

On maintaining your artistic voice



Multimedia Artist Cleo Reed discusses holding on to your creative integrity, honoring your ancestors, and showing up for yourself

September 15, 2025 -

As told to Nereya Otieno, 2366 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Art](#), [Collaboration](#), [Family](#), [Identity](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#).

As a multimedia artist, can you try to describe the core of your work as simply as you can? As if you were explaining it to a 10-year-old cousin.

I would say my name is Ella, but I perform as Cleo—Cleophus was my great-grandmother's name. I work in multiple disciplines, but music is the first language that I learned how to express myself in creatively.

I use my family's history as a huge part of my work, as a resource and an ongoing point of reference. I'm very much a space-maker, a little bit of a disruptor. My performance style can lean into performance art because it can be very site-specific, informed by the setting, the land, what is happening in the institution. I use that as a way of seeing a project through.

I'm inspired by any sort of cultural commentary, current events. Right now, I'm inspired by capitalism, Black capitalism, labor movements throughout the US, this new socialism wave. I feel inspired by absurdist work, by sculpture, sound as sculpture, sound as space-making, sound as room immersion, like full immersion, taking someone to a setting through music.

So music was the first language that you felt able to express yourself in. Does it feel like you're taking that language and translating it elsewhere or have you developed fluency in other mediums of expression?

I think what attracts me the most to music is that it is immaterial. Growing up in classical music, community art spaces, DIY spaces, and in a hardcore band—all of these experiences have given me the wherewithal to be able to see different musical genres as dialects and different processes of completion as opposed to different ideological frameworks.

Music is more universal than associating it with political identity and what have you. I think that's why people's music tastes can be so much more diverse than their taste in furniture or film or some of these more material art forms. So I can't help but to think about sound when I'm looking at other mediums. How can I add music to this? How can I use my best set of tools to make sure that an installation feels authentic to what I'm trying to convey?

But it's interesting because I appreciate the fine art process. These ideas of hiring and recruiting assistants and researchers. Also the theater processes, finding distinct collaborators who are, when properly done, centered in the process of completing the work. I went to Berklee [College of Music]. They want you to learn to be virtuosic, phenomenal in your own right. But in these other spaces, there's kind of a disdain for this individualism that is often praised in commercial music. That's the way that I kind of weave through those

different languages. I just try to take a little bit of each process and use that to inform the way that I'm going to approach a new medium, maybe something that I'm a little bit less familiar with.

Are there times where multiple mediums feel like they're actually at odds with each other, or does it always feel like it's working?

All the time. I'm trying to find a way to keep the creative integrity at heart, but now I'm bringing other people into play and it becomes their baby. When it becomes their baby, things can get lost and I have to make sure that what I'm trying to share with the world is intentional. That's the only way that I'm going to stay sane as an artist in these times.

When you're collaborating, how do you remind yourself what's at the heart of the project? It's tough to incorporate other people but ensure your unique voice is still singing, but with a choir.

That is really all that I'm aiming for, for the work to feel in such alignment that it does feel like I'm singing along with the choir. I honestly just pray and have a lot of really important self-talk with myself as I start to make these new decisions. I ask spirit and my ancestors to guide me through these new collaborations and have blessings over these collaborations and make sure they're handled with care and honesty. That's all I can really do. That is me. That is an effort for me to show up for myself, and then, when I'm able to show up for myself, I can really give my collaborators my best answer and just help them understand my overwhelming yeses, and then to help them understand my nos as well.

Trust is also a collaborator. Giving up control is a creative choice. Collaboration can be abstract. I feel like rooms and spaces are collaborators. If someone brings their dog, it's like, "I guess we're collaborating with this dog," because it's influencing what's going on. Maybe now we're taking a walk when we would've just sat here and stewed in something. But this dog has to pee.

Yes. Yeah. I feel that.

After you realized that sound/music was the mother tongue of your expression, when was the first time that you tried applying it to something else in a real way? A real way could be at eight years old, but I'm just wondering if you know when that was.

When I was a child, music was a huge part of my self-worth and the way that I validated my opinion. It helped me build a sense of trust with myself creatively, so I think there were a few moments. I joined an all-girls rock camp when I was eight years old—which I still teach at every summer.

You made a band, you wrote a song, and then you performed it at the 9:30 Club in DC at the end of the week. I lived in DC from 2005 to 2013, a significant part of my childhood. In that time, my father lived in LA, and I would visit him. I had a very bi-coastal kind of childhood at that point in time. I remember my mother getting really excited about what I was going to wear to the showcase at the end of the week. I had learned about Spinderella, The Slits, and the Riot Grrrl movement. And my mom was teaching me about folkloric music in all forms: blues with Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, queer icons like Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Odetta. So I had this real overview of how identity could be expressed through clothing.

At that time, I was going to an all-Black school that had a uniform. So my opportunities for expression were really only on the weekends. Naturally, I wore a tutu and a studded bracelet and a crop-top, because I'm fab. That was my first time seeing how music helped me understand how I wanted to walk through the world and what kind of identity I wanted to have.

