

On rhythm and balance



Multi-disciplinary performer and percussionist Guillermo E. Brown on the ways drumming and electronics are deeply rooted in his personal history, finding a rhythm between your work life and your private life, and creating new frameworks to allow people into your creative practice.

April 22, 2020 -

As told to Sara Wintz, 1920 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Performance](#), [Process](#), [Identity](#), [Success](#), [Multi-tasking](#).

Who do you look up to?

My grandfather. I can definitely look to him for that sort of prototype of the type of artist or even the man I want to be. He was the first person, besides my mom, to encourage my drumming and rhythmic sensibilities. He was a drummer. My mom had a holistic approach to parenting, which meant that she didn't separate parenting from dancing or drumming or singing.

But my grandfather was the first one to sit me down with a drum and actually *play*. To actually play drums with me, together. He was also an electrician. We made little buzzers and things with batteries and he showed me how to solder. There's a clear, direct link between my grandfather and the studio that I see before me now. Those combinations and hybridizations of electronic and acoustic instruments, and drumming, and those aspects of play - are so intrinsic to my identity as a human being and as an artist. I definitely can trace it back to those early moments we shared together. Absolutely.

Where did you grow up?

I grew up in the tri-state area of New York. I spent summers in Washington D.C. with my maternal grandparents. The same grandparents that nurtured my drumming. (They also taught me how to love the outdoors, about gardening and cooking, and baking with my grandmother). I definitely see myself as a New England-born kid who grew up a stone's throw away from New York City. Close enough to NYC that I could get there very quickly, and far enough away that I had space and room and trees and a place that was just for making noise.

What's your family like?

I consider myself Afro-Latino and Caribbean because my father comes from Panama. Relatives of mine were in Barbados and Jamaica, before they went to Panama. I consider that cultural mix, from the Caribbean Islands and from Central America, a crucial component of my cultural strategy. That's like, my cultural coat of arms. My mother's side of the family is American, and I've been trying to discuss our history on my mom's side of the family, because we're an African American family with all sorts of shades.

How does your background inform and influence your creative practice?

I try to use my cultural background as a set of materials that are part of my "weaponry." It's the sort of

positive and negative consequences of colonialism. I'm beginning to think a lot about how my work with computers and electronics may complicate someone who has a history of slavery or indentured servitude in their family tree. It's something that I'm thinking about.

Does it feel complicated to be a person of color who is working in digital spaces or with digital software? To be an Afro-Latino percussionist who sometimes uses a drum machine?

It's complex. It's a tense position because I *am* drumming. Drumming is so human, so clearly part of human existence. Stereotypically, drumming is associated with or essentialized as a part of African identity. It's racialized.

I don't essentialize it as much as it just happens to be my particular story: growing up in a household where drumming and singing and dancing weren't separate from daily life. It's a particular function of the diaspora. In a European household, you might find piano lessons and ballet lessons.

It's almost like, wearing a different rhythm is similar to wearing a different piece of clothing, or a new hat, or an old accessory, something that makes you feel like you can conquer the world. It puts a little bop in your step. Music functions in the same way. It has the power to heal, to renew, to reframe your imagination, to bring together disparate communities.

Those are vibrations of the earth, communications from the future, communications from your ancestors, or ghosts in the atmosphere that are trying to speak to you or through you. When you go into the performative space, those are the voices you're giving life to, you're sounding out: those ghosts, those ancestors, those unheard, those silenced. If we begin to look at how nature, how the natural world speaks to us: that is what I'm playing and playing with. A product produced from the same digital element that allowed the natural world to speak. You know? To speak it clearer and louder, and to communicate its purpose.

How do you balance the creative work that you do to make a living and the creative work that you do to satisfy your own artistic vision?

I have to manage my time because, even though working on The Late Late Show is this fun-and-games atmosphere, it can be exhausting. I feel fortunate to be part of such an incredible and supportive team at the Late Late Show, working a job that lets me consider myself as a human *and* an artist is extremely hard to find.

My project is taking these sonic worlds that I've experienced as a player and an audience member in jazz and electronic music and in academic settings, in institutions, and experimental sound, experimental frames, and practices, and creating a new frame for them that allows people, other humans from outside of those particular contexts, to participate in my work.

Drumming is so essential to human existence. I always find that I'm asking myself questions like: *How does my drumming sound? How does my particularly experimental approach to voice work sound, in an essentially human context? How do I create a platform that's bite-sized enough for people to become interested? How do I cultivate a desire from audience members, to engage with my work more than the next wave?*

To make it accessible?

