

# On holding onto wonder



Composer and musician Angel Bat Dawid discusses why Black artists can't just be artists, establishing new habits, and why there is no on/off switch when it comes to creativity.

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As told to Mark Frosty McNeill, 3173 words.

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**Was there a point you realized that music, and more broadly sound, can make a tangible impact on people?**

Absolutely. I discovered that very young. I knew that music had an effect on me that I didn't have words to express. Just getting obsessed with sound and, I'm dating myself, wanting to rewind the cassette over and over again. I always gravitated to things like that. I've always been an imaginative, adventurous child and music always allowed me to explore that.

My earliest music memories are going to see *Amadeus*. My father took me. That came out 1984 so I'm four or five years old, but I remember going to that movie theater, hearing all those violins and strings, and it doing something to me. Music and movies. Those are big things in my family. We watched a lot of films together and the two go together perfectly. Music is what drives the film. How do you know when to cry? Because you heard the violins. How do you know when something is looming? You hear some ominous, low vibrational tone. And those are very intentional in movies for that reason.

I think it started with music having a tangible effect on me personally and then I'm like, "Hmm, I wonder what would happen if I did that?" I was always curious about the process of making sounds and playing instruments. I got very curious, very young. I wanted to see what it was like myself and to see if I could have the same effect, not necessarily for an audience, but just to see if I could do it. And, of course, the obsession and hunger becomes even more until you're like, "Okay, this is what I want to do all the time."

**It starts with the appreciation of the power of sound as an individual, but the next step is often sharing communally. When did you start sharing with the public and was there an early moment that you remember having an impact on others through performance?**

I think it started with my observation of some of my favorite artists. For instance, Michael Jackson was a favorite because he was a child performer, and also Mozart was a child performer and I would go to the movies and see Annie. She was a child performer. And I'd be like, "I'm a child, they're doing it. Ooh, I want to know what that's like." So they're having an effect on me and I definitely wanted to know what it felt like to be on the other side, having an effect on others. So looking at all those musicals, absorbing all those films and all the culture of being a little kid in the eighties, *ET*, all this Hollywood stuff. You get caught up in the fantasy and so there's me listening to it, but then there's me wanting to be in it, too. What would that be like? Because if these performers have an effect on me, I want to know what that's like as well.

Probably my earliest ensemble that I can remember putting together was me and my brother. He had a fire truck and I remember taking the little ladder and strumming it like a guitar. And I gave him two sticks. I'm like, "You play the fire truck, like a drum." And we had songs. When we were done, I was like, "Okay, we're ready to go on."

tour. Let's go right now." I was like, "Mom and Dad, I want to show you guys this song." I really thought I was a professional musician at that point. I was like, "I did that. I wrote some songs, we got a hit, let's go." And so I performed it. Of course they were like, "Oh, that's great," and everything. But I was just like, "Aren't I supposed to be on tour?" I was kind of disappointed like, "Wait a minute. I did that thing that Michael Jackson did, and I'm just going to my room afterwards." I pondered it.

And that's when you start having those tests and trials of being a musician—if this is something that you want. Like, when you have worked on something and you have this idea you've succeeded, but you're not where you thought you should be.

I had inklings of doubt if I was capable to be a musician. Those seeds of doubt would be reinforced by certain situations where I would put my all into something and present it to people and I was either ignored, pushed away, made to feel like I was different, made to feel like my sound wasn't good, that my voice wasn't good, that I didn't really know how to play the clarinet.

And then imposter syndrome, being a Black woman artist, there's a lot of stuff that I didn't know would be attached to music that has nothing to do with music. As I grew up and came into the reality that people have a lot of particular ideas about women and particularly Black women, all the racism, you grow up and all these little inklings of doubt make you really question what music is.

So I think it's definitely a journey with this sound, and those types of trials are necessary as well. I think a lot of the trials I face as a Black woman, musician, composer, artist, interdisciplinary artist, is trying to really understand my place in all of this and trying to find my space of what it is for Angel to do music. I have a lot of heroes and heroines and people who I look up to, but it's like, *what am I trying to do?* And that's where experimentation and abstraction come into play.

**Does it help to tap back into the wonder that you experienced as a child playing the firetruck?**

Yes.

**Tapping back into that source of pure joy of experimentation to help calm an anxiety or to get beyond it?**

Well, "tap," it's not a thing that's like—I think the question you asked is very white because you guys look at things like there's a separation between things. There is no, "I'm tapping back in." What you're talking about is spirit. You know what I mean? It's a continual flow.

