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As told to Lior Phillips, 2973 words.

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On recentering creativity as a parent

Modern jazz icon Kamasi Washington details how his creativity and perspective shifted after the birth of his daughter, the challenge of committing to an instrument, and the benefit of low-pressure learning.

The first time I saw you perform live was nearly a decade ago at Primavera Sound in Barcelona, in their auditorium space. Everyone was losing their minds in that room after being out in the fields all day.

We created a whole little world that day in a way.

Which you do with your music as well. Do you have an ideal space where you want your music to be played, or performed? Do you think of live performance when you're writing for an album?

I feel like we try to create the music in the place that we're in. Rather than wanting to take a particular music to a particular place, we create the right music for wherever we are. And it is fun to be in different places, different spaces, because it inspires different music.

Is that connection to space inherent to the style of music you make? I'd imagine that having an additional root to improvise off of would be important.

The type of music we make is like riding in a boat on a river. The better you are at giving into the current, the further the music will go. Practicing this idea that you have to just let go and let it go with where it's moving...sometimes being in different spaces all the time helps. You get into this flow where you're just an artist, and you come into every show with an open heart. You get used to not knowing what's going to happen.

Rituals and structure and routine can be important for creatives, but you have to have confidence to let go of that and allow for the unexpected too.

There's obviously more than one way to do things. Personally, even when I'm recording a record, I just get my spirit to a place where it's not holding onto something and just open. Then all those special magical moments, I can catch them and go with them, see them and feel them. And it's the same thing with everybody else I'm playing with. When we're all in that state, we see everything the same.

Now, that's not to say that we couldn't make something set. Sometimes we're doing something for TV, and we can hone it in and make something very particular and that's good too. It's not like that's bad. They're just two different things!

That willing flexibility and determination to figure out what is needed is so important throughout life. I know you're a relatively new parent too, and those are great characteristics to have when it comes to kids. How old is your daughter now?

She'll be four in a few months.

My twins will be four soon too. Parenting takes so much creativity.

Parenting is like living life again. All these things you take for granted, seeing someone having all these experiences and seeing them discover things, start to learn things, seeing what she likes and what she doesn't like and what she gravitates toward ... Reflecting on your own journey and seeing their journey

at the same time, it gives a beautiful perspective to life.

That's so true. I've been so delighted watching my kids' relationship with music evolve already. Do you believe in a generational connection in music? I mentioned seeing you perform with your dad, and I know your daughter is credited on your new album.

She's very early on her journey. I definitely could see that she has a connection to music, and she is definitely a creative person. Whether or not that will end up ultimately being her life's work, it's hard to say. But like you're saying, there's something in our genes that makes that connection definitely a possibility. It's in the genes, but also in how we're raised. She's similar to me. I was raised in music, and had music all around me as a baby and growing into it.

Do you picture yourself on stage with her one day?

Yeah, it's a trip. When I was a young adult, I used to play with a musician named Gerald Wilson, and I was just kind of tripping. I was thinking about her like, "Oh, wow, it would be a trip when, 20 years from now, I'm playing with her and I'm trying to keep up with her and her friends." [Laughs]

Can you imagine? What is she into now? Does she listen to your stuff?

She likes my music. She's had her whole little journey. When she was two weeks old she was just crying and crying and crying. We couldn't figure out what to do, and I don't know what made me play this one song, but I had this playlist that I made for her when she was still in her mom's stomach, and we used to put headphones and play for her, and so I think that's where it was. So I went back to that playlist and we played her some Eric Dolphy. She heard Eric Dolphy and it was like her main thing. We had to play Eric Dolphy, because that's what he does.

Isn't that incredible? Everyone tells you to play white noise, or to play the most generic classical music, but when you play something important to you it really works.

It's like the connection to music becomes closer. Sometimes I see her singing along to some pretty complicated things. I'm like, "Wow, how are you doing that?" For her whole life, music has been so close. It's easier for her.

And music, especially something like Dolphy, conjures so much in the imagination. And you can't beat that for a kid.

Music seems like it exists in a plane that is beyond your understanding—beyond your anything. It's really hard to put into a box, like, why do you like a song? It's an impossible question.

