

On creating things that resonate with you



Journalist Pendarvis Harshaw discusses engaging your community, how we and our stories evolve, and learning that you need to fill your own cup.

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As told to Camilo Garzón, 3144 words.

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Where were you born and how did your upbringing influence your creative work?

Born in Columbus, Ohio. My mother moved to escape a toxic relationship with my father and so my sister and I were raised in Oakland. I like to tell people that as a baby I told my mom, "it's too cold out here, got to get to the warmer weather." So I ended up in the Town at three years old. And from the balance of being in my mom's household with the influence of my sister and my aunt, as well as with the influence of the neighborhood and my schooling, you get me. My writing started off as raps and poetry but evolved to journalism, and that's what's carried me through Howard University, UC Berkeley, and now at KQED.

How did your education influence your creative pursuits? And vice versa.

During my first year back from Howard University, I taught with the African American Male Achievement Department, a part of the Oakland Unified School District. I had this audience of young Black men who wanted to learn about the world, and as a journalist beyond this class, I said, "You know what? Here's an opportunity to bring my profession into the classroom and allow them to meet the world that's outside of this classroom." So that's when I started the [OG Told Me project](#) where I interviewed older Black men. I wanted to introduce these students to elders in their community and also show them that there's life far beyond 18 years old, because I know when I was 14, I was like, "Man, I'm not even going to make it to 18." I had elders in my community who I'd come across their paths, be it the bus driver, the preacher, or the pimp, you name it, and they'd offer a word of advice, even if it was just, "All right." Crossing somebody's path and saying, "All right," lets you know, "Oh shit, if nothing else, I'm headed down the right path, you said all right." You know what I'm saying?

Makes sense. You mention 'OG Told Me,' which started as a Tumblr and later became a book. You used technology and storytelling to breach a generational divide and provide a kind of wisdom that you saw was needed. Why was this such an important project for you?

It's important because it's near and dear to my heart and I think it resonates with people because of that. And then really it's just the African American male experience of something that all humans experience—and that's growing old. So that universal concept of not only growing old but having these experiences and wanting to pass them down, that's something that you see in all walks of life and I wanted to document it because people were walking past it. If you were a Black man in America and you live to be 60 years old, you've seen some shit. You've survived. These are the OGs in front of the corner store, the park. Let's talk about your story.

I think that you as a storyteller have told stories that are often overlooked because they haven't been seen in the way you have. What are the kinds of things that you look for in a story? What is the spark?

I think in the most simplistic form, it's like, "Hey, that's cool. There's a story there." Or, "Hey, that's not cool. What's the story behind that?" But even deeper, there's the context. I do this exercise where I wake up in the morning and read multiple stories, starting out with arts in the Bay Area. Then I look at the Bay Area as a whole, then go statewide, national, international. And so I have a context of what's going on in the world and then if I could find the most small, sharp needle in this big haystack that speaks to everything else that's happening in this haystack, then I've found exactly what I'm looking for. And so I look for those stories.

How do you think that your writing has developed over time? What kinds of changes have you seen in your process?

I think it's gone along with my personal evolution. Initially, I wanted to tell stories that show Black men in the proper context. I was just so mad at the media, growing up. You asked me earlier about how growing up informed the storytelling I do now. I remember so many stories of just Black men being depicted and being demonized in the media. And I was a part of that generation where I saw my reflection, people who looked like me, being shown as demons in the community, and so I wanted to do something to reverse that narrative. As I grew, as I matured, I realized that Black men aren't the only ones being demonized. And so wanting to do stuff that does something to rectify situations and as my eye opens up to more injustices and greater stories to tell, I think I find just more things to dive into.

One of the things about Rightnowish, the radio show and podcast that you host, is that it's never just about the art or about the news. There's always something more you can say with words, with language, about people's context.

True. Words are only so strong.

When journalism—which is the official-words-against-whatever-powers-that-be profession—falls short, how do you think creatively on how to tackle issues?

That's when I work on special projects which are like taking the same words and putting them on steroids. As opposed to just writing an article, take it a step further, make it a documentary, do a live presentation. Get more people involved, turn it into 3D. With Pop-Up Magazine in their early days, I did a presentation on Oscar Grant and showed why his story was really important and this was far before Fruitvale Station was a film. I recognized that this filmed recording of a person being shot down in broad daylight by an officer is setting the tone for the next decade plus of what's happening in society.

These are vital stories and you've reached people with them where they're at. Let's get into your documentary work for a second. On Reel Talk, you said that filmmaking is the highest form of storytelling. And recently, you did a showing of your documentary The Dream Continues. What do you think was the biggest lesson to this day that you learned while creating this documentary?