Yes, yes. Access. Exactly, exactly.

So... what's a week in the life of Guillermo E. Brown like?

Four days a week, I'm at CBS. Usually, I leave my house at 1 pm, or 1:30 pm. Before I go to work, I try to work out. I walk the dog. I try to read a little something. I try to make something sonically in my studio, or get on the drums, or hit some congas, or hit some percussion, or play piano, or sing, or mix a record, or respond to emails. There's the art part. There's also the house maintenance part that I might do in the morning. Gardening.

Other sorts of house-upkeep chores.

Then I go to work and then I'm there. We usually have a band meeting with our team members who are more on the production and administrative side. They explain what's going to happen, the rundown of the show. Then, other producers might come in and talk to us about a "bit" for that day or explain that Celebrity A is going to sing this particular song. Do we know it? Can we rehearse it? Can we play something that sounds like it, or that gives the impression of it?

Then we might go to our studio room and work on some things, record something. I might lay vocals in place of another celebrity who a particular song or parody song is being pitched to. They get a chance to hear what a particular style vocal might sound like, and that gets sent out. Then we have rehearsal, which consists of us going into the theater, running a quick version of the intro, and running the first bits of the show with the kind of intro segment. There *might* be some opportunities for me to play a traditional comedic rim shot response. Those kinds of sound effects things, so the audience knows what's coming.

We usually start taping at 5 pm. We tape for an hour or two, depending on how things are running: which celebrity is late or not, which member of our team is off set doing another job and is late coming back. Any number of things can hold up a show.

Then we run it, then it gets edited so that it gets back to the East Coast by 9 pm PST. It gets broadcasted at 9:37 pm PST. 12:37 am, back East. I might have a gig or a performance or dinner plans or I might come back home. Monday through Thursday, that's the flow. Friday, Saturday, and Sunday are my days to explore a little bit more in the studio and be more playful. It's essential that I get that time. It's extremely important for me to be in the studio making sounds and editing during those three days. That sets me up for the week in a very real sense. My sanity is enhanced if I'm able to create in my studio.

How do you nourish your creative side when you aren't working?

Trying to listen, trying to see stuff, talking to other artists, going to therapy, working out, relaxing, trying to get massages; swinging in a hammock, going swimming. Yeah. Those are the vibes. Acupuncture. Shopping.

What do you shop for?

I like to buy art and electronic gear. I like clothes and shoes. Not that I have a lot, but I do like looking. Another thing I inherited from my grandfather is looking at catalogs. There aren't a lot of catalogs that exist right now, but Restoration Hardware has a beautiful catalog and I recently got their... Now I'm dreaming about outdoor furniture and thinking about redesign for the outside and things I'm thinking about building. Yeah. I like doing that kind of research. I really would like to build an electric car. To take an old car and make it new again using electric batteries. I'd really love to take on that project. I do a lot of dreaming around renewing old things and making things usable. Some furniture projects that I'm thinking about. Research for my next projects.

What are some of the subjects that your creative work examines?

Pegasus Warning is this kind of alternate character that I perform as, to frame my work in a different way. I'm using that persona to explore the inner dimensions of my emotional landscape and to look at the world outside of myself as well. I use Pegasus Warning as a way to engage with the world. It's a separate practice from Guillermo Brown's jazz drumming or Guillermo on the *Late Late Show* or any number of those bits.

What about Bee Boy?

I think *Bee Boy* engages the mythological world and the human world and the environment. It's a way for me to draw parallels between the animal world and the human world. It's a way for me to look at how humans treat animals and how humans treat each other. My cultural background is tied to a deep respect for the environment and also, I

guess, a kind of intertwined-ness with the environment.

It's when the commercial world comes into play that it becomes a problem, and that commercial world could be described as the criminal justice system. It could be when capitalism comes in and complicates those relationships. That's kind of where I'm at with *Bee Boy*: looking at how the same or similar maladies face black and brown folks the world over.

Guillermo E. Brown Recommends:

My favorite pieces of musical gear right now:

Isla Instruments KordBot

Elektron Octatrack

500 Series Tube Compressor from Falcon

OB-6 (A collaboration between two awesome guys: Dave Smith and Tom Oberheim.)

Name

Guillermo E. Brown

Vocation

Multi-disciplinary performer, Percussionist

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