On embracing blocks as opportunities



Artist, musician, author, and improvisational performer JJJJJerome Ellis discusses the importance of patience, learning to let go, and fighting against instant culture.

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As told to Sammy Maine, 2580 words.

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What decisions led you to walking the creative path you're on today?

When I was in university, I encountered this quote from Joseph Campbell that said, "Follow your bliss." I found that very helpful at the time and some of the decisions that I have made towards this creative path have been a matter of following. Following not just what gives me bliss, which is so often making music, but also following my curiosities, following my intuition, following where I think there's maybe an opportunity to make money or make a living, and following other people who I admire. It's also about following my stutter; sometimes I think of it as a wild animal. The stutter to me knows so much, and I try to learn from it by following it.

An example of that would be in *The Clearing* both on the album and in the book. When making the album, I would record myself reading some of the text, and then I would stutter on certain words. Then when I would be working on the music to accompany it, I realized that the stutter chose to appear in certain places. So maybe this 15 seconds is a place in the music where there can be a shift of some kind, whether taking out an instrument, adding an instrument, changing the rhythm, or something. Those are the clearings.

The stutter is mainly out of my control. There are some things I can do to avoid it or mitigate it, but it's largely out of my control. Whereas for much of my life, it being out of my control was a great source of pain and still is in some cases. But I feel more comfortable embracing its unpredictability and just letting it take the lead. I sometimes think of it as riding a horse; where I have the reins and I can request the horse to stop or go in a different way, but obviously the horse is so much more powerful than me and the horse is in control. It's a negotiation.

I feel like so many of us are, not skeptical, just maybe hesitant to follow our intuition. Were there any practices that you've put in place to enable yourself to trust your intuition more?

When I was growing up, my mother would tell me about her experiences with her intuition. She would refer to listening to this voice that can speak very quietly, but if you practice listening to it, then you can eventually listen to this voice inside of you. She would also use the word clearance; she would say, "I don't have clearance about this," about a decision that she had to make.

I like thinking of a runway because the form of stutter that I usually speak with is called a block. So, I like thinking of clearance and blocks. My mom taught me a lot about how to notice if I don't feel clearance about something, if I do feel clearance about something, and how to listen to that voice. It was harder for me in the

past to even recognize when I needed more time or when I wanted more time and to feel confident enough to articulate that. That's an ongoing practice and it's allowing for more rhythms. I'm very drawn to polymeter in music and different musical practices of really studying polymeter and all that teaches me about how different rhythms and different time shapes can coexist and the way that makes a very particular and beautiful kind of music.

My friend James teaches me a lot about certain forms of drumming. Drumming from the Ewe people in West Africa; I think in Ghana and maybe elsewhere. They make drumming music where there are so many different kinds of meters existing at the same time. Listening to it is a portrait of how to allow for just different intuitions to exist at the same time too. So I think music and polymetric music really helps me listen to my intuition. And dissonance too. Just because something is dissonant, doesn't mean it's wrong or bad, which I feel is a truism when I say it but I really have to practice. I still find it very hard.

It's so interesting that there's the phrase creative block and that you've used your block stutter to be creative. Do you believe in creative blocks? Are there any practices you do to work through it?

It's very challenging working through it, but I think my stutter teaches me how to work through it. One of the things that it teaches me is when the block is happening, it presents an opportunity for another kind of encounter, another kind of beauty, and another kind of intimacy. The story that I often tell, and it's just one of many examples, but this one time I was at a Dinosaur Bar-B-Que in Brooklyn. I was in line and I went up to order my food. I got through my order, it's very busy, there's people lined up behind me and then the person asked me my name, and I block on my name. The person taking my order just stood there and waited so kindly, very gently. I felt so safe with them. I'm blocking, I'm blocking, and there's nothing coming out. At a certain point, they were like, "You can just tell me the first letter if you want." And I couldn't say that. So we just stood there, I don't know maybe 15, 30 seconds, and then I said my name, and then we went on. To me, it was so beautiful. Me and this person who I may never see again, whose name I do not know, we shared this interval of silence. It was just so beautiful and so intimate and so vulnerable. Vulnerable probably because other instances I have people will say, "Oh, did you forget your name?" Or they'll laugh. There are many ways that people react to me stuttering up my name, some of which have been very painful. With that particular interaction, the block enabled this specific exchange between the two of us that probably would not have happened if I didn't stutter my name.

The stutter creates this door to another thing, and I'm forced through the door. I can't control it. When I then try to bring that over to thinking about a creative block, it's like, "Well, what is happening right now in this creative block is hard." It's hard. And it creates a question: What alternate forms of beauty, intimacy, care are now possible because of this block? The block opens up a possibility, or it places me into unknowing.

I love this idea of creative block as a liminal space and so much of your work is centered around improvisation, but we live in a culture that is so instantaneous. How do you navigate improvisation along a system that relies so much on instant culture?

I feel like so much of the pain that I and other people who stutter experience in our stutters is tied to this instant culture and forms of patience and forms of listening. For so many years, my stutter felt like such a burden. I hated having to take all this time to speak. When I would visit restaurants in university and I had friends who were waiters, I'd be like, "Man, I can never be a waiter. Look at all the talking you have to do." I've worked as a librarian, shelving books. I've worked as a piano tuner, which requires very little talking and a translator for written documents. Now I'm a full-time artist and I'm much more comfortable in my stutter. When I was little, I wanted to be an actor, and I was like, "Well, I can't do that either," because you have to be up on the stage talking. I didn't know about all the different actors who stutter; Marilyn Monroe and James Earl Jones. And then when I later started doing theater and performance as an adult, that was a big part of my healing in my stutter.

