

On letting your work be judged



Rapper and songwriter Jamall Bufford on the importance of building your own support system, the ups and downs of promoting yourself, and understanding the power of your own voice.

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As told to Ambrose Mary Gallagher, 3178 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Money](#), [Day jobs](#), [Adversity](#), [Independence](#), [Business](#).

When did you first realize that you were an artist, or first think of yourself that way?

I was definitely doing art-type things before I considered myself an artist. I started writing—I guess raps—in high school. It was ninth grade, I was 13. At the time it was just a fun way to pass time... I think when I realized that this was something that I could potentially get good at and want to share with other people is when I found friends who did a similar thing. I think that's when I considered myself an artist. Or a rapper.

I think the term artist really didn't come into my lexicon of describing what I do until I was closer to adulthood. I was doing it the whole time, all through high school, all through college, but it wasn't until having deep hip-hop conversations with people that I realized this really is an art. Like, this is something that people value a great deal. Ever since then I have definitely considered myself an artist. But when I was young, it was just like, "Yeah. I like to rap."

What did finding other people do for your creative process?

It's huge. Finding people who are interested in similar things as you, it played a huge role in me being the artist that I am. The fact that I am still doing it, almost at age 40, is because I have people around me who still do it and are still interested in it. Many times along this journey, if I was the only person I knew around me who had this passion, I definitely would have stopped. Because sometimes, the money is not there. When the money is not there, it's like, "Why am I doing this?" I get it, it's an art form, it's fulfilling, but when you become an adult and it's time to pay bills, it's like, okay, "What's really going on here?" Doing this by yourself is very challenging. That support system was key in my development, and it still is key to me continuing to do what I do.

What advice might you have for young people, or maybe people who are doing it solo right now, who want to find a community like that?

The first thing I always say is find a support system. Find a team. Sometimes that's easier said than done. You know, after answering that question so many times, I started to think about it in more detail. All right, you're telling people to find a team, but how? How do you even foster that type of network?

You've got to make yourself vulnerable in some cases and say, "Hey, this is what I do. Does anybody else do the same thing that I do?" You have to utilize the networks that you have and put yourself out there. [You have to find] somebody that you're comfortable with, somebody that you enjoy spending a lot of time with, because you're going to be spending a lot of time with these people. Somebody that you trust... or at least trust that they have your best interest in mind. Somebody that you trust enough to share probably some challenging topics with

because, you know, when you're working on any art form you put yourself on display in a lot of ways. Somebody that you can tell about what's going on in your personal life, somebody that would share with you what's going on in their personal life. It can't be one-sided.

It's not easy, I'll definitely tell people that. It's not easy to form that network, but it is important. I think it's the foundation of any successful artist. I don't mean money success, but just someone who feels validated in what they're doing.

Where do you usually start a project? Do you think in terms of a whole album? Are you thinking about individual songs? Or do you start with lyrics?

It usually starts in my head. Well, probably for the last 10 to 15 years, that's been the case. Early on, hearing beats could kind of guide me, because I was new to it, obviously. And at a young age, you don't have a ton of life experience to dive into when you want to search for a topic or subject matter. Now, I literally have almost a constant stream of lyrics, ideas, thoughts, themes, and concepts going through my head all the time. I think that just comes from, obviously, years and years of life experience, and years and years of writing, too. Now, I can write in my head without getting a pen and pad, or using my phone. I can just recite lyrics to myself over and over and over again until it becomes a verse in my head. Time is valuable now, you don't always have time to grab a pen and paper to write.

That sounds like a good technique, following a popular artist's beats to practice that technical stuff.

Yeah, I tell young artists that, too. Who do you like? Who do you enjoy listening to? It's okay to mimic them. Try to emulate what they do. If there's something that you like about them, take that little piece and apply it to yourself. I was definitely a product of all my favorite rappers when I was young. Now I like to think I've established my own "voice," but maybe I haven't. Some people might listen to me and can tell, yeah, he listens to Nas, or he listens to Redman, or Common, or Wu-Tang, whatever. Or Outkast, hopefully. But, you know, there's nothing wrong with that—appreciating your influences, and even utilizing some of their tools.

During the creative process, what do you find is the hardest or most challenging part? The initial writing of it, revising it, mastering, or promoting?

