

On making whatever you want, whenever you want



Musician and comedian Reggie Watts on juggling a variety of projects, making technology work for you rather than against you, surrounding yourself with the right people, and letting “fun” be your primary creative impulse.

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As told to Kailee McGee, 3328 words.

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How do you balance work life, and life-life? Is there a clear separation?

Work life and life-life... You know, I don't think there is a clear separation. I'm not at work for long enough for it to really cause me to get into a zone too long? I'm at work, at most, two hours, but most of the time like an hour and a half. That's four days a week. Also, even interviews and stuff like that—which I don't really consider work—I just think it's part of your life if you choose to do certain things in life. So, I don't think there's a separation. I just kind of view it as a continuation. They're all part of life. Life is what you're doing.

Do you ever take days off?

I try to, but it doesn't ever quite work out. I tried for a while to keep Fridays open and Sundays open, and then just stuff... I don't know. When you have stuff coming out, and there's promo and press, sometimes there's just no way of getting around a scheduling thing, so it just kind of ends up getting scheduled. Days off are rare. I have to go out of town. Even then it could be like, “Could we sneak in a phoner?” Which again, it's fine. I don't mind. I like interviews, I think they're really fun. But, it's hard for me to take time off. I have to really be very firm about it, in order to manifest it and make it happen. So the answer is, I try.

Do you have a morning routine?

What do I do? I get up. I try not to check my phone before getting out of bed, but that usually fails, because I have a lot of automated things connected to the phone.

Like what?

My thermostats, my sleep stats. I have a smart bed, so it tells me how I slept the night before. I like to check that and see, “How did I sleep?” I also have a ring that tells me how I slept, so I check that, too. I always cross-reference the two. I don't really have a routine. I mean, I'm trying. I love the idea of a routine—it's fun. I think it's important. I think you should have a routine, but for me, it always shifts.

I'll get up, and I'll be like, “Oh, I got up at a good time. Now I can get up, and I can eat breakfast right away, and I can have my energy whatever, my substitute for coffee drink thing, and then take care of something, and then go to the gym.” But then what ends up happening is, I'm in bed until the last possible minute. I get up.

I guzzle my breakfast down. I kind of move some stuff around for a second, and then I'm like, "Oh shit, I need to go to the gym." Then I get into my car and then I'm speeding to the gym. Then I get to the gym, and usually I'm there a little late or right on time, and then that's my morning. It's random. But, I have a dream of having consistency.

I've heard you have a new app. What is an app?

An app is an application. That's it. My app is called WattsApp, and it's kind of like my own social media page, kind of. It has videos; it has text... photographs if I want, live streaming. I can lock media to a certain radius. Oh, and there's a store where I sell all my old electronics. That's what the app does for me.

How do you feel about it?

I like it. We haven't made a big splash announcement yet, so it's just out. I'm making a commercial for it in the next couple weeks. I just love the idea of making fake commercials, and loading my app with all the dumb shit I've always wanted to do, without stuff like Instagram/Facebook bullshit getting in the way, and tracking, and all that dumb shit that doesn't really matter. I want a place where fans and friends can just go to see the stuff that I post, and know they're not being tracked, and they're just seeing that shit. There's no social component, so they don't have to worry about comments and all that stuff. It's a safe space for people to check out my shit. Then there'll be cool events on occasion, a notification like a live music event, a live streaming music event.

What do you think it means to be "real" these days?

To be "real?" I think to be "real," these days, if you're talking about the digital aspect of life, and the fact that we can project all different kinds of versions of ourselves, I'd say being real just feels like something honest. You're excited about something and you post something because you're excited about it. You share a link to something because you're interested in it. As long as it feels honest and you're excited and it doesn't feel like you're under some kind of aesthetic surveillance police, like you're posting something and you're having to check to make sure it's okay with somebody, or the current status quo—as long as you don't feel like you're editing yourself for something that's other than yourself, I think that's the way, at least digitally, to remain honest.

I see a lot of posts on Instagram, and I'm like, "I don't know, man. I don't know what that is. I don't connect with it." You can still sense if something's honest, when you're looking at someone's profile. The human eye can detect so many subtleties. When you're looking at someone's profile, and you see a certain type of photo, even if it's manicured, you can tell, "Oh, they wanted that. They wanted it to look that way. They're projecting an image, but it's them, and they're behind it." There's a way of trying to be honest with yourself, even though you have all these crazy editing tools at your fingertips, and you can curate stuff. But as long as it's self-curated, I think people can tell if it's real.

What's your relationship like with your phone?

