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As told to Sammy Maine, 2560 words.

Tags: Music, Adversity, Inspiration, Independence.

On leaning into your limitations

Drummer, producer, and songwriter Kwudi discusses different forms of discipline, creating the right environment for artmaking, and how limitations can lead to our best work.

You grew up in a household that really embraced the arts. Did you have a particular role model in your family that steered you on your creative path?

As a career, I have no role models in my family around that. There's nobody that I grew up with that took it further than anything past a hobby. I was actually on track to be a veterinarian, or in particular a herpetologist, somebody who specializes in reptiles and amphibians. My mom teaches chemistry and physics and biology, and so scholastics were always first and foremost. I was in music classes in school, but it was because that's something that we had to do. As I was starting to choose colleges, I got offered a full scholarship to UC Berkeley for their animal sciences program. I remember sitting with my counselor and she asked me if I had ever thought about going to school for music. That was the decisive moment where it went from, "Oh, I'm in a high school band, I play music with my friends, I play drums on the back porch" to "Oh, it's go time!"

Why do you think she suggested that? Was it to do with your grades?

My grades in school were as perfect as they could be. My mom was the kind of mom where if I came home with an A instead of an A+, she'd tell me I was underperforming. It was less about the grades, and more about the intensity with which I played music. I was in jazz band, marching band, and concert band in high school. I also played in the community college big band, too. My counselor said, "You do this in times that you don't have to. If you're waking up to be in jazz band before school, maybe this means something more to you than an elective." The science was there, but I was choosing music on a very regular basis. I just didn't know that places like Berklee existed at the time. I graduated when I was 16 from high school, and I just hadn't thought about it. Nobody in my family had suggested it. We just knew that I had to go to college.

Do you still have a disciplined routine that you try to stick to?

I was lucky enough to be raised in a community where discipline was part of the craft. I grew up playing a bunch of different types of drums, djembe most specifically. It's a hand drum out of West Africa, and it really hurts to play. It causes blisters in your hand, it messes up your skin and makes it really hard. That was the first drum that I remember learning how to play and so from a really early age, there was this idea that to get good at the thing, there's going to be some kind of exchange, there's going to be some kind of process. With djembe, if you stop playing for long enough, your skin will get soft again and as it gets soft, the sound starts to change. It makes it more uncomfortable to play. So you actually have to keep playing* **to be able to keep playing*. That part wasn't even drilled in, it's just the reality of what the instrument is. You've got to play if the goal is to play. If the best is going to come from you, you have to create the environment in which that seed can grow.

That's a discipline that I've tried to carry over where a good portion of my time needs to be in a creative space, and it needs to be in creative thought. Now, what's difficult about me is that the ideas that are most exciting to me have come in moments where I've been relaxing or between one thing and another. I think that creating space for me to rest and recharge has been important for me to learn. I'm not one of those people who can come into the studio every day for eight hours and make something that feels good, but I am a person who can make sure my studio is set up at all times so that when I am ready to come in, I can get to it. It's the discipline of setting up a garden; you don't necessarily have to

tend to the plants every day, but the soil's got to be ready. The water's got to be ready. I try to make it so that that's part of my daily routine: I try to open myself up to myself every day and that definitely means giving up certain things. I have to make sure that I sleep well. I try to make sure that I take care of my body and my mind. I try to make sure that I'm in a healthy mental state as often as I can. That's the discipline. It doesn't really help me if I come into the studio for eight hours a day, seven days a week, but I make six hours worth of bullshit.

In June 2022, you were hit by a car while riding your motorcycle, and you suffered serious spinal cord injury. Did your approach to art making change after that?

Yes, for sure. What's been difficult for me to reconcile is that before my accident, I didn't really feel like I had a story that was worth telling. I really want to be an artist, but the artists that I look up to often were the most troubled. I wasn't a particularly troubled kid and I've been blessed with being pretty happy most of the time. I've had tough stuff happen in my life, but my brain has a hard time remembering it as tough stuff. It was weird with the accident because I was left with what felt like the minimal facility required to still make music in this current stage of technology. So I lost a lot of function in my hands and I don't have a function below the waist basically. I didn't lose my ability to speak or my ability to follow rhythm. That's been one of the crazy things, is with severe brain damage, which I'm lucky enough to have skirted, you can lose your ability to count and much less sing, much less express yourself, much less write. And it took me time to get back to writing, that was a weird thing. But I feel like I was left with just enough to get the ideas off. Again, with current technology, I have all this stuff set up in my studio where I had to learn how to wire it so that I could control everything from a computer keyboard instead of having to play it.

So everything that I've been making lately is all programmed note-by-note through MIDI. It's changed the way the music sounds a little bit to me, but I think that it has made it so that I'm left with the bread and butter, the bare minimum. I'm hoping that what's changed is that the potency of what I do has gotten better. Maybe the message is a little stronger simply because I have less to work with. And I think sometimes in art, the limitation is what makes it great, what you do with what you have. I'm sitting here and this is the first time literally in my entire life that I haven't been able to play a drum. The feeling rhythm in my body is different. This is the first time I can't move my legs, so moving to music is different to me, it comes through me differently. Trying to make sense of that has been the task.

