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As told to Paula Mejía, 3168 words.

Tags: Music, Mental health, Process, Inspiration, Focus.



On taking the time to sound like yourself

Rapper Fat Tony on writing things totally in your head, learning to step outside of yourself in regards to your work, and why you have to remember to give 100% of yourself every time.

Do you keep a journal?

Since I moved to Los Angeles at the end of 2016, I keep journals... because I don't really write with my hands unless I'm signing a check. Everything is typed in my phone or in the laptop and it just feels nice to sit with my pen and write out stuff, and honestly when I get a bit anxious sometimes, or worked up or in my feelings, it helps me to write that shit out rather than letting it out in negative ways, you know?

Is it more spur-of-the-moment and stream-of-consciousness stuff that you write in your notebook? Or are you writing lyrics and thoughts and other things in there?

One, I don't really like to write down lyrics. I prefer to write it in my head. Two, it's mostly like a Dear Diary type of thing, like, "So I'm doing this, I'm working on this, I'm hoping that this works out, I made this person upset, this person made me upset." It's really just outlining what I've been up to and what I've been feeling. And I like to look back at it, because some of the time it's quotes from people, like if I go to a party or something, and somebody says something cool to me.

It's really nice to keep a record of that, just to know where you were at that time, too. It's nice to take a moment and reflect on those experiences, and also to see how far you've come and how you've grown.

I honestly got into it in the first place 'cause of [Henry] Rollins and his *Get In the Van* book. He has a diary from touring with Black Flag. I always liked his style of dating things, and listing the city he's in, and writing a blip of what they did that day—whether it's mundane, like, "We drove here and got gas here and ate here." That might be a whole entry. Other ones might be about a dream he had, or about a date that he went on or whatever.

You mention you prefer to write lyrics in your head. How do you go about doing that?

So my friend Shaka "Tom Cruz" Girvan, back when we first started working together in like 2007, I remember that he mentioned to me that he just learned this neat trick of how to write lyrics in his head instead of writing them down on paper. And I didn't get it at the time, I was like, "Wow, you really do that?" Granted, I had heard of it from the media 'cause people like Biggie do that, or Jay-Z does that, Lil Wayne, people like that. But he was like, "Yo, I just learned this trick and I'm gonna show it you one day." And years later, in 2012 when we started working on *Double Dragon* and some on the *[Smart Ass] Black Boy* album, he showed me how to do it, and I wrote both of those albums that way.

I find that personally, I'm usually happier with the stuff that I get just straight out of my head. If I do it on paper, then I write it quickly rather than lingering and letting the feeling escape me. But the whole reason why that's good is because it kinda helps you make it concise, and I think it helps you edit faster. Like, I was recording earlier and I made a verse that way. As I write the song, I'm doing it piece by piece: so four bars here, four bars here, and I'm able to get it out, and then hear stuff that I don't like and change it.

And it also changes the way you say stuff, because writing words versus speaking them is different. When you speak, you say things that aren't grammatically correct... I aggressively spell check and grammar check everything, so when I'm writing lyrics down, I get kinda stuck in that, and it takes me away from expressing the right thought. But for me, I feel like the songs of mine that I love the most are the songs that I either wrote in my head, or typed out really quickly and didn't second guess myself very much. And if I did, it was for the right reasons.

Do you have any kind of rules for yourself or self-imposed limitations when you're sounding things off in your head? Is there anything that you do differently to try and help that process?

I try to stay on topic. I try not to deviate too much from what the topic or the theme is. Even if there is no theme, like the song I did earlier was for a friend's mix tape where it was me and this rapper Milo

rapping over this producer's steel-kick dubs beat. And the producer wanted us to just freeform rap about whatever... it's the kinda song where we could just rap about being tight.

Within that, I still wanted my verse to have some kind of structure, so there're certain things that I stuck to where in the song it was about introspection, or growth. I talk about getting rid of my fears, and in turn getting more accolades. That's kind of the challenge that I set for myself, because when you aren't writing it down, you can kinda go anywhere. Which is good.

I think some of the best conversations are conversations that go all over the place. You talk about politics, you talk about romance, you talk about food, you talk about the environment, you talk about whatever the fuck. But even within that, when it comes to songs, I think it's important to stick to at least a mood that I'm trying to portray.

