

On why honesty is essential to creative work

Musician and producer Barteess Strange discusses believing in yourself, building a team you can trust, and the joy of walking a different path.

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As told to Sammy Maine, 2831 words.

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You come from a military family, and you've moved around a lot in your life. How does place figure into your creative language?

There are a lot of things I write that I know where they came from and when I play the song I feel like I can go there. For example, "[Boomer](#)" is about two different places physically in my life. The first part of the song is representative of Brooklyn, when I was experiencing this new freedom of living in a Black community and feeling very supported as a Black person. And I felt really safe. Oh my god, I could be wherever I wanted to be! And the back half of "Boomer," sonically, is referencing how I grew up. It's a very rootsy, country, down home comfortable feeling, where you can be comfortable in your house, not outside. So that song is two places put into one song.

Do you feel like you have to be in a specific place mentally or physically to create?

No. I think that's a gift of moving around a lot. You can go home in your mind. And I feel like, for me, I'm very good at that. Wherever I'm at, I can always find a place in my mind where I can be comfortable.

Growing up in Oklahoma, you were one of the only Black families there, and then moving to Brooklyn you found a community. You've described your song "[Hennessy](#)" as trying to go against the stereotypes that have been put upon you. You wrote it 20 years ago, so is there anything you wish you had told yourself when you were younger?

Yes. The thing I would say to myself is, "You're not strange. You're a pretty normal person." I just thought I was weird because I was the only one that looked like me, that liked as many things as I liked. I liked everything the white kids liked, but I liked a lot of other stuff too. There just wasn't a lot of people for me to relate to, so I always felt like I stood out. But in reality, when I moved to the East Coast, I realized I didn't really stick out, and that was a really cool thing. In the same breath though, because of my experience growing up in Oklahoma, I had something that the people on the East Coast didn't have, so I had another experience to pull from. So I would just tell my younger self, "You're not weird, dude. You're fine. Just hang in there."

Did figuring out that you weren't as strange as you thought you were alter your creativity in any way?

When I met other Black people that were creative and driven and had vision for their art and were doing it, it made me want to do it more. Realizing that I was a part of a crew or a movement of people empowered me. But because I was in Brooklyn, I knew I wasn't going to stand out. I didn't have the money or the time, and I always feel like you need one or the other. If you have both, incredible, but I needed to move somewhere where I had time. That's why I moved back to DC because there were a lot of punk bands sliding out of NYU and they had a lot

of money and a lot of facilities. I was working a full-time job, my rent was \$2,450 plus utilities, plus the train, the credit card. I couldn't financially or mentally do it there. I needed to move somewhere where I could zone in. I realized I had to stop spreading myself so thin.

You work with so many people and you also played football in college. Did that experience help you to figure out who would be a good collaborator?

I've always been a team-oriented person. I think in the beginning because I didn't really believe in myself, I always thought I couldn't possibly have the answers and I needed smarter people around. I also really enjoy learning from other people, and I don't really like being the front person. I'm most comfortable being a utility player and adding value. I used to work in the political space and one thing I did learn from working and leading campaigns was how to build a winning team but also when to recognize weaknesses in yourself and the team you've built. The shitty thing about being part of the democratic process in a band is that you need other people's buy-in to make a decision, but I didn't want that. I wanted to be able to make the decision when the time came and once I figured that out, I knew I could build a team that will help me to have a career in music.

All of those experiences seem to have poured into the way you work today.

I'm really grateful for them because it has allowed me to be nimble. And I've hired, and I've fired, and I've won, and I've lost many, many times. I know what I work with and what I don't. Now, I think I know what it takes to win. There's something that we talk about in organizing a lot where it's like, "If you win, who's at the table? Now work backwards." It's thinking about who's there when you win. Start there, one at a time.

You're such a prolific writer and I feel like you're always working on something new. There doesn't seem to be a moment when you're just chilling. How do you know when an idea is worth exploring or when it's time to stop working on something?

I chill by working on these things. It's how I release, and it's relaxing to me, and that's how I've always been. I know something is worth exploring when it makes me curious or excited, or if I'm calling Graham (Richman) and I'm like, "Listen to this, isn't this cool?" That's when I know, and that doesn't mean I need to finish it, but it does mean I should keep poking the bear. Some of my songs come together really quick, but a lot is just me poking the bear over a long period of time.

Does your process differ when you're writing for yourself versus when you're writing or producing for someone else?

It's very different. I'm a little more loose and a lot more forgiving with other people. I'm way harder on myself. I try more things with other people and I'm a little less risky alone. I feel like other artists' visions have been really fun tapestries for me to just put something into and see how it plays with the rest of what they do, and it always gives me another idea for my own stuff. So production work is a big part of my personal process of making music big time.

How do you edit your work when there's so much of it being made?

Rarely do I feel like I have everything I need to finish. If I did something alone, I'm skeptical if no one else has touched it. I'm already like, "Am I good enough to do what I just did? I like it, but maybe I'm wrong." I'll take it to the people in my creative world and ask them what they think of it. At that point, one of two things will happen. I'll be like, "Fuck y'all, you don't know what you're talking about," and that's when I know it's done.

Well, maybe it's just a case of needing someone to say something like that in order to be more cemented in your own opinion. If you feel like you have to defend it, then it's done, and it's good.

Yes, I need to test it. That's actually something I use with Graham (Richman) and Chris (Connors) all the time

because I'm like, "I've written this song, but I want to strength test it. Let's keep writing. I think it's done, but let's throw more at it." I write pretty quickly, and I always have a lot of things recorded and ready, so I feel like I always have time. I'm never up against the clock. There's never a label that's like, "Where's the record?" I'm always really early, so I've got time to play.