I love that documentary. I'll give you a couple of lessons. One—*The Dream Continues*, literally. Stories continue. They continue to evolve, especially with documentaries. So check back in with your sources, check back in with the people you feature. Two—the story is a microcosm of a larger story. What's that word? A fractal?

Yeah, fractal, like a figure that just keeps expanding and deepening into the same formal elements.

Yes. Same shape every time. And when I say it's a fractal, I mean that in *The Dream Continues*, one of the people featured, Francisco—aka Amend, his artist name—mentions how you can go from being a tagger, to doing scribbles, to tagging your name, to doing bubble letters, and then the characters, and you put it all together and you do pieces.

And so, as a journalist, that's kind of how I did it as well. I started off writing a little poetry, okay, that poetry's going to turn into a rap, that rap's going to turn into a song. Oh what? I can tell this same story that's in a rap but not over a beat and it doesn't have to rhyme and that's called an article? It's a commentary? Cool. I'm doing commentaries now. Then I have in-depth reporting. Next thing I know I'm doing short videos,

photography, I've dabbled with that. And so, I'm combining all the tools in my belt into one and I'm doing a documentary film and it feels so good to just put everything together.

In most of the creative pursuits of your life collaboration seems to be key. But what are some obstacles that you've run into with these collaborations? How have you resolved them?

I don't think there's anything unique about the things that popped into my mind. The only unique thing that popped into my head was self and how self can stand in the way of collaborations. And when I say self standing in the way, it's largely a lack of confidence in self. And so, I think about the possible collaborations I could have had if I would have believed in myself more, reached out to people, and been more assertive.

How do you push yourself to let go of that doubt from whatever ends up being in the back of your mind sometimes?

Hmm. None of the answers I said were healthy?

I hear you. Sometimes it's not even healthy.

Yeah, maybe it's healthier to imbibe a shot of tequila and write versus not writing at all. Like sitting with those thoughts... constipated thoughts can't be healthy.

If anything, they just breed more thoughts. If you're overthinking, you're already just going to continue snowballing.

That's no fun for anybody either. You're sitting there, it's like a big thought-fest and you can't speak to anybody. Doesn't make it fun.

Yeah, it clouds thoughts too, I guess.

One thing, the healthy thing I will say, is jogging, and there's clarity in that. I also jump rope. Exercise in general. And the other when there are big things on my mind—sleep on it. Wake up first thing in the morning, pop up, knock it out. Whatever it is. Send off that email, write that letter, first thing in the morning before the day starts and that way you don't walk around with it on your chest.

Yeah, I feel you. When you told me about the reason you ended up in Oakland, it's just what it often is about: family stuff. Do you feel like writing has helped you be more at peace with it?

Yeah, it's helped. Writing and reading obviously. Reading on this subject matter. I've been doing that for as long as I can remember, just reading about people's problems and how they've solved them. And I also end up writing about my problems and how I've solved them. That OG Told Me project was largely due to me growing up without my father in the household. Me seeking father-figure advice, OG wisdom. And even the fact that my father and I have the same name and me wanting to bring some type of prestige to the name, if you will, there's something there. So there's a lot of layers to it.

That's amazing, it's in a sense a conversation with Pendarvis in the present and future. You're talking to yourself. One thing that I did want to follow up on is about that idea of prestige, not only in terms of name, but also career. In a panel session presented by Aunt Lute and POC, and which you hosted, we heard from three writers of color. One of them, Tongo Eisen-Martin—the 8th poet laureate of San Francisco whom you have interviewed before—said that these kinds of things we like to call identities sometimes become like a stamp. It's like, "I'm a journalist, let me show you my stamp." And we legitimize ourselves that way and some of our work and our ego. How do you think you have defined some of those stamps as well?

I wouldn't say I defined them, I feel like I've fallen into them. I think I definitely have. If money were no object and there was no connotation to what level you are in society by what job you're working, I'd be a word peddler. A poet. A rapper. A whatever. I would change it every day. I'd be a stenographer in a courtroom one day

and a playwright the next day. I would just have fun with words but that's not possible and journalism is a respectable profession. I thought about the longevity in it. There are only so many 60 year old, 70 year old rappers. There are a lot more 60, 70 year old journalists and they are usually more highly regarded when they're of that age. And so, those are the things that I thought about when I got into the profession at 16 years old. And I don't think it was all bad, but I definitely think I fell into it.

