

# SOUL FOOD-FOR- THOUGHT:

The Real Roots of Liberation  
San Francisco Black History Month benefit  
entertains as it enlightens

by Mat Thomas

The modern vegan movement is no longer confined to potluck dinners and picket sign protests: it's now a growing cultural force whose message is reaching mainstream audiences and engaging new social constituencies. Case in point: the *Soul Food-For-Thought* benefit held at San Francisco's Herbst Theatre on February 12, 2010, presented by the International Fund For Africa (IFA), a non-profit organization dedicated to helping people and animals in countries where poverty and starvation wreak inconceivable havoc.

Produced by Bob Linden of Go Vegan Radio, which sponsored the evening's activities with The San Francisco Vegetarian Society (SFVS) and In Defense of Animals (IDA), this event drew over 500

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"This event has changed my life forever. Thank you for your powerful message. Many of us who were there that night have taken the next step to becoming completely vegan."

- Sandra K.

Soul Food - For - Thought  
The Real Roots  
of Liberation

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people from diverse racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds together for a night of fun and fellowship. The fabulous vegan food, affable celebrity hosts, stellar lineup of live performers, silent auction of tribal art, non-profit outreach tables, and transformative message of compassion aimed at African-Americans all helped make Soul Food-For-Thought a thoroughly unique celebration.

The evening started in Herbst Theatre's famous Green Room, one of the city's premiere party venues. Featuring breathtakingly elegant classical architecture, this expansive hall is graced with crystal chandeliers and a portico lined with stone columns overlooking City Hall's illuminated golden dome. Guests socialized here while enjoying a buffet of cuisine catered by some of the Bay Area's top vegan restaurants, including Golden Era, Golden Lotus, Loving Hut, Herbivore, and Souley Vegan.

The night's first act, the vegan Haitian-born singer-songwriter King Wawa and his Oneness Kingdom Band, laid down rocking Rasta grooves and got people dancing to tropical beats. Revelers carried this copasetic atmosphere downstairs to the theatre when it came time to officially start the show.

First up was comedian Leo Flowers, who warmed the crowd with vegan-themed humor, followed by celebrity vegan co-hosts Traci Bingham of Baywatch fame and NBA superstar John Salley, who warmly welcomed everyone to the event. Dr. Elliot Katz, founder and president of IFA, helped the co-hosts introduce his friends from the African dance troupe Fua Dia Congo, whom he has known for more than three decades. Their drumbeat-driven number, colorful traditional dress, and electrifying dance moves made for a truly awe-inspiring spectacle.

Next up was Dr. Anteneh Roba, Founder and President of IFA, who presented a lecture accompanied by a photo slideshow from his travels throughout Africa. Now a practicing physician

**"I'm now looking at animals in a totally new way. I never realized how much they suffer, so this is definitely going to affect the way I eat."**

- Diane B.



Left: Leo Flowers delivers laughs  
Below: The fiery rhythms of Fua Dia Congo  
Bottom: Co-host Traci Bingham with speaker Kenneth G. Williams



Photos by James McCaffry



in Houston, Dr. Roba was born in Ethiopia, and through IFA promotes holistic solutions to the inequities that plague both people and animals in developing nations today. Roba's emotionally moving talk ran the gamut from recounting his harrowing personal visit to a slave dungeon in Ghana to his grief at helplessly watching a newborn infant die in Addis Ababa for

lack of basic neonatal care facilities. Ultimately, he tied everything together by noting that humans cannot be free while enslaving other species.

The ambiance shifted when reggae band Midnight Sun took up their instruments and brought the crowd to its feet. What started with one young couple dancing at the front of the auditorium soon drew a bevy of dancers, then singer Milo Karobi brought them all up on stage. After intermission,

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Top: Reggae sensation Midnight Sun  
Above left: IFA founder and president, Dr. Anteneh Roba speaks  
Above right: PCRM's Dr. Milton Mills prescribes a vegan diet



Clockwise from top: King Wawa's stirring solo performance  
Baywatch star Traci Bingham enraptured by the entertainment  
IFA's Dr. Roba with Dr. Eliot Katz, IFA founder, president and co-sponsor  
Vegan NBA all-star John Salley and friend  
Midnight Sun singer Milo Karobi

**"I've never seen anything like this. This is going to inspire me to implement healthy and environmentally-sustainable eating at my day care."**

- Jane B.

