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As told to Sammy Maine, 2573 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Success, Failure, Mental health.

On being clear about what you're putting out into the world

Singer, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist Meshell Ndegeocello discusses the importance of boundaries, the joy in spreading love, allowing yourself to fail, and not getting lost in the outcome.

What has your work as an artist taught you about yourself?

That the world is not so black and white. There are shades of gray. My work has shown me that I just really enjoy the process of it. I'm a bit detached or disassociated with the outcome, but I derive the desired feeling through connecting with other people and creating something. It's the process of trying to create sonic landscapes and paintings that bring me some satisfaction. Within that, I hope other people can hear something in it as well.

You've been working for a few decades now. Has your time in the industry shifted how you think about yourself as an artist?

I think COVID definitely showed me. I had become very insular. I was just living with my laptop and my soft synths and my own world. It wasn't until I realized I missed the five of us going on tour and being in the bus and finding out different things about the music and ourselves on stage that I started to understand that I'm at a different time. But in terms of consumerism, I was in the music business in the eighties and nineties where it was all about consumption, the metrics and charting. Now you have to sell yourself and you are in charge of the marketing. You are in charge of understanding how to create an audience in a way that I would have never been exposed to at first. At first the artist was totally kept out of that. You were treated as a commodity, which could be good or bad, but it allowed some distance. And so, the only thing I see now is that I have to protect myself and not get lost in the outcome. Everyone is already talking about projected numbers, and I'm just like, "When are we going to rehearse?" "What's it going to be like for the people?" "Am I trying to recreate the album? Or am I trying to make something different in the live experience?" I just find that I have to maintain a very sheltered sort of existence so that I'm not taken down by, "Oh, that post didn't get as much." What does that post mean? Does the link work? Does the QR code have a virus?

What is your relationship like with digital spaces and social media?

I fell prey to thinking it was my friend. I really enjoyed these images and my morning thoughts, and I still do. But now I also see the darker side of it; it's harder to connect in person. So the last few months I've been really trying to stay off of it and leave my phone and go out for walks. I just made a recording after doing most of the writing outdoors because I could just get up in the morning and walk or drive to Great Barrington and go in the woods or just be out of the zeitgeist, which I don't even think exists anymore. There's no one zeitgeist. So I wanted to get off of it, but that's how I let people know there's music out. It's a hard dance.

Do you think it's become harder to connect in person because of the pressure to use social media as an artist?

I don't know why, I can't say the impetus, but we all are struggling to connect with one another. The human language is one of the reasons, too. I think we're all working with different understandings and we are unable to have nuanced conversations about things we disagree about, and so it makes people shut down.

I think this whole 'you can be whatever you want' is not working, for me personally.

Your new album circles around seeing old things in new ways. What does that look like in practice for you?

It happens in my art space, my creative space. During lockdown I was scoring two to three different TV shows, so for 10 hours a day I was on a screen taking in other people's stories, energies, wants, and needs. So at night, once everything died down, I had an Omnichord that was given to me as a gift. This so-called older device was freedom to me. I could make music and have these thoughts of creativity and really think about lyrics with this simple machine. Or I find myself drawing more, just pencil to paper. I find myself sifting through my closet and I find I can play bocce in my backyard. I have old drum machines that I'm falling back in love with. The new luxury for me is not having to buy anything or go anywhere; that I can access all that I want and need in terms of entertainment within the space I've made for myself, within my home.

Is it important to your creative practice to pause and take stock of what has gone before? There's a pressure to keep speeding ahead and be the first to do something. How do you deal with that?

You believe that's possible? Let me ask you that. Do you believe people can make things 'first'?

I don't think so. People constantly say: "I want to see something fresh. I want to see something new. I want to see something I've never seen before." But everything is a remix of what has gone before. We're inspired by our surroundings and influenced by our experiences, and others always factor into that. But I do feel like there is this pressure that you always have to be like, go, go, go. That ties in with what we were saying about social media and how our attention span is really awful now; we are just speeding through. We want something new, new, new, new all the time. I think our brains are rotting in that way.

Yes. I had to study a lot of Sun Ra for a project, so I really got into a few things he was saying and we're in need of a new myth. He was like, "Look what this one has gotten us. Look at the fruit of it. Look at the fruit of the binary good and bad. Look at the lack of nuance." What is fresh? Fresh just means you're under 25 and somebody noticed you. I mean, there's new technology, but a car is just a horse, and a movie screen is just cave paintings. What is really new? It's all built upon these building blocks of humanity seeking out transcendence, easing their pain and entertainment.

Is it important to you to have that time to take a pause and slow down in order to create? You create so much too, and I'm sure you're under a ton of deadlines.

I allowed myself to fail. I got fired. If I wasn't on the phone with you right now, I was going to end my day by getting rid of my iPhone. I'm going back to the flip phone. I really enjoy the creative process and I have enough of that insane mental health disease called faith, that whatever's for me will be for me. Whatever I'm supposed to have will be for me because there's no reason I shouldn't have got this far. It's those moments where I'm tucked in the corner with a book, that's my personal joy, and I'm okay if that's not for everybody else. I love everyone around me so much. I'm just really trying to take stock of it. I wish I could tell people that I love them, and that this goes by very quickly. That sounds corny, but it does.

What do you think is stopping you from telling people that you love them so much?

Because no one wants to hear that, I guess. I don't know.

I would argue that anyone and everyone wants to hear that.

I feel that about humanity lately. I see people, I want to be like, "I love you. I just want you to know." I've been meditating on Yoko Ono. I don't care what anyone says about her. She was really transcendent in that idea of just this unwavering love for humanity through creativity.

And she was totally villainized for that too.