Do you think that attraction to the immateriality of sound is somehow related to how much you moved around as a kid? You had to be part of so many different communities and you now work in so many mediums. Is there something that translated in your head as, "This can't be held onto, and that's the reason why it is so important." I keep thinking about the ability to morph and adapt as something inconcrete, and sound being so attractive to you as

that first form.

I think honoring the mediums that are often not recognized or acknowledged as material—as culture—is what I'm working with. Well, okay, wait. My first sentence is my best sentence. I'm acknowledging that the mediums that are often undergoing cultural erasure are seen as utility rather than artistic offerings. I think that the kind of Black American folk song or country song or protest song goes through that process. Even for someone as big as Beyoncé, who's on a different side of *that* spectrum than I am, but it's still interesting. She kind of still goes through that thing *where people think*, "Oh, this is just a utility to sell tickets or to do X." It just never leaves us, and I'm always attracted to mediums that go through that kind of erasure, and I'm always kind of poking at it and being like, "But why?"

It's interesting, because... I think that all that transience and that fluidity—mostly transience, not quite fluidity—but I feel like I'm just kind of picking up the pieces along the way. I feel like [*Cuntry*] feels like a collection of postcards that are tied to certain lands and periods of my life—and of my ancestors' lives. It feels like a compilation of work songs, because in the process of honoring these erased, I have to dig deeper. Not only in the terms of chords or whatever, but in terms of messaging and aesthetic and the utilitarian framework of it.

Thinking about your ancestors as collaborators, is there ever that same issue that you mentioned with other collaborators, where their vision gets tangled up in yours? Are there times when your connections with them start overtaking your personal aims for a project?

There's definitely both. I think my ancestors are human beings, and so, even one of my ancestors, my great-great-grandfather, Nap McQueen, who was interviewed for the Federal Writers Project—it's this collection of first-hand narratives from people who had been enslaved as children that was released in the 1930s. He decided to share two things: a short story about this monkey and talk about his massa and how his massa treated him better than most massas at that time, in his region of Texas.

I have a resistance to that, but also an understanding. I'm like, "Oh, wow, why would you ever be okay with a boss mistreating you?" Then, at the same time, it's like, people take shit from their boss every day. This is a normal cultural makeup in a country like this, so no judgment there. But I have to walk that line of how my personal work and opinion might not align with what I learn of their realities...

But it's interesting because my song "Salt Lime" is about drinking after work, and I wrote that in Wyoming with my best friend. It's romanticizing the idea of running up your boss's company card after work and just buying everyone drinks, even if you don't have money yourself. It's interesting, you know? I want to be this perfectly anti person, but at the end of the day, there's just certain things that I've just been conditioned to enjoy. That's where the humanness comes in, and that's how I humanize and rationalize my ancestors in their own behavior.

Earlier you said, "Wait, my first sentence is my best sentence." Do you have other credos or things that you say during your own creative process or that help, again, with that sense of potency of voice, creative integrity?

Absolutely. I'm a huge lover of lyric, of recurring phrases, of thoughts to revisit. That is one of them: "Your first sentence is your best sentence." That's how I keep myself safe in verbal communication and help myself be assertive and not ... I used to, my dad would call it backpedaling, but kind of over-explain myself and then talk myself back into the smallness that I was clinging to. I do have this rule with music where I'll make hundreds of things in a year, and one thing I'll always say is, "As soon as I feel like I want to start over with it, it's finished. If I don't like it, I need to make something better."

Because everything's going to be an iteration of a similar idea at the time, anyway.

Ain't no reason to be going back and opening and reopening a suture, just...

Let it heal and cut somewhere else for a second.

That's what I'm saying. It's just, it's good. I think that that's helped me. I love the cliché, "It's better for it to be done than for it to be perfect." I love what Erykah Badu said recently, "I think my best work is still within me." I love that. Right now I'm really into that.

When you are doing a less performative medium—such as developing instruments—how do you invoke your creative integrity there? When you're in that more mechanical process, is there still an element of your artistic voice coming through?

It's the most challenging medium for me to have that, but I really just can't help it. When I was working with Jon Batiste, I helped him develop a software instrument and also a sound library that had this backlog of quotes from American history. That was actually an offering I made to him in response to some of the ideas that he was brewing when he was developing American Symphony. That is the way that my artistic integrity showed through, because it was about the fact that sampling within a Black music paradigm is a little bit more nuanced than just finding something that has a nice rhythm. Right? It's like, "Why are we sampling this and for what purpose?" We see these artists that are committed to archive through sound—whether it's any sort of techno, DJ, dance, world. We see that sampling is important and what we're referencing is important, but bringing that to a post-classical space was really sick.

That entire answer just exemplified how we started this conversation, explaining yourself to a 10-year-old cousin. It's about Black histories, the importance of erasure and how to not reverse or erase, how to underline instead. The voice is ringing true.

Always.

Cleo Reed recommends:

Tailor - Grace Land New York in Ridgewood, Queens

Song - "There's A New World Coming" by Bernice Johnson Reagon

Cocktail - "Days in the East" Mocktail at Ras Plant Based in Brooklyn. I highly recommend adding gin or whiskey.

Performance Art Piece - "Farewell My Fool" by JoyBoy da Clown

Community Space - Abrons Arts Center

Name

Cleo Reed

Vocation

multimedia artist

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Amandla Baraka