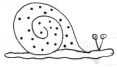




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As told to Mina Tavakoli, 2598 words.

Tags: Curation, Music, Culture, Inspiration, Beginnings, Independence, Identity, Business.

On accessibility, community-making, and being kind to yourself

Booking agent and community-maker Frankie Decaiza Hutchinson on making her own path in the world of dance music, creating a utopian world for Black artists, and why it's important to remember that we're all in this together.

In past interviews, you've discussed how you were something of a late bloomer to dance music. It led me to wonder if you felt that your entryway into dance music granted you a different vantage point of the industry in any way.

Yeah, I think so. I think not having grown up in a very music-focused household, or being around any of this gear or equipment or, really, *anything* connected to music, does benefit the way I approach things. When you don't know something, it always feels quite scary. I think that's always been a focus of what I do: to make things less scary and less serious and more accessible.

No one really wants to admit how little they know about their subject. Being very cool about that (I hope) allows people to feel like it's okay to still enjoy this world. But I do also want to encourage people to learn more about what's going on, too. It's not like it doesn't matter – it *does* matter – but we all have different access points, and it's never too late to learn things. It's absurd that people would expect people to know everything straight away.

What, then, drew you to professionally coordinating the chaos of nightlife and dance music? It seems like such an exclusive, closed-off world.

This was never, ever something I ever thought I'd be doing. When I first flew to New York, I wanted to be a writer and an editor, and I kind of did both for a bit, but I was definitely not getting what I needed out of those things in a creative or monetary way. It wasn't very fulfilling. Honestly, what got me into this work was the people I met and the people I'm around – I met so many people out here who are just so passionate about their art, and I just wanted to be a part of that in some way, and I felt like I've always been interested in creating for people who feel kind of outside of something. I never really knew what that could look like until we started doing Discwoman, and then starting the agency, and I was like "Oh, I guess I'm quite good at this." I'm not saying I'm perfect. It's still something I want to get better at.

You're allowed to say you're good at something.

When I first started, I was certainly *not* good at it, but with [Discwoman] we approached it pretty fearlessly. There were definitely embarrassing moments in the beginning where we didn't really know what we're talking about at all, but you kind of have to throw yourself into the deep end, because no one's

really giving you the tools. There was no template on how to start an agency or run any of these events, so we just sort of created the framework ourselves.

It's really funny to even think that this is my job now, because I don't think anybody really believes that it's a job outside of the scene that we're in. I'm not really sure my mom completely understands what I do. It's taken a while for it to feel really serious and other people to take me seriously, too. I mean, it has felt serious to me, obviously, for a really long time, but the sheer fact that people take me seriously now feels quite new.

Do you treat your career – and here I'm talking about your career as that of a professional community-maker – as more of an art practice, or a business practice?

It's definitely both, for sure. I'm able to spread both my creative wings and my desire to want to be in charge, I suppose. I think it's completely 50/50. Just coming down to how we present anything going on on social media to images to whatever else it is, flyers, blah, blah, blah. That all always feels like a creative practice in some respect, not as explicitly creative as maybe making music or something like that, but the whole Discwoman project is creative—developing a roster, especially. Curation is extremely creative.

What's so striking to me about the genesis of techno – and I'm thinking of Dweller and Drexciya here – is that it's so based in myth-making and world-creating. Do you think you took something about that, consciously or otherwise, and sort of built off of that impulse? Do you think there's something world-building about creating space in the way that you have throughout your career?

Absolutely. I'm trying to figure out whether I think that this was created kind of intentionally or if it was something that just happened, because it definitely felt like that when I was at Dweller a couple of weeks ago. Probably more so than last year. I don't think I was quite expecting it to be so profoundly utopian, to be honest. I think it's almost caught me by surprise how much it feels like it's almost fulfilling that idea. It wasn't like we set out to make this utopian world for Black people. It was more like we needed to just put Black people on, do a festival, show out, and claim a stance. It felt like more of an activist thing. It was just such a moving five days, and it's really taken on a whole other form, more than I ever expected. That there were people attracted to discovering something larger, something they knew they wanted to be a part of, *that* was the most beautiful thing to me.

Though the history of techno's been publicly available all along, it seems like there's been a recent mass understanding that the roots of dance music have always been Black. You had a good line during a recent panel at Dweller that went something like, "There are so many histories that I didn't know about." It feels like you weren't alone in thinking that way. What does it take, do you think, to re-center these ideas and histories?

It has to be on some of these other bigger platforms and festivals to take accountability, talk about it, and center it in their programming. When these things happen, it always falls on those who are excluded to push progress. It's like, generally speaking, the richest and whitest don't have to do *anything*. It's frustrating. I call out here and there, but I can't put all my energy into that. I'm hoping just by us existing as a festival, we can kind of embarrass some other festivals.

I think that's wise. Shame is a powerful tool.

I mean, it's embarrassing. It's really embarrassing. I think it's offensive. I'm just very tired of...being bored. It's exceptionally boring. Every single lineup is exactly the same thing. It feels like the only incentive is really money at the end of the day, which I get, but it's depressing.

Do you think of Discwoman and Dweller as assemblies of counterculture?

I'm not sure if everyone would agree with that, but to some extent, yes. I feel like it's hard for me to really say that, though. You know what I mean? I feel like I would feel more comfortable with my teams defining it rather than claiming that myself. I do think we have operated outside of the usual norms of whatever this industry is, and that's kind of why we got attention in the first place. That said, we do have to subscribe to some norms in the industry. It's quite hard to say that we're on the ground and totally outside of the box, since we are kind of still in it, and I think it would be disingenuous to say that we're completely counter to it.

