

# On cultivating joy in the creative process



Musician Mereba discusses stepping into your creative power through community and joy, embracing your differences, moving away from individualism.

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As told to Jessica Kasiama, 2453 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Beginnings](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#).

**The album cover for your latest project *The Breeze Grew a Fire* brings you back to the forefront, a striking contrast to the cover of your debut album, *The Jungle Is The Only Way Out*, which depicts you standing protectively behind your niece, as if you were in the ancestral realm. What are your reflections on the journey between these two projects?**

That was definitely intentional because although I released an EP named *AZEB* in between, I do think of *The Breeze Grew a Fire* as the answer to *The Jungle Is The Only Way Out*.

As far as the artwork, and me being more front and center, it's something that I've gone back and forth about in general with my artistry. For *The Jungle Is The Only Way Out*, I remember people not being happy at the time that I wanted to have a cover where [the visual] was more abstract because I think artists are so often encouraged to promote their appearance. I chose to protect my niece on the cover [of *The Jungle Is the Only Way Out* because] it was a message in a bottle for myself. It was a reminder to my younger self: one day, I will look back on this and remember what I went through to get here.

*The Breeze Grew a Fire*, and this era of my life, has been about me stepping into my power more fully, stepping into my roles more confidently, and not being afraid of putting myself front and center. Spiritually, I think I'm being asked to step more into who I am and the album cover represents that very nicely.

**Listening to the album, it also feels like you're reconciling with your inner child. I recently learned that you used to nanny and teach children how to play guitar. Looking back on those experiences, especially now as a mother who's returning to that spark that you had when you were young, what have you learned about children and their relationship to creativity?**

Something that stands out to me from my years being a caretaker and teacher to children is how unafraid they are of being perceived and how little they care about anything but the process that they're in. They don't mind if people are or aren't paying attention. Creatively, they are led by their curiosities and intuition. They also like to find the fun in things. I used to always have to lecture my students to practice more, but I found that the easiest way to get them to do that was to find ways around the mundane nature of doing something over and over again. It's reminded me to lean towards things that are fun for me musically - things that make me want to run, jump, and scream around the room. That's the childlike energy that I've reabsorbed watching my son be a creative soul and all of my amazing students grow and blossom over the years.

**You've been writing songs since you were a young girl yourself. How has your songwriting process evolved over the years?**

When I first started, I was emulating my favorite singers at the time, which were the divas of the '90s: Whitney Houston, Mariah Carey, Toni Braxton. I loved big, dramatic music and so a lot of my songs were those types of songs, which is hilarious, for a nine-year-old to be writing about such serious heart-wrenching things. But I feel like I've lived almost nine lives as a songwriter. I went from that to being influenced more by hip-hop and R&B. And then, I moved to North Carolina.

When we first moved there, we were living down the street from a farm with cows and I was in a new world. At first, I was resistant to it but as the years passed, I embraced the country, rootsy feeling that I had living there. That brought me to folk music and more of a singer-songwriter style of writing very confessional lyrics about everyday happenings and the mundane things in life. Folk music is really good for making ordinary things poetic. I was really drawn to that, which was a world away from where I started with my diva R&B belting anthems.

When I went to college, I got a lot more into singing and studying voice. I think that's when it started to all come together. I still used my guitar to sing and write, but I wasn't as afraid of using my voice fully. I got into rapping in Atlanta [to the point where] I was rapping more than I was singing. I was around my cousins who were [also] rapping, and they would immediately tell me when it was wack, of course [laughs]. And then I met EarthGang and I was so inspired by how they put words together. It sharpened me.

**Growing up, who were the lyricists, musicians, writers, and storytellers whose use of language and words really resonated with you?**

My father was a very quintessential, sage Ethiopian man who always had something wise to offer. He spoke in proverbs almost. Growing up, my father worked a lot and was a great provider for us, but he wasn't necessarily the most forthcoming about his story or anything about his life. When he would impart wisdom, it hit harder because he didn't say a lot. He was definitely my first inspiration of a more poetic person, a person who when they speak – the tone of his voice, his accent – everything felt important. I do think that, as I've evolved over the years, a lot of my writing has been inspired by his presence.

**You've featured his voice and wisdom at the end of the song, "Wild Sky." What went into the decision to include it in the project?**

My father passed in 2017, so for *The Jungle is the Only Way Out*, I thought about adding something in, but it was still too raw at that point. I was too sad and I wanted to keep him to myself. But as the years have passed, I remember wanting my son to hear my dad's voice. First, I showed the video to my son and he was fascinated because he had heard about my dad but hadn't associated his voice with him. The more I thought about it and prayed on it, I was like, I think this is the album, as far as the concept and how much of it is looking back to childhood. I've also healed enough from the process of how he passed and everything that happened around it to share him with the world. Being an album with no [traditional] features, it felt perfect to have him as my feature and my son singing in the background on another one of the songs, ["Starlight (my baby)"].

