On understanding what inspires you

Trans singer/songwriter ANJIMILE on music as spiritual transcendence, his journey of self-actualization, how his songs write him, and simply being happy to be alive.

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As told to Laura Feinstein, 2406 words.

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Can you tell us a bit about what inspires your work?

I'm realizing that probably the biggest inspiration is my sense of spirituality. I feel like it informs everything in my life, and thus, my musical experiences, and my musical output. I'm basically a hippie. [*laughs*] But, based on my life experiences of being alive, remaining alive in situations where I could have and should have died, and not only remaining alive, but thriving, as an individual, and as a member of the various communities I'm a part of, I feel very supported and held by the Universe. I feel a lot of gratitude for the fact that I'm alive. It's something that I think about and feel a lot.

And that flows into your songwriting?

When I write, I always write songs at moments of intense feeling. I would describe my songwriting process as spiritual because it almost feels like I'm not even there. Like I am dialing into a radio station—Radio Milky Way?—and turning the knob till I hear something. And then translating this sound into something like human music. It almost feels incorrect to say "I write." It feels like, with songwriting, I am being written. Which can be interesting and also uncomfortable, because my songwriting process tends to reveal emotions that I was not so aware of and hammers home things that I have not been willing to face yet, or that I have been feeling and haven't been honest with myself about.

Can you elaborate?

There's a song on the record called "Baby No More," and it is a breakup song. Yet, I wrote this breakup song when I was still in a relationship. I remember thinking, "shit, I think I need to break up with this person," because I am not being a good partner and I don't think I should be in a relationship right now. I'm not taking care of myself and I'm definitely not taking care of my partner.

You mentioned that you have survived things that might have killed you. Were those specific events, or the mundane everyday things that almost kill us all?

I would probably say both. But my sobriety has a lot to do with my being grateful for being alive. I'm four and half years sober. When I was in active addiction, I behaved in really unsafe ways, also struggling mentally and emotionally with the will to live. And it's wild to me that I just don't feel that way anymore. I engaged in a lot of risky behaviors. Drank a lot of alcohol. Between that and withdrawals, which in recovery can also kill you

if you're not medically watched over, I feel like I dodged a hundred bullets. But it's not out of virtue. I didn't get sober out of virtue. I got sober because I felt like shit and then one day I just felt the most like shit. I hit rock bottom. And I'm supremely grateful that happened. Otherwise, I would still be drinking and feeling sick.

I've heard of the clarity and power of sobriety described as a "superpower."

I definitely would not call it a superpower. But I can see where they're coming from. It has absolutely afforded me never-before-experienced clarity. My recovery process has evolved into a 12-step program of basically learning to take responsibility for my actions as an adult human. And that's been a huge reason for my clarity.

Do you sit down to *create* music or sit down when you *need* to create music?

It can be both, because I'll sit down and practice guitar and after doing warm-ups I'll start playing random shit. And then sometimes that's the song! And I know I'm songwriting. Or, sometimes, I'll have a melody that just pops into my head and will just start songwriting like that.

It pushes the ideas forward?

Definitely. Once I have "it," and I'm playing a guitar riff that I think is kind of cool, even for a second, I will sit down and write. And then I'll pull out my phone and immediately start recording. I have a very short-term memory. A lot of times when I'm playing, and creating, it's very spontaneous, and I don't have the capacity to recall something I've said just 10 seconds ago unless I'm recording it. As soon as I hear it, even one note, or riff that sounds remotely interesting, I'm like "shit, this could be a song!" And I turn on the voice memo and then it's off to the races.

So much has happened over the last year. Have you been inspired by the social movements taking hold?

Yes, I have found myself personally inspired. I started writing protest songs for the first time last summer, and over a four day period in June I wrote four songs in four days. It was really cathartic and also painful. I would say more so than usual. It was exhausting. In a lot of my new songs there's grief. I have a big old Soundcloud playlist of my demos over the past year or so and I would describe them as strange. There's a lot of anger and grief in a way that feels biblical. And there's a lot of literal biblical references. I've been inspired by the protests and BLM entering the white consciousness. It's definitely showing up in my songs.

Some say it's impossible for the personal to not be political. Do you find that that's true?

Yes. Absolutely. A lot of my strongest feelings revolve around the various amounts of pain, and or joy, and or grief I feel about aspects of my intersectionality. Whereas, previously, they were just the pain and grief of racism or the joy of celebrating my Blackness and the pain and grief of experiencing homophobia from my parents, versus the joy of learning to accept myself. So, whether I like it or not, it all comes out.

Are there any songs you point to as a beacon?

I would say the song "Giver Taker" is probably the one that means the most to me. It's a eulogy for a person I didn't even know that well. Who passed away very suddenly. In the brief, few interactions I had with them, she was the kindest, warmest human. And then she was gone. So I wrote that song because of a wealth of unexpected feelings of gratitude and sorrow.

My parents are religious. I am not, but I've spent a lot of time in the bible and the concept of the lord giveth and the lord taketh away. I think about the grief of loss, the divinity of love that precipitates that loss for grief to exist. I think that all emotions are important. It's that simple to me, and that's something that has taken a long time to recognize. It's okay to feel like shit, and it's okay to just accept that feeling and sit with it and recognize that it's part of the spectrum of human emotions. And it will pass just like joy will pass. Just like love will pass.

