

STACII SAMIDIN

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INTRODUCTION: TENDER TRUTHS

Koos Breukel and Hedy van Erp

As a couple, musicians Lou Reed and Laurie Anderson established three rules for life, particularly for when you don't have time to think and must make a snap decision to determine what is right to do. Rule number one is: *don't be afraid of anybody*. Number two is: *get a good bullshit detector*. Rule number three: *be really tender*. According to Anderson, that's all you need.

What would it be like if you weren't afraid of anybody? Fear might serve as a protective mechanism, but fear is not Stacii Samidin's game. His work exudes a sense of freedom and empowerment – the ability to truly see, meet and engage with people, even those most of us would rather avoid.

Samidin's upbringing, formative experiences, and time among gangs have given him insights that make him aware that fear leads nowhere, and that everyone is lucky in some way. Or, as expressed by Christopher 'Notorious B.I.G.' Wallace, whose prominent portrait adorns a mural in one of his photos: "Damn right I like the life I live, 'cause I went from negative to positive."

Samidin confidently expresses himself and his views, pursues his goals, and takes risks without fear of judgment or rejection. This allows him to build strong relationships and connect with people who haven't been treated well by life – he can be his open, authentic self with them. In turn, this awareness of his own luck fosters empathy and enables him to take photographs, granting him access to worlds that few can enter.

He has a social heart for outsiders, much like social-documentary photographer Peter Martens (1937–92), his exceptional peer from Rotterdam he never met. Like Samidin, Martens was fearless in speaking his truth and had a compassionate eye for those on the fringes of society. Martens once became an aspiring member of the prestigious Magnum photography collective, founded in 1947 by Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson, George Rodger and David Seymour. The collective's independent reporting resonates with Samidin. After all, visual history books still need to be filled with his truth.

This drive fuels Samidin's relentless documentation of 'societies' worldwide, working beyond the constraints of the dominant narrative. He highlights the strength of those with unconventional lifestyles who, despite having little or nothing, refuse to give up. His work advocates for a different interpretation of the people we often judge at first glance, aiming for a shift in perspective.

Outward appearance can be a way to dispel fear. To scare away predators, the peacock butterfly has large eyespots on its wings – the opposite of camouflage – like grillz or tattoos on a man's skin. Many of Samidin's subjects have tattoos, some carry assault weapons, and some have both. Some have a fighting dog, weapons and an intimidating appearance to help keep people at bay. Aiming to connect people, it may

**“PHOTOGRAPHY
IS MY LANGUAGE.
SUDDENLY I WAS
ABLE TO TALK
IN PICTURES.
PHOTOGRAPHY
SPOKE TO ME.”**

Photography has transformed the life of Stacii Samidin (b. 1987). No, it's more than that: photography saved him. “Without it I would be in jail now.”

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His studio in the centre of Rotterdam is a haven of tranquillity. Avocado-green walls hung with large, framed photographs, a sofa, a rug, a desk with a large monitor. The contrast with his rugged subject matter could hardly be any greater. And then there's his own appearance: a tawny man with tattoos all over his body (as far as I can see, that is) right up to the top of his bald head, with a gold grill on his teeth and round glasses with tinted lenses.

Samidin has carved out an impressive career for himself with his pictures of people who are generally viewed as living on the edge of society, garnering commissions from all over the world, and exhibitions in the Netherlands' most prestigious museums. “It wasn't until my work was hanging in the Rijksmuseum that my family understood what I was doing.”

Your career, like your whole life, has been a rollercoaster.

“Yes, absolutely. Shall I take you back to the beginning?

With pictures?”

“There is a method to my madness. Because everything I do is a reflection of myself, without anyone ever having told me. To this day I have been figuring that out for myself. My purpose is to make an honest and sincere image.” Raw honesty, he calls it. “It’s all about looking beyond the stereotypical image of a person and identity.”

“From the day you are born you meet people. First your parents and later the kids at school. Without it being a conscious thing, your plate is soon filled with all these personality traits you can choose from. Thanks to my photography, and meeting so many people all over the world, I am still constantly stumbling across norms and values that are new to me. We are all interesting little islands.”

What did your world look like when you were a child?

“Until I turned 18, I grew up in a closed community. My family is a mix. I have Moluccan and Javanese roots, we’re from Padang, Sumatra and Suriname. I experienced my environment as the purest. There was a Moluccan family, a Javanese, a Surinamese and a Sumatran family. I belonged to all four. I was, in fact, the centre.”

“I grew up with thirty cousins all around me. We lived together. Until I was 18, that was my world and the bedrock of my existence. We built a safe, autonomous zone. No one could tell us who we were. We could do whatever we wanted. To the outside world, certainly, we seemed to be a gang. I call it a family. A strong family. A society. A world within our current world.”

Stacii was 18 when Rotterdam photographer Kees Spruijt crossed his path – and it would turn out to be a life-changing meeting. “He was the photographer known for taking pictures of radical groups on the fringes of society,” he laughs, “that was us, too.”

Until that moment you had no idea about your own future.