I want to go back to what you said about people you looked up to who had troubles and you were striving for that in a weird way, and then this awful thing happened to you. I wonder how you feel about the idea of a tortured genius now that you've had this experience and you're on the other side of it.

If there is a tough pill to swallow, that's got to be the one. I'm not religious. I am spiritual. I grew up in a church. My dad's a preacher among other things and with my mom being a science teacher, we've always had this house of existential belonging and understanding met with hardcore science. I've found that I lived my life in between those two things. I believe that it's important that we pay attention to what's in front of us. We live in a physical world. I also believe that there's maybe something outside of us that's bigger than that's at play. I don't think that's a guy on a cloud, but I do think that there's an energy that we may not be able to understand. All that to say, it's crazy the way that you get handed what you ask for. One of the difficulties of being a happy person in a world where a lot of people are not happy, people don't feel you. When I show up someplace at the beginning of the day and people are like, "Man, I didn't get any sleep last night. My body hurts." I'm like, "I slept okay. I got up, went to the gym at 6:00, let's go." You know what I mean? And nobody wants to hear that fucking song but I would sit in my pursuit of being an artist that made people feel something. I would wish for something to talk about.

Then the accident happens, and I've had my first real bout with even dipping my toe into what depression would feel like because I never had to really battle with that before. What feeling like you're not in your own body might feel like, not sleeping well, not trusting things around you, being scared. A lot of my life and my joy exists in my privilege physically. I've always been a little bit bigger than most of the people around me, so I don't feel unsafe. I don't feel like I'm at risk ever. Now everything is a threat to me. It's a weird thing to wrestle with, but if I'm being honest with myself, this is exactly what I asked for. I asked for the story, and I know I didn't ask for it this way, but that's where the God stuff comes in. I think we get these answers in exactly the way that's going to work for us over the course of our life. And again, it's a tough pill to swallow that maybe what's going to bring me all of the things that I was looking for before is losing all of this. If that makes it so that I can support my family and put good music into the world, then maybe that's just the sacrifice that I was set up to have to pay. That's a hard truth but it's something that I might be able to get used to and find the value in the right doses.

I'm sure it took you a while to come around to that way of thinking about it.

When I was in my post-hospital therapy, my doctor said that patients who experience spinal cord injury are the happiest right after it because there's kind of this window in the first year or so when you're going to experience the most recovery along the process. If you're going to walk again, normally the signs show up. So when I first woke up right after the accident, they told me to wait six months before I made any kinds of decisions. Those were really happy six months comparatively, because every day is this new opportunity to move a toe again.

The problem is that as you go further away from that, it becomes less and less likely, and so you're

walking away from the thing you want every day. I came to the conclusion that it was going to be important to identify with these feelings because this is big, and maybe this is what I can use in my art. Maybe this is how I find community through people who have gone through some things that I've never been able to understand before. Now I do. As I've gotten further from the accident date, it's become more like, uh-oh, I might actually never walk again but I still have to try. I still go to physical therapy while recognizing the reality that it might not happen. When I think about the tortured artist part--the James Baldwins, Nina Simones, Amy Winehouse--it's like what they were looking for, might not happen in their lifetime. I think that as they dug deeper, it just became realer.

What have you found to be the most important resources to you as an artist now?

If this had happened 30 years ago, it would look totally different. I don't know if I'd be able to make music. Being able to set up my laptop and have actual hardware instruments be triggered by clicking buttons is cool. The coolest thing for me is the combination of digging into instruments in a way that I didn't have to before. And also, the internet is tight for that. It's cool to be able to ask very detailed questions, and through forums, somebody possibly shows up and figures out those answers. There's one tool, called Vochlea Dubler 2, and it allows you to sing into a microphone which then translates to MIDI notes. That's pretty cool because that didn't exist when I started making beats.

What is the most exciting part of this new path that you're on?

The timing of it. I've never been great with cultural timing. I feel like people, especially in music, have had terrible music shoved down their throats, and by no fault of the artist in my opinion, because people are trying to survive. You're going to do what you think is going to sell. I wish that weren't the case. I blame the system of it, the "industry," and I think that because people have been fed so much art without nutritional value, they now want something that's going to give them something to move through the difficulty of the rest of their life with. There's music that's fake in every genre, there's music that's real in every genre. I'm lucky enough to have come around to this experience in a time where people want something to bite into. I'm hoping that I can do my part in giving people that, in giving people an honest and real representation of what one person believes should exist in the world. Here is human emotion, here is a human trying.

Kwudi Recommends:

Good bread and good butter

Dialectical thought: The practice of holding opposing thoughts/perspectives in your mind and accepting the validity of all of them

Mushrooms with someone you love

You should have to kill for a meal one time or stop eating meat

Figuring out what you like and why you like it, then making zero excuses about them (and accepting the consequences)

Name

Kwudi

Vocation

drummer, producer, and songwriter

Fact

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