Promoting is definitely the hardest. The creative part, thankfully, for me isn't really challenging anymore. A lot of writers have claims of writer's block, which I know exists and is real, but I rarely struggle with that because I figure, I just got to get it out. I'll write it down, then maybe if I don't like it, it doesn't have to go anywhere, but I will always be able to put thoughts down because it's fun for me, it's therapy for me. I need it. Every time I thought about stopping, it was like, I literally need to create in order to stay, for lack of a better word, sane. But really, just to stay who I am.

The creative process, the most difficult part now is for sure after it's all created, figuring out how to get people to listen to it or pay for it. Even when I was young, it wasn't too difficult to come up with ideas, and write, and create. I think back then the hardest part was maybe finding beats to rap over, because there weren't a lot of producers. I was blessed and fortunate enough to be around, literally, some of the best producers probably in the history of Michigan hip-hop. They were people who I grew up with, and went to high school with, and played basketball with—you know, like Vaughan T, 14KT, the Haircut (or Mayer Hawthorne), Trés Styles. Like, these are my friends and they just happen to all be really good, really dope producers. I was fortunate, but early on, when they were just learning how to make beats, it wasn't like I could just say, "Hey, give me a beat," and have one.

How do you get through that promoting part?

Right now, with the streaming services, it's not really easy to make money off of the sale of music. What gets us the most money? For us, and this is just us, it may not be for everybody, but for us it's getting on stage. Performing brings us the most income from our art. Finding those places that want to book you, who have the money to book you, who have the means to book you is tough. We play the game because everybody is on streaming

services, so of course we put our songs on streaming services. It's available everywhere, but it just doesn't bring us a lot of money. For us, it's shows, it's merchandise, hats, t-shirts. It's trying to find licensing opportunities. Like TV, commercials, TV shows, any way we can get connected in that world we try to do. We've had moderate success in getting stuff licensed... But, I think the reason why we're still doing it, the bottom line is we—I'm talking about [the rap performing arts group] the Black Opera now...

Not the royal We.

Right. Not the royal We. [laughs] Bottom line is, we know we have to do this. It sounds corny, but we feel like it's our calling. Whether we're getting paid or not—we want to get paid, of course—but, we've come to realize we have to do this. So, it's really on you to figure out: Is this something you cannot live without doing? If it is, then money won't dictate how you move.

But, yeah, it's tough. It's very difficult to make money off of art that you love. It's a constant, everyday brainstorm session, going back and forth with ideas, and tossing things around. A strategy we tried for my last solo album was that for the first month we didn't put it on streaming services. We went straight to Bandcamp, and it was like, "If you want it, you've got to buy it." It helped. It gave us a lot of initial income to help with the continuation of the product, which was shooting a music video and pressing CDs. That money, and putting it on Bandcamp, helped fund a music video to further promote, and purchase CDs to sell physical copies. You've got to be creative, and think outside the box.

How do you know when a project is done? Are you a perfectionist?

I'm probably as opposite of a perfectionist as you can get. I like broadness. I like people to possibly hear a flaw. I like the human element in music. My music and business partner, Magestik Legend, he's definitely on that spectrum of perfectionist. I think that's why we work well together. We balance each other out. He takes a lot longer with his creative process. I'm a little quicker.

How do we know when something is done? It's just a feeling that you get: did we get out everything that we wanted to get out in this piece? There's no real science to it, it's a feeling. Not that I'll put out any old thing, but like, once I feel like it's ready I am not afraid to put my music out there for people to judge. I know it's going to get judged, I want it to get judged. A lot of people are like, all right. I'm done. I created it, it feels good. Now people get to actually see this, or hear this, absorb this, consume this. Some artists get super nervous, and tense, and it's like a whole thing. I literally don't care.

Early on I did care. I for sure did. But now, probably for the last—definitely over the last 10 years of making and putting out music—I started to realize I make music for myself... and most of the people who listen to rap in general can't really do what we do. A lot of people try. And that just sounds crazy now because, you know, with technology the way it is, you can literally do everything on your phone, so maybe everybody can do it.

Yeah, but, they can't do it.

But they can't do it! Yeah. I'm cool with people nitpicking, and judging, and rating my music. Because really, at the end of the day, that's not what I do it for. I don't do it for accolades. If anything, I do it for my sanity. I do it for myself, to stay who I am. And it's a way to make money. You know? It's another way to make money.

How do you keep your creativity flowing when you're doing things outside of music?

