

July 3, 2020 -

As told to Amy Rose Spiegel, 1821 words.

Tags: Art, Music, Inspiration, Collaboration, Process, Multi-tasking.



On creating the future you want to see

Musician, poet, and activist Moor Mother discusses teaching children to be creative, some possible versions of the future, telling your own story, and resisting fetishization.

What does a typical day look like for you?

I wake up and check my email. Try to clean up the house a bit. I take a shower, get some breakfast, and then I figure out what tasks I have to do for the day—whether it's, like, finish a remix or write a poem for something, think about ideas for workshops. Just pretty much get whatever creative work I have to get done. Then I go to the grocery store and shop for dinner. Right now, it's basketball season, so I try to time my cooking dinner with watching basketball. Then, my partner comes home, and we're creative some more.

I write anywhere—on an airplane, while walking, in the bed. You know, I just write. I have to write because it's a part of my job also. Whenever I can get a moment, I'll try to write as much as possible.

You worked with Mental Jewelry on your new EP, *Crime Waves*. What is your approach to collaboration, in a broader sense?

I'm addicted to collaboration. I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm always collaborating. Sometimes, I don't even know a person before I collaborate. I meet you in real life, I saw what you performed, I loved it—I want to collaborate with you, right away. That's it.

It's kind of a double-edged sword, because I know that, to get the point that I want to get across, I have to do the majority of it myself. I'm definitely into sharing a story, when it's sharing someone else's story, but I can't call it a Moor Mother track. It's got to be called something else, because it's not the same. There's something of my telling my particular story that's not heard. When I work with a collaborator, we're telling all these other stories.

You brought up your workshops and your poetry. How do your workshops and your poetry both support and differ from the ways that you make music? How does it all fit together?

It's kind of different. I have my own workshops I do by myself, but a lot of it comes out of the work that I do with my collective, Black Quantum Futurism. When sound is involved, and of course that's where I'm playing music, I see them as different. My poetry, I see that as more connected to the music, or connected towards sound. I see this as a different world, too, the poetry, because the workshops are about a particular thing or subject matter.

I have a poetry workshop that I called "Anthropology of Consciousness." That's more like a skill-share about the ways that I create—maybe they can work for other people, that kind of thing. Ways to write about the environment. That's what the whole workshop is about. A tool that I use to write poetry and then I'm just passing it to them and hopefully they can get something out of it. It's pretty much how the workshops are, really like a skill-share and exchange of information. The information that is credible to the practice.

Are there specific practices or methods that people in your workshops respond to most vigorously?

My collective does a workshop called "DIY Time Travel," and everyone seems to really love that. My partner, Rashida Phillips, studies a lot about time travel. The workshop is about practical ways to time travel, outside of the whole Hollywood-science ivory tower. People love that. She has a lot of information, and the way that we break it down is pretty cool.

I have a freestyle hip hop workshop that I do with kids. That's always so cool. The kids are always excited. I have them all come up with mini rap groups. Sometimes, I let them battle me if they're interested. I love doing it. I'm also on the board of a non-profit called Girls Rock Philly, and a couple times a year, I'm giving young children the chance to start their own bands and participate in workshops.

How do you introduce music-making to kids? What do you say to them to get them going?

I'm pretty unconventional. I think I'm successful with children because I'm a weirdo. It's like, I'm not too intimidated by them. I'm just going to talk to them. I'm going to let them know that it's okay. There are no expectations. We're just going to have fun. I try to loosen them up and crack jokes, stuff like that. I'm not so stiff. Kids gravitate towards that.

The first thing that we do is a warm-up exercise where I have everyone come up with a rap name. Then we all get in a circle and I say, "What's your name, where are you from, and where are you going?" Everyone is asking each person this question, and then they're just freestyling what their name is, where they're from, and then where they're going. I'll do a quick example, then once we go through all of that, everyone is a little more loose, and laughing, and feeling embarrassed, but seeing that they were actually on beat and everyone did it! Starting with something simple where everyone can be successful is always good. It's really cool, because they get really creative.

