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As told to Max Freedman, 2808 words.

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On learning about yourself from your community

Musician and organizer Sam Rise discusses music as the power of the people and how our environments shape our creations. Can you talk about why you quit your day job to focus fully on your music?

We were coming out of the pandemic, and at the time, I was one of the co-directors of [Girls Rock Philly], a nonprofit music mentoring organization for girls, trans youth, women, and transgender-expansive adults. We'd cleared the lockdown iteration of the pandemic. I poured a lot of energy into that work, into the community that made the work magic, but there was this sort of noticing in me of a moment of departure.

Over the course of the same timeframe, from the beginning of lockdown, I was carting around a rolling speaker and a microphone and playing songs to people coming out of their windows so we could do karaoke where people were singing from their homes. Music in the street, in a way that we could still be connected to each other, that same rolling speaker became this tool in this moment of uprising where it was like, we need every megaphone, every way to amplify ourselves, not just to chant and demand justice, but to sing together and remember ourselves in a really powerful musical moment. I think a lot of artists found ourselves in a position of actually really remembering how essential our work is. What it is to stitch people together, have the tools to honor our grief, transition, imagine new ways forward.

After a couple of years trying to hold both those spaces—the nonprofit element, and getting engaged in a more concentrated way in direct organizing in Philly—I just felt like there were lots of ways I could commit and contribute support to the world. It felt like time to pursue all the tools I have that I'd been putting on the back burner as someone who always wanted to be a performer but sort of [found my way] through all these other paths. I'm delighted in this window to be saying yes to art and yes to music. And it seems to be saying yes to me, which is the magic feedback that makes me want to keep moving.

I'm curious to hear more about it saying yes to you, because I talk to musicians pretty often, and it seems difficult to make a living off a career in performing.

Local artists and local creatives are local businesses. Local musicians are local businesses. It's strange to me that we're always having to justify or fight for the resources we need when I don't know how we'd make it through impossible moments without art and music. It's something we've commodified or relegated to buying when it should be integral to everything we do.

I was so nervous about trying to work full-time as an artist because it had been years since I'd done that, not since after college, but it's been pretty amazing. Within a year of committing to making music full-time, I was accepted into this fellowship program, the Black Opry Residency, which was such a delight—specifically the amplification and reinforcement that Black Americana, country, roots, and folk music must be amplified, centered, and resourced. That I got to be part of that pilot here in Philly was such a gift and a delight.

Some of these projects combine more off-the-wall, wildly imaginative thinking alongside social justice issues, like work with the Bearded Ladies Cabaret and its Cabaret on Ice, what we did at the beginning of the year, talking about climate change, but making music while doing that skating in February when it was 80 degrees outside. That work has been really resourced and has been resourcing me, which is wonderful.

Most recently, being nominated and awarded a Pew Fellowship...in a moment where 12 people are chosen from a city with such rich and vibrant arts culture as Philly, to be one of those people is pretty extraordinary. I have a lot of complicated feelings around institutions and how philanthropy works, but I also feel really grateful for the opportunity to have been nominated by my community and be part of such a beautiful constellation of creatives. That resource doesn't have to go to a project. It can just be to make sure that I'm cared for while I'm trying to make the work I want to, which is no small thing.

It's so difficult to center and prioritize the vision and hope we have for the world as creatives when you're also trying to make ends meet, when your attention is stretched in different directions. Everyone has a benevolent side hustle. We're all working on each other's projects and passing around the same \$20 bill at shows and readings. I want to keep working for and advocating for a world where artists are fully funded as a city service, as a resource.

When you're in community with other creatives, having a fellowship where you can just nurture your creativity, how does it shape your creative process?

With the Opry residency, we lived together for a week here in Philly, so it was a home game for me, but everyone else was coming from different parts of the country. We also met online for months in advance. Getting to check out each other's music and talking to different music industry professionals about what resources were available to us was really interesting. Connecting with people who we don't have perfectly overlapping, homogenous stories, but there's power in the places where we overlap. Being able to connect with each other, whether through things we're celebrating or challenges we're navigating, is a really beautiful opportunity. Each of us had a different stake, a different style, or a different approach.

