

On adapting to creative limitations and learning to thrive



Musician N8NOFACE discusses being open to possibilities, being self-taught and the creative benefits of getting sober.

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As told to J. Bennett, 3419 words.

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How would you describe your creative philosophy?

First off, I stay open to everything. My work is music, but I'll draw, write—I love poetry—so I'm trying to always keep the creative muscle and imagination going. I try to be open to everything—no rules, no complaints of lack of tools or what I can't do. I just try my best to get my idea created with any means I've got. Everything will be the poor man's version, but I get ideas that I just need to try.

You write every day. Have you always been that way?

Yes. I would say I started doing that early. When I first started doing music, I was 18 years old. Growing up, I loved all music, just listening to it on the radio, or my family playing it, but hip-hop just grabbed me, and I wanted to do that. I was a young Mexican-Jewish kid in Tucson, Arizona, this dirt down by the border. In rap, it was all about bars and rhymes, so I was like, "Okay, I got to write and practice—what they call 'keep the sword sharp.'" And so, every day I was just writing raps.

I got into poetry because my dad would write these poems when we were 10, 11 years old, and then he would read it to us after dinner. So, I always had a love for that, even at a young age. Then rap and hip-hop came. And hip-hop is a competitive art form. You're trying to beat the other guy in a battle. So, it was always like, "Yo, I gotta be sharp with it." But that started way back when.

My girl journals. She'll just write. So, now I find myself just writing constantly. But I started working on it every day, starting when I was 18.

So, when you're working on a record, you have a vault of lyrical ideas to pull from.

Exactly. I'm always writing, and even songs will come about sometimes that way. I'll make this piece of music, but the [lyrical] idea isn't coming. I have journals and books laying around everywhere, and I'll read something and maybe I pull one line of a poem I wrote years ago. There's the song. I'm a weirdo, so the subject matter, the frequency of the story, needs to match the frequency of the song. Sometimes I just wait a lot. I'll dig from old stuff I've written years ago. Then you got to make it fit rhythmically, once you're starting to now put these words to a rhythm and a beat, but yeah—there's always something to pull from. I do it a lot.

When did punk come into the picture for you?

I think I was like 15. I remember seeing Suicidal Tendencies come on The Box—it was a show; we could order music videos. My mom killed me because me and my buddies were just ordering over and over. I had never seen anything like it. The crew I came from in Tucson, we knew about punks from skating around the city or seeing them on TV, but we didn't know any. When I saw Suicidal Tendencies, these guys dressing like homeboys from my area, and yet they're making rock n' roll, it was crazy. Then I found out this stuff existed in LA for years, and there's punk rock gangs, and all that. But I didn't know at the time. So, Suicidal came on my radar when I was like 15, and I loved it. I went and bought the tapes, but I didn't go dive crazy into punk. It was just, "Okay, this is dope." I listened to it, but it didn't make me go any further.

Then, years later, I opened up a hip-hop shop in Tucson. Now I'm talking my late 20s, maybe 30 even. At the shop, I'm selling records, I'm selling graffiti supplies—paint and all that—and the graffiti writers who are coming in the store, they got no problem telling me the music I'm playing sucks. Then they show me the music they're interested in, from rock to indie to punk—everything—and I just fell in love with it. Always being a guy who was open to everything, I just dove in headfirst.

How did you decide that you were going to make music that could exist in both worlds—hip-hop and punk?

You know what's so funny? My buddies will tell you, back when I was just doing rap, there'd be times I'd call it "punk rap." I wasn't even that heavy into punk yet, but I approached my hip-hop with this punk aesthetic. Everyone else was wearing gold chains, and I just was sloppy, messy, and didn't give a fuck. And I don't mean just my appearance, but even the textures of my music. Once the graffiti writers started showing me their music, I had a buddy of mine who was into hip-hop with me and we were like, "Let's try to make a different style of music with these machines that we make rap with." I had my SP-1200 [drum machine], my ASR-10 [sampling keyboard], and again, at this point, I'm 30 years old. I've been doing rap all these years, but I just did it for me. I didn't put myself out there.

I just started experimenting with different sounds with my vocals, but because I didn't know anyone who played instruments, I was like, "Yo, let me try to do it with these machines." So, it just came from an urge of wanting to creatively do something different, but only using the tools I had. I had no buddies to go start a band with. Again, even in my 30s, none of my crew or friends or people I felt comfortable with played instruments. And I was too shy of a guy to go post up in a music store looking for a band.

There are a lot of benefits to working by yourself, though. You learn to do everything. Is that the experience you had?

Yeah. Again, I'm always so shy to talk to real musicians because coming from hip-hop, it was sample-based. I was still a sampler who was like, "Okay, I got to chop this up. I'm not just going to take a loop of music—I got to do something to make it mine." I always had that mindset from young. That taught me time signatures and beats and tempos. But I'm just a vocalist. Even to this day, I view myself as a vocalist who had to make beats because I had nobody. I still barely know how to play chords. A lot of my music is done playing single notes or doing weird things to produce some sound. But yeah, I definitely think that when I finally got in the room with some real musicians, I felt confident enough to hang with them because I understood some of the language.