Time travel is something really interesting, and totally different, to introduce at a workshop. How does that start out?

We do an introduction where we ask everyone two questions. We say, "What does the future look like to you?" We remind them that the future can be five minutes after this. It can be 10 years in the future; 1,000 years. It's relative. Then, we ask them, "What's your favorite sci-fi book or movie?" From there, everyone really gets loose. Like I said with the freestyle thing, everyone gets loose. Everyone starts making comparisons about how everyone's answers about the future are very bleak—or very positive.

What does the future look like to you?

The future looks like a hacking and reclaiming of technology. Hacking the technological structures that exist, but also reinventing the future that we want—returning to the past also, in a sense. The past informs my work right now. I need to have that information to understand what's going on in my particular process. That's where the term Afro-futurism comes into play for me as an artist. Not like I'm trying to be this Afro-futurist artist—that's what I like to listen to. The way that I enjoy music, a lot of the artists are not alive anymore.

The way I'm processing music is not linear. I love everything. I love the music that's just starting, like with the young kids I work with at Girls Rock Philly. The stuff that's just starting may not be perfect, or it may not be the song yet, but I see that that's coming—that's how I process things.

You have the voices of people whose physical bodies are a part of the past—you sample the voices of Sandra Bland and Natasha McKenna on your record. I read that you are also trying to study every place a Black woman has been. How does the consideration of Black women's histories, up to the present day, inform the work that you make?

I'm always into mysticism and the occult. When it comes to ancient rituals, the woman—the maternal—was very revered in a sense of respect. Not like it is now.

If you're into that, you start studying priestesses and goddesses, and I realized that Black women and African women have been all over the world. I was really inspired reading about women in South America, southern Italy, and women in Morocco. I never received that information in school. I feel like it is up to me to learn more about myself.

I love that so many of our stories are connected. The more I learn, the connection just keeps growing. I like extending the lifelines of all of us. Maya Angelou to me is the same as Zora Neale Hurston. I can't think of the word for it—it's a nice energy that connects us all.

America is a very strange place to be when you don't know exactly where your family comes from, or your language, or even the legacy of a Black woman or an African woman. What is that? What does that mean? What's the history of that? It's part of my nature: wanting to know more, and knowing that the narrative has been controlled. I'm thinking about what's before Black, about labeling, and social constructs of organizing people into boxes. That's where that idea comes from: expanding more than saying, "This is America." It's the world.

I want to come back to the idea of control as it applies to fetishization, which you address very directly in your music—your last album is called *Fetish Bones*. In what ways were you thinking about it as you wrote?

It has infiltrated every aspect of our society. Look at the simple thing of the treatment of women. I can stop at that particular point and ride it for the rest of my fucking life, you know what I mean? In so many ways, it's absolutely ridiculous.

The way we fetishize is a money-maker. It's capitalism. It's its own genre. I think about artists, especially women like Billie Holiday and Nina Simone and all of these people that we claim to love, but somehow they end up dying alone, without honor. That pisses me off. I'm also a musician that happens to be a woman. I want to change this.

Trying to change it is about love. It's about being a part of the love factor of this, being the respect factor, vibrating in that energy. It's not some simple tool that we can go and run up into somebody's office or yell at someone. You know what I mean? I don't know that type of thing. I'm just trying to be a part of what I want to see.

I like connections. One time, I performed at a college in Florida, and this young person came up to me after the show and wanted to talk one-on-one about ways to deal with anger. Their partner had experienced a sexual assault, and they were very angry. It was a good conversation to have. It was really nice to be able to not just do a show, but connect with people, to share experiences.

Moor Mother recommends:

Recurrence Plot (and Other Time Travel Tales) by Rasheedah Phillips

Style of Attack Report by Metropolarity

The Color of Hope: People of Color Mental Health Narratives by Vanessa Hazzard and Iresha Picot

Mama Day by Gloria Naylor

Seraph on the Suwanee by Zora Neale Hurston

Name

Moor Mother

Vocation

Musician, Poet, Artist

Fact



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