Yes, she was. I find myself seeking out a new canon. 2016, I found myself wondering like I know all Shakespeare, I know all the so-called great books. I wanted to just challenge myself and look another way and create another dynamic with myself. New conversations. New and fresh is, who can I meet that I have nothing in common with, and they'd give me something I wouldn't have chosen for myself.

You're an avid collaborator. How do you approach working with others, and what do you find to be the most rewarding or most difficult thing about working with other people?

My social makeup is that with music, you could have one song, but you have five people, and we're all connected to this one song. We're all trying to achieve the same thing to bring out the best of it. So that's what I enjoy. I thought I wanted to be a painter, which I do. I'm doing a lot more now because I crave solitude. I switched to music when I was young just because I was like, "I don't really have to talk to you. We're just all playing music, but we're together."

It's a different kind of conversation, isn't it?

I didn't have very erudite parents, I'm sort of autodidactic. Talking is not my first love, but communicating through music or dance or massage, tactile things, I really am more in tune with. It's an easier flow for me.

After putting a lot of things in place to have better mental health, have better creativity, how do you establish certain boundaries in an industry that almost always overlooks them?

I keep a great distance. I've already fallen. Speaking of myth, Prometheus, that's what flew too close to the sun. I'm old. I'm out of that. It's like a hormone shift. In one part of your life, you're very feral. You're driven by your desires. I think as I aged, all these beautiful people came into my life, especially the person I chose to love and spend my life with. They showed me alternatives. They gave me choices. I think I have, knock on wood, real friends. Friends who would tell me, "You're flying too close to the sun," or "There are consequences to that action. Are you prepared to accept them?" I think the body is humbling. Eventually your body will slow you down and testify against you. So those things keep me regulated. I'm not a dinosaur. I can see the comet coming. I know a lot of great artists who I had such faith and admiration in, and I got to watch their ascendance and their transcendence and their demise. I'm very watchful.

Was there anything in particular from witnessing those artists' demise that made you shift your own behavior?

Oh, definitely. Like this particular recording. Yes, I wrote it alone on my Omnicord in my attic, but I knew I had to go to other people because they were going to bring my ideas to fruition. I can see that there comes a time you have to really check yourself and humble yourself to ask for help. I'm glad I have people around me. Also, from scoring. The film and score business is 50 to 80 people working on one thing. There is no I.

You mentioned you got fired and you got yourself to fail. But what does success look like to you? Has that changed over the past few decades that you've been in this industry?

Success is when I see you walking that street and we talk about a book. Success is maybe I get a free coffee from a couple of places. Success is I can afford to take my friends out for extravagant dinners. Success is that I could sleep well at night and I'm not homeless. I'm a woman of color in her fifties who might actually be able to die with dignity. I know that sounds crazy. But I'm also a two-spirit person that gets to live in a world that is changing and seeing that things are not black and white. Or the binary. Success to me is seeing the pain in the darkness, but I'm not crushed by it and seeing the joy and the success without being fooled by it. Oh hold on! I see somebody I love and I'm going to tell them.

[I'm so happy to see you. You're a fantastic human being. Good to see you!]

Okay, so yes, I do think about that industry a lot. I just watched the Little Richard doc as well, and that one, it is just like, you definitely can't gaslight the person. The management industry, the agent, like, what's more powerful? The agent, the manager, or the publicist? What's the new dance we're in? I'm excited by that. I would love to interview Jay-Z and ask him if the best time was when he was first starting out or now that he has everything? I bet it was the whole just trying to think of ways to make it work. That's exciting to me.

Pose that question to yourself.

For me now it's now. Then, I was naive. I had a beautiful naiveté. I signed the worst record deal. They robbed me. It was terrible. I was just happy to have someone paying attention to me. But I enjoy it now because I see it for what it is. I'm going to make whatever I'm going to make. Whatever's going to happen is going to happen.

I'm on a major label now, a label I dreamed about as a child. If it would've happened to me when I was younger, I would've crapped all over it. But now that I got it as an adult, I appreciate it. I see it for what it is. We're in this dance together. So this is a good time for me. I'm not youth obsessed anymore. I think I was. But like I said, your desires change centrally, mentally and musically. I do believe we're in this time where people are really used to getting in the top 100, but now we have the music from the last 2,000 years almost in a sense. Your access to what you need is amazing musically. Just be really clear about what you're putting out into the world and understand that it may not work now, but when someone's digging through the dust storm and finds some weird drive it might work again. That's what excites me. And the music that people are making with alternative instrumentation and the human voice. To me, the theater and entertainment came before the church. The things that connect with people are timeless. Timeless.

Meshell Ndegeocello Recommends:

1. Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals by Alexis Pauline Gumbs
2. How To Overcome Your Childhood By The School of Life
3. White Tears by Harry Kunzru

4.

The Friend Who Listens

about this. They're skilled at making occasional little positive sounds: strategic "mmms" that delicately signal sympathy without intruding on what we're trying to say. They give the impression they recognize and accept our follies; they're reassuring us they're not going to shred our dignity. A big worry in a competitive world is that we feel we can't afford to be honest about how distressed we are. Saying one feels like a failure could mean being dropped. The good listener signals early and clearly that they don't see us in these terms. Our vulnerability is something they warm to rather than are appalled by.

Fourthly: They separate disagreement from criticism. There's a huge tendency to feel that being

5.

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2. Suppressed voice, varying from, say, 500 Hz to 4,000 Hz

3. FREQUENCY MODULATOR, VOICE CONTROL PANEL

4. Output is some tone or less a steady tone, sounding like breath, but with frequency embedded

5. Brain can hear voice & understand

5. Ear only hears a "tone" or "background noise"

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