It's like everybody's, I'm sure. Love/hate. I have always been an early adopter of all kinds of communication technologies. I always was ahead of the curve and figured out a way—even though I was poor—to have those technologies. So my relationship with my phone is... I understand it's a portal to another version of ourselves. Like, we're kind of cyborgs at this point. Whenever you're holding your phone in your hand, you're essentially a cyborg. You're integrating with a machine that allows you to enter into a formatted digital version of our current analog world. So, I appreciate it as a tool in that sense, but I also realize that we're in a zone right now where capitalism is making things really suck, especially on the social media side, where everything is being tracked.

The other difficult thing with my phone—it's just the user interface. I'm spending so much time, like, "Did I spell that correctly? Oh no, spell check is not working. Okay, let me try that again. You know what? Let me go to voice dictation. Oh, voice dictation for some reason isn't working correctly? Let me try it again. Oh, let me reboot my phone. Oh, is my Bluetooth on? My Bluetooth is not working. Did wifi... Oh, the wifi is off. That's why

my location tracking isn't working that well. Oh, is this working? No, I pressed this. I pressed this once again. It's not registering. It's too small of a zone."

Sometimes I feel like throwing the phone. Technology should work for us. We shouldn't be working for technology. That's what bums me out. Sometimes I'm like, "This is really cool. What a great tool." That's like 25% of the time. The rest of the time, I'm just like, "What the fuck is going on with this? Why did they fucking design it this way?" I'm just so pissed. It causes so much anxiety. And then the social media aspect of comments, and, "That's not what I meant. You don't understand me. This is what I mean." I don't know. It's a weird time right now.

What is your favorite part of your creative output right now?

Trying to make more difficult and complex ideas and realities manifest—things that appear to be big and challenging, I'm trying to make them feel attainable and easy to accomplish. Like, "I want to do an improvised and livestream sitcom. Let's just do that." I'm practicing trying to manifest large-scale things in an easy way.

Do you map out your months, year, career? Is it all by design, or are you just improvising as you go along?

I'm just improvising. I have ideas in my head, things I want to achieve. I have those kind of floating out on the horizon, and I just try to make sure that things are happening, or my team is kind of focused on helping manifest those things. I'm just trying to attain a feeling, really. The feeling is total creative flow and freedom. I want to be able to make whatever I want, whenever I want, and release it whenever I want. That's really the state that I want to remain in at least 90-95% of the time. Whether it's a short film, full-length feature film, a small video game, a weird podcast—whatever form of media, song, album, music video—I want to be able to make those things, push those things into reality, whenever I want to.

How do you decide to start a project? Is it a conscious decision?

I usually have a very clear idea of what I want. If I have an idea, I'll mention it to a producer, or I'll just kind of bounce it around to my creative friends, see how they react to it. Talking about it with people just reinforces it. Then I just kind of put it on the list. I mention it to my producer, and then she writes it down. Then we decide if we're going to work on that, or we're going to work on another thing. It just gets added to the list, and then we just kind of go through it. It's really an improvisation. I don't really write things down. I just keep things in my head and imagine how I'd like it to feel, and how I'd like to see it, and how I'd like it to look when it's released, when it's in reality.

How do you decide what to focus on today, and what to focus on this week?

It just depends on whatever I'm feeling strongest about. WhatsApp was something I wanted to do for a long time, and thankfully my friend Sasha Markov—who's probably one of the greatest advertising creative minds currently in existence—she hooked me up with the right people to find this developer, that made it possible for me to afford to be able to make the app, and someone who operates in a way that I enjoy operating, which is trouble-free and quick. I've got an idea, that person knows how to execute it, and we're done.

Sometimes when you're working with people, they're looking at you for the vision. Once you explain it, if they're not able to turn and look at the thing that you're seeing, and they don't see it, they're not the right people to work with. You are not the vision. The vision is out there. You need people who can see what you are looking at that are like, "Oh fuck. Right. I got it." Then they're in service of the vision. Now you're on a team that's all working for the same shit.

That's the thing I've been learning. Since Sasha hooked me up with this dream of mine to have an app, it's crazy. I'm like, "Whoa. This is insane. This is one of my recent life goals, and now it's in existence." It's on the app store. I can go there. I have a platform now. I don't have to ask anybody permission to do anything. I can do whatever I want, any time I want. And if people want to look at it, they can. If they don't, it's fine. It's

free. I'm happy.

What kind of people do you surround yourself with, creatively?

Assholes, and dicks, and fuckers. No, no. No. I tend to surround myself with people who can get shit done, but in a way that's not like, OCD anxiety. I don't like it when people add that layer. It's unnecessary. I like to surround myself with people who view things practically—who are happy, inspired, and motivated to make things happen, and who are taking care of themselves, who really prioritize their health and their wellbeing, and celebrate life, and take advantage of life. I like to feel healthy, communicative, playful, expansive, open, whilst not running away from darkness and problems, things like that. You know, people with high awareness levels.

