On finding inspiration in boredom

Comedian and Musician Zack Fox discusses collaborating across disciplines, the raw beauty of Black Atlanta culture, why he doesn't abandon projects, and harnessing the transformative power of taking a loss.

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As told to Phillipe Roberts, 2266 words.

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You came into music through the comedy world. How did you get comfortable performing music live? How was it different performing in the standup world?

They were both kind of tangential for me because I came to standup from the music world. Because I would host shows and emcee for people in Awful Records back in Atlanta. That was my early 20s. They'd be like, "Zack, you're funny, host the show tonight. Just DJ and say wild shit on the mic." From there, the path was through comedy and then back into music. It's been this weird swirl of the both of them informing each other. I'll land somewhere be like, "Oh, I should take that trick from over here and put it over here, and kind of let it all feed off of each other."

Are you looking for a different reaction when you perform songs live than when you're doing comedy?

I think the ultimate goal for me was finding a synthesis. Comedy and music are just two different worlds entirely. Standup has a certain etiquette that comes with it. When people are at your standup show, they're not screaming at you and throwing shit on stage for you to sign. And that etiquette has its drawbacks. With music, everything is kind of smashed. It's completely within the etiquette for me to get in the crowd and mosh with people. It's completely within the etiquette for you to laugh, scream, emote however you want to. Finding a synthesis with that is been my ultimate kind of goal; always keeping those things that are present in comedy shows that I love and trying to find that middle ground with the emotion of music.

How do you identify the right people to collaborate with? You probably get asked to work with so many people; I imagine you have to turn folks down occasionally.

A lot of the relationships that have happened have kind of been born out of—it's going to sound stupid, but—being drunk with niggas. And being like, "I like you." And somebody being like, "I like you, too." It's very childish. But if we share principles and we're both like, "Let's be nice to people, let's be chill and be drunk together," then we're probably going to figure out some way to collaborate. That's how it's been with Thundercat. That's how it was with being Awful. And hopefully it'll continue to be that natural. I never want it to feel like someone's got to get to this elite platform and speak to this. Because I'm not going to do that. I like talking to people down here on the ground.

You have a very close relationship with your fans and you're very accessible to them. How do you maintain healthy boundaries with them?

I feel it's just finding when to take those breaks. Because the social media shit is so deeply ingrained—it's in my DNA, for sure. It's where most people found out about me. And I see certain people who are way more open about their personal life than I am. And there's people like Hov who are like, "Nope, I'm a billionaire. I'm going to build an oil pipeline through St. Louis one day. You'll never see me on Twitter ever." It's like that's what works for him. I think Hov, maybe deep down, he knows he's too sensitive to deal with the onslaught of people talking to you all day. And that's perfectly fine.

I always tell people that the more you see me tweeting, the more down bad I am. If you see me tweet more than three in a day, you should be like, "Ah, we got to hit this nigga up." And it might seem the inverse to fans! Where they're like, "Damn bro, we ain't heard from him. He ain't said nothing online in two weeks, is everything okay?" It's like, no, I'm thriving. I'm running on the beach with my dog. When it's starting to bleed into your real life and you start talking to people in real life about Twitter shit, that's probably a sign. I think everyone should start to learn how to activate a part of your mind that cringes every time you go, "oh, do you see so-and-so arguing with so-and-so on Twitter." You should just automatically feel sick to your stomach.

What do you feel the greatest influence of growing up in Atlanta has had on your art?

Oh yeah. I mean, all of it completely. No matter where I'm at in the world, I feel like Atlanta is always going to be an influence. Because it's like the rambunctiousness that existed in Atlanta between 2002 and 2008, it's just unmatched. I see people starting to take notice of it now. And it's so weird to think about it, but it's retro now. Kids growing up now, that's like the '80s to them. You know what I mean? They see they see my Southern culture of wearing on 4XL white tees and Girbauds and Reeboks. And every iteration of a crank dance that came out. What I miss about it was how low tech it was, and how it just wasn't baked, it wasn't cooked. It wasn't ready for any kind of mass consumption. So that just kept it so raw, and so ridiculous and funny, and just genuine. And the emotion of a song would be like, "I'm fly. I'm going to make a whole song about that."

You're playing a huge part in revitalizing and creating a new appreciation for Atlanta culture of a certain era. Do you feel a responsibility to do right by it? To not make it into too much of a joke where people aren't taking it seriously?

What's that that saying? Once you pick a flower, you've already fucked up the beauty of it.

I think the worst thing I could imagine is people trying to revive the music of that time. People need to be stewards of that culture and know what they're standing on; the references that this rapper's making and the cultural through line of this comes from there. And even in Memphis, they need to be the stewards of that to Atlanta. And be like, "Yep, the shit that y'all are doing, we were doing." That kind of archiving, especially amongst Black people, is how we gatekeep. And keep white niggas from like jacking shit. Gatekeeping matters, man. And I don't know how else we do that besides forming new, concrete communities around the music. And being, "No, this is this. And you don't know anything about that."