Absolutely. Of course, there are clever ways to describe what a musician is doing in a song that you like, or a theme. With your new album, it's focused on music's connection to dance, to physical movement. That's something that the listener can feel immediately and experience.

And that reality is so universal. Every culture has music and every culture has a dance that goes with it. It's that feeling of sound making us want to move in a certain way. It's part of our operating system. And seeing that with a kid growing up, it's like, "Oh, wow. It's always been there. I can't take credit for it."

But you do need a level of curiosity to cultivate it—which is why I always love speaking to jazz and improvised musicians. How early in your life did you see the value of exploring music more spiritually and deeply in a way that brings people together?

I guess I had a very organic relationship to music. My dad is a musician. My mom wasn't a professional musician, but she played music. I had an older brother, he ended up later gravitating towards photography, but when we were kids he was a prodigy on piano. He could play the blues. And so, a lot of everyone's focus on music was on him. I could just have music as my own. Nobody was really looking at me, but I had all this access.

I'll never forget, I forget why I did it, but one day I brought my clarinet to school. I could play this Boyz II Men song, and my friends were like, "Damn! That's so cool!" And, for me, it was like nothing. I'd already had this connection to music where if I heard something and I liked it, I could figure it out. I realized that the other kids, that wasn't a part of their reality. They couldn't just play a song that they liked. I remember showing them other music, the jazz side that I was getting from my dad that they necessarily didn't even know about. I liked all the stuff that they liked, Boyz II Men, N.W.A, all of that stuff, but I remember when I first showed them Art Blakey, it became this thing for me. I guess in that sense music always had this social, connective feeling to it, because for me it started off as that.

Taking the pressure off seems to have been really important for the early stages.

Yeah. But as you grow in music, there definitely becomes a pressure to practice and to grow and to be able to have a certain level of ability. That came later for me. When I got older, I heard musicians who had the ability to do certain things, and I wanted it too. I was around my dad and his friends, so I could hear them do all these things. I had very clear goals. Fairly early on—early for most normal people—when I was 11 my dad saw I was interested in music, and so he started doing things like having me read the

biographies of the musicians that I liked. He knew I liked Charlie Parker, so had me read Charlie Parker's biography. When I got into Miles Davis, I read Miles Davis's autobiography, and John Coltrane's. And in reading about the artists you love, there's a big part of all their stories where they went through a time where they just completely consumed themselves with the instrument. That idea got ingrained in my mind. I needed to just fully immerse myself. So, when I was about 13, I really wanted to be a real musician, to have that connection like they had. So I did. I was so singularly focused on it that my mom thought something was wrong with me. I was in my room practicing, and my friends would come over and they'd say, "Hey, you want to come out?" And I'd be like, "No." And so, she called a therapist.

The therapist was one of her friends. She was like, "So, Kamasi, are you sad?" And in that part of my journey in music, it could be a little frustrating. It's not necessarily joyous. So I might've come out of the room after practicing for hours because I couldn't get the things I was trying to do right, couldn't figure it out.

How early did you decide to commit to saxophone as your method of expression?

I started off on drums, and then I went to piano, and then I started playing clarinet. When I was about 11, my brother's best friend liked jazz. And then, when I showed our other friends jazz and they liked it too, that unlocked something in my heart with it. All of a sudden I wanted it to be my thing. So, I told my dad, "I think I want to switch to saxophone." And he was like, "No, stay on clarinet. Clarinet, saxophone, same thing. If you can't play the clarinet, then you can't play saxophone." Back when my dad was coming up, in particular, if you wanted to make a living as a musician, and you're going to be a saxophone player, it was better if you're what's called a doubler. So, you could play saxophone, flute, clarinet, oboe, things like that, more woodwinds. And of those, saxophone probably is the newest and...I don't want to say the easiest, but the most logical instrument. It's made in a way that it is easier to play. And he knew that I liked saxophone players. I was really into Wayne Shorter and Dexter Gordon. He knew that once I switched to saxophone, I probably wouldn't be as interested in playing clarinet. So, he was trying to get me to go further on the clarinet before I switched.