In Tucson, you were part of a musical duo called Crimekillz. What was the process like with that?

Well, I was doing music by myself all the way up until Crimekillz. For so long, I always did music by myself. Again, I had a crew of guys, my good friends, who I fucking love, they looked at the music I was doing like, "Oh, that's a hobby. We're over here getting money. You're wasting time." So, I was working by myself forever. The kid I did Crimekillz with, his mom was my high school teacher. He knew about me and my friends, and he was one of the kids coming into the store showing me different music. I showed him Crystal Castles, like, "Check out this weird band using video game sounds," and that's where we came up with the idea for Crimekillz. We took some Game Boys and this genre called chiptune, where you write music on the Game Boy, and did punk to it. He was the first person I ever worked with. Then I moved to Long Beach, and I was back on my own again. But it wasn't a big change

because I had been doing it so long.

He was the guy who knew how to break into the Game Boys to make music, and you did the lyrics.

Yeah. Me and him were exploring these different genres of music, and I found a love for them. But I always go back to where I come from and my crew. My dream was always, "How do I make this weirdo music that I love with these harsh frequencies or synthesizers, but make these guys over here enjoy it?"

I decided to tell the stories you might find in rap, the stuff we're living. So, I brought that, and this kid was the hacker, the modifier—he was making the music. We broke up because we were just a mess, and I came to Long Beach. He went off on his own journey. I still wanted to do that stuff, but on my own. So, I had to figure out how to make punk music with synthesizers, now that the Game Boy was gone. I had already been learning about the Screemers and other synth punk bands from the '70s, like Fad Gadget, that would incorporate synths but do punk. That's when I was like, "This is my shit right here."

When he was writing the music, did you find it was pushing you in directions that maybe you wouldn't have gone otherwise?

Oh, yeah. I loved it. That's one thing I'll always go back to. That kid and me, our chemistry was just so spot-on. Any music he would show me, he knew exactly what I wanted to hear, and vice versa. When we showed each other bands, it was like we knew. He never showed me a band where I was like, "Yeah, that's cool, but it's just not my vibe." I had never, ever experienced chemistry with anyone like him, man. Wherever he went musically was exactly where I wanted to go. And we would talk about it, I'd be like, "Yo, can you do this?" And he would take it there, but we were always so in pocket and on the same page. Sharing that with someone is so cool. As much as a mess as we were, and sometimes he'd break my heart, I just loved it. I never experienced anything like that. It was really beautiful.

When you say you guys were a mess, you mean you were on drugs.

Yeah, me and him were both fucking nuts. Coming up in Tucson at that time, in the 90s, drugs were so cheap. And being right by the border, they were the best drugs in the world. So, me and him were just... well, the songs are online. We're talking about bringing drugs over, and then there's just so much of it, you do it. We were really bad.

Did getting clean change your creative perspective?

I'm only a little over four years clean now, but in the beginning, I was really scared of it. As silly as it sounds, I thought I'd lose this thing I had that would help me write these songs that I enjoyed. It's not like I was depending on music for money—I was still holding down a job—but it was some weird loop. I was like, "If the pain goes away, I'm not going to be able to write music I enjoy," or "This funk that I have is going to go away." And I found out I was so wrong, man. Now, being sober, if I wanted to write a depressive dark song, I can still visit that emotion. In an almost weird way, I can tap it quicker now, being sober.

I once heard an actor say, "Being light makes you able to get to the heavy emotions quicker." And I find that to be so true. But at first, I was so scared that if you took the pain away, I'd lose the paint. Now I know that's not true.

People fall into this trap of thinking that drugs are going to make them more creative. It might be true for short bursts, but in the long-term it's the opposite.

I saw it happening in the SoundCloud era, where these rap kids were loving to get on drugs and pop pills, and then using that as their aesthetic for the music. And we lost a lot of kids, man. A lot of them passed away who had a lot of talent. When I was making hip-hop in the early days, that was a bad thing: you didn't want to be a junkie. In rap, as silly as it sounds, you wanted to be the guy selling drugs—not using them. Drugs came on way

later for me, in my late 20s, way after I was making music. We do all grow up with our favorite musicians being addicts, but I don't think they did it to help their music. It just happened in their life. And I get really scared when kids play with it to give their music that vibe. You don't need that, man.

You've made a ton of music in your closet with a drum machine, sampler and microphone. You're not in a fancy studio. Your aesthetic has been shaped by doing everything yourself with the equipment that you have.

