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March 14, 2024 -

As told to Max Freedman, 2455 words.

Tags: Music, Business, Collaboration, Independence, Inspiration, Money, Process, Success.

# On creating your own opportunities

Musician Cakes da Killa discusses remaining open to just doing it, artistic success as business success, and why one repeat collaborator is sometimes all you need.

**When you were first getting started a decade ago, you were lumped in with the regrettable, narrow, and othering term "queer hip-hop." How did getting put into a box just because of your identity and lyrics shape your songwriting and creative process?**

It kind of didn't at all because I was always so visibly and vocally queer. I thought it was going to be a deterrent for my music. It put me in a box but also put me on a platform, in a sense. It's kind of a double-edged sword. I had no complaints about it until it got to the point of people continuing to talk about it as if it was a sub-genre, as opposed to appreciating the music for just the music.

**Over the years, have you had to hold day jobs alongside your music career? If so, how have you managed both? If not, how have you successfully made a living off your creativity?**

I was blessed to not have to work until COVID when I had to get a job at a supermarket, which was very humbling, very rewarding, and also traumatizing because that's the only time I ever had genuine culture shock as an adult.

Falling into my music career, I didn't know it would be a source of income, because there wasn't many people before me doing what I was doing that was actually able to survive off it. When I was able to start touring very early in my career and pay my bills, it was kind of just like, what?

That went on until COVID started, and that's when the market was really hit, and I had to get a job. From that experience, I was able to get inspired to make my first short film, *Visibility Sucks*. Now, I'm back to working for myself again because, as an adult, I spent more years living this entrepreneur hustle life versus working, clocking in at a nine-to-five.

My main form of income comes from touring, so when you take touring off the table, there's only so much money from royalties and publishing. The reality about most musicians is, a lot of people live double lives where, regardless of how fabulous they look on Instagram, most people do have a nine-to-five.

So many people would ask me, "What do you do?" I'm like, "I make music." And they're like, "No, what do you do?" And it's like, "I don't do anything." There was a rumor that I came from money or I was this kept woman. I was like, "No, I just was very blessed to get into a lot of tour circuits early on in my career that kept me afloat." When those wells dried up, I had to do what I had to do. Period.

**I'm curious how you first broke into those tour circuits. That's a major part of you staying creative without having to do anything else career-wise.**

It was mainly timing...and the quality and amount of work I was putting in. My first tour came about on a fluke. There was an Australian tour with [Kalifa fka] Lelf, Brooke Candy, *House of Ladosh*, and a DJ named Mess Kid. Brooke dropped out of the tour, and I was at a Lil Kim concert, and the promoter reached out to me and said, "Can you fly to Australia tomorrow?" I'd never been on an international flight before, and I looked at my friend and I said, "We got to go home. I have to pack."

Having that freedom to throw yourself into the system always helped me. That was maybe eight years ago, and I've been to Australia over 10 times. For me, it's always being open to just do it.

**Looking back to that first international flight to Australia, what fears were sitting with you, and how did you get over them?**

The main fear was whether I was going to get my fucking money. I mean, at that point, I was kind of scared of flying. I'd only been on one other flight, but I just let go and let the universe do what it's going to do. I was obviously super excited to go to Australia. How many people even get the opportunity to go to Australia, especially a Black independent artist? I was just excited for the opportunity.

**I'm curious about any recent times you've let the universe take you where it's going and it's led to something amazing creatively.**

There's so many things, whether it's picking management or working with this label I'm on. The main thing is reaching out to artists who I'm inspired by and to know that they're willing to work with me. I dropped a mixtape series during COVID called the *Motherland* series, and I was able to work with an artist named Nomi Ruiz and an artist named Sam Sparro who I always looked up to.

As artists, especially independent artists, we kind of doubt ourselves because we don't have that mainstream success, but that doesn't mean other artists don't respect our talent. I've had interactions with a plethora of artists that I never thought would know who I am. That's always really affirming and makes me feel like I'm doing something worth something.

**There were six years between your first and second albums, *Hedonism* and *Svengali*, but only a year and a half between your second and third albums, *Svengali* and *Black Sheep*. How do you know whether something you're working on is an album, an EP, a mixtape, or a single, and how do you know that it's done?**

I'm very creative and very much an artist, but I'm also very business-minded. It depends on how much I'm working on. I could write as many songs as I want to. As an independent artist, I don't have the privilege of mainstream artists to go into the studio for a week and make 200, 300 songs and then whittle them down. I'm paying for studio time, typically out of pocket, and I recoup that money when I get an advance from a label after I pitch the whole project to them.

For me, it's about how much money I'm willing to pay for the mixing or the mastering and the recording. The creative side is, "Am I saying what I want to say in that moment?" For me, it's always, "What is the vibe or message I'm trying to get out?" If I achieve that, then that determines whether it's an album or an EP or whatever.

**To what extent do you view your music career as running a business?**

This comes with being an adult. I always said for the longest time, "Once my career or my art becomes a business, I wouldn't want to do it anymore." But the reality is, it's a blessing that you can do something creative that people want to buy, and it comes with the territory.

Artists need to sell work. Do you need to sell things to be considered an artist or feel fulfilled as an artist? No, but most artists want to be successful, and to be successful, you do need to understand the business side of your career and industry.

