On honoring your vision

Musician Nubya Garcia on trial and error as a form of perseverance, trying something new to keep your curiosity alive, and knowing when it's time to put a bow on your creations.

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As told to Max Freedman, 2654 words.

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You orchestrated strings for the first time on *Odyssey*. How did you learn how to do that, and how did you power through any doubts along the way?

I would be absolutely lying if I said it was a walk in the park. I would've never imagined myself being able to do this, and throughout the process I was like, "Why on earth didn't I just get an orchestrator or an arranger?" And the why, for me, I couldn't tell you other than pure curiosity, even though it was really hard.

I tried lots of different things. I wasn't afraid of changing the voicing to see how it would sound with this note in the bottom and the top or whatever. I experimented a lot, and I really had to trust my vision. I would go and listen to a bunch of stuff, but I didn't do that in the way that maybe I will in the future. I didn't want to become a carbon copy of someone else's arrangements. I think that's an incredible way to study, and it's how I learned the saxophone. But for this point in my composition, arranging, and writing, I wanted to understand, focus on, and find out what my strings arrangement or orchestrator voice was in this context.

I didn't want to get too wrapped up in, "Billy Strayhorn did it like this," or "Miguel Atwood-Ferguson did it like this," or "Terrence Blanchard did it like this." I didn't want to do that yet, and I'm excited to begin that process of analyzing my own [process] and theirs at a later date.

I went through lots of trial and error, lots of time, lots of experimentation. I had some books that I was dipping in and out of, but I wish I was more of a book person, and I'm trying to be, but I think I'm a doer rather than "sit and analyze, then apply." That's a work in progress in terms of my education style.

I think overcoming-doubts-wise, it was just pure perseverance. I had moments that felt like pure revelation, that, "Oh my god, this is working perfectly. I can't believe this sounds exactly the way I want it to sound, and I'm so excited it's reached this place. I wonder if I can lead it here, lead it there." I also had moments where I was like, "I don't know why this isn't working" or, "I don't know how to get to what I can hear in my head." But we got there eventually. I had a lot of support from friends who listened to me say, "I absolutely can't believe how much work this is."

That's the long and short of it. It was a real journey, and I feel so fulfilled because I did it myself. I grew up in orchestras and I've seen and heard amazing arrangements, incredible conductors, so there was a lot of pressure on myself to kind of be that, until I realized you just have to go forth and do, because if you get in your own way, you'll talk yourself out of trying something and beginning the journey of becoming adept and excellent at it.

As I'm asking you about what you've done, you sometimes answer by talking about what you're excited to do next.

Is your mind the kind that's like, even if you've completed the album, you're already thinking about what's next?

Yes and no. I don't even want to begin to think about doing another album because it's so much work. Even though I love it, I'm very much still in *Odyssey*, but I also do recognize that, with the strings world, I'm at the beginning of that journey, so there's lots of things I don't know. That's what keeps me curious, excited, and ready to explore—and not necessarily for anyone else to hear. There's loads of writing that I did while doing this album that was for me—it was for development. I can be someone that doesn't sit still in terms of creative projects, but I'm hoping I do remain in *Odyssey* world for a while.

How do you know that an album or a song is done? Since jazz is more of a collective generation of music, is that a collective decision, or is that your decision?

It's my decision. This is my music at the end of the day. I know that's a bit of a rubbish answer, but the music is done, in a sense, before it gets to the band, and then we perform it as us. But the music is written, the chart is written, the map is in front of everyone, and what comes next is inflection, personality, and individuality within the context of the collective.

In terms of post-production and every part other than the playing and writing, I know when it's done—I think that's just the easiest way to say it. I'm not a chaser of some gold star in the future of said piece of music. If it feels ready and cooked, then I'll absolutely serve it and let it go. If it's not there yet, I'll work until it's ready. And that may take some time, going away, coming back, going away, coming back. I don't have any qualms about letting go, because you get bored, and I don't want to get bored of my music because I have to go and enjoy it. I think I have quite a good—I don't know if discernment is the right word, but I just understand when this particular [song] has gone as far as it can go in this moment.

To hear you talk a little more about collaboration: Jazz is an especially collaborative form of music, but are there any areas of your creative process in which you need solitude?

100%. The writing process. I find that I enjoy the quiet. I've done loads of projects where they've been collective bands, but for my band, I like to have everything done from a logistical time-saving point of view, and then we can shape it, build upon it, try something out; [if] it doesn't work, cool, scrap it, try something else. But I like to have the score ready, the music written, some ideas in my notes of, like, "Not sure about this section, but let's try these two things and see which one feels right to me in the moment and live." I can feed off of people really well, but I enjoy building something slowly in the quiet by myself.

It's interesting to hear you speak about the writing process being one of solitude, because when I listen to *Odyssey* as compared to *Source*, I hear more guest vocals. What creative instinct drew you toward including more guest vocals on *Odyssey*? What did you learn about yourself from bringing more guests into the fold?

The vocals came in after everything was done, so in a way, there was more space in my mind to delve into that process, which made a huge difference. If I was trying to do it all at the same time, I would've just dropped the ball, or some things would've gotten missed. They feel like they occupy different parts of my creative self, so I want to give them the adequate time they need.

I learned the power of language. I am all for instrumental music resonating with you, taking you there, transcending you to another place, and making you think about things or feel things that you didn't even know were going to come up. I think when you are not dictating something with lyrics, you can go anywhere. And I wanted to support that and provide something else because I also understand the beauty and power of having someone speak absolutely true to what you are feeling, and thinking, "Oh my goodness, I needed the words, and those are the words I didn't even realize."