So I'm not only hearing what I'm saying as far as the words, but I'm hearing how it sounds and if it sounds interesting. Like if it's a good flow or a good cadence or a good tone in my voice, it just makes the editing process faster. I'm confining myself when I'm stuck to writing lyrics down by hand or typing it out. I can get into this mode that I call the "homework mode" when you just have an assignment due and you wanna get it done and you just kinda BS through it. I feel like I can get like that with my lyrics sometimes, if I'm just stuck writing it down and it's not coming to me.

Also, writing in my head makes it easier to know when something isn't working. Because when I type it out, I'll sit with a beat and it'll take me a long time, and then it'll take me a while before I'm like, "This isn't going to the place I want it to go." Whereas when you say it in your head, it's quicker to be like, "Alright, this is concise, this is the right thing."

Is there a writing habit that you have that you try and work against?

Yes. I can ramble like a motherfucker in all forms of writing—from songs to an essay to whatever—and I'm always trying to cut that out.

How do you try and cut it out? What steps do you take mentally or creatively to get out of that mode?

If it's a song, I listen back to what I'm doing immediately and I really think about it and try to think outside of myself. If it's writing an essay or something, I like to put it down for a night and then revisit it the next day when my head's clear. Same with music, too. If I'm making a bunch of songs for a project, I like to make a whole bunch in a certain period, then take a break from that music, and then listen back to it with fresh ears as a fan of music and tell myself what's good and what's whack.

I was wondering if you thrive when you have a bunch of different things going on, or if you need to do the one thing and focus on that. What's the best way that you work?

I feel like I'm at my best when I have multiple things going on, because it allows my brain to go somewhere else and reflects another part of my talent or my taste and I have a break from this other thing. So when I go back to it, I have fresh eyes or fresh ears. I'm the kind of person that's constantly doing mad different shit.

I can't stay still. I love doing different projects constantly. I've never viewed myself as just doing one thing. I love that at this point in my life, I'm able to publicly do a lot of different things. I think when I get stuck on just doing one of those things, part of my brain gets too caught up in the business of it and the political side of it, which I think can really drain me as an artist.

I like being in a zone that's free. I think the best zone to be in is to feel the way you felt when you were a freaking child doing stuff. Like my zone for making music is to feel like I'm 18 and graduating high school. 'Cause that was a point in my life where I was young enough to still be a kid and have my imagination go wild and really dream wildly, but also feel like, "Yo, I'm kind of an adult, I have ownership of myself, I have the agency to do what I wanna do." And that zone is perfect. I think as you get older, some of the stereotypical mindsets of being older kind of close you in and take you away from the parts of yourself that make you wanna be a wild kid.

How do you remind yourself of that?

I listen to the stuff that I love today and that I've always loved, things that made me feel like myself early on. I listen to albums like Prince's *Dirty Mind*, which when I heard that in high school, I was like, "Wow, this music right here means to me more than anything else that I've heard before." Or when I heard songs like "Murder" by UGK, which I hear and I'm like, this makes me feel freaking alive, from the rhyming to the beat. I see myself in this and it just reminds me of being young and alone in my bedroom listening to this stuff loudly and being happy. Being happy with the validation and nothing else. Not caring who's paying attention, not caring what they think, totally closed off and being more than content with myself. That's my favorite zone.

I've been thinking a lot about your album *10,000 Hours*, and this idea of putting in time before you start to reap the benefits. What struck you about that?

Well, something that changed my life is right here in New York City. I have a friend named Nargis, and I remember in 2013 I'd go to her house and she had this Miles Davis autobiography sitting by her front door and I'd always look at it and read through it when I was hanging out there. The last time I was there

hanging out, I was looking at it and she told me to take it. I love that book, it's my favorite book by a musician. I think that his story is incredible.

One thing that he said was that it takes a long time to sound like yourself, and I think that's really true. In our age, we've been kinda taught that the artist is best at the first thing they do. I call it the *Illmatic* effect: Nas did *Illmatic* and it's his first album ever, and it's supposedly the best hip-hop album of all time. I think that that gets put into the mindset of fans, that the early stuff is their best.

But what Miles Davis said I think is true for more artists than people who have an *Illmatic* out the gate. As you progress and you get older and you try different things, you find better ways of expressing yourself, and you get to edit yourself and get to the thing that you really wanna do with your art. I called this album *10,000 Hours* 'cause I feel like I'm getting closer to the best version of myself as a musician.