Can you say more on what sort of practices you have to adhere to?

You know, like booking practices, for instance, negotiating offers, asking for fees, things that are pretty irritating and process-oriented, but those are still the things that you have to do. I mean, just existing as an agency that takes bookings from places, that doesn't feel that counterculture, really. It feels like you're just part of the system. I do think what we do is political, but I also think it's not necessarily outside of what everyone else is doing.

What do the structures of power look like in the collectives that you're part of or that you run? I'm thinking about Discwoman, for instance. What's your framework for decision-making in this system?

Most of the decisions we make together. If Discwoman gets some kind of offer to do a show, a tour, or something educational, we discuss it as a team. Sometimes, a lot of the stuff Christine [McCharen-Tran] and Emma [Burgess-Olson] will entrust all my judgment, because I do most of the emails. A lot of that I

just kind of do and field myself, and then, if there's something where I'm like, "Alright, I need everyone's input on this," we'll talk about it.

It's quite horizontal. I definitely think we all have different strengths. We're very good communicators, which is why we've been able to still love each other at this point. We're all quite sensitive, so that's really helped in taking on larger decisions.

Do you have visions of scaling?

Only in terms of building out the agency more. That's still a process as well. We're not in a position to pay people and pay a full-time agent to work with us. Most of the work we do ourselves. We have one other agent aside from Christine and I at the moment, Alex [Chen]. She's fantastic. But that's it. Scaling up and bringing people in is what we want to do, but also I don't want to bring anyone and then scale up if we can't afford to do that. I think we have a lot of potential to do that, but we've just got to figure out the right way of getting to that point. Unfortunately, it's all got to do with resources and money.

Since it's such an ethos-focused or mission-driven collective, have you had to redefine your ethics about your practice at all? Have you had to rethink the way you collaborate with brands, or book people?

Yeah. I think there have been a few things. When we first started Discwoman, there was an idea very much like, "We want to change the industry, and if we just add women to lineups, we can help change stuff." And I think that does work to some extent, but I've personally become quite fatigued by that approach, because I don't think it's really come back to us in the way that we want it to. A venue will book Discwoman once, and the next week will be back to the same shit all over again. The roots aren't really being tackled.

In terms of doing brand stuff, we've done a couple of collaborations. I think we're even doing more things this year. It's complicated. It's not without its criticism, like working with certain people. We really just don't have many funding options, so sometimes we do have to do fashionable things like that. We just have to be prepared for people's criticism, and I think it's perfectly acceptable for people to be critical of those things. I wish we didn't always have to do that, but sometimes we do.

Is there something that you've ever had to fight against, or something that you constantly fight against – like a habit, a thought, or an impulse – whenever you're working with Discwoman or on your own?

Holding back on being super, super angry in emails. I've had to learn to choose my battles. I'm also fighting against my own impulse to just be like "shut the fuck up," which has been a skill I've developed over the years – to be more restrained in certain respects. Also, the idea of not using your energy on things that really don't matter. You have to pick your battles. I think until recently, I felt like I wasn't good enough at what I do, and...

A classic thought.

Right, I think that's quite a common feeling, too. Specifically for Black women as well. You aren't supposed to be doing this, or you think you're stupider than you actually are. Those have definitely been struggles for me, but I've gotten better at working with them.

It's satisfying to hear your answers, because those feel like opposing impulses. One is the need to restrain yourself, the other is to push yourself up.

Right, you can imagine me at a fucking computer. Just, like, "Who will I be today?" I feel like some of my emails are quite like that as well. Like, oh my gosh, thank you so much, and then the next email's terrible, you know what I mean?

Right, you can't underestimate the power of the smiley face in an email.

It's Jekyll and Hyde. I'll just add a smiley face to make sure people don't think I'm *really* angry, even if I am angry, because a lot of the time when I write a message, I'm not angry at the person I'm writing at. I try and not project that into spaces where that person isn't responsible. That's quite hard, too – actually wielding your anger in the right direction and making sure you're not catching people in the crossfire. It's easy to take out your feelings about something else on other people. I had a conversation about that issue recently, actually. It's just good to get called out on those things, because I think when someone's in a position of more power or access, I find that people are sometimes more apprehensive about questioning what you're doing. I was really thankful for that transparency.

Has anyone recently given you advice that you think has unlocked something for you? Or, something that you hold close now?

I mean, [DJ and performance artist] Juliana Huxtable has been a really instrumental person in my life. I remember when we first started hanging out, I was being really self-deprecating – like some boy had done something to me that was annoying, the usual bullshit – and she just was like, "What are you talking about, Frankie?" She gassed me up for five minutes. I was just really struck by her saying that to me.

Sometimes, all it takes is someone who sees you and who is so willing to lend you a piece of themselves. It also changed the dynamic between us. I already admired Juliana so much, and it became more like "Oh, we're in this together." You know what I mean? I love moments like that, where you realize that these

people that you're around, who you admire so much and look up to, you're just like, "Oh, wow. We're all the same. We're all in this together."

Frankie Decaiza Hutchinson Recommends:

1. Our latest mix by Richmond's Archangel - I love it so much.
2. *90 Day Fiancé*. I'm a reality TV junkie and this is the best of them.
3. *Burning*. I'm obsessed with this movie.
4. Boxing and running. These activities have saved me.
5. Pop Smoke. Devasted by his murder. I've been obsessed with his music and it's actually too hard at the moment for me to listen to it, but I urge others to.

Name

Frankie Decaiza Hutchinson

Vocation


Booker, agency-founder, community-maker

Fact



Frankie Decaiza Hutchinson (It's a selfie)

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