**Yeah.**

I'm particularly interested in how we talk about music. Talking about music in a sense, like it's something that I tap into and tap out to. Those ideas are very foreign. It's continual. I'm in music right now. And if you look at African Indigenous people's music, music is a part of everyday life. You got cooking songs, protest songs, even the great scholar, Eileen Southern, her great textbook that everybody who studies black music should have, called *The Music of Black Americans*, she has accounts in there from people who said that there were ancient Indigenous tribes where you had to sing your case in court.

You had to sing your case in court. Everyone did not talk, we sang, we embodied it. So it's not an on/off switch, which sometimes I find in conflict with being a Black artist working in a white world. It's a culture adjustment that I don't think that a lot of white people understand is there, but it's there.

**I appreciate the broadening of perception and understanding. You have such a defined mission and message and I imagine it's transforming all the time. What you are bringing through your music has a potency to it. When you are stepping on stage in front of an audience is there a centering space you come back to before sharing or is it continuing the flow?**

Yeah. Flow is the word. It's going with the flow. Everything is flowing in the universe, so you just flow with it. There is no on/off switch. I am this way, how you see me now. I am this way in every setting that I'm in. I'm never switching things up. This is my continual flow. I could just be working at Subway and do music for fun, and I would be very happy and content. This is just what I'm supposed to be doing.

I always reference The Oracle [character from the film *The Matrix*]. That's what I called the first album, because the mission of an oracle is a little different than the mission of a prophet. A prophet's going to just tell you whatever. A prophet don't care whether you get it or not. But the mission of The Oracle is, "Look, y'all can do whatever y'all want. And I'm going to find some way I'm going to be content by myself. But if you do come to me, if you come and you seeking me out, there's some insight that you might need or something. And for whatever reason you think I got the insight, hindsight, foresight to shed some light on your situation." If you do come to me, you come to my sound, you come to my music, you come to an experience of meeting me. That's probably what's going to happen. And so it's a greater thing than the compartmentalized way that unfortunately the world has not been taking good care of music. They just haven't and I don't like that.

**Take care of the music and it'll take care of you, right?**

Mm-hmm.

**The Oracle has a sense of wisdom and tranquility, but life is not always tranquil. Are there things that you access to help re-energize and move back on course when you're facing a challenge in life?**

Yes. I have a lot of disciplines and a lot of practices that I do to keep myself happy. You never know what's going to happen in life. But I guess my viewpoint is when something is hard, it just means I haven't done it enough. Let's say you wanted to pick up a new instrument. You might be really whack at first. Because you don't know the scales, you don't know how it works. And so you start practicing and then you start knowing your way around. And then you start producing sounds. And then you say, "Hey, I want to know more." And the more you do it—you spend time habitually with practice, practice, practice—all of a sudden you're not even thinking about it. It's just like walking. You're not thinking about walking anymore because you've done it so much.

It's the same way that I look about any situation that is new to me. I may not be good at that point. And so what does that mean? I have to do that thing more often. I have to change my habits because everything is real easy. It's easy in a sense if you understand that everything is a habit.

Racism is a bad habit. We're going to have to get out of that habit. And that's going to mean me bringing up issues that maybe you didn't think about before. So I have to get y'all in the habit of being a little bit more uncomfortable sometimes. White people. Y'all going to have to be uncomfortable sometimes because 90% of the time, black people are uncomfortable in your settings. So sometimes with the work that I do, it's important that we get to a place of uncomfortability so that we can be unified in that first. Let's be unified in us being uncomfortable together. I bring up these issues and I feel people's tension and I'm like, "Hold on. You feel that way because it's ingrained in our system. It's passed on to you, whether you like it or not." And so it's new to you. But if we get into the habit then it's not going to feel like that over and over again. It's going to be like, "Oh, okay. Now I see. Now we can work together. Oh, I didn't know that."

**It's a great discipline for everyone to be more open and aware in general. Was there somebody in your life that helped infuse that in you, to be on point to share that insight, whether through music or otherwise?**

Definitely my family. I grew up in a family of people of faith. They were unmovable in their faith and they still are unmovable in their faith. They have a lot of integrity. Children don't do what you tell them to do. We all know that. They do what you do. And so I grew up in a family where people put faith first, they put their morals and their values at the top of the list. It was about us being good people. That's the most important thing in my family. So growing up in a family like that, of people who stood their ground, no matter how many people would come at them, I saw this countless times in my family, standing up for what you believe in. Justice is very important. Equality is very, very important. These are things that I saw people in my family do.