Slowly but surely, I'm looking at myself more as an entrepreneur, a business, or a brand. That kind of thinking is making me operate differently. It's not about going out to the clubs and nightlife and getting drink tickets. Now, it's about setting up my royalties and publishing, trying to write for other artists. It's more about exploring the other side of the industry.

**I'm especially curious about your writing for other artists, because I speak to a pretty decent amount of musicians, and increasingly often, they're telling me, "I'm writing for other musicians, and it's a way to make more money." I'm curious about that and what it does for you creatively to write for other artists.**

I haven't had too much experience doing that yet. I mainly do it when I write my records and I collaborate with somebody. I've had some inquiries to collaborate with other artists, but they didn't come to fruition. That's definitely something I'm more willing to explore because I'm constantly writing music. I love to hear how other people interpret my thoughts. I also love the collaborative nature of making music. If making music is what I'm going to do for the rest of my life, I want to explore all facets of it.

**You've worked with Sam Katz on *Black Sheep* and *Svengali*. Why has he proven to be such a meaningful collaborator for you? What is it about collaborating with him specifically that works so well?**

He genuinely doesn't give a fuck, which I'm obsessed [with]. Me and Sam, we met really early on in our music careers. He's the first producer I worked with that was giving me original instrumentals. We know each other and how to push each other. What we create is very unique and cool. It doesn't fit in one genre. It encompasses all the things I love, whether that's dance music, house, jazz, rap. We're just weirdos and we don't judge each other, so that's why it works.

**I feel like, listening to the arc of *Hedonism* through *Black Sheep*, you've leaned away from the club and more toward jazz and smoother sounds over time. What has the inspiration for that been, or is it just the natural consequence of how you collaborate with Sam?**

That's mainly our natural progression of getting older. We started making music in our early twenties, and now, we're in our early thirties. I don't want to be screaming over the kind of beats I was screaming over before. I make music that fits the time I'm in and what I'm going through, and that's why you can hear the progression in my music. It's not a calculated decision. This is just the vibe I'm in right now.

### **How do you start a song?**

There's a lot of different ways. Sometimes, I could write directly to a beat, so somebody could send me a beat, and the beat tells me what to say. If I'm recording a demo, I can lay down the framework and start mumbling out a melody. Sometimes, I could just be walking, stumbling drunk from a bar in Berlin, and then, a melody comes to me and I have to make a voice note. It could also be the poem format, where a concept will come to me, I'll write it down in my notes, and then, I'll apply the beat. It depends, but once it comes, I just have to record it, because I'll forget. I was just going through my voice notes and deleting some of them because I have so many.

### **How do you choose, from that giant pile of voice memos, which ones to build out into songs?**

It's kind of a feeling. I think I have that as a creative person. I can't really explain it, but you just know what works.

With the hook on "Mind Reader," it just came to me when I was on tour, that little melody. I recorded it as a voice note, and then, me and Sam worked on the track, and I knew it felt good. In my mind, I'm like, "What do I want it to sound like?" That's how it forms, but I can't explain it. I just kind of know. But also, I edit myself a lot. I'm constantly working on demos, which is a privilege I didn't have in the past. I'm constantly editing the lyrics. It has to flow right. It has to feel right. I'm known for a kind of very compact, fast style, so I'm always on top of my shit.

### **We've talked about you being on tour. How do the places you go, and your travel, affect your creative process?**

If I don't tour, I don't have anything to talk about. I can only talk about going to a bar in Bushwick so much. It's not like I'm writing to get a hit per se or I'm trying to write a viral record. It's mainly me experiencing life and writing about the things I experience on this journey. Touring is a great moment for that because you're constantly on the move. You're constantly meeting people, constantly being stimulated, being around different cultures and sounds. That gets the juices flowing, and then, it's just the downtime [on] tours when I'm able to write based on what I've experienced.

### **From what I understand, when you're working with Sam, the process is, you write something and he produces it. Do you go in with lyrics and a melody? Do you go in with lyrics, a melody, and somewhat of a beat?**

It depends. Some of the songs on [Black Sheep], I legitimately recorded a demo and gave Sam the vocals, and he formed something around the vocal. We talk about what type of vibe we want, or my voice dictates what the beat should be, and he makes something that complements that, which is why I keep Sam very close as a collaborator. He gets what I'm trying to do with my voice. There are some tracks where Sam already had the beat, and then I'm inspired, and I write to that. It depends on the situation.

### **How do you bring other collaborators into the fold?**

If I'm working on a body of work, I don't like working with a lot of producers. Early on in my career, that was a big part of my creative process, getting a bunch of beats from a bunch of people. I feel like that complicates the cohesiveness of records, so I like working with just one person. With Sam, he did *Black Sheep*, he's done *Svengali*. Before that, I collaborated with a producer named Proper Villains on two EPs.

I like crafting it with one other person, but I also do a lot of features. For my own releases, it's a bit more cathartic. I'm able to express different sides of my creativity when I do features for other people, because working with Honey Dijon or LSDXOXO, I can do something I'm not so committed to. It's not like a marriage.

### **Cakes da Killa Recommends:**

5 *Queer Classics*:

*Brother to Brother* (2004)  
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*The Queen* (1968)  
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*Philadelphia* (1993)  
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*But I'm a Cheerleader* (1999)  
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*ANGEL*, a documentary by Sebastiano d'Ayala Valva (2010)  
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Name

Cakes da Killa

Vocation

musician, filmmaker

Fact


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