When people connect to your music do you feel like they're in that struggle with you?

Honestly, I'm still at a point of being really surprised that people give a shit about this music. I've been releasing stuff DIY in Boston and learning about myself, my sound, I'm just not used to such an overwhelmingly positive response. There's still a part of me that's incredulous. But it's lovely. That represents a human-to-human connection even if we don't know each other.

The Boston music scene, at least the Boston I remember from the early aughts, wasn't exactly diverse. Did that pose any issues?

Boston is really segregated. I came to the city to study at Northeastern and there's a train station on the edge of the campus. On the other side of the train station is Roxbury, where all the Black people live. I remember being told when I was a freshman "just be careful in Roxbury, it's dangerous there." Boston is so segregated I didn't even realize there were black people here until I left the Northeastern bubble and started engaging with the community.

But I came up in DIY and folk adjacent scenes. I played in an indie rock band for a while and was trying an indie rock sound. When I initially started playing live, I spent a lot of time navigating what my style was. I went to a bunch of basement shows back in the day, when I was still in college, and the scene was whiter. At first, I was just really excited to be a part of it, and then eventually I was like "everybody is white" and started distancing myself. But I went to rehab in 2016 and when I came back in 2017, the scene was shifting towards inclusivity in a way that I'd never seen before. So it was like "okay, alright, I can be in this space!"

How has the scene changed?

I found it to be more inclusive in terms of the local blogs and magazines expanding outside the narrow definition of what indie rock is, after recognizing that it unilaterally excludes people of color. What I see now is local blogs and venues booking black and hip hop artists, and indie blogs covering hip hop artists like Brandy Shades, Billy Dean Thomas, Cliff Notes. Black artists who have been grinding for a while on the outskirts of DIY, most of whom are native to Boston. Oompa, in my opinion, has the best band in the city, and I feel like White Boston is finally recognizing it. She sold out some huge venues, and people have been throwing respect on her name for the past couple of years, as they should be. Just recognizing that the scene, or, rather, the leaders of the scene who control the local press, are making an effort, a concerted effort, to be less racist.

What excites you now?

Putting out this album. That feels very self-serving to say, but working with Father/Daughter has been a bright spot of stability throughout this entire shitshow. I've felt a lot of support from the entity that is Father/Daughter Records. These songs mean a lot to me. To finally be able to get some recordings out of these tunes, get them sounding so much lovelier than I ever could have imagined, and getting to share that with other humans, especially with other black, queer and trans people.

How have your experiences molding your own identity changed how you view the world?

When I was growing up in Texas in the suburbs of Dallas I didn't understand anything about oppression. Or racism, or classicism. The older I got, I recognized the ways in which I was different from my peers—as a Black person, and later as a queer person—and then finally recognizing that these were oppressed identities. There was a lot of anger in my late teens, feeling furious that I was being othered by white supremacy. The difference now is that I have made a conscious effort to celebrate my intersectional identity and my Blackness and queerness.

I recently came out to my parents as trans. I was terrified because coming out to them as a lesbian 10 years ago was already a difficult experience! But I thought, "Well! I have this record, and the press release says I'm trans. I'm going to tell them so they don't find out, like, from Stereogum or whatever." When I came out, my dad was like "Hey! Congratulations! This just confirms what I already knew. I'm really proud of you and you can come

home any time.” I was not expecting that. I had written a 7-page letter and sent it in the mail. I was processing this with my therapist for months. And then he just sent the kindest, most compassionate, most gentle email. It hammered home the fact that I wasn’t telling them so they would accept me, I was telling them to let them know, because I accept myself. I love my queerness. I love being trans. It’s dope! So that acceptance was just the icing on the cake.

Listening to your song, “Maker,” I wondered—did your transition make you feel like you could be more than just your body?

It’s funny, when I wrote that song I did not yet identify as trans-masculine. I hadn’t begun transitioning. I was just realizing that I was maybe not a lesbian. Maybe not a girl. And had been identifying as non-binary. And that was another song I wrote that was very elucidating in retrospect. When I wrote it, I wasn’t thinking of, literally, the christian god. But I do believe that all humans possess divinity. That I am a spiritual being having a human experience, not the other way around. And diving into my acceptance of my gender and of my sexuality and queerness really made me feel like that spiritual being, sacred and divine. A spiritual person having a human experience.

A lot of us can struggle with identity. The sense that you’ve been plunked into a situation that isn’t necessarily what feels truest. What would you say to your younger self?

I would tell young Anjimile “I love you, and it’s going to be okay.” Because something that did *not* feel okay growing up was high school. High school sucked, but I was able to leave that and go to Boston and have some freedom and I know for a fact younger me would be like, “*fuck you!!*” But I would still say it. With love.

Anjimile recommends:

Akira–I recently watched this film for the first time and I was absolutely blown away. I will never be the same.

Lindsay Ellis’ YouTube channel, specifically her most recent two-part series on wolf porn litigation and digital copyright law. It’s incredibly entertaining.

Hugging a nice, tall, sturdy tree every now and again. It’s good for the soul.

Meditation always helps me access my inner stillness, if only for a few moments at a time.

Drink water. If you’re thirsty, you’re already dehydrated.

I got a SAD lamp last year and it’s been really helpful for me during the dark fall & winter months.

Name
Anjimile Chithambo

Vocation
Musician

Kannetha Brown