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As told to Rona Akbari, 2328 words.

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On finding healthier ways to work

Audio documentarian and artist JT Green discusses the value of a daily creative schedule, making sure to take breaks, and holding yourself accountable.

What are you thinking about, or what's exciting you these days, creatively?

I was talking to a friend of mine who suffers from these really intense migraines and she was talking a lot about how working from home now allows her to have a lot more flexibility in the work she does for other people but then also for herself because she doesn't have to consider hiding out in the bathroom to wait for her migraines to go away, and kind of reframe her schedule around that.

I was thinking about that a lot.

Sometimes I have a lot of fatigue from the medicine for my heart condition, and so it's kind of nice to know if I just need to I can take a walk outside, or I can lay down and take a nap. And it's kind of like this cascading effect that comes down of every aspect of your life, even personal writing or just having time to talk with friends.

So that's what I've been thinking about creatively. And it was definitely something that inspired a lot of thinking behind this latest little audio piece that I worked on called *PMHx*, which was kind of a meditation on my body and how in some instances I wish it could be more like the technology that is in my life because it seems a little bit easier to manage. And then thinking about that relationship between almost the original American technology which is Black people's labor. That's what's been front of mind lately.

So, when you talk about your relationship to your body, I think of the post from your blog on clothes and expression and scoring. I thought it was interesting, your relationship to your creative practice and how it's similar to dressing yourself and the comparisons you draw. I know for a while, back you were on social media, you were posting your outfits a lot. I'm curious what your relationship to clothes are in your creative practice.

There's a thread because I find myself super interested in the markers that we use to project our identity to people. And maybe, depending on the context, in its most inaccessible way it's like conceptual art that is very inaccessible for a lot of people. Like art for other artists. But then in a practical way is tchotchkes, bumper stickers, how people express the objects that they own…I think about the eyelashes on the cars.

Is wearing clothes like producing audio? Is it like being a producer?

In a way, yeah. A producer is creating the frameworks for things. They create frameworks for people to follow; they're creating the bounds for art existing. It's almost like they're professional infrastructure makers in whatever art form that you choose. So in a way, you're creating almost an infrastructure for how you want people to interpret you through clothing, you know what I mean?

It's like if I'm wearing, I don't know, nylon pants, and boots, I'm either feeling very outdoorsy for the day and I want to project this idea that I am this outdoorsy person, maybe to a stranger, maybe I'm craving some sort of conversation from a stranger, as you will. I grew up and my folks were janitors and steel workers. They all had uniforms, and I always thought that was so dope when I was a kid. It's like, these people, their professions are on display, their social club is on display. And all the family parties and barbecues used to be at the VFW and the union shops. I've always been interested in how you can portray a uniform when you don't have to wear one. So maybe there's a desire to try to build frameworks in a life that feels kind of amorphous, especially when all I do is essentially just.. my

output is ideas. And it's not like my dad, who worked in a glass factory and his thing was making the mason jars. You could look at his physical output from work.

Yeah, it's a physical thing, but yours is a digital thing. What's your approach to digital spaces? You talk about how your output is ideas and I know you create boundaries for yourself on social media. How do you reconcile with the immateriality of your work?

I find myself really interested in time and basically creating context switches in physical space. So, for instance, I'm taking this call in a different room and the way that I have you set up, I'm trying to mimic as if you were at eye height to me, to try to convince my brain that as much as possible that I am trying to mirror a situation where you are actually in front of me. Do you know what I mean? So I'm always trying to figure out ways to make immaterial material, I guess kind of like how installation artists try to do that with sculpture works.

When did you realize that you were an artist?

I think I have two answers for that. The first time I was aware that I wanted to be an artist was when… So, back in college, I worked in the library archives and a lot of my job was, after doing all the scanning of the archives needed to be put away in the storage, I would have to put away books that people left out. I was putting some books away inn the library while there was a class going on for contemporary art, it was like super 101 class. In it were a couple of my friends and including my now wife. I heard them in there and the professor drew a circle on the whiteboard and he asked what it was. Then he said, "What is this?" And then people kept giving answers but then he kept asking them to dig even farther, continually ask the question and see how far it could dig. And basically just continually asking why? And you just keep going and going on and you're seeing the trail of thought. You go deeper into the circle.

In that moment I was reminded of when I was a little kid and I was on a bus ride to Washington D.C. with my great grandma. It was a Greyhound bus or whatever, and we were on the way to Washington D.C. and we were going through I think Philly. I think it was from Cleveland to Philly. In between those stops, we had to switch at the Greyhound station, and they got a new bunch of people to come on. And I was just like yak, yak, yak, to some random lady who was next to me. And we talked. She must have humored me that entire time, but she answered every single question I had, this white lady.