One thing that really helps me is traditions of Black improvisation within jazz and free-styling in rap. I feel so much a part of the Black improvisational lineage. And to me, part of that lineage is Black dissent and Black refusal of certain practices around time. I learned so much of this in the research for *The Clearing* because I

was learning about plantation society in the United States and the different ways that the practices around time were allied to the domination of the enslaved, including that masters would sometimes forbid slaves from owning clocks or watches.

There was so much emphasis, of course, in different moments and different places on productivity and efficiency and the demands of capitalism. So when I think about this instant culture, I ask, what are the ways in which that instant culture is rooted in practices used and refined under slavery and slavery's afterlives, to use the historian Saidiya Hartman's phrase. Then I see Black improvisational practices as being in relation, and in very exceedingly complex relation, to practices of domination through time, using time as a way to dominate, again, under slavery and its afterlife. It reminds me of this quote from another historian, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, and he's talking about the Haitian Revolution. He says something like the revolution was so revolutionary that it could not even be articulated in advance of it happening. I think about that as, again, thinking of Black practices of refusal, and then further revolution, and what can be known in advance and what cannot.

It goes back to unknowing for me. Part of what I struggle with in different ways with our instant culture is that I want there to be space for unknowing, space to say, "I don't know," space to say, "I'm waiting," space to say "I'm working on it." For many years I wished that I could make myself speak sooner, but I simply cannot. And so having to do that in my own body is very difficult. What I want more space for is to extend the stutter to thinking about all kinds of things that happen in life. Maybe it's how I feel about a major decision I have to make about my job or my housing or something. Maybe that is stuttering, and maybe I need to wait.

When it comes to playing music, I'm so affected by the lights and by the crowd and the room and the environment and instead of approaching the music like I know everything in advance, or I know most things in advance and thus I can make them happen on command, what if I approach the music more empty handed and see what arises there? Sometimes it takes time. Sometimes it doesn't sound very good but then I'll stumble upon something that I have never played before and that stumbling upon it, again, reminds me of the Dinosaur Bar-B-Que encounter. I had this encounter with this person because the stutter brought us to a certain place.

As an improviser, do you believe in anything ever being finished?

I definitely believe in the unfinished. Whether I believe in anything being finished…I think my answer is both. I have a strong bent towards the unfinished and I really struggle with finishing things. At the same time, I do believe in a certain kind of limit. I think there are different ways a book can be finished and a performance being finished. With the performance, it feels like the water cycle; it's like a little rainstorm, but then the rain ends up in the rivers and back in the clouds and rains again. I would say both with my own work, but I think there are certain limits to things and maybe where things end in a certain way. But I also feel very much that it's all one thing that is just ongoing.

You've previously taught at Yale, so when you approach teaching, is there something that's the most important thing that you want to bring to your students?

I think both with children and adults, one of the things that's most important to me is freedom and play. When I was teaching the little kids, I would go to their house and I was teaching them all piano and with all of them, one of my main goals was forging a bond between music and joy, music and freedom, music and play. With one of my students, she really loved dancing and I started this practice at the end of lesson where she would pick a song to play on her phone, and then she would show me the different moves that she would do to it. That was so important for me as a way to end the lesson because I want her to understand that part of feeling good has to do with time spent with me and also at the piano. With another student we would sometimes go up to her playroom and play for half an hour. The lesson was half an hour and we'd go play for another half hour upstairs because to me, it's just as important in a music lesson. For me, playing the piano is just as important as playing with your piano teacher if I can do anything to help her feel joy in any connection with music.

With the adult students, the students at Yale, we would do a lot of improvisation. I would lead it a lot, "What do y'all want to learn? And if there's anything I can help with, we could do that." I just wanted to really so deeply resist the message that I think so many people receive, which is that music is a space of competition,

exclusion, perfection, virtuosity. I feel like it's so important to me to just do what I can to offer the opposite because I feel very lucky that I never had a piano teacher that made me feel bad or traumatized me. It's like music is our birthright, and there's so many forms of exclusion that are practiced in it. I feel very strongly that everybody should have access to music and all it has to offer. The messaging that in order to play music you have to have this kind of education, this training, this kind of background, this kind of instrument. I find those ways of thinking are very dangerous. Music is too valuable to be excluding people from. The world is so fucked up that, for me, I need as many sources of healing and freedom and pleasure as I can, and music has always offered so much healing, freedom and pleasure.

JJJJJerome Ellis Recommends:

Reading Ursula Le Guin's book *Always Coming Home*

Learning the names of my nonhuman neighbors (plants, animals, etc.).

Saying "You are divine and a child of light" to myself in the mirror.

Studying weaving with my teacher Bonnie Braithwaite at Coastal Virginia Weavers. Weaving a shawl for my best friend Luísa Black, the incredible manager of the Ryan Resilience Lab at the Elizabeth River Project here in Norfolk, VA!

Watching Cognitive behavioral therapist Katie d'Ath's YouTube series about OCD

Name
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Vocation
visual artist, musician, author, improvisational performer