## Origins of an Original Event

As unique as it was, one wonders how a production as soulful and thoughtful as *Soul Food-For-Thought* makes it to the stage, at a theatre as historic as San Francisco's Herbst for its debut.

When Ethiopian-born Houston emergency-room physician Dr. Anteneh Roba, founder of the International Fund for Africa, recently attended a vegetarian conference in Ghana, he was struck by the vitality of the African vegan movement, with young people on parade for good health and a healthy environment. Dr. Roba was also struck by the environmental devastation he saw in Africa because of climate change and America's appetite for

the burger - translating into water shortage, deforestation, desertification of once fertile land.

Equally horrifying on Dr. Roba's trip was seeing the dungeons where slaves were imprisoned before being shipped to the Americas. "Had I been in this very same place a few hundred years earlier," he thought, "I would be in chains. How awful! This shouldn't happen to anyone." And then the vision of today's slaughterhouses

and factory farms came to Dr. Roba's mind, similar thinking to the quote from Frederick Douglass when he said:

*"When purchased, my old master probably thought as little of my advent, as he would have thought of the addition of a single pig to his stock! Like a wild young working animal, I am to be broken to the yoke of a bitter and life-long bondage. Indeed, I now saw, in my situation, several points of similarity with that of the oxen. They were*

*property, so was I; they were to be broken, so was I."*

Dr. Roba further considered the health consequences of a diet of the enslaved, as he sees it in the form of heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, and obesity every day in his medical practice. He felt he had a message that needed to be heard.

Bob Linden, a friend of Dr. Roba, a radio host with a history of creating special events, shared Dr. Roba's vision and

designed *Soul Food-For-Thought* as the entertainment medium for very special messages for improved health in the African American community, environmental sustainability here and in Africa, and compassion and kindness for animals.

The International Fund for Africa presented, and was the beneficiary of *Soul Food-For-Thought*, supporting its work saving human babies, animals, and the environment in Africa.



Above: Soul and R&B legend Lenny Williams sings out for a "Tower Of Power"-ful message  
 Below Right: Searing guitarists D'Wayne Wiggins and Charles Spikes  
 Bottom: Celebrity co-hosts John Salley and Traci Bingham

King Wawa played a stirring acoustic rendition of his new tune "Haiti Will Rise Again," followed by vegan bodybuilder Kenneth Williams' introduction of Dr. Milton Mills from the Physician's Committee for Responsible Medicine. Dr. Mills delivered an impassioned and incisive history lesson about the origins of traditional American soul food, which he called "plantation food" because so much of it is made from animal parts (like pigs' feet and oxtail) that slave owners considered garbage — the epitome of "junk food" so to speak. Dr. Mills also emphasized the health hazards of meat-eating, and that pre-Colonial Africans ate a much more nutritious, virtually vegan diet.



Legendary soul man Lenny Williams closed the show with a sensational set of driving R&B classics from his Tower of Power and solo catalogs. From the opening number through the encore, Williams radiated a palpable charisma that matched his virtuosity as a singer and got people dancing in the aisles. The band was also joined onstage by D'Wayne Wiggins from Tony! Toni! Toné!

At evening's end, I thought that if more people could experience this kind of unique celebration, which brought individuals from different life experiences together for a worthy cause, the vegan community could build unprecedented cultural bridges between people of all races and dietary persuasions. Here, meat-eaters who came to be entertained also got to personally meet practicing vegans, get a taste of our lifestyle, and hear a powerful message of respect for all beings.

Racial and dietary dividing lines too often separate humans from one another and other species, but they seemed to blur on this special occasion. Hopefully, *Soul Food-For-Thought* will be the first of many such multicultural vegan events not only in the Bay Area, but across the country— and throughout the world.



"This was one of the most entertaining evenings I've ever experienced, anywhere, anytime. This was a world-class production."

- Menasse G.