It's weird—it's such a balance. Of course, I would love to get into a studio. I would love to have unlimited resources to make music. But you're right, man. One of my favorite albums is Cody Chesnutt's *The Headphone Masterpiece*, and he made that whole album on headphones in his bedroom, and I just love it. But I remember once he started popping and getting into real studios, he was still writing beautiful music, but sometimes a melody on a fucked-up lo-fi level is beautiful, and that same melody overproduced becomes a fucking Disney song or something.

Now, I can find big pieces of music that I love. I'm not against it. But I remember at my first poetry reading, the girl that was introducing me said, "He doesn't know what he's doing and he's doing it all wrong, but in that he found his sound." I like that. It's kind of true. So, if I want to make a fake band, how do I make my synthesizer sound like a guitar? Let me run it through these pedals. It's just me not knowing how to do it correctly got me my sound.

My girlfriend makes zines and does photography, and any time we see people waiting to create because they think they lack the tools, or they're waiting for a tool, we always kind of bite our lip, like, "Just do it." We're not against tech or bigger things, but my rule is, I don't let my lack of budget or even a lack of talent stop me from creating.

Your new record, *As of Right Now*, was not recorded in your closet. Why did you want to change it up for this one?

My past four EPs that I've done where it was all my music, my manager hooked me up with Chico Mann of Here Lies Man. He started fleshing out my demos, adding guitars, building them up. And then, working with him so much, he was like, "I've always wanted to make this certain style of music, and your voice would fit perfect with it. Let me produce you." And, like I said, I'm never against anything. I was like, "Let's play."

So, that's what happened. Chico Mann produced this entire album, and I wrote to it. It was a sound I wanted to do. There're things I dream about and want to do, but I lack the skill set to do it. But he got me there, and I'm really excited about it.

And these are love songs, right?

Yeah. I always write about love, but my whole thing has always been outlaw. I love the outlaw who still has a heart. I always write from that place. But with this stuff, there's no street shit on it. All my other releases have street tales, but this one is only about love.

Are you trying to get away from street stories?

No. Even right now I'm writing more rowdy stuff again. But with this one, it's just that the frequency of the music never spoke that way, like, "Hey, one of these songs needs that type of story." But I'm a weirdo. I think ideas just get sent to you.

In a previous interview, you said that no matter what the specific topic might be in your lyrics, your music is about being different. As you become more well-known and your music becomes more popular, do you feel less different?

No, because I'm still out here in the streets. I still ride the train. I don't own a car. Someone wrote a comment like, "You're on tour with Limp Bizkit. You're part of the commercial machine." But it don't feel like that in my

fucking life, I'll tell you that. Don't let social media fool you: You might see pictures of me with Travis Barker, but I'm still out here scratching for a dollar.

But as far as sonically, I've always been attracted to songs that can almost have a commercial, or catchy, or a popular sense to it—something that everyone could vibe to—but then I still like the left of center weird stuff. What was always my dream is, how do I write a fucking perfect pop song but have it be just weird and different and gutter and fucked up and even harsh to more commercial ears?

You usually put out several releases a year, which allows you to get new ideas out quickly. What do you like about that?

I know some people say, "Quality over quantity," and I think however you market your music is almost a reflection of you. I'm an ex-meth head; I'm a spaz. So, even the way you see my music come out is truly how and who I am. I know working with Stones Throw will kind of tighten that leash. I'm signed to a label, so I can't just constantly drop music. That was my MO being a DIY artist. I'm working on my full-length for Stones Throw now, and it's a different process for me because I've never written songs for an album. Each song is its own universe. All my albums that ever came out have been a label coming up to me and going, "We want to put out your record." And I said, "Cool. Here's 40 songs—you curate an album."

Do you worry at all if fans will accept the different style you're doing on *As Of Right Now*?

Some kid wrote a comment on my YouTube, like, "All Nate's newest stuff is soft. I miss the punk Nate. Now your name's N8Nopunk." I was like, "Damn!" But the very next day, I was in a studio doing a feature for a grimy LA punk band. So, I know I'm going to upset people, but I hope they stay with me through the journey. Find the album that you like from me and listen to it. But man, I just go where my heart goes. Someone once told me I'd be hard to get signed, because in the middle of making the record that the label wants, I'm going to be like, "I want to do bluegrass country." Now, I'm not a guy that just goes to genres. I always try to think about, how do I make this me?

But I've got to do everything, man. I don't believe in boxing in. My uncle rode bulls. Why can't I write a country song? I've cried and been a drug addict, so I write songs about that. Then I just choose the frequency of how I tell the story. It's never fake or dishonest—it's always with pure intentions. But I'm going to go everywhere, and I'm just grateful that people go with me.

N8NOFACE recommends:

Book: [Blood Meridian](#) by Cormac McCarthy

TV: [MobLand](#) starring Tom Hardy

Music: [Jimothy Lacoste](#)

Food: Sonoratown (Long Beach)

Also: "Exercise as much as you can."

Name

N8NOFACE

Vocation

musician, rapper

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