How do you resist the urge to always stay connected and current? Especially as a comedian, with so much of what you do being about distilling the current moment. How do you balance those things?

From a comedy perspective, we've entered a new epoch where you are not going to be able to keep up with everything that's going on and how fast it's changing. I saw someone talking about *The Boondocks* coming back. And I know Carl Jones. I'm a huge fan of Carl Jones. I'm a huge fan of Aaron McGruder. And I want that show to come back. But people on Twitter were like, "Oh yeah, they need to talk about this. And they need to talk about that, and they need to talk about that." And I was like, well, the beauty of *The Boondocks* was that it's timeless because they were able to craft their own narratives and even predict what was coming. And in a way Black Twitter has kind of taken that mantle. Those jokes swim around.

I think if you try hard, you're going to fail. It's like trying to catch butterflies. You're not going to do it right now, man. There's too much going on. There's not even a writer out there, non-fiction or fiction, who has captured in a book or in an essay what it feels to be alive right now with all this bullshit going on. And you can't say that about any other time. You know writers that can encapsulate the 80s, 70s, the 90s. But now it's

just like everything's so spread out. I feel like, for me, finding my pocket and what I like to talk about and moving more inward into how I'm interpreting the world as it goes along. I think everything's going to become a lot more niche and personal for people. Because I can't be on the phone all day. I'll lose my fucking mind.

When you're working on music, new material for standup, or you're in the writers' room, whose feedback is the most important to you when you're working on something? Is it all internal compass? Or do you have people that you know you can go to and ask, "Hey, is this funny? Is this working?"

Yeah, yeah. For sure. It's people that I work pretty closely, like Jak Knight and Alex Russell. It's people that I've just kind of made friends with in the last few years. Even my manager, Ethan, who the way we met was so non-transactional that I know I can always trust him to be like, "That shit is kind of whack." And I'll be like, "Oh okay. Damn." Having people that you can bounce your ideas off of, that's the essence of comedy, and really the essence of anything that's going to be good. If anything feels easy that you feel comfortable doing them by yourself, you should always be like, ah, I don't know."

So it shouldn't feel too easy then?

Yeah. Even in working in comedy, and seeing what my homies have to go through to get TV shows made, being Black in Hollywood. It's like, man, if your show makes it past white people easily, you might need to go back and think if you were saying what you really want to say. You need people to come in to kind of kick your ass and humble you.

Have you ever abandoned a project? Have you ever started something and then been like, this is not going to work, and then you had to move on?

I haven't abandoned projects really because I really feel like I'm just getting started. And some of the things that I'm finishing are just now being able to get out. But I've definitely abandoned ideas that were a part of these larger projects where you think you're going in this direction. And I feel people should always be as audacious as they want to be, and really, really shoot for the stars. But if that shit ain't working, nigga, pull that back from the stars, right? Get it out of there.

Have you ever said yes to a project, and then realized, "This isn't it?"

No, no. I've always felt, even when I got and moved out to LA, my plan was to kind of try to cut my teeth on working on things with other people. You know what I mean? Because you can't figure out everything by yourself. I wanted to write for TV shows. And maybe eventually write something new with someone, which I've done. So I've tried multiple combinations of it, and I'm just going to keep going with that.

But I've definitely said yes to some stuff where I'm like, "Why am I doing this?" You're just like, all right. And you just kind of have to learn from it, man. You got to put your hand on the stove and burn yourself sometimes. I've said yes to TV shows to be on them where I'm like, I'm not happy here. I'm getting a check, but I'm not happy. And I'm going to have to eat this L. But that L is going to be the most powerful thing that you have moving forward. Because now you know.

How do you balance the everyday business of being a working comedian/musician with the creative work?

I'm starting to learn that the boring stuff is the work. I used to look at it in this false dichotomy that doing all this boring shit, or typing this up was taking away from my creative time. But I've gotten more jokes out of just being like, "Let me close my laptop, stop trying to be creative today, and just go to the dentist. Just go to the dentist appointment that I set up today, and just fuck with those people there."

Sometimes doing that minutia you think is taking you away from something is the same as you going and doing just 30 pushups. Before you're like, "These pushups, they're going to be ass." Then you get up and you're like, "Damn, I'm sexy." I like finding the joy out of the boring life shit. Not even just paperwork and stuff. Just trimming

the lime tree I've got outside. When you take the time to stop being in your head, and you go like, "I should get the bugs off the lime tree." And then you're like, "I'm off my phone. Now I'm being alive."

Zack Fox Recommends:

Purchasing a firearm

S.A.N.D.A.S. by SahBabii

Being barefoot

The Dawn of Everything by David Graeber and David Wengrow

Going to an aquarium while dangerously high

If you can do all these at the same time you're the final boss

<u>Name</u>
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<u>Vocation</u>
comedian, artist, actor, and writer

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