Thankfully, probably 80-90% of the "day job" work that I've done has involved music in some way. Even working at Tappan Middle School, most of the young people that I work with love rap, they love to rap, and write, and create, and record. I've been able to, fortunately, incorporate a lot of that in the academic world at a middle school... but the ultimate objective at the school is the academic side of what the young people are doing and, unfortunately, not so much the personal growth, the community building, the restorative practices, the mindfulness...

Working in a school, I'm done at 3:00 and then I have summers off, which is awesome. That's when I do most of my traveling and touring. It is tough to find that balance, but thankfully, I'm in a place—knock on wood, hopefully it continues—where it doesn't take much for me to get back into the creative mode when it's necessary.

But it's not easy. It's definitely not easy doing the day job, and then... flip the switch. It's inspiration, too, for what I create. A lot of my most recent work has been talking about what I see with young people, addressing that in some way and trying to bring light to what's going on in their lives, what's going on in these schools because it's not all great. Even in Ann Arbor public schools, especially for young kids of color, it's difficult. I can say that as a Black man who grew up in Ann Arbor. I had a great time, don't get me wrong. It was a great academic experience, and a great social experience growing up here. But, I also had a great mother who did an amazing job, and an older brother, and a group of friends that I've been with for over 20 years. And we didn't have social media. It was different...

How does social media factor into your work?

It's a huge part of my music. Huge part. I don't 100% love it. I don't know if this is the goal of it, but to me it's almost like a daily competition. Seeing what other people are doing and thinking, man, I want to be in Aruba. How come I can't go to Aruba? Or I want to buy a house. This is your new home? Awesome for you, sucks for me. That part of it, I don't enjoy. I mean, the relationships that I built recently mostly have been through the internet, and the show opportunities that I get, it's because of the internet. I can go to Europe because of the internet. I need it, it's important, but I also see the effect it has on young people. Again, I'm almost 40, and it affects me. I can't even imagine how it affects a young person.

Social media demands so much personal stuff out of artists and musicians, where sharing your life becomes an aspect of promotion. Do you have a hard time separating that?

At least 10, maybe 20 times we've sat and had long conversations about how to let them inside more, let them get to see a different side of you. You know, I'm cool with it, but I definitely think that people don't need to know everything. Like my wife, she is not into social media really at all... and if that's not what she wants, that's not what I'm going to do.

I play basketball, and I documented my whole basketball season in Instagram. Like every game day, I would post something about the game that we played, and we actually ended up winning the championship. That was cool. But—to be completely transparent with that transparency—that was intentional, you know what I'm saying? I didn't just wake up one day and say, "Yeah, I want to do this. Document my whole basketball season." It was, how could I comfortably give people a different side of me that they may not know about, in order to maybe reach a person that is on the periphery, or on the fringe of being a supporter of what I do musically? Some people might connect through basketball.

What do you feel like are the biggest questions you're bringing up right now in your creative life?

Well, I don't know if this is the creative side, but still one of the biggest questions is: How do we make more money doing this? That's constant, that's almost every day. Then with the mission and vision with what we do with The Black Opera, how do we want people to view The Black Opera? That ties into, how do we want people to view us as individuals. I'm not a politician, I wouldn't call myself an activist. Some people might, with some of the music that we make and some of the things that we support. But really I'm a rapper. That's what I love, that's what I do, but I also realize that we have a voice and there are some people who listen to us. We try our best to put out images and messages that positively affect people.

This is a whole different conversation, but, even though we, with The Black Opera, we kind of separate our personal identity from The Black Opera in a lot of ways—even visually with masks on, and wardrobe changes when we perform, and stuff like that—even though we do separate it in that way, I am The Black Opera. I'm part of The Black Opera. At the beginning, that wasn't the case. We were very intentional about separating our personal identity from what The Black Opera is. But now a lot of people know. We put it out there. That opens up the door to a lot of things, people challenging me on what I believe in, or what I support. We talk about that. Are we

prepared for that? Are we prepared to stand up for what we believe in? These messages that we portray and support, are we ready to take on that challenge if somebody challenges us on what we say, and talk about, and stand for? That's a constant question. We think we are, but it remains to be seen.

Jamall Bufford Recommends:

TV show - *Martin* (hilarious)

Movie - *Coming To America* (hilarious)

Book - *A New Earth* (influenced the concept of my latest solo album *Time In Between Thoughts*)

Album - Outkast - *ATLiens* (biggest influence on who I am as a rapper)

Sport - Basketball (I love playing and the NBA is the most entertaining league, even in the off season)

Name

Jamall Bufford

Vocation

Rapper, Songwriter

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Louis Rideout