfranchised, they are middle class, and just don't get it. Start with the choir, get them to sing really well, then go to the congregation, then to the community, and then we all go out to the nation. It's a step-by-step process.

By and large, the reason we haven't ever won is because we haven't really tried in a sophisticated way. It's not rocket science. Very few people actually really try. It's hard but not out of reach. There are decades of de-programming that have to go on for people to feel like they can change something. That is why making it really simple and fun is the only way you are going to do it.

I think we stumbled on to a killer strategy.

MAG: What's Kerry going to do for inner-city blacks?

Upski: This is how I think of Kerry: it's like when a car kills a child in a community. What do you do? You can't bring back the life of the child. You can't get rid of all cars and stop them from killing. So you organize and you put up a stop sign, or a speed bump, or something, and you have to fight for that stop sign or that speed bump. So it's a victory because it brings the community together. It says we won't be powerless in the face of this thing called cars that kill children. It makes that community feel empowered to do more things in the future. You start small and you move on to bigger things.

To me Kerry is a stop sign. He's not our savior. He's a finger in the dam.

It's not really about Kerry, it's not even about Bush, it's about a radical right-wing movement that currently controls both houses of Congress and is attempting to keep the presidency, to install Bush for four more years. If they succeed, they will appoint three more Supreme Court Justices and they will effectively control all branches of the government with no effective opposition for at least the next four years.

What is really scary and unprecedented is that the Republicans are terrified of America in the long term. In our lifetime, it will be a majority of people of color. People of color tend not to vote Republican. This is pivotal for them, because if they don't install George Bush and get control over all channels of government and get voting machines installed, they are going to be voted out of there. This is their last chance to lock down their political machine. They have to vanquish their opposition to stay in power. That is what they are trying to do. For me, it's not about Kerry being good on any issue. It's about stopping a one-party state that has a radical right-wing agenda and has power over all of us to do anything it wants. As bad as things already are, they could get much worse.

I don't have much hope that Kerry will be good for black America. He will be much better for working-class, and poor and middle-class America as a whole. The Republicans want to strangle all federal government programs that benefit working-class and low-income people. The Democrats at least don't have an institutional imperative to kill, wipe out or get rid of black people, as Republicans do. The best we can hope for is for things to be slightly better.

It's not about Kerry, or Bush, or these politicians, it's about us pulling in our power to put better people in office and this election is one important step in that staircase. Just as this is the most critical election for Republicans, it is for us. If we don't stop them we fall through the staircase into the basement. And it's real dark down there.

MAG: What happens if The League of Pissed Off Voters is successful, young people, black people and Latinos come out in droves to vote and Bush still wins or Kerry wins but doesn't support any of the issues the hip-hop generation cares about? Will the young voter ever vote again?

Upski: Yeah, I think about that all the time. Politicians represent the people who put them there: the corporations or voter blocs. Kerry's voting record [as scored by the NAACP, environmental groups, labor groups] is pretty high. As politicians go, he's decent. He has spoken out about the prison industrial complex putting more black men in prison than in college, he's taken on the military industrial complex, and [former

President Ronald] Reagan's covert war in Central America in the '80s. He was brave in opposition to that.

Scenario one: Bush wins. It means that progressive forces didn't do our jobs. We didn't organize well and we will have ourselves to blame.

If Kerry wins: we will have a stop sign and there will still be cars killing children.

Our organization is going to be around for decades. And, we will have an incredibly potent political force that is going to be swinging local races in 2005, running candidates in 2006, and preparing for 2008, starting right away. We are going to be throwing parties, starting businesses, and finding life partners.

This is the greatest progressive political moment of our generation because it's got an unprecedented number of people involved. People working together across the ideological perspective, having real conversations. Moderates, liberals, progressives, radicals, all working together. Moments like this don't come along very often. We have to build relationships and skills and a shared analysis during this special moment of unity that we can carry beyond November 2. That is what the League was created for.

MAG: What is the biggest obstacle facing our generation?

Upski: Where do I start? We are facing the three horsemen of the apocalypse: environmental decimation, plus turbo-capitalism (so that peasants in India are trying to mirror the materialistic lifestyle in the U. S.), combined with a nuclear and military industrial complex arming the planet to the teeth. If you draw the graph to its logical conclusion with any of those three trends, it's not pretty. It's going to take an enormous shift in consciousness and it's going to call for leadership that's beyond what we've been trained for. It's going to take everything we've got to avert the three horsemen and their current leader Biff.

MAG: Do you advocate change from within the Democratic or Republican parties to make them better represent "pissed off voters"? Or, are there options beyond electoral politics that we should ultimately strive for?

Upski: Yes! I believe we have to use every strategy. Our village is being attacked so don't tell me not to use pots and pans, water, fire, anything that we can do to save our village.

The only reason that I'm so obsessed with electoral politics right now is that it's one weapon we haven't used. I'm obsessed with [electoral politics], not because it's more important than sustainable agriculture, or spoken word poetry, or lobbying, or community organizing, or art, or learning to have healthy relationships. There are so many weapons that we need to use to take our country and world back from the forces of evil. But electoral politics is just one we've been ignoring so we're going to surprise people when we whip it out.