I remember when we got to the next stop, my grandma told me, she was like, "Why you got to ask all them questions? Nobody wants to hear you do all that." And I remember I felt a lot of shame after that. And I know there's a lot of other stuff in that or whatever, but years later, seeing a place or a profession or some sort of school of thought that was, "No, you should ask questions and you should continue to ask questions," and the idea of thought being encouraged. I was like, "Okay, dope, that's what I want to do."

So that was conscious. But when you asked the question, I immediately thought back to when I unconsciously knew I wanted to be an artist: My folks texted me some photos of pictures books I used to draw when I was little. The picture books were alternative narratives about news stories that my dad had watched on CNN.

What's your daily routine?

I wake up at 5:00 o'clock or 6:00 o'clock, and then it's workout. It's either TV workout now, or hop on the bike; before, it was going to the gym. Big breakfast. Shower, make coffee or tea. And then depending on how it is I usually have an hour, an hour and a half of time that's kind of flex where I'll write, work on my own projects.

I don't mean this as a flex, but if I had interviews with people, I'll take those calls or those things and it's before work. And then 10:00 to 6:00 is work, and then 6:00 to 7:00 is completely off limits because that's when C'ne and I go for a walk outside. And then 7:00 to 8:00, making dinner or we have dinner delivered or whatever. And then 8:00 to 9:30 is usually either C'ne and I, we watch something together on TV or if one of us has a social event, like this, or we both kind of do our own thing which usually means I'm watching TikTok or I'm working on art or reading or something. And then 9:30 hits, goes on until eternity.

Is morning best for working on your personal projects?

Yeah, writing always is happening in the morning, for sure. I'm a huge journaler, so that's usually when I dump what has all been happening. It's when my mind is most fresh. I try to write down my dreams, too. It's cool because in the evening I'll look at the stuff that I wrote in the morning and then I'm seeing what I was actually trying to get at now that I'm a little away from it.

That metaphor of personal style and scoring was a thing that came about in a morning writing session. It was like, "whoa," it was just a line that just popped into my head and I was like, "Wait a second." And I just bullet pointed it, and I did the why exercise, and I was like, "What is happening here? I'm interested in that, I'm interested in that," da-da-da. It's kind of a reverse engineering of your thought, it's like, "Why did I have that one liner?" All of it's trying to retrace your steps to reverse engineer why you had the thought. And then usually that's what ends up leading to a more fleshed out idea.

It's funny because now that you had pointed out the thing about being a producer, it is a way that producers usually work. It's always working completely backward. When you see the end result it's like, "That's it?" And then you just figure out, "How did I get here so I can complete it?"

It's like, at the end of the day you've got a show, right? So what becomes before the show? You keep seeing the episode before you keep seeing the episode. What are you doing? You're receiving the final mix. How do you get the final mix? You send some mixes, and you just keep doing that…

It's a system.

Yeah, it's a system, so building a system, an OS for your life. At least the way I kind of look at it as.

How do you know when a project is done?

I usually give myself a time limit. Either an hourly time limit or it's a deadline driven time limit. For things that I consider more sketches, I'll give myself a two hour time limit. Usually that's the time before work and it's like I know I want to flesh out this idea and whatever it is at the end of this two hours is going to be the thing that's going to go… I'll either do a time limit-based thing for smaller works, and a date-driven thing for larger works.

Even for my personal things, I always put a deadline, because I know I'll completely fiddle with it otherwise. I have such an interesting relation with time because I've had so many near-death experiences with multiple pulmonary embolisms. Having those instances happen so many times in my 20s, you kind of see that, as corny as it sounds, literally every single day is a gift. How bad would I feel if so many things that were just germs of ideas that I was maybe scared wouldn't be perfect never made it out because I didn't happen to live?

So it's like, putting a date on a thing and saying, "Okay, whatever it is at this date, that's it, you've got to ship it out." I think that's also a design approach that I learned as well, because everything is so product based, but it's like putting that product-based mindset into art making. It's helpful for me personally, because it does make me feel accountable. It's almost like I'm my own client. I think that's why I put it on my calendar, because I almost pretend, it's like my brain telling me, "Hey, dude, I'm expecting you to creatively fulfill yourself. Don't let me down."

What advice would you give to a budding radiomaker or someone who wants to be in the space of audio and art?

I would ask the question why are you interested in the medium of sound? And I would write that down, and then I would do that why exercise. I would say, why did you write down that answer? Why did you write down this? Do that like five times, and then do whatever it takes to fulfill those five answers. And it's like, basically you're creating your own mission statement in your creative practice in that instance, and it's kind of the best way that you can honor yourself.

JT Green Recommends:

This Bollywood cover of Shania Twain that my friend Ashley Hefnawy showed me.

Alt-Text as Poetry.

Transcendent Waves How Listening Shapes Our Lives by Lavender Suarez

Audio Playground assignments

Perfect Love by Ariana Martinez

<u>Name</u>
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<u>Vocation</u>
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