What advice would you give your 16-year-old self?

Work on your communication skills in relationships. Like, learn how to communicate what you're really feeling, and don't be afraid of being able to communicate that. That's probably the biggest one, because it's not reinforced, especially for young men. It's just not encouraged. You know, like keep it hidden, tuck it away. Or, project this certain idea of masculinity, or coolness. It's just not healthy to maintain that style of outlook, into your 20s, 30s, 40s. I mean, it's never too late to learn, but I would say that to him, because it's a huge deal.

What advice do you have for millennial artists who aren't sure exactly who they are, or how to find their specific voice?

Don't look at the outside world to find yourself. It's not really out there. The inside informs what you're receiving from the outside, so you have to start from the inside. Then, the reflection of the outside world informs what's on the inside. That really is just a matter of having fun. It really is.

If you feel confused or you're like, "I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know where I'm going. I want to do this thing, but I'm unsure." Don't fixate on the uncertainty that you're feeling. Just know what you are certain about—what brings you joy and what makes you feel like you're having a good time. Have a good time. And when you have a good time, it opens your mind and it puts you in an inspirational state, and you're like, "Oh fuck, I know what to do." Because you're waiting for the wave, you know? It's like we're all just surfers, out looking for the wave.

Some people are terrible at finding waves. They're just out there and they're like, "I don't know what to do. What am I doing?" And, it's really about calming yourself down, and listening, because everything in the entire universe—all of reality—is constantly feeding you information. And whether you want to be the victim of an onslaught of information, or whether you want to be able to quiet yourself down and allow the information that needs to come in, to come in, and the rest of the shit that doesn't matter, just fucking let it go.

Learning is a slow process. It's like undoing a knot. It's really tight, and you're like, "How am I ever going to get out of this knot?" But then you just slowly work at it. It slowly gets looser, and you get a little bit of space here, a little bit of space, a little bit of space. Then before you know it, you're unraveling the knot, and what was once impossible is now possible. It all starts with small things, you know?

Things that you get frustrated with, you're like, "You know what? Why am I frustrated about that? Why don't I just slow down, and reapproach it? To a certain extent, always look for the easy, most fluid path. Anything that gets in your way, just get out of that situation. Don't listen to that situation. It's only going to reinforce your frustration and lock you down, and create more uncertainty about yourself.

So for me, it's about quieting down, taking a breath, and thinking about, "What would be fun to do right now? You know what? I haven't called my friend in a long time. I'm going to call them." Doing shit that you know you want to do, but you've just been putting it off.

Reggie Watts Recommends:

1. Watch the series called Undone. I would recommend seeing that.
2. Checking out any Level products. They deal in cannabis products, and they're like extracts, sublingual pills, things like that. Their whole thing is about micro dosing THC. They have a huge variety of THC. I don't work for the company or anything like that, it's just, I'm on a crusade to show that cannabis is more than just getting fucked up. It actually can work in a really targeted, precise way, to kind of combat the effects of a stressful lifestyle. I would recommend going to CCA, because it's all women-run and owned, and it's fucking dope. They know their shit. Go to CCA, check out Level products. They're the shit, and there's so many to choose from.
3. Say hello to people more often – like good afternoon, good morning, good evening, when you're passing people on the street, and not being on the phone as much. It's really small, but it actually feels really good when someone says, "Oh, good evening." It can change your whole night. It's weird. It's such a small, tiny thing. I know that Millennials in particular are really buried in their phones, and they're like, "Whatever." But, just saying hello, and like holding a door open for somebody, just engaging with people a little bit more publicly I think is a good thing. It doesn't have to be anything more than that.
4. Some type of workout. Some kind of hike or something physical that you can do, that's fun, or you can make fun, because without your health, you've got nothing. Literally. Nothing you have materially, nothing you've achieved in your life matters. Once you're not feeling healthy, it just takes over everything. Take your health seriously. If you're on the fucking Juul, figure out how to get the fuck off the Juul. If you're drinking a little bit too much, consider drinking less, trying to be a little bit more of a connoisseur about what you're doing, and less of an escapism in that way.
5. Practice loving yourself no matter what state you're in, no matter how you're pissed off at yourself for not doing something. Give yourself a break. If you start loving yourself, you start giving yourself a break, you start enjoying problem-solving. Also, if you're complaining about something over and over again, but you're not doing anything to change it, recognize that. Be mindful of the things that you're complaining about. Think about how you can solve that problem. You've got the potential. You've got people around you in your life who support you. If you don't have people around you in your life who support you, then fucking dump those motherfuckers. Get with people that can recognize who you are and not reinforce the terrible, inefficient things in your life. You can love that person, and still get rid of them for a while. That's it.

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Vocation

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