We need to do everything. We need to take over and influence and hold accountable the major parties. And, we need to support and build third parties in a way that is smart. People have a lot of dreams about third parties that are not reality based in the context of American politics. In Europe, third parties can have power because they have proportional representation. If in Germany the Green party [Greens] gets 10 percent of

the vote, it's great because they get 10 percent [of the representation]. Here if the Greens gets 10 percent of the vote, the nearest party just gets fewer votes. In *How to Get Stupid White Men Out of Office*, we profiled a few Greens who were really successful. We love the Green Party and we love their principles. It's a testament of their strategic flexibility that they didn't endorse Nader. Nader on the other hand is being ideologically rigid at the wrong moment in history. He's saying we need to get rid of cars, which I agree with, but there is a truck speeding toward a child.

I think our best realistic hope is to do what the right wing has done, which is to take over a major party. Thirty years ago the radical right wing decided they were going to take over the Republican Party. Before that, they were like us—the Christian-right didn't want anything to do with electoral politics because it was dirty. An unholy deal was struck to unite the people of God with the people of weapons because they were scared of blacks, women, trees and gay people.

So this is our moment when we are getting scared. Just like they took over the Republican Party 30 years ago, our best and most realistic hope is to take over the Democratic Party. A lot of people who have ideas are impatient in a self-defeating way and don't understand the time line involved in creating substantial change. They say, "Oh, [presidential candidate Dennis] Kucinich. He lost, so fuck it." It's really about being willing to stick with it for the long term because that is the only way to achieve results. A lot of people take their toys and go home.

I've been trying, and falling on my face, since I was 13-years old to do political stuff. Over the last 17 years of trying and failing, I am actually starting to learn and get good at things. That is why I think the League is so successful because those of us that have been doing it have spent decades trying and failing and learning from our mistakes and getting smart on how to win and how to build sustainable and powerful [coalitions].

MAG: Tell me more about The League of Pissed Off Voters.

Upski: I'm really proud of the League. It is the best art project I've ever been part of.

I started doing all this stuff as an artist. I was a graffiti writer who wanted to push the envelope of graffiti and I ended up here. Not to diminish the seriousness of all of this. For me, just in how I think about the work and how I experience it, it's all a big art project and I do it with the same sense of curiosity and kid-ish joy that I did when I was doing graffiti when I was 11. It really fascinates me because it's the most multifaceted art form I've ever participated in. When people talk about politics they have this boring image of it but there are so many layers there. It really takes an artist to figure out how to re-imagine it and change it.

I actually think that most of the great art projects of our time will not be painted, nor drawn, nor played in music, nor written on a page. They are less obvious mediums of art. All these artists are ghettoized into painting or writing or the other typical art school mediums. What's so creative about doing "creative work" in a medium where there's a glut of artists?

We don't need any more great painters or rap artists, we need creative people to do work in the less obvious mediums of art. And politics, talk about a medium of art where there are a whole bunch of people drawing stick figures: the most un-creative people in the

world. That is where we need the brilliant artists to put their imaginations. What is so exciting right now is that people are!

I think people will look back at this time as a renaissance of creativity that has been inspired by our political climate.

MAG: I think our generation often feels like we never have enough money to fix the problems we see, particularly the political problems. You have spent a lot of your energy in the last few years redefining philanthropy for the hip-hop/Indy generation. How important is money in making political change?

Upski: Money is the most powerful medium of art of our generation and we need it like we need everything else. No great social movement has succeeded without visionary rich people. It's absolutely necessary but it shouldn't be focused on too much. A lot of things people want to blame on money are deeper problems that money won't solve. Money's necessary but not sufficient. There are a lot of rich kids in art school that feel bad about their money. Think about it as more paint, just paint.

MAG: If hip-hop politics become mainstream does it cease to be hip hop?

Upski: The word hip hop has lost most of its moral cachet in the last couple of decades, if it ever had some. When I was a teenager, I thought I would die for it. But hip hop is not the movement. It is not the thing we should be ready to die for. There is a big kernel of something there but its got so much music industry crap on it that hip hop has already ceased to be hip hop.

Ras Baraka becoming the deputy mayor of Newark, that is hip hop. [This is one of the success stories featured in *How to Get Stupid White Men Out of Office*] What I mean by that is: it is about a young person of color who did something his own way and succeeded, he wrote his own story. He beat people that were better funded, more powerful, more entrenched, with his ingenious, imaginative strategies. That is what is hip hop about it.

The danger is, of course, that what will happen to hip-hop politicians is what happened to hip hop. It's the question that Raven asks at the end of *Bomb the Suburbs*, "How do you get power without becoming what you resist?" It's the age-old story and dance about how to go into the political whorehouse without losing your pants.

For the full text of the Upski interview and for a web-exclusive feature on Upski by Dani Deahl see www.fnewsmagazine.com.