I think it's a process that doesn't really have a set end. There's no time I'm gonna know that I've finally reached it. Maybe that'll be an album that's super critically acclaimed or whatever, but I think it's more so about being yourself. Every piece of music I make, I feel like I'm able to express a different part of myself that's more of the inner me. And it makes me really happy, it keeps me excited about making music. I always feel like there's more out there. I always feel like I can make a better song every time, or a better album, really, or give a better performance.

That's what keeps me excited: that I have room to get tighter. Even right now, I'm thinking about my next album. My album ain't even a month old yet, and from the first week that it came out, even before it came out, I was already thinking of what I want my next album to be. What can I do better than I did on this album, and what can I do differently?

So what is a creative success for you, what does that look like?

Something that I can look back on and have few edits. When I make something and I step away from it and I listen to it or I read it or I watch it, and I'm like, "Damn, I wouldn't change anything about this." That's a success.

Can you tell me about the music you've been recording lately?

Last night we made this song, and the theme of it was about checking in on friends who might not be doing well with their mental health, whether they're depressed or suicidal or frustrated or whatever the case may be. Just checking in on people so they know somebody cares about them. A friend proposed this project that she wants to do where she'd have artists make songs about mental health for high school students. Because she works with kids in education and thinks that it's a shame that her curriculum is so focused on all these other subjects, but has no focus on emotional intelligence. And she doesn't see that curriculum changing, so she thought it'd be a cool project to get artists to make music about it.

I wrote my verse about a friend that I grew up with who I lost touch with and then I found out that they killed themselves. This also happened to a friend of mine earlier this year, a guy in Houston who I played music with growing up. So I wrote about that for my verse. I was really trying to focus on getting and expressing that grief in my voice. And in my words. It's one of the first times recently where I've written a song and the focus has been purely on expressing that, and not the wordplay or how clever it is. I really wanted to get that mood across and I think that's a bit challenging. I think when you're a rapper, you can get into this mode where it's so easy to just come up with bars that are impressive or clever or have nice wordplay or just sound like good rapping. But in my writing, I really wanna focus on that emotional aspect and I feel like I haven't done a lot of that in my music, so I wanna challenge myself to do that more, maybe with my next record.

How do you challenge yourself to get that across in the music and not focus so much on the bars? What techniques do you use to try and get that feeling across?

When I'm writing it, I just try to make sure every word counts. That I'm not just giving you filler. That's another thing with rap, I think most of rap is filler, because it's so many words and you're bound to kind of get into filler zone. But I think that there's a difference between good filler and bad filler. You can have some good filler that's interesting or technically sound, and then have a really powerful emotional part in there too, or just something that stands out. Then it makes the filler worth it. If you give me a 16-bar verse and you're giving me all this filler about how you're a great rapper, but then you say something else profound in just a bar or two, that's enough to sell me on it.

How has your relationship to your voice changed over time?

I think I'm more conscious of my voice than before. In the past I feel like I was just focused on the words, and that would lead me to sometimes sounding kind of stiff in my recordings, just sounding very bare and not like I'm totally into it. I've become more aware of that over time and I wanna make sure that my voice is matching what I'm trying to get across, 'cause that's half the battle. I think when you're a rapper and you're a writer, you can get so trapped into the words that you forget that you gotta really sell it with your voice.

I heard this podcast called The Chunk... I was kinda obsessed with it for a little bit, but there's an episode with Chris Rock and he was showing them his notepad that he keeps on stage when he's performing.

And one of his notes to himself was "energy," which sounds really basic. But he was saying that he writes that because he wants to remind himself that he has to sell the performance, even now. Even though he's extremely famous and well off and has been a successful comedian for a very long time, he still believes that he has to go in there and give it his all and that's kinda what I'm telling myself when I'm in the studio now. Before I would just focus on putting out the best writing possible, now I wanna sell it every time.

Fat Tony recommends:

The Truth by Prince

They Can't Kill Us Until They Kill Us by Hanif Abdurraqib

Sweet James Jones, Live From Harris County Jail compilation by Pimp C

Champion Coffee

Amarin Café

Name

Anthony Lawson Jude Ifeanyichukwu Obiawunaotu

Vocation


Rapper, Writer, DJ, Game show host


Fact




Nathaniel Turner

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