Being able to hold different facets of the same gem was a beautiful opportunity and a challenge because I used to write my music in secret. I love performing, but I studied jazz music, and I performed with bands as a collaborative piece. It wasn't until the end of college, in my early 20s, that I had an opportunity to perform my original music with a band. I'd written it, but I never really shared it. A friend of mine was like, "We should play a co-bill. We'll have the same band and we'll feature our songs." It was the first opportunity I'd ever had to play my music, and those musicians sort of became my band. I write and arrange for the musicians that I work with, but I rarely accompany myself.

In the Black Opry tradition, a lot of the time when you're performing, it's in writer's rounds where, sometimes, people have an accompanist behind them, but on the whole, the artists are accompanying themselves. While I'm used to writing or practicing guitar at home, or making a little video here and there, holding myself up and supporting myself in a community project was a really tall order. I was pretty nervous and scared about it.

It was so beautiful to have this year of putting my weight down in my music, really resting into what I can do, where I support other projects and practices. With something like the Black Opry Residency, you've got to have a practice of trusting yourself. I learned a lot in that window of time about what that would look like.

As we talk about creative environments, I wonder: You've lived in Philly, Wisconsin, Wyoming, all kinds of places. How has your location shaped your creative process?

I'm definitely a product of my environment. I love to learn, notice, and listen deeply to the places where I am. I talk about songwriting more as song-catching. Just having a practice of noticing, awareness, or presencing means things arrive, want to be known by you, and want to be shared with other people. Plenty of practice goes into that process. Being prepared to hold or articulate something is skill-building. Most of the places where I've lived have absolutely shaped and informed the direction my music has taken.

I first moved to Philadelphia to study music from Wisconsin. The city radicalized and surprised me. The fingerprint of Philadelphia jazz, but also Philadelphia organizing and mutual aid, is really interesting. The participatory, collaborative devising that happens in this city is so unique. It really resonated with me as someone who longs to collaborate. There are people interested in being singular artists and having a team that articulates their vision. For me, it's much more about, how can I create a conversation that's improvisatory, or that we're moving through together, these different elements that are set out for us to explore.

Wyoming puts the fear of god in you. It's pristine wilderness but culturally so different from anywhere I've ever been, especially during the time I lived there, which was the run-up to the 2016 presidential election as a Brown queer person and partner to a white man. I was watching what was happening in Ferguson, Missouri and in New York, the advent of the Black Lives Matter movement, and I was feeling really isolated and [then] recognizing that's not ever actually true. What is it to amplify and name what liberation looks like wherever you are?

There was a little bit of musical isolation in that place. There's a really small committed community of songwriters and artists. There was a scene that existed there, but it was different than institutionalized jazz on the East Coast. You have to make your own fun. You find the songs that everybody knows or the three chords that everybody knows, you learn each other's music, and you hold each other up. That really fed the part of me that [wanted] to find my way into folk music and Americana. I don't think I would've connected as deeply as I do with country music if I hadn't lived in Wyoming. I don't think I would've found my place inside that music if I hadn't had to make my own fun, set up a gig, or play these different venues.

Everywhere I go, I gather a little piece of that place. It gets integrated into what I'm making. I always learn a lot about a city by the songs I write about that place. Even the music I'm writing right now in Philly is so different than the music I was writing when I first moved here as an 18-year-old.

A recurring thread here is social change, and I knew you as an organizer before I knew that you make music. How does your creative work power your political work, and how do you think creativity can power political movements?

When I think about the lineages I want to study and be a continuation of, whether it's social justice organizing, direct action organizing, mutual aid, radical resistance, Black feminist legacies, and the musical traditions that I love—jazz music, avant-garde, folk, country music—all those things are bound to each other [via] the ways that relationships organize us inside those worlds. They've always fed each other.