But then I wrote a story about going to see my father while he was incarcerated when I was 25 and I felt like it should be published by a big name publication and all [of these places I pitched to] turned me down. And I was like, "Well maybe if I got this Master's degree from UC Berkeley, they would know I'm a real journalist." Went and did that, and of course, now they can't stop publishing me. People hit me all the time. They go, "You got a stamp of approval. Well let's talk to the Black man about Black man stuff." But I definitely fell into that. Now the question is, will I ever get out?

Crap, yeah they box you in. I know. But one thing that I think you've done beautifully, and the Bay Area is the better for it, is your actual nuance with arts and Oakland itself. You were interviewed for Oaklandish, where you had once worked, and you described Lake Merritt. And what you mention in the interview is also the thing that shook me about Oakland. It was just like, "Oh, there's all these colors, shapes and sizes," and it's also been a safe haven for a lot of people. It is for you and it is for me. Do you think this view of Oakland keeps pushing you forward?

Yeah, I think it does push me forward. I don't know... All right, yes, it did for a long time and for a long time Oakland was like a place where I would look at myself as a social scientist. Oakland would be like my laboratory, if you will. I felt like all the stories I could tell out of the Town could speak to people around the world. And now that I've relocated in the past 18 months, I've moved to Sacramento. I now look at Northern California as a region where Oakland is still my home base and I feel like now I'm just at the satellite office. And looking at Northern California, I've grown to understand really the impact of this entire region and how the weather in Monterey impacts shipping from Reno. Things like that. And so, that's kind of where my mind is now. But for a long time, that Oakland and Lake Merritt picture that I painted was my basis. And I think that even now, to this day even with the evolution and looking regionally still at the heart of this region is Lake Merritt, a mecca of sorts. Lake Merritt serves as that rock.

It does. Also, I do remember in that panel session I referenced earlier, that I did see your four year old, right?

Yeah.

Yeah, your daughter was trying to get your attention and you said to us in the audience, "She just needs to get my attention for two seconds. Gimme two seconds." It was caring with the audience, yourself, and your daughter. And that's one of these underrated, undertalked creative pursuits, especially for men. Being a dad. How has your creative process been for you since becoming a dad?

During this time, this pandemic, just being in this house, this intimate shared space with my daughter has been... When it started, she couldn't open her own door. She was three and just like a baby, baby. Now she's a big girl and she can turn on my camera and she'll talk about her Barbies. And so, seeing that growth, being a journalist, and being able to tell her story, has benefited not only myself but also my family. I printed out a handful of photos and sent them out to folks for Easter but I wouldn't have taken a camera to do that without having that journalism background.

The fatherhood thing informing my journalism has definitely made me think a lot. I've always been pretty much of a forward-thinking person, thinking about the future, the next generation. This has put context to what the next generation means. And when I think about it, it's not just obscure ideas. It's like, actually my daughter and her homegirls are the future. These kids in 20 years, they're going to be at the Olympics or spelling bees. And so, I'm really thinking about what are the resources I need to leave them with. What's the story I need to tell them about this time? You didn't ask this but I got to tell it, I gotta put it out there.

Go for it.

What fucking gets me is that so much is being asked of me. So much is being asked of me and it's like, "Hey, listen to my mixtape." "Hey, did you get my email?" Show up for this, do that, do this. And then I have this four year old who's like, "Look at me." And it's caused me to realize that I need to fill my own cup and also be transparent with people about filling my own cup. I am growing into understanding that yes, there are people asking things of me, and knowing that I don't have to answer calls and don't have to be there all the time. I can also just communicate to folks about it and they'll be just fine. So, it's been a lot. I've grown so many gray hairs this year!

Pendarvis Harshaw Recommends:

Read the book '[Mancchild In The Promised Land](#),' by Claude Brown.

Watch "[Time](#)," by Garrett Bradley.

Watch "[No No: A Documentary](#)," by Jeffrey J. Radice.

Eating crunchy food when taking writing breaks--carrots, chips, crackers, and apples are my favorites--especially apples with peanut butter.

Listen to "[Tears For Johannesburg](#)," by Max Roach.

Listen to stand up comedians. They are the best storytellers.

"[Fredrika Newton + Huey P. = Revolutionary Love](#)," one of my favorite episodes of the *Rightnowish* podcast.

Read "[Oakland Makes Everything Black, Blacker](#)." The Blackest essay ever written about Oakland. By me.

"[New York Times Magazine: Is Prison Necessary? Ruth Wilson Gilmore Will Change Your Mind](#)." READ THIS!!!

Name

Pendarvis Harshaw

Vocation

Writer, journalist, columnist, photographer, documentarian, radio and podcast host, educator

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Brandon Ruffin