



Che “Rhymefest” Smith, President/Founder, Art of Culture, Inc. Institute of Politics Fellow, University of Chicago

Che “Rhymefest” Smith is an award-winning recording artist, humanitarian, actor, and community advocate. He is the recipient of two Grammy Awards, an Academy Award, a Golden Globe, a Critics’ Choice Award, and a Soul Train Award for his artistry that bridges intersections between Che’s communal, national, and global experiences.

Che grew up on the South Side of Chicago, attending Bouchet (formerly Bryn Mawr) Elementary School and South Shore High School and began grooming his artistic abilities at the age of 15. As his career developed, he became a global voice promoting music as a positive, empowering and transformative force in the lives of young people. It is in this spirit that he seeks to be his community’s voice on Chicago’s new elected School Board.

Throughout his early career, Che was taught and guided by activists, musical icons, and intellectual giants. These include the Rev. Jesse Jackson who brought Che along for transformative visits with inmates at the Cook County jail, explaining the origins of mass incarceration and the need for education to uplift people and communities harmed by inequality. DJ Jazzy Jeff featured Rhymefest as his official M.C. for seven world tours, where he was exposed to a variety of cultures and learned new ways of engaging music for communal power and social change. Acclaimed author and educator Dr. Cornel West of Harvard University asked Che to join him on a song titled “Welcome 2 the Chi”, where he was encouraged to leverage his artist notoriety for social and political Justice.

As a Dartmouth Montgomery Fellow, Che conducted creative writing courses that instructed students on how to leverage impactful narratives for positive social change. Later, as a Pritzker/Axelrod Fellow at the University of Chicago’s Institute of Politics he lead a seminar series unpacking the social and political value of “Cultural Currency”. Working with Chicago rapper Common and singer John Legend as a co-writer of “Glory” for the civil rights-era film “Selma”, Rhymefest helped garner a Grammy, Golden Globe and Academy Award for the inspiring theme song.

Using film as a tool to reach larger audiences, Che was the subject of the Showtime/Breakthru films documentary “In My Father’s House”. He purchased the childhood home of his estranged Father only to find that he’d been homeless for most of Che’s life. Rhymefest embarked on a journey to reconnect and redeem their relationship. The film earned a Georgia Film Critics Association Award, and an African American Film Critics Associations Award. This on-screen appearance led to Che’s acting debut in the Emilio Estevez written and directed film about homelessness and the importance of publicly funded libraries “The Public” starring alongside Gabriel Union, Michael K. Williams, Jeffrey Wright, Alec Baldwin, and Emilio Estevez.

Seeing the transformative difference he could make in community through music and mentorship, Che co-founded the non-profit organization Art Of Culture (formerly Donda’s House), collaborating with the Chicago Park District and Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE) to serve thousands

of youth artists throughout the city. He organized and led events such as “Bridges to The Blues”, where intergenerational artists were paired and given opportunities to fuse classic Blues with contemporary music styles. The result was an epic annual performance at the Chicago Blues Festival in Millennium Park. Art of Culture was also instrumental in the creation of TIP Fest (Teens In the Park), which currently serves as Chicago’s largest platform for young artists to showcase their talents and connect with resources. Smith was named Co-Chair of The Year of Chicago Music, an initiative by DCASE to highlight our city’s vibrant and diverse music scene.

Most recently Che has taken his philanthropic direction nationally and internationally as Art of Culture curates experiences based in the healing power of nature, culture, and art. Under Che’s leadership Art of Culture collaborated with The Skillman Foundation to host a one-week nature retreat through Wyoming/Yellowstone National Park, partnering city centered youth from Detroit with Indigenous youth of the West for a journey that inspired positive cultural connections. Art Of Culture has expanded into the African diaspora with the development of Golgotha Elementary schools Art and technology department in Arusha Tanzania, as well as a youth Deejay academy in Dakar, Senegal.

At the core of Rhymefest’s humanitarian spirit is deep love and sincere belief in the power of education and what can be accomplished when people of good will unite. This is why he’s an active member of the Abolition Institute, a peace seeking organization with the mission to combat enslavement in the West African country of Mauritania, called “Slavery’s Last Stronghold” by CNN. Rhymefest frequently travels to Mauritania as part of a humanitarian delegation, working with local organizations, formerly enslaved people, and artists to help fight slavery and discrimination.

Che’s son Solomon attended CPS’ Shoemith Elementary School. Smith lives with his family in Chicago’s 6th Ward and will be a School Board Member that our entire community will be proud of.