

2013

## Robert Farid Karimi Interview

Kenneth Seung Yu  
*DePaul University*

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**Interviewer: Kenneth Seung Yu**

**Artist: Robert Farid Karimi**

**Phone Interview & Social Media: Chicago, IL**

**Date: May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2013 & June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Asian American Art in Contemporary Culture during the 2013 Spring Quarter as part of the Asian American Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, Media, & Design. This interview was approved for publication by the artist in 2017.*



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**Bio:** Robert Farid Karimi is an interdisciplinary playwright, multimedia humorist, activist, and poet and the artistic director of kaotic good productions. His works include self (the remix), The Cooking Show con Karimi y Comrades, Shaving time, and the Approximate Value of a Foot Bubbler. Karimi has collaborated with artists such as Guillermo Gomez Peña and Laurie Carlos; performances include the Edge of The World, Reverend of the DiscoChurch, and McMuertos. His awards include a National Poetry Slam Championship, an Alliance of Artists' Communities Midwestern Voices & Visions Award, a Verve Spoken Word Grant, NPN Creation Grant, a Kohler Arts/Industry residency.

A San Francisco Bay Area native, son of Iranian and Guatemalan parents and a UCLA graduate, Karimi's work has been featured from Alaska to Australia. A National Poetry Slam Champion, and Def Poetry Jam performer, Karimi's writings have been published in Callaloo, Latino Literature Today, and Total Chaos: The Art and the Aesthetics of Hip Hop by Jeff Chang. A 2009 Creative Capital grantee, he is currently developing The Cooking Show: Diabetes of Democracy, Farid Mercury, an exploration of Persian politics, masculinity and pop divination, and editing Punto!, a new Latina/o spoken word anthology. – Bio from <http://www.kaoticgood.com/bio.html>

### **Interview Transcript:**

**Kenneth Seung Yu:** Tell me about yourself.

**Robert Farid Karimi:** Well, my parents are Iranian and Guatemalan which makes me half Iranian and half Guatemalan. I had interesting childhood growing up in my area in Northern California because I never really felt as though my race was an issue because I was sort of mysterious and wasn't categorized in a certain race. I had strong influences from my Pilipino friends growing up especially my influence towards hip hop and that aspect of pop culture. I then went on to attend college in Los Angeles at UCLA where I then went on to do various performances all around the world. I recently came back from Asia where I was immersed in such a new life style and culture. It will be interesting how this experience will influence my future work.

**KSY:** How would you describe your art?

**RFK:** My art...hmmm...in the fancy art world terms: its public practice art, its social practice art, its relational art, its theater. My work concerns itself with human to human relationships. Making people laugh, inspiring people to think about what nourishes them. I use pop cultural metaphors to create my work because I try to create work that engages audiences. At first, I started focusing on work that was about mixed culture and how someone of mixed culture navigates the universe and shape shifts and reinvents. Now, all that is still there, and I am interested in how to get audiences to participate and rehearse the ideas in my work. I am all about doing it live, but I use all media to play with this idea.

**KSY:** Do you have a philosophy when making food/art?

**RFK:** I see art as a reactionary process. Especially in the West Coast I have seen this over the years, going to college in LA and living in Northern California. I wanted to sort of bring back those characteristics to Minneapolis where I currently am working on *The Cooking Show*.

**KSY:** What types of food do you prepare from your cultural background?

**RFK:** We prepare food in The Cooking Show that's from everywhere. The Cooking Show started as a show that explored themes about immigrants and how immigrants adapt their recipes. I used my Guatemalan mother's versions of my Iranian father's recipes. But I also used recipes from folks who adapted recipes - remixed them.

In the *Cooking Show con Karimi & Comrades*, Mero Cocinero (the host of the Cooking Show) has used many of my mother's recipes, and recipes that I created over the years - remixes of Persian food, Guatemalan food, or even Filipino or Mexican Food. In Viva La Soul Power, the pop up restaurant that's part of the *28 Days of Good Energia*, we cooked food from recipes people taught me as we toured the show. These were all recipes with stories because I believe Stories feed us. -link video of *The Peoples Cook* <http://vimeo.com/channels/thepeoplescook>  
-link to webpage <http://thepeoplescook.org/>

**KSY:** Where did you get the idea to start *The Cooking Show con Karimi and Comrades*?

**RFK:** I had the idea of bringing food of creating an event that brings performance and food together. I wanted to bring an experience of me discussing certain topics such as mixed race issues which are hard to discuss but change the audiences' perspective. What if we bring in food to the equation? That will most definitely change the mindset of my audience.

**KSY:** Do you ever address Asian or Asian American identity, themes, or histories in your work? Any Examples?

**RFK:** Always. I am half Asian. It's in my one man shows: *Farid Mercury and Self* (The Remix). In FM, I explore the identity of Persian men and how they recreate that identity post 9-11 through the lens of interviews I conducted and the spirit of Freddy Mercury, lead singer of Queen and an Indian-Tanzanian of Persian descent. -link to trailer <http://vimeo.com/22627191>

**KSY:** Have you ever been included in an exhibition that was labeled as Asian or Asian American or have you ever been labeled as "Asian" or "Asian American artist"?

**RFK:** I saw exhibits that were labeled as Asian or Asian American, reflexive. Just like the reflexive property when x is equal to x. I felt as though Asian American art is under represented and the Asian American crowd is not thinking outside of the box enough. So I would like to see the Asian American community grow in that aspect. In the end art is a business and getting the community involved in certain art puts a lot of pressure on today's curators.

**KSY:** What types of exhibition opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you over the years?

**RFK:** Over the years, the opportunities have been interesting. I've traveled around the world trying to gain more knowledge about my background and that has helped me with numerous ideas. I recently received the Creative Capital Award which has increased the amount of opportunities that I have been receiving.

**KSY:** What are you currently working on?

**RFK:** I am currently touring Viva La Soul Power, the pop restaurant of *The Cooking Show con Karimi & Comrades*, and coming to Chicago in the fall. I am mounting a tour for 2014 of Farid Mercury, and writing my next work called *Agua Got No Enemy* which explores the connection how many communities of color can't swim and their relationship with water.

**END**