**Shifting back to your sound, it is a combination of the lyrical clarity and directness born out of your background as a folk protest singer-songwriter and your reverence for hip hop and soulful R&B. I'm curious, do you notice any overlapping themes or characteristics between these genres?**

Definitely between hip hop and folk music. I feel like those genres encourage a more verbose approach to telling your story whereas I feel that R&B has evolved to being a lot more intimate to each person.

There's also some overlap [in the history of hip-hop and folk music] that really worked for me as I fell in love with both of them. If I'm listening to Bob Dylan, I feel like only he could sing that song. It's almost weird to think of someone else singing it because it's so particular to the exact moments of his life. I feel like that's how it is with hip hop too. With most rappers, you can't really cover their song and have it be the same as your life and what you experience. Those genres for sure inspire me as far as how I approach writing. And there are so many rap records that sample classic R&B records; there's such a symbiotic relationship between them.

I love finding the points in different styles of music that feel most universal. There's probably so much more

that I haven't even noticed yet as far as through lines between them and how they connect to each other.

**What do you do when an idea for a song strikes? I wanted to ask about if you start with music or lyrics first, but I'm generally curious about what the process of catching a spark of inspiration looks like for you.**

When my life was a bit more open time-wise and something popped in my head, I would have the ability to pause, write it down, and finish it at that moment. Now, ideas do come and go. The ones I hold onto are the ones that keep coming back. As a songwriter, the most potent melodies are the ones that keep haunting you.

Sometimes I get an idea of a lyric or a concept. That does happen more now too, because I'm a bit more reflective as I get older. I might think about something from a new perspective and be like, "That'd be a cool song." I didn't really do that as much before. I would let the song write itself, but now I'm like, "I've never really heard a song about this particular thing, and I want to [write] about that." So it's a little different each time.

**Ethiopian instrumentation is featured throughout the album, bringing warmth and specificity to the project, as well as a portrait of your lineage. What have you learned about making space for the multiple parts of your identity, especially in an industry that can be restrictive when it comes to expressions of black art?**

In a lot of ways in my life, [even beyond the music], I've lived in a limbo space so all I can do is be myself. I recognize that being myself is not the clearest picture of something that people have seen before, but I've strengthened my ability to accept that over the years. When I was a kid, it was a lot harder for me and there were times in my life where I thought that I would be more understood or related to. I didn't know that I was so strange to people. As I continue, I have accepted that part of my job as an artist and as a human being, with the background that I have, is bridging things together for people. Like creating new neural pathways in your mind, I'm creating a new pathway for somebody who doesn't make perfect sense related to things that we've seen before.

I want people to be nuanced in their own art and in their own ways. Trust, if I could have, I would've chosen to be a lot more easily understood, especially as a child. But as time has passed, I find pride in being exactly who I am and it making sense to who it makes sense to. That's probably why people who do connect with my music connect with it in a very particular way because maybe in their own life, in some way or another, their nuances aren't as understood either. I've gotten used to rejection and I thank god for a very supportive family, community, and the reminders that I get that I'm doing the right thing.

**Thinking of some of your long-time collaborators - such as producer Sam Hoffman, make-up artist Melanesia Hunter, or visual artists Jalan and Jibril Durimel - can you speak more to the importance of cultivating a creative community, especially when living in a culture that so often champions individualism when it comes to success?**

I was having a conversation the other day about the juxtaposition between how things are so individualistic now and how I came up as an artist. Being in Atlanta, at the time that I was, it was the most communal underground music scene you could imagine. It was magical. That's where I met a lot of my long-term collaborators, my Spillage Village brothers, India Shawn, and different artists [and collaborators] who have meant so much to me.

Coming out to LA, it was only natural for me to look for that here too. I think it's about finding the right people that share those philosophies about how to create together, dream together, and build together. I will say a major shout-out to Melanesia. She's been my makeup artist for many years but she's also a true representation of a community leader. I met almost everyone that I create with in LA through Mel because of a weekly music event she still puts on. I know it was ordained by God for me to meet her because it was hard to find a community of people who wanted to help each other and reach out horizontally instead of vertically. Things [can be] so vertical here. Without meeting her, I don't know how I would've found that.

Everything we are each trying to do could be so much stronger if we supported each other consistently. I still try to do it. I still work with other artists. Collaboration is part of my passion because of how I started but beyond music, it's in everything. Looking at the world, we have to get more realistic about community again. We have to get more realistic about giving what we have to the community instead of keeping everything for ourselves and hoping that we'll get further than the next person with what we have inside. I don't think it's sustainable.

Whether we learn it by choice or by force with what's coming in the world that we live in, we're going to have to use each other's resources more to progress. I pray that we keep that in mind as artists and human beings that society has been focused on individualism for a while now, but we have to be moving out of that. We have to evolve past it because it's too expensive out here, too hateful, and scary. We need to regroup. That's my philosophy as an artist. That's my philosophy as a mother. That's my philosophy as a human being. I look forward to the future of the community a lot.

**Mereba Recommends:**

Nights out strictly for dancing

Orion Sun's music

Gua Sha

The Tennessee Valley via Huntsville, Alabama

The poem "Quietness" by Rumi

Name

Mereba

Vocation

singer, rapper, songwriter, producer

□

Vincent Haycock