So I think it's only a natural progression that those things would be passed on to me, would be important to me. We don't have to be the richest. Nah, my family ain't never been like that either. Humility was always the best thing. Do people make mistakes and mess up? Absolutely. But there's an uncomfortableness in that. People in my family, if they did wrong, they just didn't feel right in it like, "Oh, I ain't trying to live like this. Ugh." I'm the same way. When I make mistakes or I'm doing something that doesn't feel right, it feels better to be kind and to be loving. Now loving doesn't always mean nice. Loving means I'm telling you the truth. Loving means sometimes you have to cut some people off. Love looks like so many different things.

**This family influence seems to have really helped foster your growth. Did this way of being and living and loving—hard love and easy love and all the rest of it, infuse in you the importance of being a mentor?**

Most definitely. Black artists can't just be artists. You can't have a gift and just go out. No, no, no. Mm-mm. Because of where we've been placed in this system, we have to have a whole different agenda. My whole career, if you want to call it, is in three settings—business, the actual creative part of me composing and making music, and education. And I say this for Black artists, specifically. Any other race, y'all can have your own plan, but for us, because of how we've been in this country of just economic turmoil and so much bull, we going to have to play this game a little different. You just can't just be an artist. Your business is going to have to be on point. Meaning every part of the business. And it's a lot easier for us to have business on point than our forefathers, because they made it extra hard for them.

So many black artists in the past have been exploited and are still being exploited. And I even get exploited quite a lot. So business got to be on point, business is just like you practicing your horn. Spending a day on your emails is like you just went and practiced your scales. We have to get to that point. And then education, our music has to have some type of educational component. Just has to. Mentorship, whatever gifts you have, you have to give it back to the community.

One of my goals, as I'm thinking ahead, is what does Angel look like at 50? 60? 80? 100? 200? I'm thinking that far in advance and you know, it's definitely looking like a school. I come from educators. My mother and my father are both educators. My dad's a minister. My grandmother was an educator. That was their passion. So I realized that if I want the most blessings for my life, I'm going to have to have a very strong educational component. Working on that is the same energy as me here playing my instrument, performing.

And then, of course, the creative part. That's the part that we all already want to jump into. But until we don't live in a world with white supremacy, I'm not going to be able to just be creative all the time. We're just not at that place as a world. And we need to stop acting like we are. It's not safe for Black people to perform. I'm going to tell you that right now. If only you knew. Especially in the jazz world, where less and less people look like me playing Black music and treating Black people a certain way. To go back to what you were saying about keeping that wonder, stay in that child, it is challenging.

Going to Europe, I was starting to get cynical. I was starting to be like, "You know what? I'm not messing with y'all, Paris. I ain't messing with y'all, Berlin." That's why the live album was that. I was like, "I'm not impressed with Europe now." And sometimes I was like, "I don't even know if I want to deal with them." Some of these festivals, the things that I've been through behind the scenes are just, ugh. Actually, you know what, I'm not going through anything. I'm just thinking about Nina Simone and all these other women before me. They were going through stuff. But the stuff that I be going through is still there.

To keep that alive, I have to keep that sense of, "Okay, I didn't want to let go of that wonder." "Okay, let me go to another country and experience it." So with our last tour I did with the Brotherhood I was like, "You know what, I'm going to go to Europe with the mindset like, 'Hey, I'm in Paris.'" Like that old school feeling that we used to have. And you know what? I had a good time. So it's both. It's a lot of self discipline. It's a lot of learning new habits. Doing things that bring me to a place of peace, ultimately, and taking care of myself. Even on this Brotherhood tour they lost all our luggage. I had no instruments and because my band is in such a state of love and we were just so happy to be with each other, not one person complained. We were in the flow.

**Angel Bat Dawid Recommends:**

The United-Independent Compensatory Code/System/Concept: A Compensatory Counter-Racist Code by Neely Fuller Jr.  
(book)

The Spook that Sat By the Door (film)

Turmeric (a spice)

Frankincense & Myrrh (a scent)

Black Orchid (a type of flower)

Name

Angel Bat Dawid

Vocation

composer, improviser, clarinetist, pianist, vocalist, educator, DJ

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David Raccuglia