I have that [feeling] a lot because I wouldn't say that lyricism is my strong point, or my gift or my purpose, yet. Maybe I'll go into it more. I'm fascinated by the way that lyricists tell stories, and I always have been. I've always listened to a lot of vocal music, and it was a conscious decision to involve and collaborate with more of my favorite lyricists and vocalists.

When I had written the tunes, I thought to myself, "The instrumental is done. This one needs a vocal, and this one needs a vocal, and this one needs a vocal." And then I sat down and was like, "I hear Esperanza [Spalding] on this one." I didn't for a second think she'd say yes, just because she's Esperanza and she's incredibly busy and at an amazing point in her career and has done so much. When she said yes, I was like, "Oh my goodness, this is a dream come true." Making something with her and seeing the way she constructs the story was absolutely phenomenal. I said the exact same about Ritchie and [with] Georgia [Anne Muldrow]: "The tune is done, I hear Ritchie on this. The tune is done, I hear Georgia on this."

And then, by some weird twist of fate, I ended up contributing my own lyrics to the album on "Triumphant." I'd written the chorus ages ago, but I had no intention of doing a spoken word piece since I never have. I was like, "We've got all this space in the tune. I don't want it to be a saxophone. I want it to be a different kind of message, a real poignant end of the album, pulling everything together. This is the space for it." The person I asked wasn't available, and we were right up against the deadline, and I had this idea of, "I want this now."

I didn't envision [myself on vocals] at the beginning of the process. We were out of time, and I was in Brazil, and Kwes [*Odyssey*'s producer] was like, "Well, why don't you do it?" And then another friend also said, "You should write something." I was like, "What if it's rubbish?" And then I just did it. I was like, "You know what? I'm not going to think too hard about it. Let's just go. Let's just do it. We're out of time to overthink this."

I'm really proud of it because it says everything I wanted to say in a way I didn't think I was able to. I don't think I have a beautiful command of language, but this hopefully marks something of continuing in that direction in the future.

It's quite powerful to put words to something. I learned a great deal about myself from working with such phenomenal lyricists and watching them construct a story.

A theme I'm hearing as you talk about *Odyssey* is that you were trying new things and taking a lot of risks. Does that sound right to you?

Yeah, definitely. I had a really strong vision and plan, even though I probably couldn't put it into words for you, but I knew where I wanted to go, how I wanted this to feel, that kind of thing. The vision was much bigger than anywhere I have been before. That was the risk-taking and the pushing, the really sitting with myself and saying, "How am I going to elevate from what I've done before?" That was my goal, to push myself creatively and compositionally, to make something that I'm proud of creatively and artistically.

I'm curious about your choice of Kwes as a producer because when I think of his work, I think of electronic and maybe pop/R&B songs first. Why Kwes? Why have you worked with him of all people?

We worked together on Source, and [it] was such a phenomenal process of like-minded people. And also, I love electronic music, I love soul, I love R&B, so I need someone who understands the full spectrum of my musicality. And Kwes does wholeheartedly because he loves music. It's not like he calls himself an electronic musician. He's a musician, he's a producer, and I worked with him in the band Nerija. He produced our record. This was before *Source*, and I had such an amazing time meeting his creativity, and his approach works really well with me.

I am very driven. My vision is ironclad-strong in my mind. That doesn't mean it doesn't shift and change, but I'm heading somewhere, so I need someone who's ready to get on board and have that same childlike wonder when you make something fit and work. And Kwes has that wholeheartedly.

I have only great things to say about Kwes because the process has been nothing short of amazing. He asks me questions and can take yeses and nos or, "I like that there, but I don't like it there." Or, "I changed my mind about this thing we decided yesterday." He's an amazing facilitator, and he was the best support and the best driver alongside my drive.

I didn't know until researching you for this chat that you played flute on "Virile" by Moses Sumney. What was

surprising to me about that wasn't that you were on a Moses Sumney record—it's that you were playing flute instead of sax. Was that a first-time thing for you? Why flute instead of sax?

It wasn't the first time I've recorded flute. I've recorded quite a few things—they're just not under my name—but one thing that is under my name is the record I've done with Maisha. That was probably the first time I was on flute on record, and I started playing flute on stage in that band.

I'm self-taught on the flute, haven't had a flute lesson. So I feel very self-conscious about that, even though I don't believe you need [lessons]. If you're dedicating yourself to the practice, then you're dedicating yourself to the practice. However, I dedicate myself to my saxophone practice and my composition practice, and if I have any more time, it goes to piano.

I love, love, love the flute. I love playing it. I love the way it makes me feel, the timbre, the texture it holds. I just wish I spent more time diving into it. I know so many incredible flute players that it leads to that insecurity of, "I need to spend way more time on it before I could ever go back on stage."

Moses Sumney asked for flute, and someone put him in touch with me. I'm a huge Moses Sumney fan—have been from the very, very first recording. It was a full-circle moment for me, and I wanted to show up, be what he heard, and add a sprinkle of me [into] that. He was ironclad in his purpose, drive, and vision, but also very open to letting that sway and move ever so slightly. That was a really wonderful process. [It also reminded] me that I can do something that doesn't feel like my everyday, and I'm really grateful for him providing that space.

It was just wonderful to be involved in his world of creating—that record [*græ*] is incredible. All of his records are. It was really wonderful to feel a part of this rich universe and texture that he built. It was phenomenal. I enjoyed it.

Nubya Garcia Recommends:

Five pieces of art that have stayed with me and inspired me!

Frank Bowling, "Sacha Jason Guyana Dreams," 1989

Aubery Williams, "El Dorado," 1960

Nádia Taquary, "Transmutação," 2021

Robert Delauney, "Windows Open Simultaneously (First Part, Third Motif)," 1912

Marianne Werefkin, "The Red Tree," 1910

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