But then, I was already trying to learn these songs and saxophone solos and stuff on clarinet, so I was like, "Man, this stuff is hard. I can't get it to sound the same." And then one day I just took my dad's saxophone and immediately I could play these things that I was struggling with on clarinet. Saxophone just felt like my voice, like the instrument that I was hearing in my head. Once that happened, all the other instruments got pushed away.

When you are curiously and hungrily searching for that sound and you don't know how to explain it, that's a noble quest.

It's like your spirit animal or something like that. Sometimes I'll hear good musicians, and I'll be like, "Oh man, you're a bass player, but you're really a piano player."

You're like a musical instrument whisperer. People can come to you with their musical instrument woes.

From that point forward, were you moving more out of your bedroom and more into collaborative work? Did you have to re-learn and foster your creativity in relation to other people?

When I got serious about music and switched to sax I was in junior high school. It became real clear to my parents that I was really into music, so they sent me to a music high school. What happens then is all your friends are musicians, and we're all on our individual journeys but we're learning from each other. We're playing with each other. We go to concerts together, we're hanging out, we're sneaking into clubs and getting each other on gigs, doing gigs together. It just really naturally becomes this communal thing. You start to identify with the musician life. We used to talk about it, like, "Oh, let's go do some regular people stuff." Like, "What are you doing? I'm doing some regular people stuff. I'm going to go grocery shopping." [laughs]

I didn't really have to learn to make music, because it just took over my life. I think it's part of my personality, too, just to be an inclusive person. As I grew in music I realized that the highest levels of music had a connective principle to them. Obviously when I was a younger guy, I was much more focused on virtuosity and how fast and high you can play. As I grew, the apparent thing that came to me was that none of that really matters. What really matters is how are you connecting, and how are you connecting with the other musicians. The music that I really loved had obvious connection to life, whether it was super virtuosic or super simple.

Some artists get so caught up in the optics of it all, as much as the virtuosity. You're going fast, you want to show off, you want to push yourself. At this point in your life, as a parent, creating so much music, touring so much, do you manage to separate the sides of yourself to the point of not getting caught up in one facet?

It was a difficult walk in the road in life for me when I became a father. It had always been an easy decision. "Music's number one," and then everything kind of just followed. And all of a sudden it was like, "Well, no music." Even before she was born, I was thinking, "Oh man, I wonder if I'm going to..." That fear comes in. You start thinking like, "Man, am I going to be wack?" And it's surprising that to me that, in my opinion, when I put my daughter as the first thing in my life, the music actually got stronger. My connection to music became stronger because it was attached to some life. Being a father becomes number one, my daughter becomes number one, but the music has something much more powerful to connect to. Even though I had less time to spend on music, it's like I'm more productive.

I'm so grateful to hear that it was so fulfilling for you, even if more challenging. I think too many people still fear that all going away. Our brains go through this metamorphic process in parenthood. You start questioning your entire life. Like, "Am I doing the right thing? What is going to happen in their future?" Then you start creating these different worlds.

Exactly. It's like a fourth dimension or something like that. It's almost like before you have kids you don't even realize that that exists, and all of a sudden...

And I don't know if you can ever be prepared. But it's beautiful that she's already so involved in your creativity, like you were with your family. She's going to be cooler than all of us.

I feel that way. I feel like I'm going to be known as, "That's the Akili's dad."

Kamasi Washington Recommends:

"Dear Lord" by John Coltrane

Royal Danish Ballet's performance of Igor Stravinsky's Firebird: I just recently found this version of the Firebird Suite that Glen Tetley choreographed for the Royal Danish Ballet, and it's so beautiful.

Street Fighter VI: The best fighting game that has ever come out.

The Mysticism of Sound and Music by Hazrat Inayat Khan: If you're a musician and you love music, it's a very beautiful book that will give you a different perspective as to how powerful music can be. It's a collection of Khan's speeches, so it can be a little bit repetitive but there are some just beautiful gems.

Chess: I used to be really into it in high school. I got back into it, and I was reading all my old chess books. Back then there was no such thing as YouTube, but there's all these YouTube channels of people just teaching the greatest chess masters. When you see great chess players, you think they'd be mathematical but it's more artistic than that. It's philosophical. It's just beautiful. It's very much like constructing a beautiful melody.

Name

Kamasi Washington

Vocation

musician

Fact

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1