Were you always early even when you had a day job?

Yes. I grew up a classic Black kid. You've got to be 10 times smarter, 10 times faster, always ready, always prepared, excellent always. That's not good or healthy, and it's no way to grow up, but it's definitely a reality of my existence now. I don't know if that's the driving force behind why I create as much as I do, but I feel safe in it. I definitely feel very prepared when I go into those meetings, and I'm like, "Oh, I've got 85 songs. I'm not like these other people you work with," and that's something I'm proud of.

You've previously said that as a military brat, you molded yourself to whoever you found yourself around in order to fit in. That's definitely not the case now but how do you steer away from doing that in an industry that tries to put everyone in a neat little box?

It's so fucking hard. Still, I think my instinct is to fit in, but I stop myself because I hate what I make when I do that. But I still feel so much pressure because I still feel like I'm the only one; I'm in a world of musicians where they can all work together, and then there's me. I'm not like them. I was talking to someone about this the other day where I realized that my journey is just going to be different than others because I'm not writing sad love songs, and I'm not a part of that thing. I would like to make hopeful, exciting, dynamic music that's honest to my life and what I've experienced. I'm not going to sound like Phoebe or Lucy or Courtney or any of those people. Don't get me wrong, I love their music, but even after being around them and touring with them and seeing their fans, I realized I'm not like them. My journey will be different. I didn't do all that work to get here and become the thing I see on TV, which is literally what "Wretched" is all about.

What does your curiosity look like?

I'm naturally curious. I'm very interested in people to the point where I can become consumed by individuals and want to know everything about them. I can become very attached to people and I feel like because I was in the military, I developed a way of being where I could meet people and get so much from them. When I was younger, I was fascinated with adulthood and how to be an adult, how to be a gay adult, how to be a straight adult, how to be an adult that's a swinger, how to be one that travels for their living, how to be an engineer. I was just like, "Whoa. You can live in so many ways. All of them seem fine. All at once even." I'm curious about every aspect of life and how people lead their lives. I think I was looking for an excuse to choose a life that was different from the one that I felt like I needed to choose. I realized a lot of people weren't my parents which was what I wanted. I love my parents, but I knew I didn't want to live my life like my parents. Then as I got older, I think that kind of changed in a way, but I still feel like I meet people that I fall in love with and I want to know everything about them.

Do you have any habits that you have to fight against in order to get work done and how do you do that?

Honesty is a crooked bone. It is something that you can write without, but you're not writing unless you are using it. You can do a lot without being honest, but at a certain point, you have to be honest. Especially when you think about singing a song every night for years. You're going to want to mean it. I know how to write music, I can write without being honest and it's so easy to lean on that and just make a record that way. So, I think it's an easy habit. It's like not wanting to have a therapist. It's easy to not want to have a therapist or to not want to improve. It's easy to just live life and make excuses for how things are. You know, not everybody's making changes, so why should you? There's enough evidence to support that. But deep down, we all know we want to be better, and that's the honesty I'm talking about with music. I write music to inspire people and to make people feel like they belong, and you can't do that if you're not being honest in the writing.

What has creating music taught you about yourself?

That I can do anything. I used to put all these limits on myself about what I was capable of and who I should be and what success looked like. But if the last 15 years of being a musician in a focused manner has taught me anything, it's that I can do anything. I never thought I would get to do what I'm doing now, but it was because of all the little things I did over the last 15 years that it's possible.

Has the meaning of success changed for you since becoming "successful"?

I remember going to the Bowery Ballroom, and looking at the band playing and just being like, "If I could even play here..." I've done it. But now the bar just keeps jumping itself because you learn more. My goal is still the same. I want to be a sustainable business. I want to be an artist that isn't jaded, that's healthy and makes work that they believe in and brings their friends in and collaborates. I want to be a real songwriter that stands the test of time. I want to be the 60-year-old that puts a record out and my fans like it and none of the young people do.

Bartees Strange Recommends:

Collaboration. I come from a beautiful community of artists. I'm amazed by them every day. Not just because of how they bring themselves to the music, but how they live their lives. They're all very special to me and I adore them. Without them it would be very hard for me to believe in my work. It means everything to look across the room to see Dan (Kleederman) and Graham (Richman) nodding their heads. I love them.

Learning about the history of your family. My family are Southern Black people, from Southern Black people. Our ties to each other are so deep. There's an unfathomable bond that connects us to the South, our kin and each other. When I think deeply about the story of my family and this country I can't help but feel so many things. So much music comes from that.

Cooks. I love chefs, and people who really give a shit about what they make for other people to eat. In a way I've likened it to producing albums. So many little pieces and small choices that really add up over time. It's so cool watching somebody who's really put their 10k hours in on food. That shit is deep.

Being outside. Sometimes I really shit on nature. Especially when people write about it. I grew up in the woods kinda, like my parents did. Always out in the country, a barefoot rascal kind of kid. I had a need to bond with the land I was from and I forget about it when living in DC or Brooklyn. But there are times when I'm in Oklahoma, or Gastonia, or even outside of Charlotte driving around where I feel a peace that truly crushes me.

Sports. I was a pretty wild athlete for a huge chunk of my life. And in my family there's a big history of great athletes. I think I'll always love and respect people who dedicate themselves to things other people would find frivolous. There's an art in that ya know? Like Michael Jordan. He's such an inspiring guy, for better and worse. LeBron James. Emmitt Smith. The Williams Sisters. I literally tear up watching ESPN classic sometimes, no cap.

Name

Bartees Strange

Vocation

musician

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Luke Piotrowski