On wandering and exploring

Comedian and musician Jaboukie Young-White discusses
translating your creative skills in one medium to
another and the fluidity of boundaries between
disciplines.

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As told to Max Freedman, 2593 words.

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We're talking in the lead-up to you releasing an album of music [*All Who Can't Hear Must Feel*], but most people might know you first as a comedian.

I think the feeling at the center of that is, there's this gulf between what you know yourself to be and what other people perceive you as, and when there's a discrepancy between those two, it can feel so jarring. For me, I'm like, "I don't see why this is weird." But then, when I think of what people would be familiar with from me, I'm like, "Yeah, I could see that."

I've been known to be a comedian and, on top of that, mischievous and a little anarchic in terms of my social media presence. So some people, before they were willing to engage, were like, "Are you for real? Is this a joke?" That's been a major thing to navigate, but a comedian doing music, I'm not the first to do that at all. I think it's more so a larger cultural thing of having to be masterful of one thing in one area, just letting that be it, and not branching out to other things. But that wasn't how I was raised. I'm always interested in what someone who is good at this thing is doing in another thing, or how that translates, or what practices they bring from their original medium into a new medium.

There's that longstanding thing that comedians want to be musicians and musicians want to be comedians, and I understood it going one way for the longest time—a comedian wanting to be a musician. It would be so great to get on stage, and people are so excited just for you to be there, and you don't have to put on the song and dance. In stand-up, you do a bunch of intellectual labor to get a reaction out of people, whereas I've gone to concerts, and musicians will, in between songs, be like, "Water," and everyone's going crazy, dying laughing, and I'm like, "This room is so hot right now. If I could do a tight five, it would crush so hard."

Now that I'm doing music, I see why, now, being a comedian would be so enticing, because to be a musician now, you have to be a comedian. You've got to post content. Music videos are going in a more Ludacris, Busta Rhymes sort of direction where it's absurd, a little comical. That's a trend right now, just because humor is so inherently viral that it's being employed more in marketing. The dance between irony and sincerity with music and comedy, that's at the heart of all of it.

You came up in these digital spaces, but they're very difficult to maneuver as a creative person. How do you do it?

I have a pretty fraught relationship with it. On one hand, I can't divorce my successes from digital spaces. They fast-tracked me through more traditional media, just because I was successful, or had metrics that people respected in these digital spaces that they didn't fully understand. They were like, "I guess people like him, I don't really get it, but okay," and that benefited me in a lot of ways, but in other ways, you're playing with

fire. It's a huge attention drain if you're not careful. It can siphon some of your energy away from being able to practice what you're actually doing. The marketing, branding, and promotion can become so flashy, dopamine-fulfilling, and fun that it can take you away from doing the actual work.

In terms of the mechanics of existing in those spaces, that's one thing I've been mindful of, but the best part is being able to reach people you'd never be able to reach physically or in person. One gripe I had with standup—before I had enough of a following to fill a room with people who were there to see me, I was like, "This is cool," but when I say things online, I'm saying them to everyone and every kind of person. When I say them in stand-up, I'm in a room in a specific neighborhood that draws a specific audience that might be exclusionary to other audiences. The internet, for a long time, was great to counteract that, but the way the algorithms have shifted now, I don't know if that's necessarily the same.

That's another pitfall of the internet and digital spaces. You're beholden to whatever the technocrats are deciding to do at the moment. I always think of, in Mario games, when you jump on the platform, as soon as you touch it, it starts falling, so you have to jump off and move to the next thing. The algorithm is constantly doing that, but it's so insidious because these are our relationships and people that we know in real life that they're basically holding hostage and keeping away from us until we look at some amount of advertisements or pay the monthly fee.

Increasingly, I've been trying to find alternatives to existing in digital spaces, or at least trying to figure out some sort of hybrid, because the internet I experienced as a young person is gone. The community, freeness, weirdness, and cross-pollination of that is something I want to recreate in my own work and the spaces I create.

You were saying that doing a stand-up show is for the people who paid to be there. I'm curious if you feel like your album is similarly cultivating a smaller audience, targeting a certain group, things like that.

Initially, when I was making a lot of these songs, I never had the idea of releasing them. I've always made music, but I never really thought it would be released. I also always kept that door a little cracked and was like, "I don't know, maybe one day I'll do it. Who knows?" And then, when the opportunity came, I was like, "Okay, well the door opened, so now, I can't not do this. I have to actually do this."

The other thing I really love about the internet in terms of that audience is, I can't really say that it's a smaller audience or a bigger audience, or whatever the size of the audience is, because with the internet, you're just putting it up there, and then, it exists. I just saw a TikTok yesterday about, I forget the band's name—if you heard the song and you've been on TikTok, you would know the song immediately—but they've been getting millions of streams every day and had to re-record and remaster it because it's gotten so popular. That's the beauty of the internet to me, how things are just preserved in amber, and you never know when it's going to be discovered, rediscovered, or have a new life. I think that's so beautiful. That's one thing I am praying stays. It's almost like we're watching the ground crumble underneath us in terms of the internet infrastructure and how things work.

How did you teach yourself the skills needed to create music?

When I was in college, I majored in TV production and screenwriting, and I did not follow the curriculum. I was going to drop out my sophomore year, and then I was like, "If I drop out, I'm going to have to get a job, and I don't want to do that yet, so I'll just start taking whatever classes I want, and in the next two years, I'll figure out what I'm going to do after graduation." I started taking classes I was passionate about and found interesting. One of the classes was film scoring, and in that, I learned how to use Logic Pro, and I learned the basics of, this is what compression does, this is what distortion does.