“No, I didn’t even believe I had a future. At that age I was missing out on normal little things, like having a part-time job or hanging out with other young people. It wasn’t until I was 17 that I first visited the centre of my own city, Rotterdam.”

“We didn’t have the internet and for us the world was everything we could actually see with our own eyes. As a result, a very strong set of norms and values grew within me: loyalty, respect and reverence for where you come from. Not just respect for your environment, but also for your ancestors. Sincerity. We held on to those key values; they brought us together.”

But there was no social contact surrounding it?

“No, because we weren’t accepted very easily by the outside world. We weren’t allowed into any clubs. I couldn’t find a job. When my classmates were asked, ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’, I couldn’t think of any place where I would fit in.”

“I was completely absorbed by our culture and where we come from. My greatest inspiration is my ‘mixed’ grandmother. Of course, this was clouded by the shadow of colonisation, which led to a lot of protests at the time. I was proud of our culture and where we come from. I wanted to make a stand for that, but I couldn’t find an outlet. Except in resistance. I wasn’t lashing out against people but rather against the government. All that is 19 years ago now.”







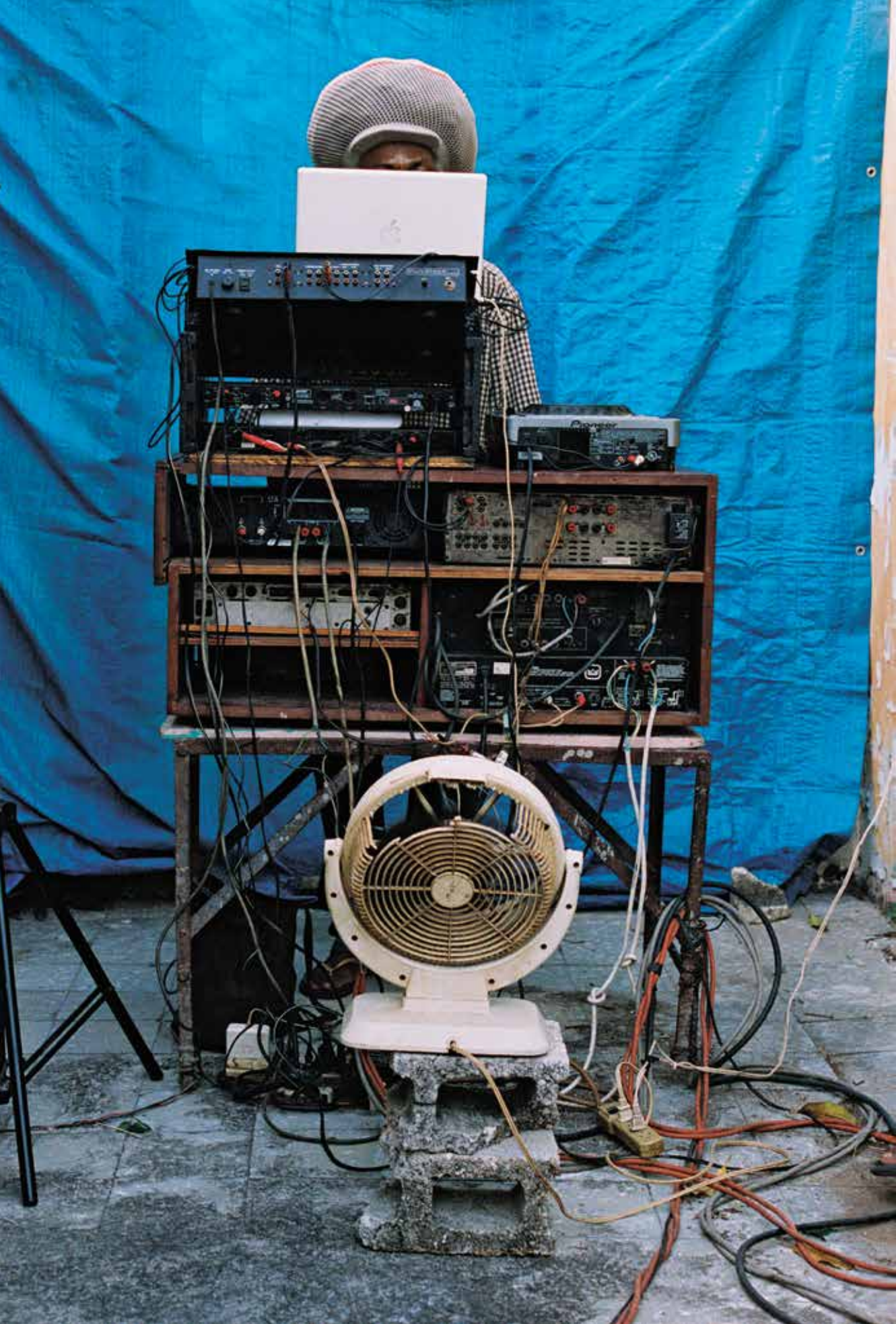




















CREATING A SHIFT
IN THE INDIVIDUAL AND
collective consciousness
by challenging our
perception AND RAISING
the voices of the unheard



COLOPHON

Photography

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