Toni Cade Bambara said that the work of the artist is to make revolution irresistible. Many other teachers in various phrasings have said music is our birthright. It belongs to us. It's one of the primary tools we have for connecting to each other. It's not something that's the icing. It's our bread and butter. It's the everyday thing we need, or the rice and beans. It's a staple. The more urgently I felt the need to participate in world-building through relationship-building and community organizing, the more powerfully I felt the need to make music to sing together.

In 2020, one of the most powerful moments I can remember [happened] in the housing encampment on the Ben Franklin Parkway when police had scheduled a sweep of the camp. This would happen all the time, where they would call a sweep and everyone would mobilize to protect that space. There was a tense, almost frenetic energy of fear. To the surprise of no one, the [cops] had shown up as puffed up as they could get. But we sang and chanted together. The feeling of connection...we found with each other [created a] literal, but also figurative, resonance and harmony. Everyone in that space felt unstoppable.

When we make music together in a fraught time, we say we're not disposable to one another. We'll move through our anger, we'll move through our grief, we'll move with our joy. We'll honor it all. The more my heart breaks inside the world and in relationship to the great unraveling that we're seeing right now, there's also this demand to bring our art, our radical imaginations, to it. That's the one tool that I have, but it's a powerful one. It's one that works. It's hard for me to imagine a world without it.

Sometimes, in my mind, when I'm practicing music or writing or feeling nervous about accompanying myself on an instrument...there's this little voice in my head that says, no one wants to hear that. The self-saboteur. Everybody's got that imposter or self-deprecating thing, but I feel like it's loudest when it's the most important. When I can quiet that voice or not let it drive the bus, those are sort of the watershed moments when I find the most connection with a broader community.

A lot of voices would like us to think that business as usual will have to suffice. No one wants to hear that. "We want troubleshooters, not troublemakers." Creatives are born to trouble everything, rattle things, or point to something different. I'm just so compelled to that.

Circling back to when you worked at Girls Rock Philly, what have you gained for your creative process from teaching others?

I learned more there than I taught there, and I think that's true of any interaction with young people. The young are at the gates. It's our responsibility to build a world worthy of them, not the other way around. Creating spaces that are youth-centered instead of youth services where it's like, I'm here to fix you, or I'm here to shape or mold you, is what the world needs. [Young people have] the brightest ideas with the capacity to imagine and the energy.

[At Girls Rock Philly], I was a glorified keyholder. I opened the door, I got pizza, I watched [the kids] do incredible things and made sure they had the resources to do it, and I was always in the front row cheering them on as loudly as I could. They also taught me about my transness. They taught me more about my queerness than I knew.

By holding the door open for people who knew themselves and knew that centering their curiosity was the most important thing they could do, by modeling behavior and action that made the most room for them, I ended up carving out space for myself. I think that's something the world really needs. We're so convinced as we get more calcified in our ways of being and seeing that marginalized voices are on the periphery because they're nonessential. It couldn't be further from the truth. When we bring those voices and those perspectives into the center we imagine a world where all of us have everything we need.

From a musical perspective, young people are the most fearless, the most creative. They're not afraid of feedback or breaking things. They're figuring it out. They're going to play the drum as hard as they can or strum as loud as they can. If a string breaks, we cheer.

I spent so much of my life trying not to have needs and trying to get it right so that there'd never be a reason not to keep me in the fold. We all lose a lot of time in learning ourselves and how we can care for each other when we're afraid of messing up. Our capacity-building happens when we make mistakes, so creatively, I'm more of a risk-taker.

I think there's a road away from pursuing my own music that would've been possible if I hadn't had that infusion of connection with young people in that program. They're everything. Those are my mentors.

Sam Rise Recommends:

Reading "The Decision," by Jane Hirshfield

Building friendships with people who are at least 20 years older and 20 years younger than you

Listening to Bernice Johnson Reagon's album Give Your Hands to Struggle

Seeking out-and seeing in person-the art of El Anatsui

Make touching the Earth a daily practice.

Bonus rec: Making really delicious cookie dough in a big batch on a day when you have the energy...freeze

some to have on hand for the days when you don't.

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