This was 2013, I think, so this was before the YouTube tutorial-industrial complex. You could look up, "This is how you use Logic Pro," but now, you can watch a 22-minute video on how the millisecond glide on Logic Pro Sampler can be used in different contexts. It's so granular now, and during the pandemic, that's what I was mainly using to take it to the next level. I built a studio in my apartment and was producing a bunch of stuff at a level I hadn't done before.

It had been a slow process of, over the years, fucking around, and I would share stuff with my brothers, and my brothers are capital-M Musicians. My younger brother is a session guitarist, my youngest brother is great with proper instruments, and I'm just an electronic artist. For me, it was a lot of going by ear. It's almost embarrassing to admit, but I knew very little music theory or any sort of formal knowledge. It was just a cobbling together of what I thought was cool and what was working for me in the moment.

At what point did you know the songs on the album were done? How did you know you'd reached a finished state?

That process was interesting, because there were some songs I worked on, did so many demos, went to the studio, re-recorded it, and then would listen to it and was like, "Somewhere along this process, we lost the initial emotional thread." The project ranges from lo-fi to hi-fi, and so many different production devices or methods, or using high-quality studio shit versus just using the [Focusrite] Scarlett interface and a really shitty microphone.

I was trying to service ideas first and foremost, and there would be songs where I'd hear the more polished version and was like, "Actually, that doesn't communicate what the song needs to communicate." Something is lost when you upgrade it to that level. It needs to sound shitty a little bit to capture what it was doing. What made it feel done was feeling like the song took you somewhere from the beginning to the end or evoked something.

What's your day-to-day process? In terms of music, comedy, or anything else creative you're working on, what does a typical day look like for you?

Right now, I wake up, I walk my dog. I'll make music for two, three hours. Making music, it's therapeutic. There's a meditation quality of focusing on a sound or a loop and then slowly tweaking, "Okay, maybe turn the attack down on this." And then you listen to that and see how that little difference affects the sonic quality, communicates something different.

I'll do that for a few hours, then chill out for a bit, scroll, maybe watch something, walk my dog, and then watch something. And then, usually before bed, I'll write, and that will entail whatever project needs to be written or whatever I'm working on at the time. That's the flow I'm in as of right now. It also changes depending on if I'm on set or if I'm doing something that requires me to not be home. Then, the process is more willy-nilly.

I'm always writing something down, either a thought that I'm like, "This would be cool to explore again," in stand-up or in music, or just writing down a phrase or turn of words. For this project, there are a lot of lyrics that have been in my Notes app for years and were something that I was like, "Okay, this works here," or, "What if I extrapolated on this or took this idea and fleshed it out a bit more?" It never fully stops. My brain is always going, but recently, I've been trying to create more space and discipline to sit down and force myself to do it so I'm not cobbling together these little individual ideas and thoughts last-minute before I'm like, "Okay, I'm going to do a show. What do I got?"

Do you have any writing tics or habits you have to fight against or that you lean into? If so, how?

Music allowed me to stop trying to correct a bad habit I had, which is, I would write jokes, or an idea of a joke, and be like, "This isn't funny. This is just a clever thought or turn of phrase or wordplay." I love language, and I love words so much. I will just look up the definition of a word and find the etymology of it and be like, "Oh wow, this comes from an Indo-Sanskrit language."

I love how words hold our reality and shape our world, and I love the fluidity of them. I love the ambiguity of them. They dictate so much about life, and they're like this watery, powdery, impossible-to-grab-onto kind of thing. They're always slipping through your hands, and I think stand-up is something that is very convergent. To get to a joke, there has to be one solid, or maybe a couple different, understandings of a joke, but it has to solidify. It can't be this abstract, loose kind of thing. A joke includes inherently tight word economy. It's efficient. It's almost like math.

When it comes to lyrics, the same rules apply, but there's a little more room to wander and be more fluid, loose, and abstract. I think that released the pressure I was feeling with stand-up, where I've cultivated this voice and this way of speaking, and I like it, but I don't think it can necessarily hold everything I want to say.

What role do collaborators play in what you do? Both in terms of music and comedy, and anything else creative you do.

I started the album during a time when I was very alone and isolated, but I can't really say I made it by myself, because I was riffing on and responding to things that either were going on in my life or things in music I had really responded to throughout my life. I don't think it's possible to do anything entirely yourself or entirely alone. You'll always be responding to something that, whether you're aware of it or not, is close to your heart. I don't think there's any other way to create.

In terms of actually collaborating with people, on this project, musically, my brothers played a big part in terms of sending music back and forth. Even, honestly, my alt [Twitter] account, I would do little live [videos] and play versions of the song, and that was getting me excited. I was like, "I just messed around with some buses on this song. Let me go on live, and I'll play it and share it with these people."

Nothing is made in a vacuum, and my brothers played a huge part in it. Vagabon did some backup vocals on it, and she was amazing to work with. Alex Tumay did most of the mixes, and Neal Pogue did some of the mixes as well. Alex Poeppel was the recording engineer. There are so many people involved in the process that, even though this was a pretty insular project, I can't say I made it entirely by myself.

Five classic Jaboukie comedy moments from the internet:

Jimmy Fallon Live stand-up set (2017)

Jaboukie on socialism (2019)

A now-deleted tweet about mental health (2019)

That time Jaboukie impersonated CNN on Twitter and got banned (2020)

Jaboukie at Pittsburgh Pride (2021)

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